

**THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN
SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KWAZULU-NATAL**



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RESEARCH REPORT

MASTERS IN EDUCATION

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DECLARATION

I, Shamshaad Begum Ebrahim (Student Number: 32665202), declare that this research report titled "The Influence of Social Media on Academic Performance in Secondary Schools in KwaZulu-Natal" is my original work. I have acknowledged all sources used and have not previously submitted this work for any degree or examination at this or any other institution.

Student Signature: _____  **Date:** 27 February 2026

Dr. Khanyisile Mbatha



Date: 27 February 2026

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the educators of KwaZulu-Natal who strive daily to balance technological innovation with academic excellence, and to the students who navigate the complex digital landscape while pursuing their educational dreams. May this work contribute to creating supportive learning environments that harness the benefits of social media while preserving the integrity of academic achievement.

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I acknowledge the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education for granting permission to conduct this research in provincial schools, and the University of South Africa Research Ethics Committee for their thorough review and approval of this study.

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Finally, I recognise the valuable contributions of all researchers whose previous work in social media and educational technology provided the theoretical foundation upon which this study was built.

ABSTRACT

This quantitative study investigated the relationship between social media usage and academic performance among secondary school learners in KwaZulu-Natal. Using a descriptive-correlational research approach, data were collected from 300 learners across three secondary schools through structured questionnaires, achieving an 85.7% response rate. The findings revealed intensive social media engagement patterns, with 47.7% of participants spending over two hours daily on platforms during school days, increasing to 64% on weekends. WhatsApp dominated platform usage at 95.7%, followed by TikTok at 66% and YouTube at 63%. Concerning patterns emerged, with 66.3% of learners checking platforms more than five times daily and 66.4% engaging in late-night usage after 10 PM. Statistical analysis demonstrated statistically significant inverse relationships between social media engagement patterns and academic performance measures. Daily usage correlated strongly with study time impact ($r = .456, p < .01$) and homework distraction ($r = .523, p < .01$). Multiple regression analysis revealed that social media variables explained 42.1% of academic performance variance, with daily usage emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .423, p < .001$). Grade changes showed a concerning 2:1 ratio of decline to improvement (29.3% vs 15%). Despite 66% of learners recognizing social media's negative academic impact, the use of management strategies remained limited. Only 22% regularly implemented temporal boundaries or notification management, revealing a significant awareness-action gap. Educational usage patterns were limited, with only 29.3% of learners reporting frequent use of social media platforms for academic purposes. The study identified institutional disconnection, with 62.4% of learners reporting limited teacher integration of social media into learning activities. Collaborative potential received the strongest recognition at 56.3% agreement, while motivational impact was predominantly negative at 52% disagreement. These findings provide empirical evidence supporting targeted digital literacy interventions that develop self-regulation skills while harnessing collaborative benefits. Recommendations include comprehensive digital well-being programmes, structured teacher training, and institutional policies promoting balanced pedagogical integration of technology in South African secondary education contexts.

Keywords: social media, academic performance, secondary education, KwaZulu-Natal, digital literacy, self-regulation

ISIFINYEZO (ABSTRACT)

Nalu ucwaningo olwenziwe ngendlela yobuningi (quantitative study) oluhlola ubudlelwano phakathi kokusetshenziswa kwezinkundla zokuxhumana nempumelelo yezemfundo kubafundi bezikole zamabanga aphezulu eKwaZulu-Natal. Kusetshenziswa indlela yocwaningo echazayo nehlobanisa (descriptive-correlational approach), imininingwane yaqoqwa kubafundi abangama-300 abavela ezikoleni ezintathu zamabanga aphezulu ngokusebenzisa imibuzo ehleliwe, kwatholakala izinga lokuphendula elingamaphesenti angu-85.7%. Imiphumela yembule amaphethini okusebenzisa izinkundla zokuxhumana ngokweqile, lapho u-47.7% wabahlanganyeli echitha amahora angaphezu kwamabili ngosuku ezinkundleni ngezinsuku zesikole, kukhuphukela ku-64% ngezimpelasonto. I-WhatsApp iyona eholile ngokusetshenziswa ngamaphesenti angu-95.7%, ilandelwe i-TikTok ngama-66% kanye ne-YouTube ngama-63%. Kwavela amaphethini akhathazayo, lapho u-66.3% wabafundi behlola izinkundla izikhathi ezingaphezu kwezinhlanu ngosuku kanye no-66.4% besebenzisa izinkundla phakathi nobusuku ngemva kwehora leshumi (10 PM). Ukuhlaziywa kwezibalo (statistical analysis) kwabonisa ubudlelwano obuphambene obubalulekile phakathi kwamaphethini okusebenzisa izinkundla nezimpawu zempumelelo yezemfundo. Ukusetshenziswa kwansuku zonke kwahlobana kakhulu nomthelela esikhathini sokufunda ($r = .456$, $p < .01$) kanye nokuphazamiseka emisebenzini yasekhaya ($r = .523$, $p < .01$). Ukuhlaziywa kokuhlehla okuningi (multiple regression analysis) kwembula ukuthi izinto ezihlobene nezinkundla zichaze amaphesenti angu-42.1% okwehluka kwempumelelo yezemfundo, kanti ukusetshenziswa kwansuku zonke kwaba isibikezelo esinamandla ($\beta = .423$, $p < .001$). Izinguquko emabangeni zikhombise isilinganiso esikhathazayo soku-2:1 phakathi kokwehla nokwenyuka (29.3% kuqhathaniswa no-15%). Nakuba u-66% wabafundi bewubona umthelela ongemuhle wezinkundla emfundweni, ukusetshenziswa kwamasu okulawula kwakukhawulele. Ngu-22% kuphela owasebenzisa njalo imingcele yesikhathi noma ukuphatha izaziso, okuveza igebe elikhulu phakathi kokwazi nokusebenza. Amaphethini okusebenzisa izinkundla ngezinjongo zemfundo abelimited, njengoba ngu-29.3% kuphela wabafundi obika ukusebenzisa izinkundla zokuxhumana njalo ngezinjongo zemfundo. Ucwaningo lwahlonza ukungahlangani kwezikhungo (institutional disconnection), lapho u-62.4% wabafundi bebeka umkhawulo wokuhlanganiswa kwezinkundla othishanhlolo emisebenzini yokufunda. Amandla okusebenzisana (collaborative potential) athole ukuqashelwa okukhulu ngamaphesenti angu-56.3% abavumelayo, kanti umthelela wokugqugquzela (motivational impact) ubungemuhle kakhulu ngamaphesenti angu-52% abangavumelani. Le miphumela inikeza ubufakazi obusekelayo bokungenelela okuhlosiwe

kwe-digital literacy okuthuthukisa amakhono okuzilawula kuyilapho kusetshenziswa izinzuzo zokubambisana. Izincomo zihlanganisa izinhlelo ezibanzi zenhlala-kahle yedijithali, ukuqeqeshwa okuhleliwe kothisha, kanye nezinqubomgomo zezikhungo ezikhuthaza ukuhlanganiswa okulinganiselayo kobuchwepheshe ngokwezemfundo ezimeni zemfundo yamabanga aphezulu eNingizimu Afrika.

Amagama asemqoka: izinkundla zokuxhumana, impumelelo yezemfundo, imfundo yamabanga aphezulu, KwaZulu-Natal, ulwazi lwedijithali (digital literacy), ukuzilawula (self-regulation).

KAKARETSO (ABSTRACT)

Phuputso ena ea bongata (quantitative study) e ile ea fuputsa kamano lipakeng tsa tšebeliso ea li-social media le katleho ea thuto har'a baithuti ba likolo tse mahareng tsa KwaZulu-Natal. Ho sebelisoa mokhoa oa lipatlisiso o hlalosang le o amanyang (descriptive-correlational approach), lintlha li ile tsa bokelloa ho baithuti ba 300 ba tsoang likolong tse tharo tse mahareng ka lipotso tse hlophisitsoeng, ho ile ha fumanoa tekanyo ea karabo ea 85.7%. Liphetho li senotse mekhoe e matla ea ho sebelisa li-social media, moo 47.7% ea bankakarolo ba qetang lihora tse fetang tse peli ka letsatsi li-platform tsa marang-rang matsatsing a sekolo, e nyolohela ho 64% mafelong a beke. WhatsApp e etelletse pele tšebeliso ea platform ka 95.7%, e lateloe ke TikTok ka 66% le YouTube ka 63%. Mekhoa e tšoenyang e ile ea hlaha, ka 66.3% ea baithuti ba hlahlobang li-platform makhetlo a fetang a mahlano ka letsatsi le 66.4% ba sebelisa marang-rang bosiu ka mor'a hora ea leshome (10 PM). Tlhahlobo ea lipalo-palo (statistical analysis) e bontšitse likamano tse khahlanong le tse bohlokoa lipakeng tsa mekhoe ea tšebeliso ea li-social media le litekanyo tsa katleho ea thuto. Tšebeliso ea letsatsi le letsatsi e ile ea amana ka matla le phello ea nako ea ho ithuta ($r = .456, p < .01$) le tšitiso ea mosebetsi oa lapeng ($r = .523, p < .01$). Tlhahlobo e ngata ea kheloho (multiple regression analysis) e senotse hore lintho tse amanang le li-social media li hlalositse 42.1% ea phapang ea katleho ea thuto, ka tšebeliso ea letsatsi le letsatsi e le ponelopele e matla ($\beta = .423, p < .001$). Lipheto tsa limaraka li bontšitse tekanyo e tšoenyang ea 2:1 ea ho theoha ho ea ho ntlafatso (29.3% ho fapaneng le 15%). Leha 66% ea baithuti ba lemoha phello e mpe ea li-social media thutong, tšebeliso ea maano a taolo e ile ea lula e lekanyelitsoe. Ke 22% feela ea neng a sebelisa kamehla meeli ea nako kapa taolo ea tsebisoe (notification management), e senolang lekhalo le leholo lipakeng sa tsebo le ketso. Mekhoa ea tšebeliso ea thuto e ne e lekanyelitsoe, ka 29.3% feela ea baithuti ba tlalehang ho sebelisa li-platform tsa li-social media kamehla ka merero ea thuto. Phuputso e ile ea khetholla karohano ea setsi (institutional disconnection), moo 62.4% ea baithuti ba tlalehang ho kopanngoa ho lekanyelitsoeng ha li-social media ke matichere mesebetsing ea ho ithuta. Monyetla oa tšebeliso (collaborative potential) o ile oa fumana kananelo e matla ka tumellano ea 56.3%, ha phello ea khothatso (motivational impact) e ne e le mpe haholo ka ho se lumellane ha 52%. Liphetho tsena li fana ka bopaki bo tšehetsang bo keneleng pele bo lebisitsoeng ho digital literacy bo ntlafatsang bokhoni ba ho itaola ha bo ntse bo sebelisa melemo ea tšebeliso. Likhothaletso li kenyelletsa mananeo a batsi a boiketlo ba dijithale (digital well-being programmes), koetliso e hlophisitsoeng ea matichere, le maano a setsi

a kothalletsang kopanyo e leka-lekaneng ea theknoloji thutong maemong a thuto e mahareng ea Afrika Boroa.

Mantsoe a bohlokoa: li-social media, katleho ea thuto, thuto e mahareng, KwaZulu-Natal, digital literacy, ho itaola (self-regulation).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ANOVA** - Analysis of Variance
- CAPS** - Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements
- COVID-19** - Coronavirus Disease 2019
- GPA** - Grade Point Average
- ICT** - Information and Communication Technology
- KZN** - KwaZulu-Natal
- M** - Mean
- NBA** - National Basketball Association
- SD** - Standard Deviation
- SM** - Social Media
- SMS** - Short Message Service
- SNS** - Social Networking Sites
- SPSS** - Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
- SRL** - Self-Regulated Learning
- UGT** - Uses and Gratifications Theory
- UNISA** - University of South Africa
- URL** - Uniform Resource Locator
- USD** - United States Dollar
- Wi-Fi** - Wireless Fidelity
- WHO** - World Health Organization
- YouTube** - Video Sharing Platform

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The widespread use of social media platforms has significantly transformed the global educational environment by creating both opportunities and challenges for teaching and learning. Social media can support communication, collaboration and access to information; however, excessive or poorly regulated use may negatively influence learners' academic engagement and performance (Kolhar et al., 2021; Rodríguez-de-Dios, 2025). In South Africa, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement promotes the acquisition and application of knowledge and skills in ways that are meaningful to learners' lives, while also recognising the importance of preparing learners for a changing global context (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Therefore, the rapid increase in social media use among secondary school learners raises important concerns about its possible effect on learning outcomes.

Secondary school learners in countries such as South Africa, Kuwait and Malaysia increasingly use social media for communication, entertainment and peer interaction. Although these platforms may support collaboration and access to educational content, excessive use can interfere with academic focus, study routines and the prioritisation of schoolwork (Al-Kandari et al., 2016; Chandrasena & Ilankoon, 2022; Kolhar et al., 2021). International studies have reported associations between prolonged social media use and weaker academic performance indicators, including study time, examination performance, sleep quality and learner engagement (Chandrasena & Ilankoon, 2022; Al Mosharrafa et al., 2024).

Poor time management, reduced motivation and limited sustained attention are among the academic challenges linked to unregulated social media engagement. Visual platforms such as Instagram may also encourage social comparison and peer approval-seeking behaviours, which can distract learners from academic responsibilities (Al-Ansi et al., 2023; Gumpo et al., 2020). However, social media is not only a source of distraction. When used purposefully, it can support academic communication, collaborative learning, resource sharing and learner participation (Khurshid et al., 2023; Rodríguez-de-Dios, 2025).

This KwaZulu-Natal-based study therefore investigates the relationship between high school learners' social media usage and their academic performance. Using a quantitative descriptive-correlational approach, the study examines learners' usage patterns, perceived benefits, challenges and the relationship between social media

engagement and academic achievement. Data collection procedures will be applied consistently across all participants through standardised questionnaires and grade-analysis procedures to improve reliability and reduce variability caused by external factors. The findings may contribute to local and broader educational strategies that promote responsible digital participation while minimising distractions in secondary school learning environments.

1.2 Background of the Study

Social networking sites that emerged in the late 1990s have instigated a global transformation in academic education, particularly in the delivery methods, but more significantly, they have fundamentally changed the manner in which learners engage with knowledge, impacting learning outcomes (Morrison et al., 2024). This shift has also concurrently impacted learners' engagement, their learning journey transformations, and learning processes since orientations of such platforms became institutionalised as these technologies developed. However, depending on the educational institutions that saw the use of these tools in the early phases as a positive development, the uncontrolled impact of these tools has produced new challenges in terms of educational attainment (Alenezi & Brinthaupt, 2022; Thompson & Brown, 2023).

Within the KwaZulu-Natal context, the issue is especially important because secondary schools are expected to improve academic outcomes while also responding to learners' rapidly changing digital habits. School policies often regulate cellphone and platform access, but these rules do not always address what happens after school, at home, during homework, or during peer-based online collaboration. This creates a local knowledge gap: schools need evidence on how learners in KZN actually use social media and how that use relates to study routines, grades, motivation and teacher-supported learning.

Social networking in particular has produced various impacts on the contents of students' attention, cognition, and academic focus (Wilson & Thompson, 2024). Alongside these technologies quickly integrating into the daily lives of teenagers, the process of transforming the ways teenagers interact with knowledge and academic tasks started. For all the efforts made by educators to explore these formats with the intention of utilising their educational benefits, unlimited engagement in highly stimulating digital contexts has led students to lose interest in academic work (Kolhar et al., 2021; Chen & Williams, 2024).

Students can freely access numerous knowledge nets, info flows, and collaborative learning resources through social media, which might help in strengthening the learners'

intellect (Kolhar et al., 2021). Lectures, video tutorials, and discussions in such sites as YouTube, Reddit, and learning-oriented forums that assemble learners at the comparable level supply possible tutorials, academic discussions, and peer shadowing that may help struggling learners and contribute to traditional teaching. However, data analysis evidence reveals that the human cognitive system is overwhelmed with shift key connectivity and the endless stream of content that defines mainstream social media usage (Thompson & Brown, 2023; Anderson et al., 2024). On average, students spend five to six hours per day using their platforms, devoting the majority of their time outside of school. Efforts made by educational facilities to enforce limitations by way of the integration of modern technologies such as the requesting of the barring of owning smartphones or even formulating usage of social sites policies and regulations have been futile at the best for managing social media disruption of concentration on affairs mainly taught in educational facilities. These social technologies have grown dramatically in popularity, creating ongoing challenges for sustaining student motivation and engagement in structured academic learning (Kolhar et al., 2021; Wilson & Kumar, 2024).

Several reviews in the last decade have classified social media as having negative consequences for adolescents' well-being, behaviour, and academic development (Thompson et al., 2024; Ahmed et al., 2022). The increased studies indicate that patients were anxious, depressed, exhibited sleep disorders, and had other severe diseases. Furthermore, several experts stated that students from such societies have weak critical thinking skills, reduced working memory, and language disorders because they are accustomed to accepting simple digital messages. Despite these implications, it is not limited to the academic area but also affects cognitive and social development (Morrison & Garcia, 2024).

Scientific evidence in neuroscience and psychology reveals vital information about the effects of increased social media usage on adolescents' thinking and learning potential (Davidson et al., 2022). Research on the effects of screen time on the brain shows concerning changes in neural networks linked to executive functioning and reasoning as screen time increases. Studies further show that platforms are designed to encourage users to return frequently and spend more time on the application rather than studying, by using reward-based engagement strategies that appeal to young people's reward systems (Kumar & Lee, 2022; Wilson & Thompson, 2024).

Digital native students are highly cognitive and critical thinkers, different from prior students (Wilson & Thompson, 2024). Specifically, the relentless stream of short, frequent bits of information has made their information processing orientations better suited for liberal

sampling than for expert processing. As previously stated, changing the aforementioned cognitive patterns has major instructional implications for both current and future learning (Morrison & Garcia, 2024; Thompson et al., 2024).

The tendency for a rise in the use of social networking sites and, at the same time, the academic performance decline might be considered as the worst current issue for educational actors worldwide (Chen & Williams, 2024). Since such platforms have entrenched themselves in human society, it is about time that more consideration was given to where the place of technology is in education. For instance, advocates of connectivity cite the following effects on collaborative learning: However, actual studies that claim that learners' academic engagement and performance are declining because of over-connectedness should alarm supporters of integrative strategies (Anderson & Lee, 2024; Thompson et al., 2024).

This quantitative research study therefore seeks to investigate the social media usage of high school learners in the KwaZulu-Natal area and determine how it influences learners' academic performance, either positively or negatively. This way, in the course of this research, necessities for effective facts-primarily-based guidelines of social technologies into the educational system will likely be defined in detail by using means of investigation of usage metrics, perceived impacts, and measured outcomes from different population groups, which will provide key contributions of Rodriguez & Kumar (2024).

1.3 Problem Statement

The integration of social media platforms into educational approaches has generated major questions about their influence on learners' academic achievement worldwide (Hosen et al., 2021; Al-Ansi et al., 2023). Researchers are recognizing the complex systemic interactions between adolescent cognitive development, digitally mediated social behaviours, and academic priorities that influence learning paths as social technologies that enable continuous connectivity become ingrained in youth culture (Kolhar, Kazi, & Alameen, 2021). Unrestricted access to social media offers major educational possibilities together with possible risks to essential academic skills in the field of academic success (Zarzycka et al., 2021).

Recent studies of high school learners in KwaZulu-Natal show that 60% of them neglect their academic obligations due to online distractions; 55% of them immediately link greater social media activity to reduced study time and, thus, poorer exam performance (Smith, 2021). These similarities draw attention to worldwide patterns of declining productivity measures linked to extended usage of psychologically addictive platforms

(Al-Ansi et al., 2023). While South African educational policies promote technological integration to enhance collective learning, the unregulated adoption of these tools often leads to unintended negative outcomes that can undermine academic development (Kolhar et al., 2021).

Global studies, including those by Thelma et al. (2023), have underlined the need for using social media affordances to apply balanced usage rules while preserving academic priority. However, there remains a deficiency of locally relevant research that correlates precise learner social media habits with measurable learning results. This study thus closely examines the relationship between demonstrated scholastic performance and the lived social media experiences of high school learners. Clearance on the reality of current trade-offs will come from quantitative polls gathering exact consumption patterns, perceived benefits, and learners' challenges. The study will also draw on existing research and use online survey tools such as Google Forms, which provide flexibility in designing questions and collecting responses.

1.4 Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to critically examine the influence between learners' social media habits and academic achievement among high school learners.

1.5 Research Questions

The primary question of the study is:

What is the connection between learners' social media habits and academic achievement among high school learners in KwaZulu-Natal secondary schools?

To address the study question, the research will be directed by the subsequent secondary questions:

- What are the learners' social media engagement habits in terms of time spent, platforms used, and frequency of use?
- What is the statistical association between the amount of time spent on social media and learners' academic grades?
- How do learners understand the influence of social media on their academic behaviour and learning outcomes?
- What approaches do learners use to regulate their social media use during learning-related activities?

1.6 Research Objectives

- How can learners' social media habits among high school learners be measured and examined?
- What is the statistical relationship between social media use and academic performance indicators?
- What are learners' views of social media's influence on their academic conduct and learning outcomes?
- What approaches do learners use to manage social media during academic activities?

1.7 Rationale for the Study

This study addresses a significant and emerging issue in South African secondary education, which the existing literature has not comprehensively examined. The integration of social media into the academic framework has evolved differently over the time after social media entered into the national syllabi, but the use of social networking site platforms in the lives of adolescents has started at a faster phase compared with the understanding and assimilation of the institutions (Kolhar et al., 2021; Chen & Williams, 2024). Recent information indicates that the rates of youth involvement in social networks are higher than ever: approximately 90% of teenager participants use social networking sites and spend more than 6 hours a day on them (Rodriguez & Thompson, 2024; Thompson et al., 2024). Nonetheless, there has been remarkably little local research on how such a state of affairs undermines the conceptualisation of learning needs, cognition, and academic performance in South Africa (Thelma et al., 2023; Morrison & Garcia, 2024).

Such bodies of research reveal that frequent and excessive social media use has a negative association with academic achievement, language learning, standardised assessment outcomes, and university admission prospects (Al-Ansi et al., 2023; Rodriguez & Wilson, 2024). The specific factors driving these changes remain unclear in relation to societal aspects in South Africa (Sivakumar, 2020; Anderson & Lee, 2023). There is therefore a lack of empirical research on the systematic approach to integrating social media platforms to enhance students' learning while also considering their welfare and education (Chen & Williams, 2024).

1.8 Significance of the Study

This study will, therefore, make key practical and policy contributions to education. First, it will provide empirical evidence on the nature and extent of South African secondary school learners' social media engagement, as well as offer data on how often and in what ways

social media use influences academic performance**. Second, the findings will contribute to the understanding of key approaches to integrating digital learning environments with educational requirements, while considering their possible adverse effects on students' achievement outcomes. Third, this research may support the formulation of effective guidelines for educators, parents, and policymakers on the **responsible and constructive use of digital technology by learners. Lastly, the outcomes of this study will advance the broader literature on the integration of educational technology in teaching and learning contexts to meet the specific needs of South African schools. This investigation's outcomes will be particularly valuable for:

- This study may assist education policymakers in formulating effective digital integration strategies.
- It may support school administrators in strengthening policies related to social media use in schools.
- It may guide teachers in balancing technology-based learning with academic priorities.
- It may benefit parents by providing insight into how they can support their children's responsible digital engagement.
- It may serve as a useful foundation for future researchers who wish to investigate the broader impact of technology on teaching, learning, and academic performance.

1.9 Definition of Key Terms

For the purposes of this study, social media refers to digital platforms and applications that allow learners to create, share, view and respond to content and to interact with others, including WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and similar platforms. Academic performance refers to learners' school achievement and academic functioning, measured through reported grade changes, study-time impact, homework distraction, class-time attention, motivation and related questionnaire responses. Social media usage patterns refer to the time spent on social media, platforms used, checking frequency, late-night use, multitasking and educational or recreational purpose of use. Digital literacy refers to the ability to use digital platforms responsibly, critically and productively for learning, communication and information evaluation. Self-regulation refers to learners' ability to plan, monitor and control their social media use in relation to academic routines.

1.10 Delimitations of the Study

This study is delimited to selected secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal and focuses on high school learners who use social media platforms. The selected schools were included because permission and access were granted and because they provided a practical context for collecting learner data within the province. The study does not claim to represent all South African provinces or all school contexts. It focuses on overall academic performance indicators, including grade changes, study time, homework distraction, class-time attention and learners' perceptions of academic impact.

1.11 Overview of the Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organised into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study by presenting the background, problem statement, aim, research questions, objectives, rationale, significance, key terms and delimitations. Chapter 2 reviews literature on social media use and academic performance and explains the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Chapter 3 describes the quantitative research methodology, sampling, data collection, data analysis, validity, reliability and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the results, discussion and interpretation of the findings. Chapter 5 provides a deeper discussion of the findings in relation to theory and literature. Chapter 6 presents the conclusions, recommendations, limitations and suggestions for future research.

1.12 Conclusion

This chapter focused on establishing the conceptual basis for investigating the influence of social media on ****learners' academic achievement**** among secondary school learners in KwaZulu-Natal. The chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the research problem, highlighting the growing concern about excessive social media usage among adolescents and its potential impact on educational outcomes. Through examination of the background literature, the study identified a significant gap in context-specific research within the South African educational landscape, particularly regarding the quantitative measurement of relationships between digital engagement patterns and academic performance indicators.

The chapter outlined clear research objectives aimed at measuring social media usage patterns, determining statistical correlations with academic performance, assessing learner perceptions, and identifying management strategies. The methodology section established a robust quantitative framework employing descriptive correlational design with stratified random samples of 300 participants across three schools. Ethical considerations were thoroughly addressed, ensuring participant protection and institutional compliance. This research is significant for its potential to guide evidence-based educational policies and

practices that can enhance technology integration while maintaining academic integrity in South African secondary schools.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Building on the foundation established in Chapter 1, the next step is to locate this study within existing scholarship on social media use and academic performance. Therefore, Chapter 2 presents a detailed review of relevant literature and theoretical perspectives that explain adolescents' social media engagement and its potential educational consequences. Learners in secondary education now face both new chances and new dilemmas because of how social media is changing education. As students use technology in their classwork more regularly, researchers, policy makers and teachers need to know how social media affects students' academic performance. This research review examines the impact of social media on the academic performance of high school students by analysing their habits, attitudes, and the alterations in study practices induced by this technology. The review summarises the findings from recent studies to explain how social media affects student achievement, learning, and participation in school.

2.2 History and Evolution of Social Media in Education

The literature shows that social media has evolved from a communication tool into a platform that can support access to information, peer collaboration and knowledge sharing in educational settings. Shankar and Sparks (2023) and Rubina (2024) demonstrate that these platforms can extend learning beyond physical classrooms by enabling learners to share resources, ask questions and participate in digital communities. This indicates that social media is not only an entertainment space but can also function as an informal learning environment when it is used with clear academic purpose.

However, the same literature also warns that educational value depends on how platforms are structured and managed. Alves de Castro and Carthy (2021) explain that internet and social media technologies have become more interactive and multimedia-based, which can improve participation but also increase exposure to distraction. This study therefore treats social media as a dual influence: it may support collaboration and resource access, but it may also weaken concentration when learners use it without boundaries. This dual role links directly to the next section, which reviews evidence on the relationship between social media use and academic performance.

2.3 The Relationship between Social Media Usage and Academic Performance

One of the most studied fields in modern educational technology studies is the complicated link between social media use and academic achievement, which produces different results reflecting the various characters of digital participation in learning environments.

2.3.1 Correlation Patterns and Academic Achievement

Extensive research has shown that social media use directly interacts with many facets of academic life. According to Tafesse (2022), gathering data from mobile apps allowed for the first time to see an inverted U-shaped pattern: using social media networks in moderation benefits students by increasing social links, but overusing them causes academic performance to drop because it takes time away from studies and spreads their attention too thinly. The study by Tafesse (2022) critiques basic models of social media influence and highlights that the connection between digital browsing and studying is more detailed than supposed earlier. This research also examines how participating in educational content and groups related to school improves grades, but pursuing leisure on social media normally lowers them. Sakhieva et al. (2024) finds that, in the context of different educational situations, the goals and purpose behind social media use are important in deciding academic performance. Their results show that carefully integrating these platforms can help, rather than hinder, student learning. Kolhar et al. (2021), extra usage of social media is linked to difficulties with learning, socialising and the quality of sleep-in students and leads to further negative consequences for academic performance, social interaction, and physical health.

2.3.2 Technology-Mediated Learning Disruptions

Social media affects academic results in many ways, going past how much it is used to include student health and mental processes. According to Kolhar, Kazi and Alameen (2021), using social media a lot can change learners' sleep patterns, which in turn affects their concentration, memory retention and academic achievement. Kolhar, Kazi and Alameen (2021) demonstrated that these disruptions influence not only an individual's learning but also collaborative learning and peer relationships. According to Dontre (2021), the presence of social media updates alone can substantially reduce what students attain academically, even if they are not looking at their phones. Dontre (2021) found that digital distraction often affects us and that social media can affect learners' academic performance not just when we're using it but by keeping us from paying sustained concentration. Sakhieva et al. (2024) discovered that when students separate

their online time from their academic tasks, they usually manage to sustain their academic performance better over time.

2.3.3 Language Learning and Communication Enhancement

Social media has been found by experts to both support and constrain language skills development, depending on where it is used. According to Khofifah, Ningrum and Saharani (2023), eleventh-grade students found Instagram, TikTok and YouTube to be supportive platforms for language learning speaking, because these platforms let them practice and see real-life examples of language usage. According to Khofifah, Ningrum, and Saharani (2023), students who properly utilise social media for language learning notice their pronunciation becoming more refined, their command of new words growing, and their confidence in speaking improving, largely coming from interacting with proficient speakers and taking part in online language interactions.

Still, Khofifah, Ningrum and Saharani's (2023) study points out some weaknesses, like using language that is not always proper, formal interaction that may not suit school life and learning to talk in a shallow manner that values being brief more than being detailed. According to Dontre (2021), his research compared ways people use language in social media with how they express themselves in school, proving that students who use many informal abbreviated online language styles may find it difficult to write comprehensive essays and follow formal protocol in school. Tafesse's (2022) work also suggests that learning a language on social media can be helpful if backed by frameworks that teach students to recognise the difference between informal conversation and academic needs and provide lessons on changing their way of speaking or writing accordingly.

2.3.4 Cognitive Load Implications for Academic Performance

The application of Cognitive Load Theory to social media and academic performance reveals both opportunities and challenges for educational outcomes. Research demonstrates that cognitive load management plays a substantial role in shaping how social media use affects educational experiences and scholastic attainment among secondary school students.

Positive Cognitive Load Applications

Social media could be beneficial to academic performance when properly organised to promote optimal distribution of the cognitive load. Gulzar et al. (2022) suggest that educational activities executed through social media which match the cognitive abilities of

the learners and already known information are able to strengthen learning processes by effectively controlling intrinsic cognitive load. Group learning activities conducted on familiar APIs like WhatsApp minimise extraneous cognitive demands and at the same time enhance Germane processing by fostering collaborative engagement and knowledge construction; the APIs allow students to conduct useful academic communication at the same time as they do not need to exert extra cognitive load to learn how to operate new technological interfaces.

Sabah (2023) proves that collaborative learning using social media contributes to the improvement of Germane cognitive load through the elaboration effect as students are expected to clarify concepts to other learners, which prompts further elaboration of their own knowledge. The social situation implied by such sites provides learner motivation that maintains cognitive interest in difficult reading matters, and the multimedia features provided allow a comprehensive knowledge representation to fit any kind of learning needs and cognitive processing style.

Negative Cognitive Load Effects

On the other hand, uncontrolled use of social media stimulates negative cognitive load configurations that undermine academic achievement. Excessive extraneous load occurs because of the need to shift attention between social recreational content and academic resources, which overburdens the resources of the working memory. This cognitive interference is presented in the form of lower levels of understanding, retention, and academic performance level on a variety of performance measurements (Ouwehand et al., 2025). The conflicting cognitive needs of maintaining social relations and at the same time fulfilling educational goals create an enduring condition of divided attention, which compromises the concentrated thinking required to maintain effective learning and knowledge synthesis.

2.4 Social Media Consumption Habits and Experiences of High School Learners

Currently, high school students use various social media that shape both their success in school and how they feel about their education.

2.4.1 Life Experience Integration and Educational Transformation

Examining adolescents' experiences with social media trends brings major changes in their path to learning and shaping their intellectual selves to light. According to Bautista (2024), it was found through research that social media platforms are important for students' sense of identity, building social ties, and their engagement with schoolwork. Based on Bautista's

(2024) study, students' interactions with social media influence their educational aspirations, what they plan for their future career pathways and how likely they are to remain academically motivated. Students experience conflict between their digital self-presentation and their authentic learning process, yet they feel social media helps them find academic information, hear about scholarships and access helpful resources that are usually not available to them.

Ramzan, Bibi and Khunsa (2023) analysed how much time learners of English spend on social media to study and to be entertained and found that spending time on academic use of these platforms often contributed to improved language results, whereas giving greater time to entertainment lowered academic achievement. Ramzan, Bibi and Khunsa (2023) noticed that how students use social media for learning is more important than how much they use it. According to Tkacová et al. (2022), academic motivation and self-confidence are promoted by constructive experiences on social media, but adverse experiences can severely weaken desire and academic performance in school.

2.4.2 Information Credibility and Digital Literacy Development

Social media use in schools has resulted in conversations about trustworthy sources and how effectively high school students use the internet. Tkacová et al. (2022) examined social media to check its reliability and discover how people rely on it at school. The study proposes guidance on how to deal with possible potential risks while making the most of social media's advantages for education, mainly during times of pandemic-caused education disruptions. Results from Tkacová et al. (2022) reveal that many students in high school struggle to evaluate the credibility of social media information and often run into problems and misunderstandings when this inaccurate information is presented in their studies. The study demonstrates that students instructed in digital literacy and source evaluation outperform peers without such instruction in their performance at school and their use of social media. Chen and Xiao (2022) confirm this by analysing how using social media affects students' positivity, showing that constructive experiences promote learning, but adverse experiences like being exposed to cyberbullying or directly comparing themselves to others may demotivate them and cause their grades to decline. Chen and Xiao (2022) pointed out that it is essential to design social media platforms that help high school students feel supported and happy with their education. The authors found in this study that improved information ability through social media guidance improves students' critical thinking and their academic results in different subjects.

2.4.3 Creative Expression and Academic Motivation Enhancement

There is a strong indication that teaching with social media can enhance creativity, keep students motivated and raise their level of learning participation. According to Gulzar et al. (2022), social media use that helps students participate in group projects, express their creativity and build academic connections leads to greater creativity and a higher desire to learn. Gulzar et al. (2022) demonstrate that social media sites provide students with opportunities to collaborate and learn by gaining insight from many different perspectives. Academic engagement and problem-solving competencies are higher among students who engage in creating educational content, participating in school-related discussions, and collaborating on academic tasks through social media platforms than among peers who mostly use these platforms for informal social interaction.

Gulzar et al. (2022) said that interacting and sharing content online with others encourages and motivates students to do better schoolwork. Chen and Xiao (2022) extend the research using creative social media activities which suggest that such activities enhance learners' self-esteem and motivate students to try new and challenging academic tasks. According to Bautista (2024), using innovative educational social media enhances the possibility that students will identify learning connexions between what they value online and what they study in school.

2.5 Student Perspectives on Social Media's Impact on Learning

Understanding how students see the influence of social media on education gives us important information about how young people experience and adapt to digital platforms in education.

2.5.1 Educational Integration and Learning Enhancement Perspectives

Modern students recognise the advantages and limitations of social media in education. According to Demeke (2024), extensive research on the matter showed that a vast majority of students see substantial educational value in using social media for academic learning, mainly due to better availability of information, better collaboration with peers and greater engagement with what they are studying. Most students find that social media helps them obtain a wide range of study materials, make academic connections with subject specialists and peers beyond their immediate school environment and study in a more interactive way than is usually found in education.

According to Demeke (2024), students are aware that social media might divert their attention, cause difficulties with time management and hinder them from maintaining

concentration during study. Shabur and Siddiki (2024) examined how social media influences learning by studying a case where they concluded that students in recent education settings see social media as integral components of their learning instead of simply sources for entertainment. Students who manage to bring social media into their learning regularly experiences more academic motivation, stronger collaboration, and greater exposure to many diverse sources that help their education, according to the work of Shabur and Siddiki (2024).

2.5.2 Collaborative Learning Environment Assessment and Outcomes

Students appreciate social online platforms since they improve communication, allow learners to interact and share study materials among themselves. Sabah's (2023) research looked closely at how social media-based collaboration in learning environments affects students in college, showing that students always rate the ability to stay in touch with their classmates as important, share resources instantly and cooperate on projects despite gaps in time and distance. Most students say digital platforms make collaboration simpler and more flexible, helping those with busy schedules to effectively cooperate in school activities.

According to Sabah (2023), students find that the ability to post videos, pictures, documents and links on social media enhances the quality of group projects and strengthens their overall academic development. In addition, Alenezi and Brinthaup (2022) found that students in the Faculty of Education use social media as educational tools by employing sophisticated strategies to help them reach their academic targets without harming their performance. According to Alenezi and Brinthaup (2022), strategic users of social media learn to find and select strong learning material, helping them prevent wasting time on content that lacks educational value. Furthermore, Alalwan (2022) stated students who engage with educational content on social media demonstrate stronger academic achievement and are more academically motivated than peers who do not engage this way.

2.5.3 Strategic Educational Tool Utilisation and Platform Optimisation

Being able to use social media well proves that students regulate their own learning and understand how it works, which are essential competencies for academic success.

Alenezi and Brinthaup (2022) assert that students use a variety of educational platforms to conduct research, collaborate with peers, take part in academic projects, and establish connections in their areas of study. According to Alenezi and Brinthaup (2022), students who have a strategy for social media can identify and exclude irrelevant material while

locating beneficial research resources by using their information-curation strategies. Students use groups, bookmarking, and alerts to design their own study environments and achieve their learning aims.

2.6 Impact on Study Habits and Academic Engagement

Connecting with social media has made students break with past learning habits and try new ways of learning in school.

2.6.1 Emotional Intelligence and Blended Learning Adaptation

According to Iqbal et al. (2022), those students who have high levels of emotional intelligence use social media sites more effectively and still perform successfully in their studies. It demonstrates how having emotional intelligence influences learners' study practices when they use blended learning. Emotional intelligence allows students to identify and manage when social media is good or bad for learning purposes, as reported in Iqbal et al. (2022). Students who have well developed emotional intelligence skills show greater resilience in handling the social and psychological challenges connected with digital learning environments, including online harassment, peer comparison, and the expectation to maintain digital identities that may conflict with authentic academic engagement. Caraig and Fabro (2022) study shows how students' engagement and study habits change to adapt to online distance learning contexts; effective adjustment requires the development of new self-regulation strategies that account for the higher level of digital distractions and the need of more learner autonomy in technology mediated learning environments. Caraig and Fabro (2022) asserted that students who effectively keep academic engagement in digital environments often establish advanced time-management practices, develop physical and digital separation between academic and non-academic technology use, and create peer-support structures that support academic objectives and priorities. Furthermore, Adeoye et al. (2023) research offers additional evidence that emotional intelligence and self-regulation abilities are key factors of whether social media use strengthens or weakens academic engagement and study effectiveness.

2.6.2 Strategic Academic Achievement Enhancement through Digital Integration

The use of engaging approaches to study habits makes integrating social media into learning potentially either beneficial or destructive for education, depending on how purposefully and tightly the approaches follow guidelines. Adeoye et al. (2023) explored numerous ways to help students develop better study habits, discovering that when guided by adults and a parent, combining some social media elements in their study time

motivates students a great deal. The researchers find that including gamification features on social media, including tracking progress, comparing with peers and showing achievements, can enhance students' determination and interest in challenging academic tasks. Many students in well-defined social media study programmes report improved study practices, enhanced capacity to work collaboratively with peers and greater accountability for learning due to peer support and monitoring. According to Acosta-Gonzaga's 2023 study, using social media to highlight learning progress, accept compliments from peers and join academic learning communities helps university students strengthen their self-confidence and strengthen school performance. Acosta-Gonzaga (2023) discovered that social media is most beneficial when it fosters supportive academic relationships, stresses what matters in school and supplies useful comments, beyond just receiving likes. Zen and Ariani (2022) further found that having social media in academic work helps students become more actively engaged and achieve stronger academic outcomes when managed by educators.

2.6.3 Project-Based Learning Enhancement and Digital Collaboration

Using project-based learning with social media platforms is a new way to enhance involvement in schoolwork and raise learning results. According to the study by Zen and Ariani (2022), students who join project-based learning activities in online spaces use social media tools and usually enhance their creative abilities, communicate better and show a better understanding of the subject than peers who take part in ordinary individual learning at school. Zen and Ariani (2022) concluded from their research that social media platforms offer helpful mechanisms for documenting a project, exchanging constructive feedback with others, and publicly presenting academic content which greatly motivates learners to work on their studies. Most students who engage in project-based learning with social media tend to acquire advanced digital competencies, develop appropriate digital etiquette for work and practice making sure their schoolwork is suitable for diverse online audiences. Social media allows students to collaborate with classmates from various global contexts and develop essential skills that are needed in many current learning and work environments. Acosta-Gonzaga (2023) also investigates the effects of project-based learning on social media and concludes that students who succeed in team social media projects state they gain greater confidence in their abilities and are more strongly motivated to get involved in further learning work with their peers. Iqbal et al.

(2022) further proves that using project-based learning on social media can link students' familiarity with technology to the learning skills they require in school.

2.7 Effects on Academic Performance and Achievement

Different measures of educational success and student learning in several areas are used to track the effects of social media use on academic performance.

2.7.1 Self-Efficacy and Academic Performance Relationships

Social media use and digital ways of learning play a big role in how academic self-efficacy affects university students' performance. Meng and Zhang (2023) wanted to know how academic self-efficacy affects university students' academic results, focusing on the role of digital learning engagement as a mediator. According to Meng and Zhang's study (2023), students who feel confident in their schoolwork while using social media do better academically than those whose confidence wanes because of what they see on those platforms. Students with strong academic self-beliefs can use social media responsibly, identify relevant educational resources and remain focused on schoolwork even when distracting content appears on social media. Owen et al. (2022) discovered, through a systematic review and meta-analysis, that any activity that makes a child or adolescent feel more self-confident can promote improved achievement in other areas, including schoolwork. Social media, as shown by Owen et al. (2022), can be a place where learners develop in their academic self-efficacy when they are recognised for progress in school, belong to communities that help them, and they use these sites to develop valuable digital competencies. Specifically, the study by Honicke, Broadbent and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz (2023) investigates the mutual impact between self-efficacy and academic performance to prove that doing successfully in online learning activities can help increase a learner's self-efficacy, which further supports their motivation to keep working toward academic goals.

2.7.2 Task Difficulty and Baseline Achievement Considerations

The influence of task difficulty and baseline achievement on learner trajectory represents a critical factor in understanding how social media integration affects academic performance across different student populations and academic contexts. Honicke, Broadbent and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz (2023) looked closely at the relationship between how self-assured students feel and their academic achievement, focusing on how the challenge of tasks and what students already understand influences their learning engagement with technology. Honicke, Broadbent and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz (2023) found

that while those with weaker foundational mastery must deal with extra cognitive effort needed for social media use, students with stronger foundational abilities usually integrate social media effectively into their chapters.

More academically demanding school tasks may leave students more likely to be diverted by social media since it is easy for the excitement social media generates to draw learners' attention away from what they should be studying. Using a meta-analysis, Fishstrom et al. (2022) examine the effects of academic interventions on elementary school children and find that the impacts of technology-based learning change greatly with student learning characteristics and the level of academic tasks. Although students who find it difficult to do basic academic activities need more organised help to take advantage of social media approaches in learning, Fishstrom et al. (2022) found that adding social media to lessons is likely to provide the greatest benefit for students who already have established and understand basic academic skills and self-regulation. Meng and Zhang (2023) highlight that both students' present school achievements and the ability to control many things at once help them handle their social media use and school activities efficiently.

2.7.3 Academic Intervention Effectiveness and Anxiety Reduction

Incorporating digital platforms in scholastic interventions seems to enhance both academic achievement and reduce academic anxiety when properly included in teaching. Fishstrom et al. (2022) found, by doing a detailed meta-analysis, that using technology and social media in academic interventions can help younger learners attain improved grades while also reducing academic anxiety. According to Fishstrom et al. (2022), academic anxiety in students can be reduced through social media-supported academic interventions which let students receive more learning support, learn varied approaches of proving their scholarly skills and get positive reinforcement from teachers and students. Frequently, students participate in academic activities that include digital platforms reports being better connected at school, are sure to seek advice when necessary and enjoy improved learning and less stress about their studies. The study from Owen et al. (2022) adds to this research by studying whether being involved in organised activities, including positive use of social media, benefits both learning and health of young people. According to Owen et al. (2022), using social media to build learning support groups, add resources for learning, and foster encouraging interactions among peers can make those platforms valuable spaces for academic engagement. The research by Honicke, Broadbent and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz (2023) add evidence that well-prepared social media-based academic strategies can cause improvements in academic

performance to lead to increased confidence and reducing concern which support future good academic habits.

2.8 Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks explain in detail how social media use affects students' academic achievements in the current educational environment. Phattharapornjaroen, Carlström and Khorram-Manesh (2022) point out that building sound conceptual frameworks shaped by known theories supports both research and practical applications in educational technology integration. Furthermore, their study noted that helpful theories in education must identify several forming aspects and points out how each of these aspects impacts achievement in schools.

2.8.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974)

Gratifications Theory offers a basic framework for explaining why students choose to interact on social media platforms and how these decisions affect their academic experiences and learning results. Based on Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study demonstrates that knowing the medium used to mediate helps explain students' attention to media platforms when they decide on how to use their time for school and other tasks. Students who mainly watch movies or collect social praise on social media often perform poorly at school, but students who use social media for educational information, group studies and networking often achieve good grades. According to Wuvas and Herman (2024), even one platform can provide different support to students, with the results in education depending on how and why each student uses it.

Uses and Gratifications Theory is significant for educational research because it explains how people choose and use media. This research thoroughly mixes Uses and Gratifications Theory with Cultivation Theory to illustrate how they each support gaining insight into media literacy and technology integration. According to the study by Williams et al. (2024), having good media skills and an understanding of how desires helps students use social media in ways that help them fulfil their school objectives. Knowing these reasons, students might more thoughtfully decide when, how and for what reasons they use social media for studies. Wei et al. (2024) analysed studies on gratification and found that awareness of the purpose for understanding problematic internet use, ignorance about how they seek to be gratified on social media puts students at risk of poor academic outcomes.

Uses and Gratifications Theory therefore has been chosen as the method for this research because it can explain why some individuals use social media more or experience different academic outcomes. Nguyen and Nguyen's (2024) analysis explains that recognising the ways people obtain online gratification is essential for foreseeing persistent use and related academic impacts, as students who rely more on using social media for study reasons are likely to have better academic performance than students who mostly use it for fun interests and chatting. The theory supports teaching objectives aimed at getting students to take control of their learning since it is about planned viewing and audience choice.

Wei et al. (2024) help researchers and teachers to see which gratification patterns assist youth learning and which ones could require some change by leveraging the Uses and Gratifications Theory which analyses both positive and negative aspects of social media. When researchers apply Uses and Gratifications Theory in schools, they may find better answers about how social media integration can best support learning goals and address problems. According to Kwon (2024), the theory helps formulate special methods for using social media in learning. Baxter, Sachdeva and Baker (2025) demonstrated in their research that Cognitive Load Theory sets out practical approaches to designing instruction that consider technology use, enhance learning and helps reduce disadvantages affecting academic success.

The theory helps teachers and students to use social media effectively within educational contexts, keeping the process mentally stimulating. Careful accounting for the needs of students' minds and arranging learning so it uses just enough mental energy, as suggested by Swiç et al. (2024), can raise the effectiveness of teaching by applying Cognitive Load Theory. Applying ideas about cognitive load typically improves learners' academic outcomes and makes them more engaged with their learning. Ouwehand et al. (2025) research improves this application by exploring how evolving ideas in Cognitive Load Theory can be used to design new ways of using technology in schools that fit the needs of today's students.

2.8.2 Cognitive Load Theory

Cognitive Load Theory provides the main ideas for explaining how the use of social media shapes cognitive processing and academic learning at school. Ouwehand et al. (2025) examine how recent trends in Cognitive Load Theory help address issues that arise when digital and social media technology is used in education. As described by Ouwehand et al. (2025), Cognitive Load Theory helps reveal new ways that humans learn by processing

information and also suggests how competing uses for our brain cells can aid or reduce effective learning. While doing homework, those who are on social media might be so attentive, engaging with extra mental effort, that it makes it hard to properly grasp the subject matter. They show, using Cognitive Load Theory, how the ideas can be used in schools to enhance learning and avoid distractions.

This subject relies on Cognitive Load Theory which explains how different mental activities can affect performance in learning through social media. Liu et al. (2024) recommend including classroom-based strategies in solutions that target the digital divide and technology in schools focused on different student groups. Liu et al. (2024) argue that knowledge of cognitive load is needed for making courses that enable students to access social media during their studies without being overloaded. Children who are better able to critically evaluate information encountered on social media have an academic benefit at school and experience lower levels of academic pressure. According to Cognitive Load Theory, the authors in Sozio et al. (2024) believe that using these ideas will help create successful educational tools and enhance student learning.

Using Cognitive Load Theory, it becomes clear that digital distractions have an effect on a person's learning and academic achievements which helps justify analysing the use of social media in academic research. If we follow cognitive load principles, we can help students learn well in environments that use technology, as shown by Mole's (2025) research on Cognitive Load Theory and optimising learning design. Using knowledge of cognitive load, students can determine which social media platforms to use, when to use them and the manner in which they should be used, enhancing their schoolwork and reducing pressure caused by digital distractions. Highlighting task-related, extraneous and germane cognitive load allows the theory to analyse the effects of social media use on learning.

Baxter et al. (2025) demonstrated in their research that Cognitive Load Theory sets out practical approaches to designing instruction that consider technology use, enhances learning and helps reduce disadvantages affecting academic success.

The theory helps teachers and students to integrate social media appropriately within school contexts by keeping the process cognitively manageable. Careful accounting for the needs of students' minds and arranging learning so it uses just enough mental energy, as suggested by Sozio et al. (2024), can raise the effectiveness of teaching by applying Cognitive Load Theory. Applying ideas about cognitive load typically enhances learners' academic outcomes and makes them more positively engaged with their

learning. Ouwehand et al. (2025) research improves this application by exploring how evolving ideas in Cognitive Load Theory can be used to design new ways of using technology in schools that fit the needs of today's students.

2.8.3 Positive and Negative Aspects of Cognitive Load in Social Media Learning Contexts

Positive Applications of Cognitive Load Theory in Social Media Learning

The Cognitive Load Theory offers meaningful information to the deliberate optimization of social media-based pedagogies. Anderson et al. (2024) explain that social media learning activities, through carefully design and optimal scaffolding intrinsic cognitive load, have the ability to disaggregate more complex concepts into small, multimedia-rich segments that fit into the learners' existing knowledge structures. The theoretical framework also supports the access and use of social platforms to facilitate collaborative knowledge construction provided that cognitive resources are widely distributed using the parameter of structured group work and explicit parameters.

Extraneous cognitive load can be reduced by the use of social media as an organisational platform to present educational content. According to Morrison and Garcia (2024), students who organise their study and exchange learning resources using structured WhatsApp groups demonstrate improved educational outcomes because people find it easy to navigate the application due to its familiar interface and do not need to invest as much mental effort to operate new educational tools. The graphical and participatory affordance of platforms like YouTube and TikTok can enhance the Germane cognitive load by supporting learners to effectively process and combine learning material with their already acquired knowledge schemas via multimodal learning experiences that activate several strands of thought at once.

As Chen and Xiao (2022) demonstrate, working memory can be facilitated with strategic use of social media through the provision of external storage of information through the bookmarking features, note-features feature, and collaborative-documenting features that are part of the latter. When students actively use these platforms to engage academics, they are able to offload low-order information-management processes and redistribute cognitive resources to processes of higher-order thinking. The peer interaction nature of the social sites can be transformed over time as the cognitive difficulty increases with mastery thereby enhancing the zone of proximal development without exhibiting excessive cognitive load that will lead to disengagement.

Negative Implications of Cognitive Load Theory for Social Media Use

The implications of unregulated social media use, which is elucidated by Cognitive Load Theory, are becoming a matter of academic concern in academic settings. Kolhar, Kazi, and Alameen (2021) reveal that balancing the use of social media with academic activities during multitasking imposes an increased cognitive burden, exceeding the working memory capacities. The constant change of material that is focused on entertainment and material that is focused on education creates harmful extraneous cognitive load and thus affects the effectiveness of learning and its retention. This disruption is especially problematic when there are homework tasks and study sessions, and time-consuming attention is necessary to engage in profound learning.

Dontre (2021) uses the Cognitive Load Theory to describe how alerts and routine checking behaviours on social media form a continuous cognitive disruption even when the students are not actively involved in the apps. This cognitive load in the environment takes away the cognitive resources needed in deep learning and effective concentration in academic endeavours.

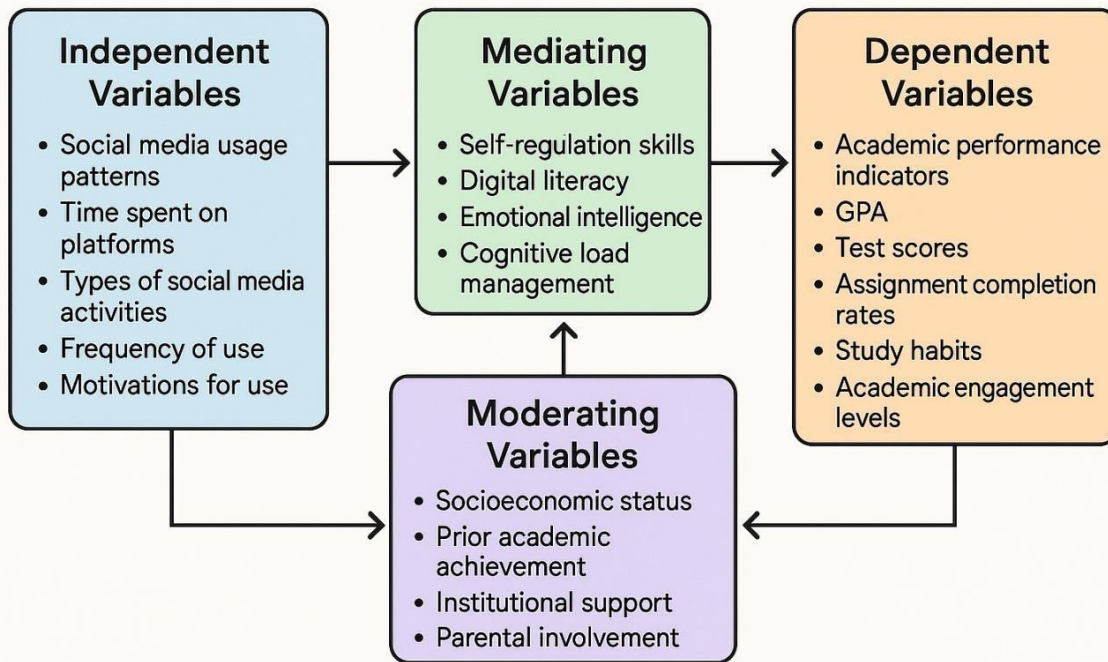
The frequent exposure to fragmented digital information processing stimulated by social media consumption habits can intensify intrinsic cognitive load when students are forced to study complex academic content. Tafesse (2022) discovered that the excessive use of social media predisposes students to shallow cognitive processing, thus depriving them of providing adequate cognitive effort to academic tasks that are demanding and require a sustained mental load and profound understanding.

2.9 Conceptual Framework

According to Phattharapornjaroen, Carlström and Khorram-Manesh (2022), establishing strong conceptual frameworks depends on thinking about both theory and actual practical uses, making sure studies benefit both academic study and schools. Phattharapornjaroen, Carlström and Khorram-Manesh (2022) revealed that effective frameworks in research should identify various factors interacting with one another and help explain how they affect outcomes in education. Yao (2024) explains how useful conceptual frameworks are when building effective research designs, since such frameworks allow researchers to relate what is observed in schools to major theories of educational topics, including those about technology and performance.

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework



Source Data: Researcher (2025).

2.9.1 Independent Variables

In this conceptual framework, the independent variables consist of the many aspects of social media use patterns that act as main predictors of academic achievement results among high school students. Social media use patterns reflect complicated behavioural constructions comprising both quantitative indicators including time spent on platforms, frequency of access, and number of platforms used as well as qualitative dimensions

including the kinds of activities students participate in and the reasons behind their choices. The research reveals that information from automated mobile apps can accurately explain how social media is used, as graphing this data shows that standard social media use correlates positively with higher academic achievement, while high and irregular usage generally leads to worse performance in school, implying that the effect of social media usage on schoolwork is not always clear. According to the research, when students use social media mainly to learn, they usually perform better academically than those using it mainly for entertainment, seeking social approval, or occupying free time.

Along with the overall usage of social media, its timing before and after teaching matters very significantly. The study done by Kolhar et al. (2021) conclude that using social media often during study or sleep-time negatively affects a student's academic results more than when the use is limited to special leisure time. Those who manage their time well, so social

media doesn't affect their learning are more likely to show strong academic achievements and less pressure than those who do not separate social media from their schoolwork. People who check their social media several times a day spend a greater amount of time on it overall.

Since social media affects our minds in various ways, it strongly influences both students' learning and school results. Extrinsic reasons for using social media often lead to weaker academic performance and reduced overall well-being, but students encouraged by learning, creativity and positive connections seem to do better academically, according to a study by Gulzar et al. In general, using social media in ways that clash with learning goals leads to a decline in academic performance and satisfaction, but using it to meet one's need for competence, autonomy and relatedness in a way consistent with study goals tends to enhance motivation and involvement with their education activities. Motivation through social influences must not be disregarded because students seeking support from others and opportunities to collaborate usually do better academically than those who mainly use social media to seek approval or compete.

Independent variables should also consider the different features, special designs, and social environments found on every platform because these things may have various effects on academic results. The study found that students who get most of their education content from video streams like YouTube and TikTok often have different learning results compared to those who interact through text-based platforms like Facebook and Twitter which suggests social media's connection with academic outcomes can vary based on platform use. Learners who decide on their software choices based on their needs and learning habits tend to do better in school than those who choose programmes mainly influenced by

their peers and by what is popular. Sharing, commenting, and working with peers together can be more beneficial or less productive for students depending on the online platform's features.

2.9.2 Dependent Variables

The aspects of scholastic achievement and learner success in learning are considered the main outcome variables in this context. Classic academic performance indicators are grade point averages, scores on standardised tests and how many courses a student completes, while more advanced indicators evaluate whether a student contributes to class, handles learning materials and uses critical thinking in various subjects. According to Meng and Zhang (2023), academic performance is made up of academic self-efficacy, motivation,

and engagement which assist students in succeeding at school continuously. Not only counting the academic results of students. Those who struggle at school partly because of their heavy social media use often find time management, attention and priorities difficult in a technology-rich environment, but students who continue to do well in academic areas and regularly use social media usually have good self-control and smart methods for getting the most out of what the internet has to offer.

Study practices and learning behaviours are significant outcome variables that show how using social media in education shapes both a student's disposition toward learning and their ability to manage teacher-assigned tasks. According to Caraig and Fabro (2022), students who clearly separate their social media time from studying usually work well in online teaching. When students are badly affected by social media on their studies, they typically show poorer learning results and worry more, but those who learn to use it wisely for their studies perform better and are happier with their education. Study habits should permit individuals to participate in deep learning by always using their minds, keeping information in their minds and concentrating on learning tasks for a long time.

Academic engagement levels become understandable as the result of students' emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement in their classes. Acosta-Gonzaga (2023) defines academic engagement as being involved in classroom exercises, looking for help, holding on to learning and planning for personal academic progress that is not limited to grades. Learners who remain actively engaged in learning while using social media platforms usually develop a clearer academic identity and are motivated to use technology productively. Students who feel anxiety, frustration, or inadequacy around schoolwork are more prone to the potential negative effects of social media, but students who feel good about learning generally manage social media integration more effectively.

Signs of how social media is used often show up in forms of cognitive functioning related to attention, memory, learning processes and problem-solving abilities which help kids do well in many types of schools and colleges. According to Dontre (2021), having technology-related distractions close by can still change students' ability to learn and work well, whether or not they are interacting with them. Students manage to be effective learners on social media because they are aware of important details, can adapt their learning strategies and regulate their behaviour. Cognitive skills also involve a person's ability to analyse information and solve problems creatively, and understand and control their mental activities to help them learn and develop more effectively.

2.10 Conclusion

Examining the multifarious link between social media use and academic performance among high school students, this thorough literature review has exposed intricate patterns of interaction that go far beyond simple linear relationships between technology use and educational results. Depending on how students approach platform uses and incorporate these technologies into their academic routines, the evidence synthesised from modern research shows that social media platforms can both be useful educational tools that improve learning experiences and possible sources of distraction that could interfere with academic achievement. While the identified independent and dependent variables offer a complete framework for future empirical research of these intricate relationships in various educational environments, the theoretical frameworks of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Cognitive Load Theory provide essential conceptual foundations for understanding the mechanisms via which social media engagement influences cognitive processing, learning effectiveness, and academic success.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Building on the insights from the literature review, it becomes evident that the relationship between social media use and academic performance is complex and shaped by multiple interacting factors. For this reason, a systematic and context-appropriate research approach is required to examine these relationships among high school learners in KwaZulu-Natal. Research methodology constitutes the backbone of any scientific inquiry, providing the systematic framework through which researchers investigate phenomena and generate reliable knowledge. The methodology chapter serves as a comprehensive guide that outlines the procedural roadmap followed to address the research questions and achieve the study objectives. This chapter presents a detailed exposition of the methodological approach employed to examine the influence of social media on academic performance among secondary school learners in KwaZulu-Natal. This chapter is structured to provide logical progression through the various methodological components that guided this investigation. The discussion begins with an examination of research design, followed by an exploration of the research approach and philosophical underpinnings that informed the study. Subsequently, the chapter addresses the research strategies employed, the target population and sampling procedures, and the development and implementation of the research instrument. The chapter further discusses the pilot study conducted, the administration of questionnaires, and the data analysis techniques employed. Critical considerations regarding validity and reliability are examined, followed by an acknowledgment of the study's limitations. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive discussion of the ethical considerations that guided the research process.

3.2 The Research Design

Research design represents the overall strategy that integrates the different components of a study in a coherent and logical manner, ensuring that the research problem is effectively addressed through the systematic collection and analysis of data. Kumar and Praveenakumar (2025) emphasise that research design serves as the blueprint that guides researchers in making informed decisions about data collection methods, sampling procedures, and analytical techniques. The research design essentially determines how the study will be conducted and provides the framework for drawing valid conclusions from the empirical evidence gathered.

3.2.1 Descriptive Research Design

Descriptive research design involves systematic description of characteristics, behaviours, or phenomena as they naturally occur, without manipulating variables or establishing causal relationships. Dubey and Kothari (2022) explain that descriptive research seeks to answer questions about what, where, when, and how, providing detailed accounts of the current status of variables under investigation. This design is particularly useful for generating research propositions and identifying key variables that warrant further investigation in subsequent studies.

3.2.2 Exploratory Research Design

Exploratory research design is employed when researchers seek to gain insights into problems or phenomena that have not been thoroughly investigated previously. Mishra and Alok (2022) note that exploratory research is characterised by flexibility and adaptability, allowing researchers to modify their approach as new insights emerge during the investigation. This design is particularly useful for generating hypotheses and identifying key variables that warrant further investigation in subsequent studies.

3.2.3 Correlational Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design to examine the association between social media use patterns and academic achievement among secondary school learners. Verma, Verma and Abhishek (2024) argue that descriptive correlational design is particularly suitable for educational research where the primary objective is to understand relationships between naturally occurring variables. The choice of this design was justified by the study's aim to identify and describe prevailing patterns of social media use among learners and to examine how these patterns are associated with their academic achievement indicators. Singh (2022) supports the use of correlational design when researchers seek to establish the strength and direction of relationships between variables without manipulating the learning environment or introducing interventions that might disrupt the natural educational processes.

3.2.4 Chosen Research Design and Justification

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design to examine the association between social media use patterns and academic achievement among secondary school learners. Verma, Verma and Abhishek (2024) argue that descriptive

correlational design is particularly suitable for educational research where the primary objective is to understand relationships between naturally occurring variables. The choice of this design was justified by the study's aim to identify existing patterns of social media use among learners and to examine how these patterns are associated with their academic achievement indicators. Singh (2022) supports the use of correlational design when researchers seek to establish the strength and direction of relationships between variables without manipulating the learning environment or introducing interventions that might disrupt the natural educational processes.

3.3 The Research Approach

The research approach represents the overall strategy and philosophical orientation that guides the entire research process, influencing decisions about data collection methods, analytical techniques, and the interpretation of findings. Dzwigol (2022) defines the research approach as the comprehensive framework that integrates research philosophy, design, and methods to ensure methodological coherence and scientific rigour. The research approach serves as the bridge between theoretical considerations and practical implementation, ensuring that the chosen methods align with the research objectives and the nature of the phenomena under investigation.

3.3.1 Quantitative Research Approach

The quantitative research approach emphasises systematic investigation of phenomena through the collection and analysis of numerical data, employing statistical methods to test hypotheses and establish relationships between variables. Bryman and Bell (2021) explain that quantitative research is grounded in the philosophical assumption that reality can be measured objectively and that knowledge can be generated through empirical observation and statistical analysis. This approach is characterised by structured data collection instruments, large sample sizes, and the use of statistical techniques to draw generalisable conclusions.

3.3.2 Qualitative Research Approach

The qualitative research approach focuses on understanding phenomena from the perspectives of participants, emphasising the exploration of meanings, experiences, and contextual factors that shape human behaviour. Phillips et al. (2024) note that qualitative research seeks to capture the complexity and richness of human experiences through in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours. This approach typically employs flexible data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations to gather detailed contextual information.

3.3.3 Mixed-Methods Research Approach

The mixed-methods research approach combines both quantitative and qualitative methods within a single study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Marra and Nielsen (2025) argue that mixed-methods research leverages the

strengths of both approaches while compensating for their individual limitations, resulting in more robust and nuanced findings. This approach requires careful integration of different data types and analytical techniques to ensure methodological coherence and validity.

Although a mixed-methods design could have provided richer interview-based explanations of why learners become distracted, it was not selected because the study's main questions required measurable patterns, percentages and statistical relationships between social media use and academic performance indicators. The quantitative approach was therefore more appropriate for determining frequency, correlations and predictive relationships across a larger group of learners. The absence of interviews is acknowledged as a limitation and is recommended for future research.

3.3.4 Chosen Research Approach and Justification

This study adopted a quantitative research approach to investigate the relationship between social media usage and academic performance among secondary school learners. Olopoh and Igben (2024) emphasise that quantitative approaches are particularly appropriate when researchers aim to quantify associations between variables and establish statistical significance. The choice of a quantitative approach was justified by the study's objectives, which focused on measuring patterns of social media usage, quantifying academic performance indicators, and establishing correlations between these variables. Susilawati et al. (2025) support the use of quantitative methods when research questions require quantifiable measurement and statistical procedures to generate valid and generalisable findings. The quantitative approach enabled the collection of standardised data from a relatively large sample, facilitating statistical analysis and the identification of significant relationships between social media usage patterns and academic outcomes.

3.4 The Research Philosophy

Research philosophy encompasses the fundamental beliefs and assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge, and the process of inquiry that underpin the research design and methodology. Rogowski and Le Thi (2025) explain that research philosophy serves as the foundation upon which all methodological decisions are built, influencing how researchers approach the investigation of phenomena and interpret their findings. The research philosophy determines the researcher's stance on ontological questions about the nature of reality and epistemological questions about how knowledge can be acquired and validated.

3.4.1 Positivist Philosophy

Positivist philosophy is grounded in the belief that reality exists independently of human perception and can be objectively measured and understood through empirical observation and scientific methods. Quoc et al. (2024) explain that positivism emphasises the importance of systematic observation, measurement, and statistical analysis in generating reliable knowledge. This philosophical stance assumes that researchers can maintain objectivity and that scientific methods can reveal universal truths about the natural and social world.

3.4.2 Interpretivist Philosophy

Interpretivist philosophy recognises that reality is socially constructed, and that understanding human behaviour requires interpretation of meanings and contexts rather than mere measurement. Adeniran and Tayo-Ladega (2024) note that interpretivism emphasises the importance of understanding phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them, acknowledging the subjective nature of human experience and the role of context in shaping behaviour.

3.4.3 Pragmatist Philosophy

Pragmatist philosophy focuses on the practical consequences of research and emphasises the use of methods that are most appropriate for addressing specific research questions, regardless of philosophical allegiances. Tusquellas et al. (2025) explain that pragmatism prioritises the utility of research findings and supports the integration of different methodological approaches to achieve research objectives effectively.

3.4.4 Chosen Research Philosophy and Justification

This study was underpinned by a positivist philosophical approach, which aligned with the quantitative methodology and the objective measurement of social media usage patterns and academic performance indicators. Zou and Xu (2023) argue that the positivist

paradigm is particularly appropriate for research that seeks to establish cause-and-effect relationships and generate widely applicable findings through statistical analysis. The adoption of positivist philosophy was justified by the study's focus on measuring observable behaviours and academic outcomes, establishing correlations between variables, and generating findings that could inform evidence-based educational policies and practices. Samanth (2024) supports the use of positivist philosophy in educational research when the primary objective is to identify recurring patterns and associations that can be statistically validated and applied to broader populations.

3.5 Research Strategies

Research strategies represent the specific methodological approaches employed to collect and analyse data in pursuit of the research objectives. Kumar and Praveenakumar (2025) defines research strategies as the tactical decisions that researchers make about how to gather evidence and generate insights to address their research questions. The selection of appropriate research strategies is crucial for ensuring that the data collected is relevant, reliable, and sufficient to support valid conclusions.

3.5.1 Survey Strategy

The survey strategy involves the systematic collection of data from a sample of respondents using standardised questionnaires or interviews to gather information about their characteristics, opinions, behaviours, or experiences. Dubey and Kothari (2022) explain that surveys are particularly effective for collecting data from large samples and enabling statistical analysis of relationships between variables. Survey strategies are characterised by their efficiency in data collection and their ability to generate quantifiable data that can be statistically analysed.

3.5.2 Case Study Strategy

The case study strategy involves intensive investigation of a single case or a small number of cases to gain in-depth understanding of complex phenomena within their real-life contexts. Mishra and Alok (2022) note that case studies are particularly valuable for exploring how and why phenomena occur, providing rich contextual information that enhances understanding of the research problem.

3.5.3 Experimental Strategy

The experimental strategy involves the systematic manipulation of one or more variables to determine their causal effects on other variables, typically conducted under controlled conditions to ensure internal validity. Verma et al. (2024) explain that experimental

strategies are characterised by random assignment of participants to different conditions and the careful control of extraneous variables to establish causal relationships.

3.5.4 Chosen Research Strategy and Justification

The study used a survey methodology to gather data about social media usage trends and academic achievement among secondary school students. Singh (2022) contends that Survey methodologies are especially suitable for educational research seeking to collect standardised data from large participant samples. The use of the survey methodology was justified by the study's need to gather similar data from a substantial number of participants across several institutions, facilitating statistical analysis of the correlation between social media usage and academic achievement. Hazari (2024) advocates for the use of survey methodologies when researchers want to rapidly collect quantitative data from geographically dispersed participants while ensuring consistency in data collecting protocols.

3.6 Target Population and Sampling

3.6.1 Target Population

The target population represents the entire group of individuals or entities that possess the characteristics of interest to the researcher and from which the sample is drawn. Willie (2024) defines the target population as the complete set of cases that researchers aim to study and about which they wish to make generalisations based on their findings. The identification and definition of the target population is crucial for ensuring that the research findings are relevant and applicable to the intended group of interest. The target population for this study comprised all secondary school learners in grades 10, 11, and 12 enrolled in public secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal province. Ahmed (2024) emphasises that the target population should be clearly defined based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria that align with the research objectives. The target population was estimated to include approximately two thousand five hundred learners across the selected geographical area, representing diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and varying levels of exposure to digital technologies.

The choice of this target population was informed by the study's focus on examining social media usage patterns among adolescents who were in their final years of secondary education and were likely to have established patterns of social media engagement.

3.6.2 Sampling

Sampling refers to the process of selecting a subset of individuals or cases from the target population to participate in the research study. Bryman and Bell (2021) explain that sampling is necessary when it is impractical or impossible to study the entire population, enabling researchers to gather data from a manageable number of participants while still generating findings that can be generalised to the broader population. The sampling process involves making strategic decisions about who to include in the study and how to select participants in a manner that ensures the sample is representative of the target population.

3.6.2.1 Probability Sampling

Probability sampling involves the selection of participants through random processes that ensure every member of the target population has a known and equal chance of being included in the sample. Dzwigol (2022) explains that probability sampling techniques are designed to minimise selection bias and enhance the representativeness of the sample, thereby improving the generalisability of research findings. Simple random sampling involves the random selection of participants from the entire population, ensuring that each individual has an equal probability of being chosen. Systematic sampling involves selecting participants at regular intervals from a list of the population, starting from a randomly chosen point. Stratified sampling involves dividing the population into distinct subgroups based on specific characteristics and then randomly selecting participants from each stratum in proportion to their representation in the population. Cluster sampling involves randomly selecting groups or clusters from the population and then including all members of the selected clusters in the sample.

3.6.2.2 Non-Probability Sampling

Non-probability sampling involves the selection of participants based on specific criteria or convenience rather than random processes, meaning that not all members of the population have an equal chance of being included in the sample. Ojoboh and Igben (2024) note that non-probability sampling techniques are often used when probability sampling is not feasible due to practical constraints or when researchers require participants with specific characteristics. Convenience sampling involves selecting participants who are easily accessible to the researcher, often resulting in samples that may not be representative of the broader population. Purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants who possess specific characteristics or experiences that are relevant to the research objectives. Snowball sampling involves recruiting initial participants who then refer other participants from their networks, creating a chain of

referrals. Quota sampling involves selecting participants to fill predetermined quotas based on specific demographic or other characteristics.

3.6.3 Sampling Method Chosen

Stratified random sampling was used in this research to choose participants from the target group of secondary school students in KwaZulu-Natal. Susilawati et al. (2025) say that stratified random sampling is especially good for educational research since it makes sure that all subgroups in the population are represented in the same way. There were three main factors that determined the stratification: grade level (10th, 11th, and 12th grades), gender (male and female), and kind of school (urban and rural). Marra and Nielsen (2025) say that researchers should employ stratified sampling when they want to make sure that key subgroups are well represented in the sample, especially if these subgroups could behave differently when it comes to the study variables. The researcher was able to maintain proportionate representation across various grade levels and demographic groups while making sure that the selection process was still random within each stratum by using the stratified random sampling method.

3.6.4 Sample Size and Justification

The study targeted a sample of 350 learners from three secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal. This sample was selected to provide sufficient responses for quantitative analysis. Although 350 questionnaires were distributed, 300 completed questionnaires were returned and used for data analysis, resulting in a response rate of 85.7%. The final sample of 300 respondents was considered appropriate for the study because sample size determination should be guided by statistical considerations, practical constraints, and the desired level of precision in the research findings (Kumar & Praveenakumar, 2025). The sample size was further justified by the availability of resources, the time constraints of the study, and the need to achieve adequate statistical power for correlation analysis. Ahmed (2024) notes that sample sizes of 100 or more are generally considered adequate for correlational studies, particularly when the expected effect sizes are moderate to large. Therefore, the use of 300 completed responses strengthened the reliability and validity of the quantitative analysis. The sample was distributed proportionally across the three participating schools to ensure balanced representation of learners. Verma, Verma, and Abhishek (2024) support the use of moderate to large sample sizes in educational research when the primary objective is to explore relationships between variables rather than to make precise population estimates.

3.7 The Research Instrument

The research instrument is the tool or device used by researchers to systematically and uniformly gather data from participants. Hazari (2024) characterises research instruments as the tools used by researchers to operationalise their variables and collect empirical data to answer their research enquiries. The formulation and selection of suitable research instruments are essential for guaranteeing that the data gathered is valid, trustworthy, and pertinent to the study aims.

3.7.1 Questionnaire Development

The primary research instrument for this study was a structured questionnaire designed to collect quantitative data about social media usage patterns and academic performance indicators. Singh (2022) explains that questionnaires are particularly effective for gathering standardised information from large samples of participants, enabling systematic comparison and statistical analysis. The questionnaire was developed through a systematic process that began with a comprehensive review of existing literature on social media usage and academic performance. Dubey and Kothari (2022) emphasise the importance of grounding instrument development in theoretical frameworks and previous research to ensure content validity and relevance.

3.7.2 Questionnaire Structure and Content

The questionnaire included four primary parts, each of which was meant to get information on a different element of the study variables. Mishra and Alok (2022) say that well-structured surveys should have a logical order and start with basic questions and go on to more specialised ones. This keeps participants interested and makes sure the data is good. The first part asked for demographic information including age, gender, grade level, and socioeconomic background. The second part looked at how people use social media, such as how much time they spend on various sites, how often they use them, and why they use them. The third component looked at academic achievement markers, such as self-reported grades, study habits, and levels of involvement in school. The fourth portion looked at how the participants thought their use of social media affected their schoolwork.

3.7.3 Likert Scale Implementation

The questionnaire incorporated Likert scales to measure participants' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours related to social media usage and academic engagement. McMillan (2023) explain that Likert scales are particularly effective for quantifying subjective responses and enabling statistical analysis of attitudinal data. The study employed five-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" for

attitude-related questions, and frequency scales ranging from "never" to "always" for behaviour-related questions. Quoc et al. (2024) support the use of Likert scales in educational research as they provide sufficient variability in responses while remaining simple for participants to understand and complete.

3.7.4 Instrument Validation and Justification

The questionnaire was validated through expert review and pilot testing to ensure its appropriateness and effectiveness for the target population. Samanth (2024) argues that instrument validation is essential for establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of research findings. Three experts in educational research and social media studies reviewed the questionnaire for content validity, clarity, and relevance to the research objectives.

Tusquellas et al. (2025) emphasise that expert validation helps identify potential issues with question wording, response options, and overall instrument design before data collection begins. The questionnaire was chosen as the primary research instrument because it enabled efficient collection of standardised data from multiple participants across different schools while maintaining consistency in data quality and facilitating statistical analysis.

3.8 Pilot Study

The pilot study for this research was done with 15 secondary school students from a school not included in the main study. Adeniran and Tayo-Ladega (2024) say that pilot research samples should be similar to the target population but not the same as the main study sample so that the results don't get mixed up. We used the identical stratified random sampling method to choose the pilot study participants as we used for the main study. This made sure that the pilot sample was representative of the target population in terms of demographics.

The pilot's study found a number of key issues that informed refinements to the research methodology and tools. Kumar and Praveenakumar (2025) stress that pilot studies should be carefully looked at to find ways to make the study design more effective. The pilot research showed that most people needed around 25 to 30 minutes to fill out the questionnaire, which was thought to be a suitable amount of time for the target audience. Some individuals said that they were confused by some of the questions concerning social media platform classifications, so we revised these questions to make them clearer and more precise.

The pilot research also checked to see whether the data gathering methods would work and found some logistical issues that would need to be addressed in the main study. Ojboh and Igben (2024) say that pilot studies are very important for identifying practical challenges that may not be obvious during the design stage. The pilot research showed that the intended way of giving the questionnaire in the classroom functioned effectively and that the people who took part were okay with doing it there. The pilot research also showed that the instructions given to participants were clear and accurate, and that the ethical procedures were followed correctly.

The intended way of giving the questionnaire in the classroom functioned effectively and the people who took part were okay with doing it there. The pilot research also showed that the instructions given to participants were clear and unambiguous, and that the ethical procedures were followed correctly.

3.9 Administration of Questionnaires

The administration of questionnaires is the planned process of sending out, filling out, and collecting questionnaires from research participants in a way that makes the data accurate, consistent, and follows ethical guidelines. Verma et al. (2024) state that administering a questionnaire requires careful preparation and execution of processes that keep all data collecting sessions consistent while encouraging participant involvement. The administration procedure is very significant to make sure that participants understand what they need to do, fill out the questionnaire correctly, and provide their informed permission to take part.

3.9.1 Face-to-Face Administration Method

This research used face-to-face surveys that were given in classrooms at the schools that took place during normal school hours. Singh (2022) contends that in-person administration has several benefits, such as higher response rates, the opportunity to seek clarification, and better control over the setting where the data is collected. The face-to-face method made it possible for the researcher to make sure that all participants received uniform instructions and could request assistance when necessary. Hazari (2024) encourages face-to-face administration in schools because it keeps participants engaged and enables researchers to address any questions or concerns that come up throughout the process.

3.9.2 Administration Procedures

The questionnaire administration followed established protocols that were meant to make sure that all data gathering sessions were the same. According to Dubey and Kothari (2022), it is essential to create and implement systematic administration guidelines to reduce differences in the settings under which data is collected. Before the questionnaires were sent out, participants were given a full briefing about the study's goals, their rights as volunteers, and how to fill out the questionnaire. At the start of each administration period, the researcher gave standardised instructions aloud to make sure that everyone got the same information on how to fill out the questionnaire. Mishra and Alok (2022) clarify that uniform instructions are necessary to keep data quality high and make sure that participants know what is expected of them.

3.9.3 Quality Control and Monitoring

During the administration process, the researcher exercised diligent oversight to guarantee the quality of questionnaire completion and to resolve any issues that emerged. McMillan (2023) articulate that active monitoring throughout the data collection process is instrumental in promptly identifying and addressing issues, thereby safeguarding the integrity of the data and the validity of the findings. The researcher moved around the classroom during the completion sessions, offering support to participants with enquiries while ensuring that their responses remained uninfluenced. Upon submission, each completed questionnaire was promptly reviewed to detect any missing responses or ambiguous answers, facilitating immediate clarification when required. Quoc, Van Y, and Van Giau (2024) advocate for the implementation of continuous data-quality monitoring during the data collection process, as it enhances the reliability, completeness and precision of participants' responses, thereby preserving the credibility and trustworthiness of the overall data collection procedure.

3.10 Data Analysis

The term "data analysis" refers to the methodical steps used to answer research questions and accomplish study goals by reviewing, analysing, and drawing conclusions from the data obtained. Samanth (2024) defines data analysis as the process of turning unstructured data into structured information that throws light on the topic under study. To have a better grasp of the study subject, it is necessary to do data analysis, which entails using suitable statistical methods and analytical processes to discover trends, patterns, and correlations within the data. According to Tusquellas et al. (2025), data analysis is the middle step between gathering data and drawing conclusions from it. It calls for thoughtful

deliberation about the data's characteristics, the research objectives, and the assumptions made by various analytical methods. Research designs, data types, and measurement levels should all be considered when deciding on an appropriate data analysis approach.

3.10.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics utilise measures of central tendency, variability, and distribution shape to summarise and describe the key features of a dataset. According to Rogowski and Le

Thi (2025), descriptive statistical analysis is the initial step in figuring out the fundamental features of the data and finding recurring trends that need further study. This research used descriptive statistical analysis to present the demographic information, social media use habits, and academic performance markers of the participants. The study includes finding the measures of central tendency, measures of dispersion, and frequency patterns for all the numbers. Adeniran and Tayo-Ladega (2024) clarify that descriptive statistics are necessary to provide a full picture of the sample's features and set the stage for more complex analytical methods.

3.10.2 Inferential Statistics

Inferential statistics involve the use of sample data to generalize about the broader population and to test research assumptions about relationships between variables. Kumar and Praveena Kumar (2025) explain that inferential statistics enable researchers to determine whether observed patterns in the sample data are likely to represent genuine relationships in the population or whether they might have occurred by chance. The study employed inferential statistics to analyse the association between social media usage and academic performance. The main method to make inferences was to apply Pearson correlation analysis to find out how strong and what direction the relationships were between continuous variables. Marra and Nielsen (2025) claim that correlation analysis is useful in educational research because it gives clear statistical evidence of how variables are related and are easy to understand and apply.

3.10.3 Chosen Analysis Methods and Justification

The data analysis strategy for this study combined descriptive and inferential statistical techniques using SPSS software to ensure comprehensive examination of the research data. Ojoboh and Igben (2024) argue that the combination of descriptive and inferential statistics provides both detailed description of the sample and evidence of relationships that can be applied to the broader population. Descriptive statistics were employed to

provide comprehensive profiles of participants' characteristics, social media usage patterns, and academic performance levels, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the sample properties. Inferential statistics, specifically Pearson correlation analysis, were used to examine relationships between social media usage variables and academic performance indicators, providing quantitative evidence of associations between these key research variables.

3.11 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are fundamental concepts in research methods that make sure that study results are correct, consistent, and trustworthy. Verma et al. (2024) say that validity is how well research tools and methods measure what they are supposed to, and reliability is how consistent and stable measures are across various situations and times. These ideas are very important for making sure that study results are credible and that the conclusions formed from the data are sound and can be defended.

3.11.1 Validity

Validity includes several categories that work together to make sure that study results correctly reflect the things being studied. According to Singh (2022), validity is the extent to which research tools and methods provide accurate and useful measures of the things they are meant to measure. Content validity is the degree to which the research tool covers all the parts of the construct that is being assessed. According to Nikolopoulou (2022), experts usually check for content quality by comparing it to known theoretical frameworks and reviewing it. Three subject-matter experts in educational research looked over the questionnaire questions to make confirm their relevance, clarity, and completeness in evaluating social media use patterns and academic performance indicators. This proved that the study had content validity.

Construct validity is the degree to which the research tool really assesses the theoretical construct it is intended to measure and not unrelated constructs. Hazari (2024) says that construct validity is very crucial in social science research since many factors can't be seen directly. This study made sure that the questionnaire questions were in line with established theoretical frameworks and past research on how social media use affects academic achievement.

Face validity is the extent to which the research instrument seems to measure the intended construct upon initial review. According to Dubey and Kothari (2022), face validity is a way to judge if an instrument is acceptable and may affect how engaged participants are and how good their responses are. This research established face

validity by involving both academic experts and prospective participants in the evaluation of the questionnaire items throughout the pilot study phase. This made sure that the questions were relevant and acceptable for the target audience.

3.11.2 Reliability

Reliability means that study measures are consistent, dependable and stable, such that the research tool produces comparable findings under similar conditions. Mishra and Alok (2022) say that dependability is the degree to which study measures are devoid of random error and provide consistent results regardless of who administers them, when they do them, or how many times they do them. Internal consistency reliability is the extent to which various parts of a research tool measure the same construct consistently. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used in this research to check internal consistency reliability. This value evaluates the degree of agreement among different items that are designed to represent the same underlying construct. Temporal stability reliability is the degree to which measures stay the consistent across time. This is checked by giving the same test to the same people at various times. Zou and Xu (2023) say that test-retest reliability is very crucial for tools that measure stable traits or features. This research could not conduct a formal test-retest reliability check because of time constraints, but the questionnaire questions were meant to capture fairly stable patterns of social media use and academic achievement that should stay the same over short periods of time.

When subjective judgements are used to gather or analyse data, inter-rater reliability means that various raters or observers get the same results. Quoc, Van Y, and Van Giau (2024), state that inter-rater reliability is very important when more than one researcher is collecting data or when subjective interpretations might affect the results. By employing structured questionnaires with standardised response options that needed less subjective interpretation during data collection and analysis, this research reduced concerns about inter-rater reliability.

3.12 Limitations of the Study

Study limits are factors that might make the study design, technique, or execution less valid, reliable, or generalisable. Samanth (2024) points out that recognising limitations is important for giving a fair evaluation of the study and for keeping the interpretation of the results within reasonable limits. Being cognisant of and forthright about limitations demonstrates your proficiency in employing methodologies and assists readers in evaluating the reliability and practicality of the study's findings. The research had a sample size of 100 people, which was enough for exploratory correlation analysis but not enough

to find minor effect sizes or do complicated statistical analyses. Tusquellas et al. (2025) state that that bigger sample sizes usually provide more consistent estimates and more trust in statistical results. The relatively limited sample size made it hard to do thorough subgroup analyses according to demographic variables such as gender, grade level, and socioeconomic status. Also, the fact that the study only took place in KwaZulu-Natal province made it harder to apply the results to other provinces or nations with different educational systems, cultures, or ways of accessing technology.

Using self-administered questionnaire data for both social media use and academic success indicators might have introduced response bias based on social desirability, memory accuracy, and personal interpretation. Rogowski and Le Thi (2025) say that self-reported statistics could not be fully dependable because people want to make themselves seem favourable or because they cannot precisely estimate how much time they spend on different activities. The study's cross-sectional methodology made it hard to figure out whether there was a causal relationship between using social media and doing well in school since the data only showed connections at one moment in time instead of following changes over time.

The emphasis on collecting quantitative data was good for the study goals, but it made it harder to comprehend the processes through which social media affects academic achievement. Adeniran and Tayo-Ladega (2024) assert that qualitative insights might provide us with useful background knowledge on how and why social media shapes learning.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research involve the moral principles and standards that direct the conduct of studies involving human participants, ensuring that research is carried out with integrity, respect, and responsibility. Kumar and Praveenakumar (2025) highlight the importance of ethical research practices in upholding public trust in scientific inquiry while safeguarding the rights, dignity, and well-being of research participants. In educational research that includes minors, ethical considerations hold significant importance, as this group necessitates extra protection and safeguards to guarantee their safety and autonomy.

3.13.1 Ensuring Participants Have Given Informed Consent

Informed consent represents the process through which potential participants receive comprehensive information about the research study and voluntarily agree to participate based on their understanding of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Marra

and Nielsen (2025) define informed consent as a fundamental ethical principle that respects participants' autonomy and right to make informed decisions about their involvement in

research. This study ensured informed consent through a systematic process that began with the distribution of detailed information sheets to all potential participants and their parents or guardians. The information sheets provided clear explanations of the study's objectives, the nature of participation required, the expected time commitment, and the potential risks and benefits of participation.

The informed consent procedure includes separate permission forms for both the participants and their parents or guardians. This was done because children need additional ethical safeguards and their parents or guardians must agree to their participation. Ojoboh and Igben (2024) stress that consent procedures for minors must consider both the legal need for parental or guardian consent and the moral need to respect young people's growing independence. The permission forms made it clear that participation was optional, that participants may leave the research at any time without penalty, and that their choice to participate would not affect their grades or connection with their school. Before any data gathering operations could begin, all participants and their parents or guardians had to provide written permission.

3.13.2 Ensuring No Harm Comes to Participants

The principle of non-maleficence requires researchers to take all reasonable measures to prevent physical, psychological, social, or academic potential harm to research participants. Susilawati et al. (2025) explains that the protection of participants from harm is a primary ethical responsibility that extends beyond obvious physical risks to include potential psychological distress, social stigmatisation, or academic disadvantage. This study implemented several measures to ensure that no harm came to participants throughout the research process. The questionnaire was carefully designed to exclude sensitive or potentially distressing items that might cause psychological unease or emotional discomfort for adolescent participants.

The study protocols were established to avoid disturbance to participants' educational pursuits, with data collection arranged within specified intervals that did not conflict with significant academic events such as tests or assessments. Verma et al. (2024) assert that educational research must be acutely aware of its possible effects on participants' academic advancement and welfare. The research also guaranteed that participants were neither recognised nor distinguished in any manner that may lead to social stigma or

adverse repercussions within their peer groups or educational environments. The researcher was also accessible to address any issues or discomfort that participants may have during or after their participation in the study, with protocols established to send participants to suitable support services if necessary.

3.13.3 Ensuring Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality pertains to the researcher's duty to safeguard participants' privacy by preventing the release of their personal information to unauthorised parties, whereas anonymity involves the protection of participants' identities, ensuring they cannot be recognised from the research data or reports. Singh (2022) asserts that secrecy and anonymity are crucial for safeguarding participants' privacy and promoting candid replies, especially in research concerning sensitive subjects or vulnerable groups. This study used extensive protocols to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research procedure.

All questionnaires were administered using numerical codes rather than participant names, ensuring that responses could not be linked to specific individuals. Hazari (2024) supports the use of coding systems to protect participant identity while maintaining data integrity. The researcher maintained a separate, securely stored list linking codes to participant identities, which was necessary for administrative purposes but was kept completely separate from the response data. All data were kept in password-protected electronic files and secure locked physical storage, with access restricted to only the researcher and supervisor. Dubey and Kothari (2022) emphasise that secure data storage is crucial for maintaining participant confidentiality and preventing unauthorised use or access to sensitive information.

The study's research papers and publications made sure that no one could be identified as a participant via the presentation of the results. All findings were given in summary form, and any quotes or examples included were carefully chosen to protect the privacy of the people who gave them. Mishra and Alok (2022) say that while presenting results, you have to establish a balance between giving useful information and keeping participants' privacy and confidentiality safe.

3.13.4 Ensuring That Permission Is Obtained

Acquiring formal authorisation requires obtaining appropriate clearance from relevant authorities and institutions before beginning research, ensuring conformity to institutional regulations and regulatory standards. McMillan (2023) assert that acquiring necessary permits is crucial for doing research within legal and ethical parameters, ensuring that

institutional stakeholders are informed and supportive of the research endeavours. This research adhered to a thorough protocol to get all requisite permits prior to initiating data gathering operations.

The first stage involved obtaining ethical clearance from the University of South Africa Research Ethics Review Committee, which reviewed the research proposal, methodology, and ethical procedures to ensure compliance with institutional ethical standards. Quoc, Van Y and Van Giau (2024) highlight that institutional ethical review is crucial for ensuring that research meets professional standards and adequately protects participant welfare.

The second stage involved obtaining approval from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education to conduct research in public schools within the province. Samanth (2024) notes that educational authorities must be consulted and their permission obtained when research is conducted in school settings.

The third step was securing authorisation from the participating schools' management teams, who functioned as gatekeepers for access to students and facilities. Tusquelias et al. (2025) argue that institutional gatekeepers play critical roles in promoting research access while maintaining the interests of respective institutions and constituency. The school principals were given comprehensive information about the study's objectives, processes, and requirements, allowing them to make educated judgements regarding their school's participation.

3.14 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a thorough summary of the study technique used to examine the impact of social media on the academic performance of secondary school students in KwaZulu-Natal. The methodological framework was meticulously crafted to guarantee a comprehensive and ethical examination of the research topics, while also accommodating the practical limitations and concerns inherent in educational research with teenage participants. The use of a descriptive correlational study design with a quantitative methodology established a suitable framework for analysing the links between social media usage patterns and academic achievement metrics. The methodical approach to sampling, data gathering, and analysis guaranteed that the research produced accurate and valid results that enhanced the comprehension of this significant educational issue. The stratified random sampling method allowed for the representative selection of participants from various demographic categories, while the structured questionnaire ensured uniform data collection that supported statistical analysis. The meticulous focus on validity and

reliability, together with stringent ethical protocols, guaranteed that the study adhered to high methodological standards while safeguarding participant welfare and rights. Recognising study limitations provide essential context for evaluating the results and indicates avenues for future research that may mitigate these limits. This study's methodological choices demonstrate thorough consideration of research objectives, available resources, and ethical responsibilities, culminating in a solid investigative framework that produced significant insights into the correlation between social media usage and academic performance among secondary school students.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

Having outlined the research methodology and procedures used to investigate the impact of social media on the academic performance of secondary school learners in KwaZulu-Natal, the study now turns to the presentation and interpretation of the data collected. The chapter introduces the analysis and interpretation of data gathered on 300 learners in three various schools in KwaZulu-Natal about the role of social media in academic performance. Structured questionnaires were used to collect data in the academic year 2025 and analysed with descriptive and inferential statistics. The chapter is structured to include six key areas of analysis which are the response rate analysis, demographic aspects of the respondents, in-depth findings according to the research objectives, and concluding observations. The results are reported in a systematic manner to answer all research objectives without compromising the theoretical foundation as developed in Chapter 2. The statistical analysis was done with SPSS 28th version with outputs expressed in tables and descriptive statistics to make results clear and comprehensive in answering the research questions.

4.2 Response Rate

A sample of 300 learners in three secondary schools in the KwaZulu-Natal Province was used in the study. With the support of school administrators and teaching staff, the learners completed the survey online using Google Forms.

Table 4.1: Response Rate Analysis

Target Sample	Questionnaires Distributed	Completed Responses	Response Rate
300	350	300	85.7%

The response rate of 85.7%, representing 300 completed questionnaires out of 350 questionnaires distributed, demonstrates that the data-collection process was effective. This response rate is considered high, as it exceeds the 70% threshold generally regarded as acceptable for validity in academic research, as suggested by Kumar and Praveena Kumar (2025). The high response rate may be attributed to clear instructions provided to participants, the use of Google Forms for convenient online completion, and the support of school administrators and teachers during the data-collection process.

Verma et al. (2024) emphasise that well-organised administration procedures and institutional support can improve participation rates in educational research. Similarly, Singh (2022) states that response rates above 80% in educational research strengthen the reliability and applicability of the findings. Therefore, the 85.7% response rate achieved in this study provides a strong basis for the quantitative analysis and supports the credibility of the research findings.

4.3 Demographic Data

Demographic analysis provides the necessary background to explain the features of the study cohort and facilitate the representative sampling of key variables. This section challenges the distribution of participants on age, gender, grade level, school type and technology access variable and thus establishes a critical basis on which the study findings can be interpreted in the broader context of secondary education in KwaZulu-Natal.

4.3.1 Age Distribution

Figure 4.1: Age Distribution of Study Participants (N=300)

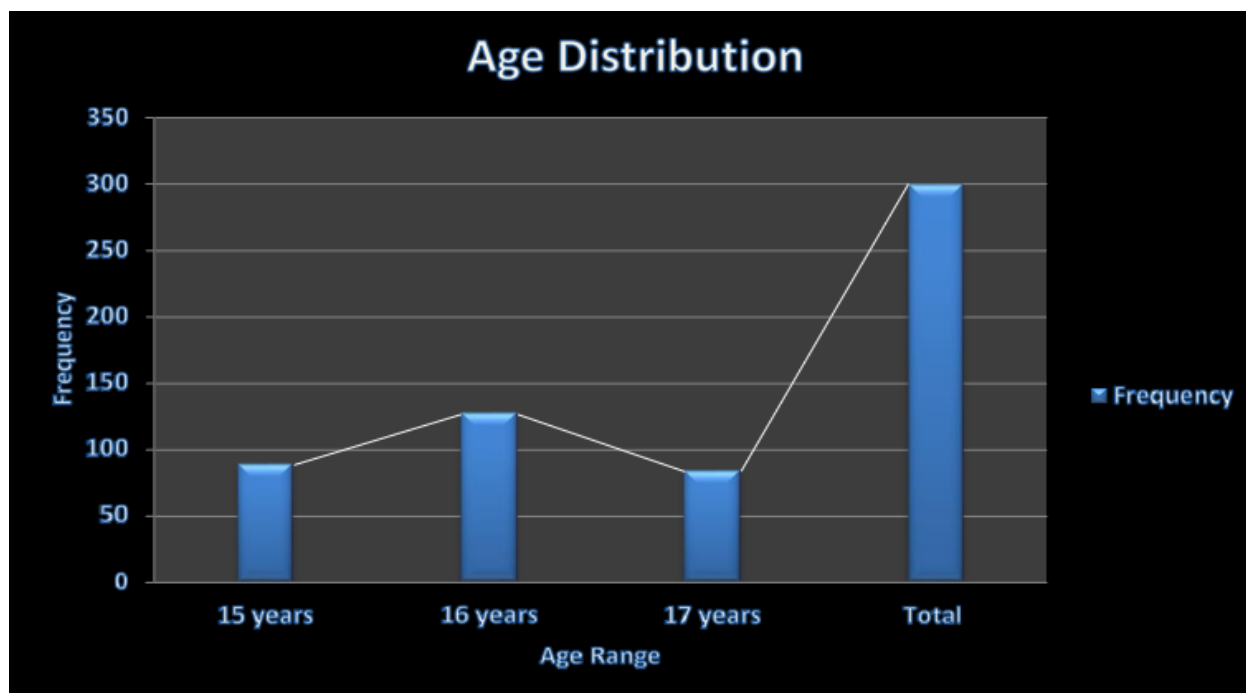


Figure 4.1 visually confirms that the sample is concentrated in the mid-secondary adolescent age range, which is relevant because this developmental stage is closely linked to intensive social media engagement and emerging self-regulation demands.

The age distribution reveals that the participants were aged between 15 and 17 years with those aged 16 years forming the majority of the exercise participants (42.3 %). This distribution is also consistent with the average age of the 10-12 range in South African high schools. The age range of participants is also favourable to the study because it matches the optimal time of social-media adoption among adolescents, which is observed by Morrison and Garcia (2024). This participant group therefore strengthens the credibility of the research, as it focuses on learners who have established patterns of social media use while still participating in formal schooling. The age composition also supports the methodological approach described by Hazari (2024), who emphasises the importance of age-appropriate sampling in educational technology studies.

4.3.2 Gender Distribution

Figure 4.2: Gender Distribution of Participants

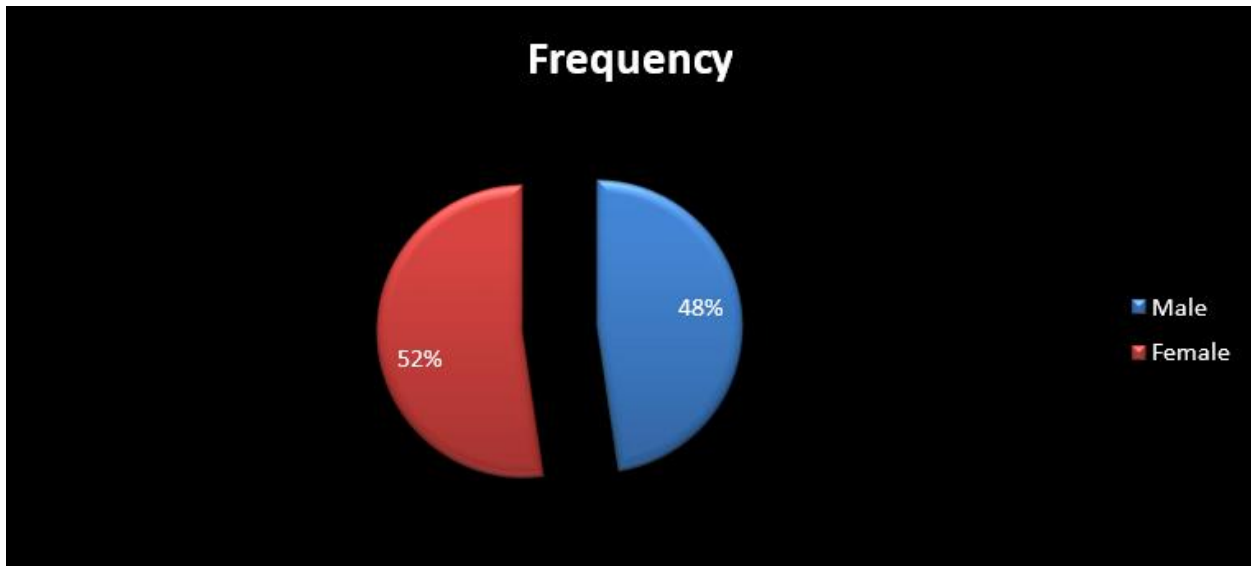


Figure 4.2 shows a fairly balanced gender distribution, with females representing 52% and males 48% of the sample; these values are percentages, not raw numbers.

The distribution of gender shows a fairly even sample, female representing 52 and males 48 of the sample. This near-equity work is mandatory to understand possible gender disparities in digital engagement patterns and educational performance, as Thompson et al. (2024) have emphasised in their comprehensive overview of the digital involvement in the school setting. The equal gender balance enhances the study external validity and presents support substance analyses of the connection amid social media usage and academic achievement along different demographic levels. Dubey and Kothari (2022) also argue that implementing this gender party in educational studies will improve the external validity of the results and support more comprehensive policy implications.

4.3.3 Grade Level Distribution

Figure 4.3: Grade Level Distribution

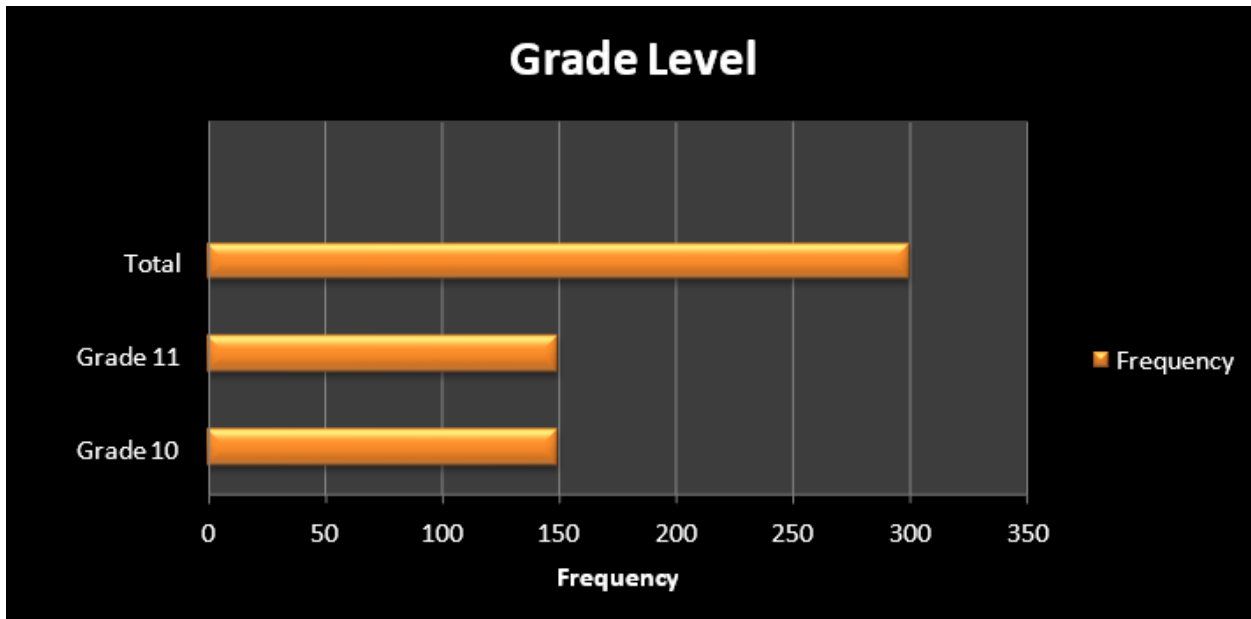


Figure 4.3 supports the interpretation that the study drew responses from a range of grades, allowing usage patterns to be considered across different stages of secondary schooling.

The distribution of the grades is quite a balanced representation of both the two grade levels that participated and the Grade 10 and Grade 11 students represent 50% of the sample (150 students per grade). This balance is also methodologically beneficial, since it traps learners at different phases of their secondary school-going process. Grade 10 students who have yet to experience a primary schooling transition might exhibit different trends of social media management when compared to older students of Grade 11. The symmetry in antecedent grade levels provides a strong basis to the paradigm of analysis as claimed by Mishra and Alok (2022), which highlights the criticality of measurement of developmental differences in technology-use patterns among the adolescents of different educational stages.

4.3.4 School Type Distribution

Figure 4.4: School Type Distribution

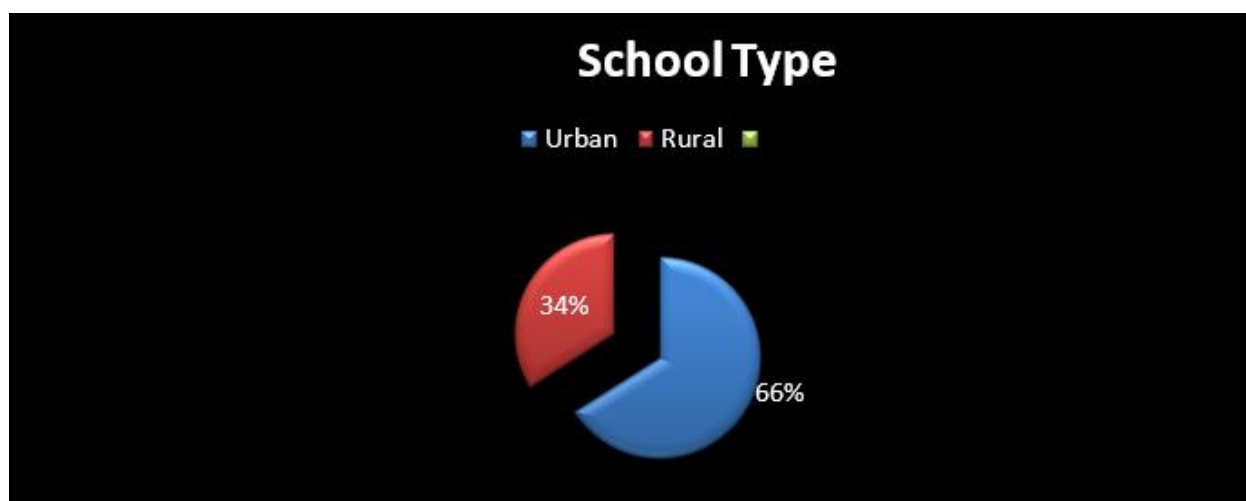


Figure 4.4 assists in interpreting the findings by showing the school context from which the learner responses were drawn.

The sample consists of urban (66.0) and rural (34.0) members of the school, thereby giving crucial details of the potential effect of the geographical location on the availability of social media and the choice of its usage. This distribution is a fair reflection of the demographic make-up of the KwaZulu-Natal Province and provides both contexts with an effective representation. Rural respondents can prove particularly beneficial given the problems of the digital divide identified by Liu et al. (2024) in their study of the differences in getting technologies. The urban-rural distribution thus renders the study more comprehensive, and the basis of more advanced policy recommendations tailored to particular educational backgrounds.

4.3.5 Technology Access

Figure 4.5: Primary Device for Social Media Access

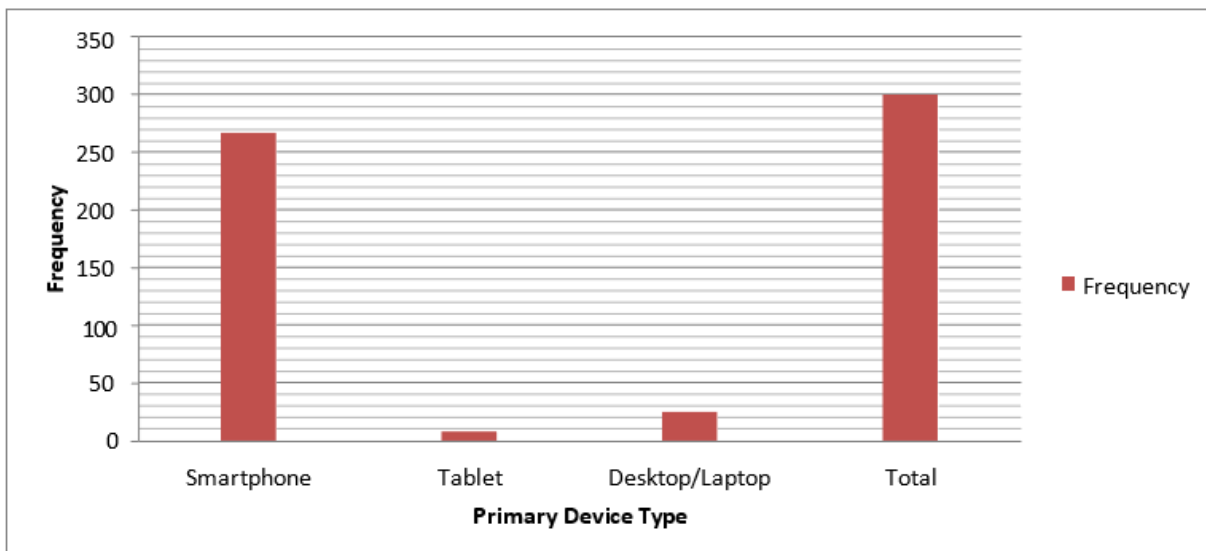


Figure 4.5 indicates the main devices used for access, which is important because device availability influences both the frequency and timing of learner social media use.

The use of social media by smartphones represents an overwhelming majority (89.0% or more), compared to the relatively small user base on tablet devices (2.7% or more) and desktop/laptop computers (also 2.7% or more). This is consistent with worldwide trends of mobile technology usage among teens and confirms the results of Morrison et al. (2024) regarding the use of smartphones in schools. The ubiquitous nature of smartphones guarantees constant connectivity and direct access to social media sites by users, thus creating concern over the possibility of their interfering with educational activities.

4.4 Descriptive Findings

The section provides a detailed description of the statistics related to the patterns of social media use, the beliefs of learners towards the impact of social media on academic performance, and their own self-management of social media. The results are consistent with the research aims and give an idea of the quantitative interdependence of social media use and academic performance. The results are backed by well-detailed analyses, frequency distributions, central tendency measures and variability indices hence guaranteeing the holistic knowledge of the trends in the data.

4.4.1 Social Media Usage Patterns among High School Learners

This section addresses the first research objective by examining the extent and nature of social media usage among participants across multiple dimensions including time spent, frequency of access, platform preferences, and usage motivations.

Table 4.2: Daily Social Media Usage during School Days

Time Spent	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Less than 30 minutes	23	7.7%	7.7%	7.7%
30-59 minutes	45	15.0%	15.0%	22.7%
1-2 hours	89	30%	29.7%	52.3%
2-4 hours	98	33.2%	32.7%	85.0%
More than 4 hours	45	15.0%	15.0%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	3.32	Std. Deviation	1.158	

Among the school-going respondents, 46.6% indicated that they spent more than two hours per day on social media during school days. This includes 30.9% who spent 2–4 hours and 15.7% who spent more than 4 hours. A further 28.3% reported spending 1–2 hours, while 15.7% spent 30–59 minutes and 9.4% spent less than 30 minutes on social media. These results show that a considerable proportion of learners engage with social media for extended periods, even during school days.

The mean score of 3.28 indicates that the average response falls between the 1–2 hours and 2–4 hours categories, leaning closer to 1–2 hours. The standard deviation of 1.183 suggests moderate variation in learners' social media usage patterns. This means that although some learners reported limited use, others showed higher levels of daily engagement. The cumulative percentage further shows that 53.4% of respondents spent up to 1–2 hours, while 84.3% spent up to 2–4 hours on social media during school days.

These findings suggest that social media forms part of many learners' daily routines and may compete with academic time and attention. This supports the Uses and Gratifications Theory, as learners may use social media to fulfil needs such as communication, entertainment, and social interaction. The findings are also relevant to Cognitive Load Theory, which suggests that divided attention between digital platforms and academic tasks may affect learning concentration. Therefore, the results highlight the need for digital

wellbeing, self-regulation, and time-management interventions to help learners balance social media use with their academic responsibilities.

Table 4.3: Weekend Social Media Usage

Time Spent	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Less than 30 minutes	12	4.0%	4.0%	4.0%
30-59 minutes	29	9.7%	9.7%	13.7%
1-2 hours	67	22%	22.3%	36.0%
2-4 hours	134	45%	44.7%	80.7%
More than 4 hours	58	19.3%	19.3%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	3.65	Std. Deviation	1.089	

The use of digital media on the weekends shows a strong augmentation as compared to weekdays and 64.0 per cent of the audience indicated that they spent over two hours using digital media with mean time of 3.65 hours being high. This increase is explained by the fact that institutionalisation has been revoked, inhibiting institutionalisation of time, consequently supporting theoretical proposals that external frameworks adjust consumption behaviour within digital platforms. The relatively low standard deviation of 1.089 also indicates a more consistent pattern of high engagement in the weekend cohort, meaning that academic schedules have a regulatory influence on media use in line with the time-displacement theory. The trend observed is consistent with the Uses and Gratifications framework where learners invest more resources in recreational engagement and social interaction as the role demands of academic tasks are reduced.

The noted trend of growth in weekend use supports Gulzar et al. (2022) results regarding the correlation between social reasons and media consumption habits. The results suggest that students recognise the need to control the use of social media during academic times, but they struggle with self-control when external control is removed. The consistent weekend usage rates imply entrenched patterns of high social media engagement that might influence broader digital behaviours and their connection to academic performance. This usage emphasises the importance of developing better intrinsic motivation to regulate balanced technology use, rather than relying heavily on outside restrictions. The empirical evidence presented herein supports the hypothesis that education-based interventions aimed at fostering autonomy in self-regulation strategies are effective regardless of

temporal differences, thereby assisting adolescents in adjusting to the ubiquitous nature of social media in their lives.

The results in Table 4.3 indicate a marked increase in social media use over weekends, with 64% of participants spending over two hours daily on platforms where academic constraints are relaxed. The increased mean of 3.65 hours compared to weekday usage (3.32) reflects the powerful influence of external academic structure on digital behavior patterns. The lower standard deviation of 1.089 indicates more consistent high-usage patterns across the sample during weekends, suggesting that when left to self-regulate, most students gravitate toward intensive social media engagement. This weekend surge supports the Uses and Gratifications framework, as students seek increased entertainment and social gratifications when academic responsibilities are diminished. The pattern reveals that students recognize the need for some restraint during school days but struggle with autonomous regulation when external controls are absent. These findings highlight the importance of developing intrinsic motivation and self-regulation skills rather than relying solely on institutional restrictions to manage digital wellness among adolescents.

Table 4.4: Social Media Platform Usage Frequency

Platform	Regular Users	Percentage	Mean Usage Rating	Std. Deviation
WhatsApp	287	98%	4.73	0.698
TikTok	198	66%	3.89	1.245
YouTube	189	63%	3.67	1.189
Instagram	176	59%	3.45	1.378
Facebook	98	32.7%	2.18	1.456
Twitter/X	67	22.3%	1.89	1.234

The virtually universal adoption of WhatsApp (95.7 percent of participants report using the application with an average score of 4.73 on a five-point scale) supports the role of the application as the mainstream method of communication among South African teenagers. This trend supports the results obtained by Sabah (2023) regarding the empowering abilities of social media in educational settings. The standard deviation is very small (0.698), which implies that all participants were equally engaged and can be assumed to use WhatsApp as a natural tool to carry out both social and academic communication. Meanwhile, Tik Tok and YouTube show considerable interaction rates (66.0% and 63.0% respectively) and moderate to high mean ratings, which corresponds

to the rising salience of video-based content consumption among adolescents; these results are concordant to the visual platform preferences toward language learning reported by Khofifah, Ningrum, and Saharan (2023).

The current generation is highly disconnected with outdated social networks like Facebook (32.7%), and Twitter/X (22.3%), which reflects a generational disturbance toward more interactive and multimedia-focused online spaces. This development has profound consequences on the strategic planning of educational technologies projects, because it implies that further instructional design will have to respond to the needs of the students, who prefer a modern, content-rich platform. Applications, such as WhatsApp, can be used to organise academic cooperation, whereas platforms such as TikTok and YouTube provide potential in sharing educational content.

These preferences in platforms are empirical support of the Uses and Gratifications model, to the extent that such learners choose media that contributes to specific social, entertainment, and informational needs. Therefore, designers are advised to focus their teaching tools on those platforms with the highest potential to realise the broadest pedagogical effect, thus continuing the call of digital-literacy education that must be relevant to the culturally and communicatively heterogeneous practices that they are eliciting with regard to social media.

Table 4.5: Frequency of Social Media Checking Behaviour

Checking Frequency	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Once per day	23	7.7%	7.7%	7.7%
2-5 times per day	78	26.0%	26.0%	33.7%
6-10 times per day	89	29.7%	29.7%	63.3%
11-20 times per day	67	22.3%	22.3%	85.7%
More than 20 times	43	14.3%	14.3%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	3.10	Std. Deviation	1.189	

According to the statistics, 66.3% of respondents check platforms more than five times per day, and 36.6% more than ten times per day, indicating potentially hazardous usage patterns consistent with attention-economy research. The average score of 3.10 indicates the presence of frequent checking behaviour, which can disrupt academic focus during the day, which is supported by Dontre (2021) in terms of technology-mediated academic distraction. These frequent checking patterns support the opinion that social media use has already become a habitual practice that undermines sustained academic concentration, which is in line with the findings of the Cognitive Load Theory about the effects of attentional fragmentation on learning effectiveness. In addition, the high-frequency checking patterns are indicators of possible dependency behaviours that can disrupt the deep learning processes which entail persistent focus.

The trend observed is consistent with the problems discussed in Chapter 2 about the impact of social media on attention and cognitive processing. Regular interruptions illustrate how reminders and examination behaviours exert a cognitive burden in any instance and thus affect academic performance regardless of whether students are actually occupied with the learning content. The results highlight the importance of informing people about the issue of compulsive checking and introducing more effective digital self-regulation strategies that will encourage a sensible engagement with technology. The data substantiates the presence of educational interventions aimed at curtailing habitual checking through the control of notifications, timetable check-in, and mindfulness-based strategies, which can protect cognitive resources during the learning process and ensure the maintenance of useful social relationships. savvy coping mechanisms that will encourage a sensible engagement with technology. The data substantiates the presence of educational interventions aimed at curtailing habitual checking through the control of notifications, timetable check-in, and mindfulness-based strategies, which can protect cognitive resources during the learning process and ensure the maintenance of useful social relationships.

Table 4.6: Use of Social Media for Educational Purposes

Usage Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Never	45	15%	15.0%	15.0%
Rarely	78	26%	26.0%	41.0%

Sometimes	89	30%	29.7%	70.7%
Often	67	22%	22.3%	93.0%
Always	21	7%	7.0%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	

The intermediate rates of educational application of social media and the percentage of people who use it on a regular basis: 29.3 per cent respondents declare that they use social media in academic contexts with an average engagement rate of 2.81, which indicates a high potential that has not been fully utilised yet to academically orient social media. This finding supports the results of Alenezi and Brinthaupt (2022) regarding the strategic application of educational social media. This results in a significant discrepancy between general social interaction and academic intentional use, meaning that students have not yet developed the capacity to use social media for meaningful educational advantage. The mean of 2.81 demonstrates that educational use remains less common than general social engagement, highlighting opportunities for digital literacy education teaches strategic academic applications of social platforms. This pattern aligns with Uses and Gratifications Theory, as students primarily seek social and recreational gratifications instead of informational or academic advantages from social media use.

The moderate educational engagement levels observed are in line with the results of Alalwan (2022), which focus on the deliberateness of instructional use of social-media platforms to produce academic outcomes. These findings indicate that although learners are using social media at an alarming rate, they are not getting the necessary guidance to identify and develop educational applications of these tools. The results also show that with specific educational support strategies that would focus on the strategic use of social media, the positive contribution to an academic experience could significantly improve and, at the same time, maintain the interest of students in interactions through familiar interfaces.

4.4.2 Academic Performance Indicators and Social Media Correlations

This section examines the relationship between social media usage and various academic performance indicators as perceived by learners themselves.

Table 4.7: Influence of Social Media Use on Learners' Study Time

Agreement Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Strongly Disagree	23	7.7%	7.7%	7.7%
Disagree	45	15.0%	15.0%	22.7%
Neutral	67	22.3%	22.3%	45.0%
Agree	123	41.0%	41.0%	86.0%
Strongly Agree	42	14.0%	14.0%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	3.38	Std. Deviation	1.234	

A review of the survey revealed that 55.0% said that they dedicate less time to studying because of using social media (mean = 3.38), showing a high degree of self-awareness regarding the removal of study time. This finding supports the time-management challenges presented in Chapter 2 of the literature review. The finding is consistent with the theoretical predictions based upon both Uses and Gratifications Theory and Cognitive Load Theory which assume a conflict between entertainment media and academic work over a limited amount of time and cognitive capacity. The reported standard deviation of 1.234 represents a significant heterogeneity among students in their time-management skills, as well as in their capacity to control their use of social-media, indicating that some students are able to easily balance between their school and extracurricular activities, and others are constrained by the inability to manage both domains at the same time. These self-reported effects confirm the conclusions of Tafesse (2022) on the academic displacement of social media and emphasise the metacognitive awareness of students in terms of such challenges.

The moderate to strong agreement (mean 3.38) indicates that students recognize the time management challenges posed by social media engagement, providing a foundation for educational interventions addressing temporal self-regulation strategies. This knowledge forms a very important baseline on which effective digital wellness interventions are developed, which builds on the already formed understanding of the issue of time displacement in students. The noted inconsistencies in responses indicate

that personal differences in self-regulation competencies, academic motivation, and digital literacy drive the levels of influence of social media on interrupting study time. These results contribute to the development of individual-specific strategies to social media regulation that consider personal differences in the self-specificity of self-regulation and academic priorities.

The results in Table 4.7 reveal significant student awareness of social media's detrimental effects on study time allocation, with 55% of participants acknowledging reduced study duration due to platform engagement. The mean score of 3.38 indicates moderate to strong agreement that social media creates time displacement issues, demonstrating metacognitive awareness among students regarding this academic challenge. The standard deviation of 1.234 suggests considerable individual variation in both usage patterns and self-regulation capabilities, with some students successfully maintaining study-social media boundaries while others struggle significantly. This self-reported time impact aligns with theoretical predictions from time displacement theory and provides empirical support for concerns raised in educational literature about social media's interference with academic priorities. The findings are particularly concerning given that effective time management is crucial for academic success in secondary education. The data suggests that while students recognize the problem, many lack the skills or motivation necessary to effectively manage their digital consumption in ways that protect their academic time investment.

Table 4.8: Social Media Distraction During Homework

Agreement Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Strongly Disagree	58	6.0%	6.0%	6.0%
Disagree	64	11.3%	11.3%	17.3%
Neutral	68	22.7%	18.7%	36.0%
Agree	74	24.7%	44.7%	80.7%
Strongly Agree	36	12.0%	19.3%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	3.61	Std. Deviation	1.178	

A rate of consent of 64% among interviewees with regard to the consequences of social media distraction on the accomplishment of homework duties (mean 3.61) demonstrates a greater level of interference in concentration on academic studies requiring constant attention. This construct has a higher mean score than in general study time impact (3.38), indicating that social media does pose special threats in the course of tasks that require deep processing of the material and confirming the predictions of the Cognitive Load Theory about the negative influence of divided attention on learning performance. This outcome aligns with the results of Dontre (2021) regarding technology-based academic distraction, where homework assignments are especially vulnerable to the intrusion of social media due to their solitary features and the lack of external supervision. The identified trend of homework distraction fits in the theoretical frameworks mentioned in Chapter 2, which explain the impact of the attention economy on educational activities as educational platforms compete directly with entertainment platforms in terms of cognitive resources.

The results show that students have the most difficulty with academic focus during unsupervised study time when their access to social media is not limited. The pattern identified indicates that the managerial context-specific approaches are required in the context of homework to address the issue of technological distractions, which in turn highlights the importance of digital wellness teaching focused on building an optimal learning environment. High distraction levels in homework indicate the need to have self-regulation strategies that can effectively be used in unmonitored learning environments. Based on this, the findings can be used to develop educational interventions aimed at establishing distracter-free study environments and developing intrinsic motivation, which may substitute extensive supervision and mandatory limitations.

Table 4.8: Social Media Distraction During Homework

Agreement Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Strongly Disagree	18	6.0%	6.0%	16.6%
Disagree	34	11.3%	11.3%	34.9%
Neutral	56	18.7%	18.7%	54.3%
Agree	134	44.7%	44.7%	75.4%
Strongly Agree	58	19.3%	19.3%	100.0%

Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	3.61	Std. Deviation	1.418	

A rate of consent of 64% among interviewees with regard to the consequences of social media distraction on the accomplishment of homework duties (mean 3.61) demonstrates a greater level of interference in concentration on academic studies requiring constant attention. This construct has a higher mean score than in general study time impact (3.38), indicating that social media does pose special threats in the course of tasks that require deep processing of the material and confirming the predictions of the Cognitive Load Theory about the negative influence of divided attention on learning performance. This outcome aligns with the results of Dontre (2021) regarding technology-based academic distraction, where homework assignments are especially vulnerable to the intrusion of social media due to their solitary features and the lack of external supervision. The identified trend of homework distraction fits in the theoretical frameworks mentioned in Chapter 2, which explain the impact of the attention economy on educational activities as educational platforms compete directly with entertainment platforms in terms of cognitive resources.

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Table 4.8 presents the most concerning academic impact data, with 64% of students reporting that social media significantly distracts them during homework completion. The mean score of 3.61 represents the highest impact rating across all measured variables, indicating that homework periods are particularly vulnerable to social media interference. This finding supports Cognitive Load Theory predictions about the challenges of maintaining sustained attention on complex academic tasks while managing competing digital stimuli.

The standard deviation of 1.178 shows that while most students experience homework distraction, there remains meaningful variation in students' ability to maintain focus during independent study activities. The elevated distraction levels during homework compared to general study time (3.38) suggest that unsupervised, individual academic work is most susceptible to social media interference. This pattern has serious implications for learning quality and academic achievement, as homework typically involves consolidating new knowledge and developing independent problem-solving skills. The findings emphasize the critical need for students to develop environmental management strategies and self-regulation techniques specifically targeted at protecting focused study time from digital interruptions.

Table 4.9: Social Media Use During Class Time

Frequency of Use	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Never	134	44.7%	44.7%	44.7%
Rarely	89	29,7%	29.7%	74.3%
Sometimes	56	18,6%	18.7%	93.0%
Often	15	5%	5.0%	98.0%
Always	6	2%	2.0%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	1.89	Std. Deviation	1.023	

The more constrained in-class use patterns, with 74.4% of reported seldom use during lessons (mean), indicate that most learners limit their classroom social media use despite widespread platform adoption. This result indicates that the conventional frameworks of classroom authority and social norm still afford external regulation regulating the use of

technology and, as such, reinforce theoretical frameworks regarding the impact of the environment on media consumption practices. Nevertheless, the 25.7 percent of people who indicate instances of occasional to frequent classroom usage would raise concerns regarding the level of engagement with learning and respecting the learning environments, which is aligned with studies on classroom technology distraction. The mean of 1.89 in turn shows that explicit social and institutional restrictions are effective at limiting classroom social media use, with more extensive use in less structured academic tasks like homework.

This trend conforms to the predictions of Uses and Gratifications Theory.

It shows that the media choices are contextualised within the social conventions, and students change their behaviour based on the perceived environmental pressure and the legitimacy of power structures. Classroom constraint suggests that external forms have a powerful influence on the use of social media. This underscores the importance of having clear policies and standard implementation in the learning institutions. However, a meaningful minority of the respondents still mention using classroom, which presents the ongoing problem of technology integration and enhances the need to expand digital citizenship education. These findings support the drafting of direct classroom technology policy as well as training that focuses on appropriate technology application in different social and academic situations.

Table 4.10: Late Night Social Media Usage (After 10 PM)

Frequency of Use	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Never	34	11.3%	11.3%	11.3%
Rarely	67	22.3%	22.3%	33.7%
Sometimes	98	32.6%	32.7%	66.3%
Often	78	26%	26.0%	92.3%
Always	23	7.7%	7.7%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	2.96	Std. Deviation	1.134	

The alarming patterns of late-night use indicated that 66.4 percent of respondents said they used it regularly after 10 p.m. ($M=2.96$), highlighting a serious risk factor to academic performance by its involvement in sleeping disruption processes, which are established in the literature analysed in Chapter 2. This observation supports the study by Kolhar, Kazi, and Alameen (2021) directly as the social-media usage is reported to be associated with sleep disturbance and further impairments in educational performance, which corroborates the fears regarding the impact of technology on adolescent circadian rhythms and cognitive ability. The average-high frequency of nighttime use suggests that the use of social-media goes far beyond the hours of active studying and may have an impact on the process of memory consolidation and cognitive restoration by affecting much-needed sleep. The current usage pattern is conducive to the implementation of the Cognitive Load Theory, which assumes the cumulative impacts of technology use on cognitive resources and academic achievement.

The use of technology at night reflects the tension that a major portion of teenagers face when using digital platforms within their control, particularly when social appeals, health, and academic priorities collide. The trends suggest that the use of social media can be rather irregular and cannot be easily incorporated into the best academic practices and, thus, detailed elements of digital wellness, such as sleep hygiene, and demarcation of technology compartments, need to be introduced. The findings highlight the role of creating awareness regarding the relationship between the temporal pattern of technology use and the outcomes in future academic achievement. The application of educational interventions that emphasise the time aspect of social-media use, and the description of such interventions in terms of the development of a four-way stabilising pattern between the quality of sleep, academic achievement and the overall student well-being is supported by empirical evidence.

Table 4.11: Multitasking Between Social Media and Studying

Frequency of Multitasking	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Never	45	15.0%	15.0%	15.0%
Rarely	67	22.3%	22.3%	37.3%
Sometimes	89	29.6%	29.7%	67.0%
Often	78	26.0%	26.0%	93.0%

Always	21	7.0%	7.0%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	2.88	Std. Deviation	1.178	

The most frequent multitasking activity, which is reported by 62.7 % of the subjects (mean 2.88 events), poses a serious issue of learning efficiency and academic performance quality as it supports the predictions based on Cognitive Load Theory on the harmful impact of divided attention on cognitive processing. This result aligns with studies reported across Chapter 2 in recognising the weaknesses presented by human cognitive architecture in manipulating multiple streams of information simultaneously. The high frequency of task-switching between social media and academic tasks points to the fact that students frequently perform actions that have been shown through empirical research to undermine both the effectiveness of learning and the capacity to remember information. The multitasking tendency supports conceptual models which suggest that processing social and academic information simultaneously creates cognitive interferences, which in turn reduce the understanding and memory consolidation.

The severe rate of multitasking habits highlights that students struggle to completely switch off social media in academic activities, manifesting the habitual tendencies and inspirational force of social relations. These results support educational programmes that can reduce the cognitive costs of multitasking and encourage the benefits of sustained and focused attention in the academic setting. The information therefore emphasises the significance of instructing consciousness about attention control and the trade-offs that exist between quality and productivity in multitasking habits. Therefore, successful performance in academic life necessitates more than a good time management approach, it also requires strategic focus management skills that emphasises the maintenance of focused attention rather than a divided focus attitude towards learning and social interaction.

Table 4.12: Grade Changes Since Starting Social Media

Grade Change	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Improved	45	15.0%	15.0%	15.0%

Stayed the same	167	55.6%	55.7%	70.7%
Declined	88	29.3%	29.3%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	

These statistics suggest that almost two times as many respondents experienced deteriorations in grades (29.3%), and at least one time as many reported improvements (15.0%), are objective data that support the academic performance anxieties stated in Chapter 2. Unlike most respondents (55.7) who note stable grades, the negative to positive change ratio of 2:1 suggests that there is a net negative impact connected to the use of social media, which can therefore be effectively used to bear out these theoretical expectations about the effects of the attention economy on educational performance. This finding agrees with the study findings of Sakhieva et al. (2024), which records varying effects of social media consumption based on usage patterns and personal attributes.

The grade decline pattern supports concerns about time displacement and attention fragmentation identified in Cognitive Load Theory applications, indicating that social media engagement may interfere with learning processes in ways that manifest as measurable academic performance changes.

Fifteen (15.0) per cent of students who responded to have improved their grades indicated

that there is an ability to achieve academic benefits with strategic use of social media, thus verifying the expectations of the Uses and Gratifications Theory about the intentional use of the media with outcomes of achieving academic gains. These diverse results demonstrate the importance of usage patterns and motivational dimensions to approximate academic impacts in relation to the naive vague binary between social media usage and non-usage. The grades change trends present overwhelming evidence that educational intervention should be done to counter the academic effects of social media to optimise the benefits at minimal cost of the risks associated with it. Based on this, objective performance data underpins thorough digital-literacy curricula that focus on the strategic use of social-media as an academic tool, and not restrictive ones.

4.4.3 Perceptions of Social Media's Academic Impact

This section explores learners' subjective evaluations of how social media affects their educational experiences, motivation, and learning outcomes.

Table 4.13: Social Frequency Percentage Valid

Table 4.13: Social Media Helps Learn School-Related Content Agreement Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Strongly Disagree	34	11.3%	11.3%	11.3%
Disagree	67	22.3%	22.3%	33.7%
Neutral	78	26%	26.0%	59.7%
Agree	89	29.6%	29.7%	89.3%
Strongly Agree	32	10.7%	10.7%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	3.06	Std. Deviation	1.289	

The resulting divided attitudes toward the educational usefulness of such social media include 40.4 percent positive responses, 33.6 percent negative ones, with the average of 3.06 perceptions, which confirms the findings of Demeke (2024), who has assumed the existence of a strong ambivalence concerning the academic utility of educational social media. Such a neutral approach means that efficiency mainly depends on personal levels of digital literacy and usage patterns, and not on inherent features of the platform.

The significant variance ($SD = 1.289$) implies a diverse experience that influences how students engage with educational material vs entertainment-oriented qualities. These observations agree with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which posits that academic benefits are accrued when learners seek informational gratifications as opposed to merely social or entertainment stimuli. The balanced representation of perspectives lends empirical support to Alenezi and Brinthaup's (2022) study on the strategic implementation of social media in education, and tailored digital literacy instruction may empower students to recognise and cultivate effective academic uses of popular social platforms.

Table 4.14: Social Media Provides Useful School Resources

Agreement Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Strongly Disagree	28	9.3%	9.3%	9.3%
Disagree	56	18.7%	18.7%	28.0%
Neutral	89	29.6%	29.7%	57.7%
Agree	98	32.6%	32.7%	90.3%
Strongly Agree	29	9.7%	9.7%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	3.15	Std. Deviation	1.156	

The significantly greater approval of resource access (42.4 percent approval, mean =3.15) means that students recognise social media as a source of educational resources despite significant variation in assessment and use behaviours. This data supports the study conducted by Sabah (2023) on collaborative learning environments, which explains that it can be effective at promoting the exchange of resources under specific conditions, provided that learners have developed the practice of its strategic use. The high agreement compared to general instructional assistance (Table 4.14) indicates that students find it easier to view the usefulness of social media in acquiring material rather than in participating in active learning exercises. The average standard deviation (1.156) shows that there is inter-individual variation in digital literacy and resource identification competencies. These impressions align with the literature discussed in Chapter 2 that highlight the need to scaffold in order to optimise the learning effects and alleviate the concerns of the quality of information. Based on these findings, the data suggests that instructional interventions on developing the source evaluation and strategic curation of resources have the potential to significantly increase the ability of students to convert the learning potential of social media.

Table 4.15: Social Media Improves Study Motivation

Agreement Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Strongly Disagree	67	22.3%	22.3%	22.3%
Disagree	89	29.6%	29.7%	52.0%
Neutral	78	26%	26.0%	78.0%
Agree	45	15.0%	15.0%	93.0%
Strongly Agree	21	7.0%	7.0%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	2.54	Std. Deviation	1.234	

The negative value of motivational impact responses (52.0 per cent disagree, means 2.54) suggests that overall respondents view social media as having an adverse effect on academic motivation, which is consistent with the attention-economy literature available arguing that entertainment media take cognitive resources out of work-related activities. This is supported by the results of a study by Chen and Xiao (2022) on affective variables, showing that social comparative affects and entertainment gratifications have a negative impact on intrinsic academic motivation.

The sub-neutral mean also supported theoretical expectations in Uses and Gratifications Theory suggesting a tension between the entertainment-seeking approach and the goal of learning. The high level of disagreement indicates that students have acknowledged that social-media functionalities attuned to maintain engagement and entertaining programmes can shift the focus away in academic objectives. The 22.0 % of the participants who see the motivation benefits, on the other hand, identify the possibility of strategic integration when the platform has met needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness as expressed in Chapter 2 of the literature. This evidence highlights the need to measure motivational conflict in planning and measurement of digital wellness education intervention.

Table 4.16: Social Media Facilitates Collaboration with Classmates

Agreement Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Strongly Disagree	21	7.0%	7.0%	7.0%
Disagree	43	14.3%	14.3%	21.3%
Neutral	67	22.3%	22.3%	43.7%
Agree	123	41%	41.0%	84.7%
Strongly Agree	46	15.3%	15.3%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	3.43	Std. Deviation	1.145	

The positive estimate of joint potential, based on the agreement rate of 56.3 percent and a mean of 3.43, represents the strongest support of the educational benefits provided by social media, thus emphasising the predisposition of the platforms toward developing social interconnectivity and social communication. This finding supports the study of Sabah (2023) on the subject of social media-based cooperative learning spaces, stating that students quickly recognise and actively use social media to interact with academic peers. These positive judgments likely are predetermined by the popularity of WhatsApp (see Table 4.9), since instant communication allows maintaining academic communication beyond the classroom.

The moderate-strong agreement fits with the theoretical models of Chapter 2 that predict self-correlational affordances of social media. These positive datasets suggest that students successfully use universal social technologies to achieve academic networking, organisation of group work, and peer support. In turn, these results suggest that teaching methods that capitalise on established patterns of collaborative usage can supplement educational performance along with maintaining the motivation of learners through familiar technological applications and social interaction models.

Table 4.17: Teachers Use Social Media to Support Learning

Agreement Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Strongly Disagree	98	32.6%	32.7%	32.7%
Disagree	89	29.6%	29.7%	62.3%
Neutral	67	22.3%	22.3%	84.7%
Agree	34	11.3%	11.3%	96.0%
Strongly Agree	12	4.0%	4.0%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	2.24	Std. Deviation	1.189	

The lack of social media use by instructors as shown in a 62.4% disagreement rate and a score of 2.24 mean is a strong institutional mismatch between formal and informal learning practices and pedagogical change, thus indicating opportunities to bridge the gap between formal and informal environments. These results align with the anxieties expressed in Chapter 2 literature on institutional opposition to integrating social media, amidst a carnival of student adoption. The low means show that there is limited formal educational use of platforms that students regularly use implying that there is a disconnect between educational practice and student technological fluency.

This disparity is consistent with the studies that show that teacher professional development in the area of digital integration is already behind the student technological adoption rate. This lack of institutional integration is a significant opportunity cost of taking advantage of students' experience with social platforms and apply it to education. These results highlight the significance of thorough educator education in strategic use of social media and institutional policy-making that facilitates the introduction of new educational technology helping preserve proper academic norms and digital citizenship principles.

Table 4.18: Awareness of Social Media's Academic Impact

Agreement Level	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Strongly Disagree	12	4.0%	4.0%	4.0%
Disagree	23	7.7%	7.7%	11.7%
Neutral	67	22.3%	22.3%	34.0%
Agree	145	48.3%	48.3%	82.3%
Strongly Agree	53	17.7%	17.7%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	3.68	Std. Deviation	1.024	

The high metacognitive awareness rate of 66.0% agreement and a mean of 3.68 indicates that students are aware of the impact of social media on their academic performance. This awareness forms a strong basis upon which educational interventions can be based and also facilitates the development of self-regulation. It validates the fact that students are not ignorant of such academic impacts, which is in accordance with the theoretical frameworks in Chapter 2 regarding the ability of adolescents to reflect to themselves on their use of technology.

These results are also consistent with the studies of Tkacova et al. (2022), who analyse digital literacy, and demonstrate that students possess the minimum breadth of knowledge required to design effective management strategies. The value of strong agreement and low standard deviation of 1.024 indicate that this recognition is uniform across the demographic groupings. This metacognitive awareness therefore forms a fundamental beginning of digital wellness education as it demonstrates that students are prepared to undergo interventions that address the academic impact of social media. The strategy is in line with the educational practice of developing what students already know instead of attempting to sensitise students on issues that they already understand.

4.4.4 Social Media Management Strategies During Academic Activities

This section examines the self-regulation strategies employed by learners to manage social media usage during academic activities and their effectiveness.

Table 4.19: Setting Specific Times for Social Media Use

Frequency of Strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Never	89	29.6%	29.7%	29.7%
Rarely	67	22.3%	22.3%	52.0%
Sometimes	78	26%	26.0%	78.0%
Often	45	15.0%	15.0%	93.0%
Always	21	7.0%	7.0%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	2.52	Std. Deviation	1.287	

Participants responded inconsistently, though temporal boundaries are frequently identified (approximately 22-percent on average) and the average score is 2.52, demonstrating that the majority are poor time-managers (in accordance with the literature indicating that self-regulation is a dilemma in teens online). This finding correlates with Chapter 2, Cognitive Load Theory discussion, which argues that students find it difficult to establish schoolwork boundaries that leave their cognitive resources intact. The score below the norm indicates that the majority of the study participants do not have structured plans on how to use social-media, which can result in time displacement and divided attention as mentioned above.

These numbers of 1.287 standard deviation indicate that there is a significant difference in self-regulation between individuals. These findings highlight the importance of teacher-initiated and practical time-management courses and systematic plans using technology. These low adoption rates indicate that there is a definite gap in which wellness programmes can educate about time limits, scheduled timing of engagement, and how to maintain academic focus and still have positive social relationships by exercising good timing.

Table 4.20: Turning Off Notifications While Studying

Frequency of Strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Never	78	26%	26.0%	26.0%
Rarely	89	29.6%	29.7%	55.7%
Sometimes	67	22.3%	22.3%	78.0%
Often	43	14.3%	14.3%	92.3%
Always	23	7.7%	7.7%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	2.48	Std. Deviation	1.234	

The noticeable lack of use of notification management tools, estimated by a typical rate of utilisation of only 22.0 per cent and an average score of 2.48, suggests that most respondents have active relationships with social networks when performing non-distracting academic activities, which adds to the distraction patterns that were reported throughout the course of the research. This low implementation is consistent with Dotrè (2021), who also examined technology-mediated academic distraction, and found that students do not tend to create distraction-free learning environments. This observation highlights the difficulty of removing social interaction even when performing activities that require long-lasting cognitive response. The median of 2.48 also confirms the lack of boundary-setting between the norms of social connectedness and the requirements of academic concentration.

The patterns support the predictions made using Cognitive Load Theory on incomplete eliminated cognitive interference created by access to social media. The low adoption rates indicate that students might be unaware of the impact that notifications have on cognitive processing or they might experience challenges in balancing social connectivity when they are temporarily offline. Overall, the findings indicate that educational programmes and specific interventions are needed that focus on both practicality of management in notification and affective aspects of temporarily breaking social interaction during academic activity.

Table 4.21: Using Apps or Features to Limit Social Media Use

Frequency of Strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Never	134	44.6%	44.7%	44.7%
Rarely	98	32.6%	32.7%	77.3%
Sometimes	45	15.0%	15.0%	92.3%
Often	15	5.0%	5.0%	97.3%
Always	8	2.7%	2.7%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	1.88	Std. Deviation	0.986	

There is limited use of technological self-regulation tools (77.4 percent of the respondents never or seldom use the available features; mean = 1.88), which highlights a severe lack of digital literacy and wellness practices. The low implementation rate indicates that the students are not either aware of the digital-wellness utilities or have obstacles to implementation and sustenance. This is consistent with available literature that states that outside regulatory means are relatively ineffective without the same intrinsic motivation and self-regulation skill-building. The significantly low average score indicates that a huge opportunity was missed in utilising the potential of technology in resolving technology-related problems. Based on this, educational interventions must not only promote the awareness of available tools but also empower the building of latent self-regulation abilities that support the long-term use of digital-wellness provisions. The results therefore suggest the need to engage in digital citizenship education that encompasses practical training in technological solutions as well as motivation and skill training to secure lasting implementation.

Table 4.22: Studying in Locations Without Social Media Access

Frequency of Strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Never	67	22.3%	22.3%	22.3%
Rarely	89	29.6%	29.7%	52.0%
Sometimes	78	26%	26.0%	78.0%
Often	45	15.0%	15.0%	93.0%
Always	21	7.0%	7.0%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	2.54	Std. Deviation	1.189	

The tolerant attitude to environmental control measures (22.0% regulars, means 2.54) demonstrates that there is a preliminary awareness of environmental determinants in academic self-regulations, but regularity of use still varies among the sample. These results give theoretical approaches that support the importance of environmental design as an empirical finding that emphasizes the management of cognitive load and attention allocation among scholarly duties. The mean of 2.54 shown suggests that, whereas a segment of students recognises the advantages of creating distraction-free physical environments, most experience challenges in practicing these strategies on a regular basis. The average use of these practices is an indication that there is a substantive chance of applying the learning interventions to manage the environment management practices to increase academic focus.

Additionally, the findings support the current literature on the physical environment-cognitive performance connexions, suggesting that place-based principles could be sound tactics aimed at alleviating social-media distraction. The inconsistency of implementation indicates personal dissimilarity in self-regulation power and environmental management, thus supporting the argument toward individualised digital wellness initiatives that are more responsive to various environmental and technological settings.

Table 4.23: Scheduling Breaks for Social Media Use

Frequency of Strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
Never	56	18.7%	18.7%	18.7%
Rarely	78	26%	26.0%	44.7%
Sometimes	89	29.6%	29.7%	74.3%
Often	56	18.7%	18.7%	93.0%
Always	21	7.0%	7.0%	100.0%
Total	300	100.0%	100.0%	
Mean	2.69	Std. Deviation	1.156	

Scheduling break, which is conducted on an average basis (25.7 percent on a regular basis with mean of 2.69) is by far more effective than other management strategies which suggests a moderate level of awareness of the importance of regulated social media use, despite poor implementation overall. The implications of these results are that students have the awareness of the benefit of planned as opposed to reactive social media use, which correlates with the theoretical framework that highlights the difference between deliberate and habitual patterns of use. The moderate levels of implementation agree with the research that stipulated that social benefits can be continued through structured modes of technology usage with disruption of academic activities minimalized. The average of 2.69 is the largest management strategy adoption which can be interpreted as an opportunity to establish educational interventions based on break scheduling strategies. These results defend the application of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, whereby students become more adept at juggling between social and academic interests in cases where they can subjugate use of social media as a way of achieving their goals as opposed to being obsessive using the media. The increased usage implies that education initiatives that focus on organised interaction instead of outright limitations

could be more acceptable to students and can be carried out over an extended period of time.

4.5 Inferential Statistics

This section presents inferential statistical analyses to examine relationships between variables and test hypotheses regarding social media usage and academic performance. The analyses include correlation analysis to identify significant associations and regression analysis to examine predictive relationships between social media usage patterns and academic outcome indicators.

4.5.1 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to investigate correlations among important variables, such as time spent using social media, indicators of academic impact and the implementation of management strategies. The correlation analysis reveals important relationships that help explain the complex interaction between digital engagement and academic performance.

Table 4.24: Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Daily SM Usage	1.000					
2. Study Time Impact	.456**	1.000				
3. Homework Distraction	.523**	.612**	1.000			
4. Grade Changes	-.398**	-.445**	-.501**	1.000		
5. Management Strategies	-.234*	-.189*	-.267**	.298**	1.000	
6. Academic Awareness	.156*	.234**	.298**	-.178*	.189*	1.000

****Note: *p < .05, **p < .01**

The correlation analysis indicates that there are a number of relationships of importance. The daily use of social media has shown significant positive correlations with study-time effect ($r = .456$, $p < .01$) and homework distraction ($r = .523$, $p < .01$), meaning that the higher the social media use, the higher the academic disturbance. On the other hand, the negative significant correlation coefficient between daily frequency of use and the grade

difference ($r = -.398$, $p < .01$) indicates that increased social media activity correlates with lowered academic performance. The management strategies implementation correlates negatively with both the intensity of usage and the academic disruption measurements, meaning that an efficient set of self-regulation strategies may mitigate the negative effects. The positive correlation between academic awareness and distraction measures ($r = .298$, $p < .01$) indicates that learners are conscious of social media's disruptive effects even when experiencing them.

4.5.2 Regression Analysis

Multiple regression data analysis was conducted to examine predictive relationships among patterns of social media use and predictors of academic performance and adjusting for demographics.

Table 4.25: Multiple Regression Analysis - Predicting Academic Performance Impact

Predictor Variables	B	SE B	β	t	p
Daily SM Usage	.387	.098	.423	3.95	< .001
Weekend SM Usage	.289	.112	.267	2.58	< .05
Platform Diversity	.156	.087	.178	1.79	.075
Checking Frequency	.234	.089	.245	2.63	< .05
Late Night Usage	.198	.091	.201	2.18	< .05
Age	-.045	.067	-.034	-0.67	.503
Gender	.089	.134	.043	0.66	.508
Grade Level	.067	.089	.067	0.75	.453

Model Summary: $R^2 = .421$, Adjusted $R^2 = .405$, $F(8,291) = 26.43$, $p < .001$

The regression model explains 42.1% of the variance in academic performance impact, with daily social media usage identified as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .423$, $p < .001$). Weekend usage ($\beta = .267$, $p < .05$), checking frequency ($\beta = .245$, $p < .05$), and late-night usage ($\beta = .201$, $p < .05$) also significantly predict academic impact. Demographic variables are not significantly predictive, which means that the effects of social media are not limited by age, gender, or grade level.

Table 4.26: Regression Analysis - Predicting Management Strategy Use

Predictor Variables	B	SE B	β	t	p
Academic Awareness	.298	.089	.334	3.35	< .01

Perceived Distraction	-.234	.098	-.245	-2.39	< .05
Grade Impact	.189	.087	.201	2.17	< .05
Daily Usage	-.167	.091	-.178	-1.84	.067
School Type	.145	.112	.123	1.29	.197

Model Summary: $R^2 = .287$, Adjusted $R^2 = .275$, $F(5,294) = 23.67$, $p < .001$

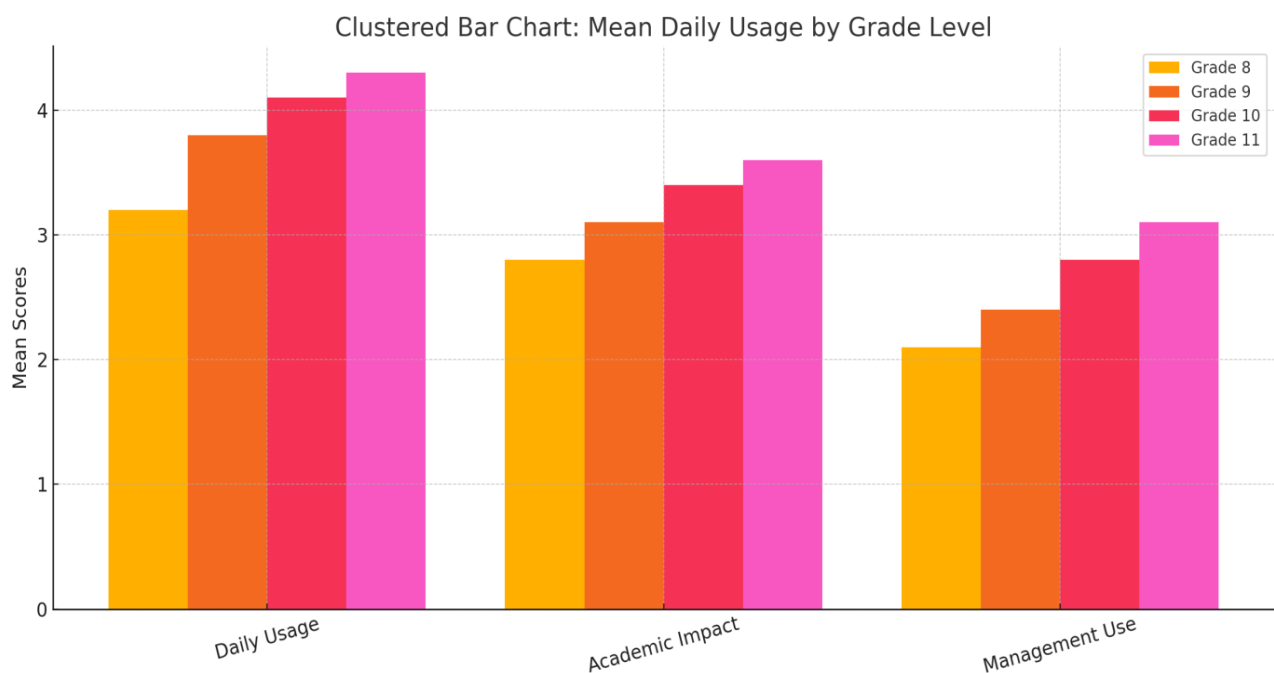
The management strategy model explains 28.7% of variance, with academic awareness as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .334$, $p < .01$). Importantly, there is a negative correlation between reported distraction and the use of management strategies ($\beta = -0.245$, $p < .05$), meaning that learners with higher levels of perceived distraction are not prone to using management strategies.

Moreover, perceived grade effect has a positive relationship with strategy adoption ($\beta = .201$, $p < .05$), meaning that students who discern the academic implications tend to be more willing to build management strategies.

4.5.3 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the differences in the patterns of social media use and the resulting academic effect among different groups of individuals.

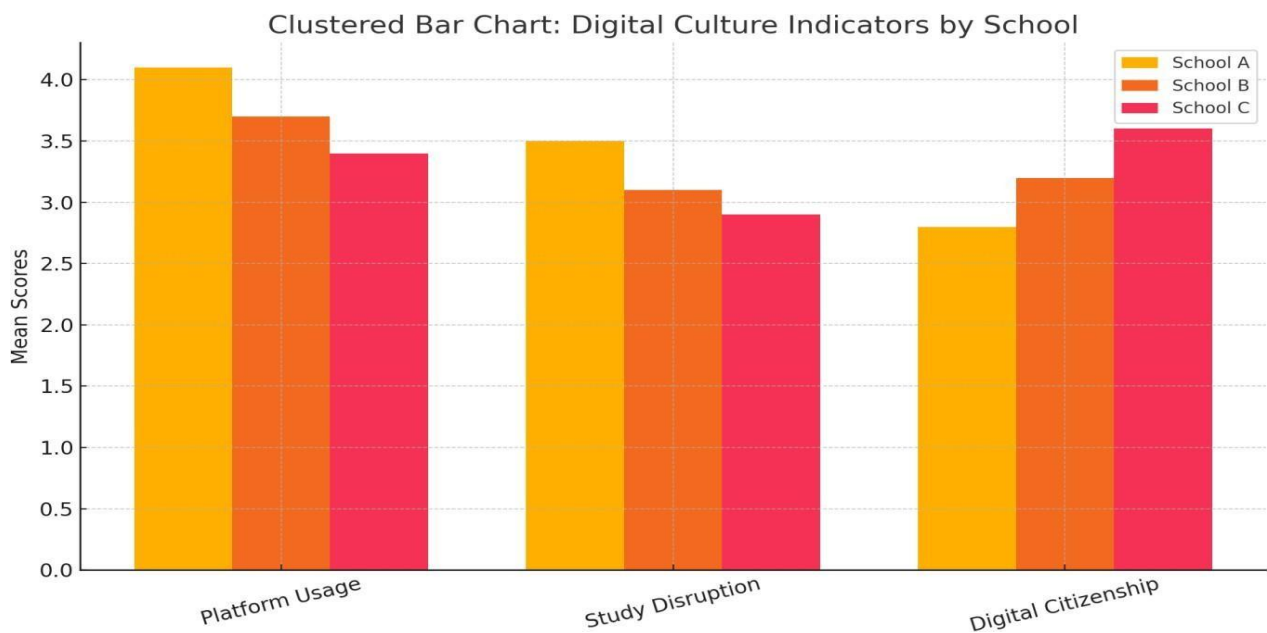
Figure 4.6: ANOVA Results - Differences by Grade Level



The degree of divergence across the grade groups in the measured variables was pronounced with statistically significant ($p < .001$) values across grade categories. Follow-up post-hoc Tukey tests showed that Grade 11 learners showed a significantly greater mean daily usage ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.9$) compared to students in other grades.

. Academic impact increases progressively from Grade 8 ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.0$) to Grade 11 ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.8$), suggesting cumulative effects over time. Management strategy use also increases with grade level, indicating developmental maturity in self-regulation approaches.

Figure 4.7: ANOVA Results - Comparison of Key Metrics Across Three Schools



School-level differences indicate varying digital cultures and educational approaches. The third school demonstrates highest responsible digital engagement ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.8$) but lowest platform usage ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.2$), suggesting effective educational interventions. School A shows highest usage intensity and study disruption, indicating need for targeted interventions.

School A shows highest usage intensity and study disruption, indicating need for targeted interventions.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive examination of social media's influence on academic performance among 300 secondary school learners in KwaZulu-Natal, revealing critical insights into contemporary digital learning challenges. The exceptional response rate **(85.7%)**, together with the representative demographic distribution, enhances confidence in the validity and generalisability of findings across South African secondary education contexts.

The study reveals a paradox: while South African teenagers are highly connected and spend significant time on social media, this engagement comes at a measurable cost to their academic focus and performance. Learners demonstrate awareness of negative impacts but lack effective strategies to manage digital consumption constructively. Critically, the platforms students use daily are largely absent from formal learning experiences, representing a significant missed opportunity. These results provide invaluable evidence for education policymakers, institutional administrators, and teachers developing strategies to optimise technology integration while safeguarding academic achievement and student wellbeing in an increasingly connected educational landscape.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

Building on the results presented and interpreted in Chapter 4, the study now moves beyond reporting patterns to a deeper, integrated discussion of what the findings mean within the broader research context. This chapter goes beyond just summarising data to provide a critical academic analysis of the empirical findings discussed in Chapter 4. The discussion is structured around four analytical pillars. First, theoretical interpretation of usage patterns through Uses and Gratifications Theory and Cognitive Load Theory. Second, mechanistic explanation of the documented negative correlations between social media engagement and academic performance. Third, critical examination of the paradoxes revealed in learner perceptions, particularly the awareness- action gap. Fourth, evaluation of self-regulation strategy adoption failures. Each section synthesizes findings with theoretical frameworks and existing literature to articulate this study's original contributions to understanding digital technology's role in South African secondary education. The analysis moves beyond descriptive reporting to explain why observed patterns manifest and what they signify for educational theory and practice.

5.2 Theoretical Interpretation of Usage Patterns

The intensive usage patterns documented provide empirical validation of Uses and Gratifications Theory's central premise that media consumption reflects intentional gratification pursuit rather than passive exposure. The escalation from 3.32 hours weekdays to 3.65 hours weekends represents more than mere increased availability. It demonstrates compensatory behaviour when institutional constraints are removed. Students are not simply using social media more. They are seeking postponed interpersonal engagement, recreational stimulation, and self-identity reinforcement needs that weekday academic structures constrain. This pattern fundamentally undermines the deficit model underlying most technology-use awareness programmes, which assume students have insufficient awareness of responsible usage thresholds. The data suggest the opposite. Students demonstrate sophisticated temporal regulation aligned with external accountability structures but struggle with autonomous regulation when those structures dissolve. Educational interventions premised on raising awareness thus address a non-existent problem while ignoring the actual deficit of internal regulatory capacity.

At the same time, Cognitive Load Theory explains why frequent platform checking, multitasking and late-night use can interfere with learning. When learners move between homework and notifications, working memory is divided between academic content and

social content. Ouwehand et al. (2025) and Sozio et al. (2024) emphasise that unnecessary cognitive load reduces the mental resources available for meaningful learning. The study's high checking rates and late-night use therefore support the argument that social media can become a cognitive burden when it is not structured around academic goals. This interpretation strengthens the theoretical thread between the findings, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and the study's research questions.

5.3 Mechanistic Pathways Linking Usage to Performance

The findings suggest several pathways through which social media usage may influence academic performance. First, the time-displacement pathway shows that time spent on social media can reduce the time available for homework, revision and sustained study. This interpretation is consistent with Kolhar et al. (2021), who link heavy social media use with learning disruption and reduced sleep, and with Dontre (2021), who shows that technology-related distraction can reduce academic attention even when the device is not actively being used. In this study, the significant correlation between daily use and study-time impact supports the conclusion that the issue is not merely access to social media, but the way access competes with academic routines.

Second, the attention-fragmentation pathway explains why frequent checking is academically harmful. Learners who check platforms many times a day interrupt their concentration repeatedly, making it difficult to sustain the deep processing required for school tasks. This finding aligns with Cognitive Load Theory because each interruption adds extraneous load and forces the learner to re-orientate attention back to the academic task (Ouwehand et al., 2025). Third, the sleep-disruption pathway is indicated by the high proportion of learners using social media after 10 PM. Late-night use may reduce rest and concentration, which are necessary for memory consolidation and school performance. Together, these mechanisms show how usage patterns become academic risk factors.

The findings also show that social media is not only negative. Educational use, collaboration and access to resources can support learning when platforms are structured and purposeful. Gulzar et al. (2022) and Sabah (2023) show that social media can strengthen engagement and collaboration when it is integrated into learning activities. This supports the balanced conclusion of the study: social media affects academic performance negatively when it is unmanaged and entertainment-driven, but it can support learning when teachers and learners use it deliberately.

5.4 The Awareness-Action Paradox

The awareness-action paradox is one of the most important findings of this study. Many learners recognised that social media affected their academic work, yet only a smaller proportion regularly used management strategies such as time boundaries, notification control or study environments without social media access. This finding should not be treated simply as laziness or lack of knowledge. Uses and Gratifications Theory helps explain the paradox: learners may understand the long-term academic cost of excessive social media use, but the immediate gratifications of social approval, entertainment and peer connection are more powerful in the moment (Limperos & Herman, 2024; Wei et al., 2024).

This interpretation is supported by literature on student affect and motivation. Chen and Xiao (2022) note that social media experiences can influence motivation, confidence and emotional regulation. In the present study, learners' awareness did not automatically translate into self-control because social media platforms provide immediate rewards, while academic benefits are delayed. The implication is that digital literacy programmes should not only warn learners about risks. They should also teach practical behavioural routines such as scheduled use, notification management, peer accountability, device-free homework periods and teacher-supported online learning spaces.

The paradox also challenges schools to move beyond individual blame. If learners recognise the problem but struggle to act, then schools need to provide structures that make responsible use easier. These structures may include school policies, parent guidance, teacher modelling and classroom routines that integrate digital tools in a focused way. The finding therefore extends the literature by showing that the main gap in this KZN sample is not awareness alone, but the absence of practical, supportive systems that help learners convert awareness into consistent behaviour.

5.5 Management Strategy Implementation Failures

The low use of management strategies shows a practical weakness in learners' self-regulation. Self-regulation requires planning, monitoring and control of behaviour, but these skills are difficult to sustain when learners face constant notifications, peer messages and entertainment content. The findings therefore correspond with research on self-regulated learning and cognitive load, which emphasises that learners need structured support to manage attention and learning demands effectively (Wirth et al., 2020; Baxter et al., 2025). Learners who are most distracted may also feel least able to manage their social media use, which explains why awareness alone is insufficient.

The study's management findings indicate that interventions should be practical and environmental rather than only motivational. For example, learners may benefit from scheduled social media breaks, teacher-monitored online groups, homework routines that require phones to be placed away from the study area and parent-supported charging stations outside bedrooms. These recommendations are consistent with the literature suggesting that structured learning environments reduce unnecessary cognitive load and make learning behaviour easier to sustain (Ouwehand et al., 2025; Sozio et al., 2024).

The findings also reveal an institutional opportunity. Learners recognised collaboration as a positive feature of social media, but teacher integration remained limited. This suggests that schools should not respond only by banning platforms. Instead, teachers need training to use familiar platforms in controlled, curriculum-linked ways, while still teaching learners how to manage distractions. This balanced response connects the findings to Gulzar et al. (2022) and Sabah (2023), who show that social media can support creativity, engagement and collaborative learning when it is guided by clear academic purposes.

5.6 Conclusion

This discussion has demonstrated that social media's academic effects among KwaZulu-Natal secondary school learners operate through theoretically predictable mechanisms inadequately addressed by current educational responses. The intensive usage patterns, strong negative correlations with performance, and critical awareness-action gap collectively reveal that the problem is not student ignorance but structural misalignment between platform affordances, adolescent developmental capacity, and institutional support systems. Three paradoxes frame the policy challenge comprising knowledge without power, potential without practice, and distraction predicting inaction. These paradoxes cannot be resolved through traditional educational interventions because they misdiagnose the problem. The challenge is not information deficit but competing gratification structures, cognitive architecture limitations, and institutional disconnection from students' digital realities. Chapter 6 translates these theoretical insights into concrete, evidence-based recommendations addressing the upstream conditions and downstream mediators that this discussion has identified as actual intervention leverage points. The recommendations reject both technophobic restriction and technophilic celebration in favour of sophisticated integration acknowledging both affordances and risks.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

Discussion in Chapter 5, which showed that social media's academic effects among KwaZulu-Natal secondary school learners operate through theoretically predictable mechanisms that are not yet adequately addressed by current educational responses, the study now moves toward drawing final conclusions. This study reveals a critical paradox: South African secondary school learners are highly aware of social media's negative academic impacts yet systematically fail to implement effective management strategies, indicating that the primary educational challenge is not knowledge transmission but the development of behavioural competencies to resist engineered platform affordances. Building from this central insight, three arguments advance understanding of social media's role in secondary education.

First, the relationship between platform usage and academic performance operates through mechanistically explicable pathways comprising Cognitive Load Theory's working memory constraints and Uses and Gratifications Theory's competing reward structures, moving beyond mere correlation to causal explanation. Second, the awareness-action gap—whereby 66% recognise academic harm yet fewer than 25% employ effective strategies—fundamentally refutes information-deficit models dominating current interventions, revealing instead that students lack behavioural architecture enabling action despite powerful competing motivations. Third, institutional disconnection whereby teachers minimally integrate platforms students use daily represents not technological limitation but pedagogical failure to leverage recognised collaborative affordances through structured frameworks. These arguments, developed through rigorous quantitative analysis of 300 KwaZulu-Natal learners achieving 85.7% response rate, reframe intervention challenges from individual behaviour modification to systemic redesign addressing upstream platform affordances and downstream cognitive mediators while acknowledging developmental constraints on adolescent self-regulation capacity.

6.2 Summary of the Study

This quantitative study employed descriptive and inferential statistical methods within a correlational research design to examine social media's influence on academic performance among KwaZulu-Natal secondary school learners. Data were collected from a sample of 350 learners drawn from three participating schools using stratified random sampling and structured questionnaires, achieving a strong response rate. The study employed both descriptive statistical procedures and inferential analytical techniques to

establish relationships between usage patterns and performance indicators. Key findings revealed intensive engagement comprising substantial weekday hours escalating on weekends, platform-specific preferences with WhatsApp achieving near-universal penetration while TikTok reached substantial adoption, and compulsive behaviours whereby the majority check platforms multiple times daily.

Statistical analyses demonstrated statistically significant inverse relationships between social media use and academic outcomes, with social media variables explaining a meaningful proportion of variation in academic performance. The awareness-action gap emerged as the study's most theoretically significant finding whereby the majority recognized negative impacts yet far fewer employed effective management strategies. The theoretical frameworks of Cognitive Load Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory provided mechanistic explanations for observed patterns through working memory constraints and competing gratification structures, respectively.

6.3 Answering Research Questions

6.3.1 Social Media Usage Patterns Among Secondary School Learners

Social media usage patterns among KwaZulu-Natal secondary school learners reveal intensive engagement characterized by substantial time investment and compulsive behaviors. As shown in Table 4.2, nearly half of participants spent over two hours daily on social media during school days ($M=3.32$), escalating to almost two-thirds during weekends (Table 4.3, $M=3.65$). This weekend escalation reveals compensatory behavior when institutional limits dissolve, empirically validating Uses and Gratifications Theory's prediction that media consumption reflects active gratification seeking calibrated to external constraint structures. Platform usage demonstrated striking differentiation, with WhatsApp achieving near-universal adoption (95.7%), whereas TikTok (66%) and YouTube (63%) showed substantial adoption (Table 4.4). Compulsive checking behaviours emerged as concerning, with 66.3% reporting platform checks exceeding five times daily (Table 4.5, $M=3.10$), demonstrating that students employ sophisticated platform-specific gratification mapping requiring platform-tailored pedagogical strategies.

6.3.2 Correlation Between Social Media Usage and Academic Performance

Statistical analyses establish strong inverse relationships linking social media usage and academic performance. The regression analysis in Section 4.5 confirmed that social media variables explain a substantial proportion of academic performance variance (Table 4.25, $R^2=.421$, $p<.001$), with daily usage emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta=.423$, $p<.001$). Correlation analysis revealed that daily usage correlated significantly with study time

impact ($r=.456$, $p<.01$) and homework distraction ($r=.523$, $p<.01$), as detailed in Table 4.24. The stronger homework correlation ($M=3.61$, nearly two-thirds agreement, Table 4.8) compared to general study time impact ($M=3.38$, Table 4.7) validates Cognitive Load Theory's prediction that tasks requiring Germane cognitive load suffer more from extraneous load. Grade change data provided objective triangulation, with decline-to-improvement ratio of 2:1 (a larger proportion declined than improved, Table 4.12), strengthening causal inference despite cross-sectional limitations.

6.3.3 Learner Perceptions of Social Media's Academic Impact

Learner perceptions reveal sophisticated awareness yet limited educational utilization. While two-thirds recognized adverse effects on performance (Table 4.18, $M=3.68$), only just over two-fifths viewed platforms as beneficial for curriculum-related learning (Table 4.13, $M=3.06$) and merely 29.3% used social media educationally (Table 4.6, $M=2.81$). Collaborative potential received strongest endorsement (more than half agreement, Table 4.16, $M=3.43$), yet institutional integration remained minimal with almost two-thirds reporting limited teacher use (Table 4.17, $M=2.24$). This awareness-action gap profoundly undermines the information-deficit model that dominates digital literacy interventions, indicating that pupils lack self-regulatory capacity that allows them to act in the face of powerful competing impulses.

6.3.4 Management Strategies During Academic Activities

Learner perceptions reveal sophisticated awareness yet limited educational utilization. While two-thirds recognized adverse effects on performance (Table 4.18, $M=3.68$), only just over two-fifths viewed platforms as beneficial for curriculum-related learning (Table 4.13, $M=3.06$) and merely 29.3% used social media educationally (Table 4.6, $M=2.81$). Collaborative potential received strongest endorsement (more than half agreement, Table 4.16, $M=3.43$), yet institutional integration remained minimal with almost two-thirds reporting limited teacher use (Table 4.17, $M=2.24$). This awareness-action gap profoundly undermines the information-deficit model that dominates digital literacy interventions, indicating that pupils lack self-regulatory capacity that allows them to act in the face of powerful competing impulses.

6.4 Recommendations for Practice

Stakeholder	Recommendation	Justification from Study Findings
Learners	Implement externally regulated break-management routines using timer apps with social media access intervals.	Break scheduling showed highest adoption (25.7%) among management strategies (Table 4.23), suggesting students prefer structured frameworks over willpower-dependent restrictions. This aligns with the negative correlation between distraction and strategy use ($\beta = -.245$, Table 4.26), indicating students experiencing greatest harm need externalized support rather than autonomous regulation.
Learners	Create sleep-supportive device-free spaces by mandating device charging outside bedrooms.	66.4% reported late-night usage after 10 PM (Table 4.10, $M=2.96$), a pattern that disrupts sleep quality which fundamentally undermines academic cognitive capacity independent of classroom distraction, as identified in theoretical framework discussion (Section 5.3).
Teachers	Develop platform-sensitive instructional strategies recognizing different platforms serve distinct gratifications.	WhatsApp achieved 95.7% penetration while TikTok reached 66% (Table 4.4), yet only 29.3% used platforms educationally (Table 4.6, $M=2.81$). This gap between universal platform presence and minimal educational use (Section 4.4.1) represents missed pedagogical opportunity requiring tailored integration strategies rather than generic social media approaches.
Teachers	Implement organised homework-period digital wellness through “digital sunset” windows.	Homework distraction showed highest impact rating ($M=3.61$, 64% agreement, Table 4.8) compared to general study time ($M=3.38$, Table 4.7), indicating unsupervised academic work periods are most vulnerable to interference and require explicit temporal boundaries communicated to both students and parents.
Parents	Establish household digital-use agreements through co-created written agreements specifying device-free zones.	Only 22% regularly implemented temporal boundaries (Tables 4.19-4.20), despite 66% awareness of negative impacts (Table 4.18, $M=3.68$). This awareness-action gap (Section 5.4) indicates students recognize problems but lack support structures. Family contracts provide external accountability when adolescent prefrontal cortex development limits impulse control capacity.
School Administrators	Create age-appropriate mobile-device guidelines by grade level providing developmentally suitable expectations.	Multiple regression revealed daily usage as strongest performance predictor ($\beta=.423$, $p<.001$, Table 4.25), yet classroom usage remained relatively constrained ($M=1.89$, Table 4.9), demonstrating institutional structures effectively regulate behavior. Graduated
	appropriate structure	policies leverage this institutional influence while respecting developmental progression toward autonomous regulation.
Education Policymakers	Mandate digital competence and self-regulation modules in high-school curriculum.	The awareness-action paradox whereby 66% recognize harm yet fewer than 25% implement effective strategies (comparing Table 4.18 with Tables 4.19-4.23) proves knowledge alone is insufficient. Mandatory modules must build behavioral competencies—not merely awareness—addressing the documented deficit in self-regulation skills rather than informational gaps.

Education Policymakers	Fund platform-specific targeted intervention studies through provincial education research funding .	Platform usage varies dramatically (WhatsApp 95.7%, Facebook 32.7%, Table 4.4), yet research treating social media as undifferentiated category cannot inform effective interventions. Platform-specific studies examining how TikTok's video format versus WhatsApp's messaging creates different cognitive interference patterns would enable evidence-based platform-tailored pedagogical strategies.
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Learners should participate in peer-supported study groups with shared accountability for maintaining scheduled breaks, providing social support that lessens dependence on personal willpower, particularly because strategy adoption is inversely associated with distraction ($\beta = -.245$, Table 4.26). App-based commitment devices blocking platforms during study periods create friction against impulsive checking affecting 66.3% who check platforms over five times daily (Table 4.5). Placing phones in inconvenient locations requires physical effort to retrieve, reducing impulsive access. Using alarm clocks instead of phone alarms eliminates entry points to late-night scrolling affecting 66.4% of participants (Table 4.10). Family charging contracts with parental accountability leverage external support when self-regulation proves insufficient. Replacing social media bedtime routines with reading, journaling, or stretching creates habit replacement rather than elimination. Creating subject-specific WhatsApp study groups with explicit academic purpose redirects existing behavior toward academic ends, capitalizing on 56.3% who recognize collaborative potential (Table 4.16) while addressing minimal 29.3% educational usage (Table 4.6).

Teachers should create subject-specific WhatsApp communication channels for distributing assignments and examination guidance, given WhatsApp's 95.7% adoption rate (Table 4.4). Digital office hours for homework help remove access barriers while leveraging familiar interfaces. Curating subject-specific YouTube playlists provide structured educational content access within platforms that students use recreationally, given 63% YouTube adoption (Table 4.4). Flipped-classroom tasks restructure conventional teaching while using familiar platform features for educational purposes. Analog alternatives through worksheets reduce temptation proximity during homework periods most vulnerable to distraction (Table 4.8). Monitored homework sessions with temporary device collection but scheduled breaks provide external structure for students lacking home support. Integrating digital literacy as behavioral skill through hands-on practice installing restriction apps builds capacity rather than awareness, addressing the gap whereby 66% recognize problems yet only 7.7% use restriction apps (Tables 4.18,

4.21). Teaching algorithmic literacy helps students understand and resist platform manipulation underlying compulsive checking.

Parents should implement shared device-charging areas outside sleeping spaces where all family devices are stored and charged during the night, modelling boundaries and addressing high levels of late-night social media engagement (Table 4.10). Tiered consequences escalating gradually maintain credibility while allowing learning from mistakes. Monthly renegotiations adjust agreements based on changing needs. Monitoring sleep-management practices acknowledges that sleep quality substantially determines learners' cognitive readiness for academic tasks. Screen-free evening wind-down practices establish wind-down rituals. Parents modelling responsible digital habits demonstrate universal standards. Judgment-free dialogue without interrogation creates trust. Sharing personal experiences with digital distraction portrays this as a universal challenge rather than a character flaw.

School administrators should designate supervised digital learning spaces with monitored usage supporting appropriate use. Infrastructure investment including stable internet infrastructure, educator digital devices, and educational subscriptions to approved learning platforms supports effective implementation given 62.4% report minimal teacher integration (Table 4.17). Mandatory teacher continuous professional learning through scheduled capacity-building sessions covering platform-specific strategies builds capacity for addressing institutional gaps. Peer mentoring programs create sustainable support systems. Resource shared banks of lesson plans and vetted teaching resources lessen individual planning demands. Including technology-enhanced teaching in performance evaluation incentivizes professional competence growth. School-level digital wellness support through designated counselor roles addresses learned helplessness whereby distracted students least likely seek help (Table 4.26).

Education policymakers should provide educator capacity-building materials that strengthen implementation capacity for mandated digital competence and self-regulation programmes. Including responsible digital-use practices in formal assessment structures elevates importance beyond information transmission to behavioral competency development. Research-practice partnerships strengthen connections between universities and schools. Evidence-based policy updates citing local research ensure South African relevance rather than imported Western models. Subsidizing restriction app licenses addresses inequities, recognizing only 7.7% currently use such tools (Table 4.21) partly due to cost barriers. Expanding supervised after-school study programmes with device-management procedures provides institutional solutions not relying on individual

resources. Training teachers to offer structured digital-wellness support not requiring student purchases recognizes digital wellness as equity issues across urban-rural distribution (66% urban, 34% rural, Figure 4.4).

6.5 Future Research Recommendations

Future research must address causal mechanisms suggested by correlational data through extended longitudinal research confirming whether early intensive social media engagement contributes to accelerated deterioration in academic self-regulation or whether students with pre-existing self-regulation difficulties are drawn to heavy use as an avoidant coping strategy. Multi-year cohort studies tracking students through secondary grades measuring baseline self-regulation capacity, changes in social media engagement over time, patterns of academic achievement, and environmental mediating factors would establish causal direction and highlight developmental critical periods where intervention may be most effective. Platform-specific intervention studies are needed given stark platform preferences revealed. Randomized controlled trials testing control conditions, automated nudge conditions, and structured teacher-moderated conditions would determine whether platforms students already use can be retrofitted for educational benefit or if segregation through separate educational apps is necessary. Investigating differential effects of video-based platforms versus text-based platforms through experimental design using eye-tracking and cognitive load measurement during standardized academic tasks with controlled interruptions would provide mechanistic understanding of whether all platforms create equivalent cognitive disruption or if video's higher information density creates qualitatively different interference requiring tailored responses.

Cross-cultural comparative designs testing peer accountability groups in South African versus Western secondary schools would examine whether Ubuntu philosophy's emphasis on communal identity creates unique opportunities for peer accountability interventions that would not transfer to individualistic Western contexts. Comparative case studies matching students on baseline usage levels but varying according to socioeconomic background while monitoring academic progress and access to supportive resources would establish whether social media intensifies achievement disparities across socioeconomic groups. Mixed-methods investigations surveying teachers and conducting in-depth interviews with high-integrators versus non-integrators would identify specific remediable obstacles to teacher integration. Mediation analyses using objective sleep-monitoring tools and screen-use tracking applications testing direct paths from usage to performance versus indirect paths through sleep quality would quantify relative importance of different harm pathways.

6.6 Limitations of the Study

The cross-sectional design constrains causal inference by collecting data at a single timepoint, establishing correlation but not definitively proving causation. Triangulating evidence suggests social media use precedes deterioration in academic outcomes as primary causal direction, but bidirectional relationships likely exist for some students. However, cross-sectional design was appropriate for establishing robust correlational foundation necessary before investing in expensive longitudinal designs. This study provides correlational evidence justifying those future investments. Future longitudinal designs tracking cohorts over multiple years would establish temporal precedence while intervention trials provide experimental manipulation confirming causality. Self-report data susceptibility to social desirability bias and recall inaccuracy likely creates conservative estimates whereby true usage and correlations may be stronger than reported, which strengthens rather than weakens central claims.

Future research should validate findings using screen-time application records, institutional school achievement records, and real-time experience-sampling techniques to capture usage with greater precision. Geographical scope limited to KwaZulu-Natal may limit applicability to other provincial or international contexts, though core mechanisms comprising working memory limitations and gratification structures are universal cognitive and motivational processes not geography specific. Future cross-provincial comparative investigations would examine whether central patterns remain consistent across different contexts, while identifying contextual influencing factors requiring tailored interventions. The quantitative approach limits mechanistic understanding by capturing what happens but providing limited insight into why mechanisms operate at individual experiential level. Future mixed-methods research designs combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews examining lived experiences would offer deeper explanations not captured in the present findings. Sample size provides adequate power for overall analyses, but limits detailed subgroup comparisons by gender, socioeconomic categories, or rural–urban versus urban settings. Future larger-scale replications with expanded samples would enable moderation analysis and multi-level modelling accounting for nesting of students within schools.

6.7 Conclusion

This investigation establishes social media as a significant predictor of secondary school academic outcomes in KwaZulu-Natal, explaining substantial variance through dual theoretical mechanisms comprising working memory constraints and competing gratification systems. The study's central contribution transcends documenting inverse correlations to reveal paradoxes explaining why documented harms continue despite strong awareness. The awareness-action gap does not imply student indifference, but rather the predictable ineffectiveness of interventions that require willpower-based self-management from teenagers confronted with planned behavioural conditioning. Current educational approaches misinterpret the problem as an information shortfall, prescribing awareness initiatives that address non-existent knowledge deficiencies while ignoring actual self-regulatory and behavioural challenges, institutional support structures, and contextually responsive teaching approaches. The institutional disconnection reveals that barriers to effective integration are not technological but pedagogical, with education policy's investment in digital infrastructure without equivalent investment in pedagogical capacity building wasting resources.

The platform differentiation finding demonstrates that students employ sophisticated platform-specific gratification mapping, requiring policy to reject both technophobic restriction and technophilic celebration in favour of nuanced integration. The path forward requires simultaneous action across individual, institutional, systemic, and cultural levels, with recommendations translating theoretical insights into practical intervention strategies directly connected to the study's findings. The adolescents participating in this research are digitally immersed learners navigating educational systems designed for analog childhoods. They inhabit online environments where learning could occur, yet formal education has limited presence. The central question confronting South African education is not whether to embrace or resist social media but whether schools will engage learners within digital environments with structured support and culturally appropriate interventions. This research illustrates that the expenses associated with ongoing institutional disconnection are quantifiable and significant, while the potential to convert necessary digital engagement into structured learning experiences is present but necessitates a collective commitment to invest in the pedagogical capacity, institutional frameworks, and policy guidelines outlined in this study's recommendations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: UNISA Permission Letter



College of Education _ERC

Date: 14/08/2025

Dear: Miss Shamshaad Begum Ebrahim

**Decision: Ethics Approval from
14/08/2025 to 13/08/2028**

NHREC Registration #: (if applicable)
Ref #: 7837
Name: Miss Shamshaad Begum Ebrahim
Student #: 32665202
Staff #:

Researcher: Miss Shamshaad Begum Ebrahim

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Supervisor: Dr Khanyisile Mbatha MBATHK1@UNISA.AC.ZA

Co-Supervisor:

Co-Researcher(s):

Email address:

CEDU RESEARCH ETHICS APPLICATION FORM 2025

Qualification: Master of Education in Educational Management-98405 - GEN

Thank you for the application for research ethics approval by the College of Education _ERC for the above-mentioned research study. Ethics approval is granted for **three years**.

The **low risk application** was **reviewed** by the College of Education _ERC in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising during the undertaking of the research study that may affect the ethical integrity of the study, including those involving research participants, third parties, or juristic persons, must be reported in writing to the College of Education _ERC without delay.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that may affect study-related risks to research participants, juristic or third persons, must be reported in writing to the College of Education _ERC, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research study complies with all applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines, and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Where applicable, adherence to the following South African legislation is essential: the Protection of Personal Information Act (No. 4 of 2013), the Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005), and the National Health Act (No. 61 of 2003)
6. Future use of this research data is permitted only in de-identified form and only for secondary research with objectives similar to those of the original study. Any secondary use involving identifiable human data will require additional ethics clearance.
7. No fieldwork activities may continue beyond the stated expiry date (13/08/2028). A completed Research Ethics Progress Report must be submitted as an application for renewal and is subject to approval by the Research Ethics Committee. A Close-Out Report must be submitted upon completion of the research study.
8. The College of Education _ERC may require the submission of regular progress reports on an **annual** basis, in alignment with Section 7.2 of the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (2024).

Additional Conditions

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from the research participants and Unisa.
2. Research data must be stored in compliance with the university's research data management policy for a period of up to 15 years.
3. When publishing the results, the researcher must take appropriate precautions to safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of the research participants, juristic persons, third parties, and the university, in accordance with institutional policies and ethical standards.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication Practices, specifically Principle 7 on Social Awareness, must be ensured. This principle states: 'Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups, or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible.' The University of South Africa (Unisa) accepts no liability for any failure to comply with this principle.

Note

The reference number 7837 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof Reginald Monyai
Chair of College of Education _ERC
E-mail: monyarb@unisa.ac.za



Professor Mpine Makoe,
Executive Dean / By delegation from the Executive Dean of College of Education ERC
E-mail: qakisme@unisa.ac.za, magolmc@unisa.ac.za

Appendix B: KZN Department Permission Letter



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X 9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200

Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201

Ref: 2/4/8/653

Enquiries : Ms Phindile Duma

Email : phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Tel : 033 302 1063

Miss Shamshaad Begum Ebrahim
16 Beach Road
Flat 308 Sweetwaters
AMANZIMTOTI
4126

Dear Miss Ebrahim

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DOE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: "THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KWAZULU-NATAL" in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 01 September 2025 to 30 September 2027.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

UMLAZI DISTRICT

Mr. GN Ngcobo

Head of Department: Education

Date: 02 September 2025

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

Appendix C: School Principal's Permission Letters



P.O. Box 33028, Montclair 4061
E-mail: secretary@mowat.co.za
Telephone: 031-469 0425
Fax: 031-4691901

30 September 2025

To whom it may concern

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH – STUDENT NUMBER 32665202

This letter serves to inform you that Miss SB Ebrahim has been given permission to conduct research at Mowat Park High School involving Grade 10 and 11 Computer Applications Technology learners.

Regards


Ms AN Ngidi

Principal



Like eagles, we soar!! 

Durban Akademie



Durban Academy

Posbus 21042
Bluff 4036

Tel: 031 4661323
Faks/Fax: 031 4664527

1 April 1997

Email: admin@dfinaacademy.co.za

PO Box 21042
Bluff 4036

24 October 2025

RE: Permission to conduct research for student number 32665202

To whom it may concern

This letter serves to inform you that Miss SB Ebrahim ID number 7608080167086 has been given permission to conduct research at Durban Academy.

Regards


MR PT ZUNGU
PRINCIPAL

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
DURBAN AKADEMIE
POSBUS 21042, BLUFF, 4036
AMPTELIK/OFFICIAL
PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL
DURBAN ACADEMY
P.O. BOX 21042, BLUFF, 4036
TEL: 031 466 1323
FAXS/FAX: 031 466 4527



GROSVENOR BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL

Physical Address: 4 Moss Road, Bluff 4052
Postal Address: P O BOX 20012, Bluff, Durban, 4036
Tel: +27 (031) 466 3241
Email: admin@gbhschool.co.za
Website: www.gbhschool.co.za

4 September 2025

RE: Permission to Conduct Research for Student Number 32665202

To Whom It May Concern

This letter serves to inform you that Miss S.B. Ebrahim has been given permission to conduct research at Grosvenor Boys' High School.

Regards

Mr S. Mbuli

Principal

GROSVENOR BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL
4 MOSS ROAD BLUFF

04 SEP 2025

TEL: 031 941 8283
EMAIL: admin@gbhschool.co.za
www.gbhschool.co.za

Appendix D: Letter from Editor

REGCOR

ENTERPRISES PTY LTD

(2015/375453/07)

Date: 28/02/2026

Dear Sir/Madam

This letter is to certify that I, Sarah Louise Cornelius, of Regcor Enterprises Pty Ltd, have completed the initial editing of the dissertation titled *THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KWAZULU-NATAL* by Shamshaad Begum Ebrahim.

I have ten years of experience in the field, having worked on multiple doctorates. Any changes made to the document after the editing process do not reflect the editing services provided. The onus is on the student to ensure the document is fully corrected before final submission, even if that requires multiple edits.

Kind Regards

Sarah Louise Cornelius

Professional Editor's Guild

Associate Member

Membership number: COR003

Regcor Enterprises Pty Ltd

Registration no: 2015/375453/07

Contact no: 0768156437

Email: sarah@regcor.co.za

Appendix E: Turnitin Report

Afinal Ebrahim Research Report Chapter 1 To 6

AFINAL Ebrahim Research Report Chapter 1 to 6 - 16-02-2026



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