

The Pull of Social Media Platforms on Student Cognition

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Abstract

At the present time, the students use social-media sites every day. It has altered their way of life considerably and altered the way they use information. The aim of this paper is to study cognitive absorption in students in social media which can be defined as the state of being in the connection and not just the mobile application. Using flow theory and cognitive absorption, this project looks at how immersive experiences are designed and how they capture and maintain student attention using platform design features, algorithmic curation and reward systems. The results revealed a nuanced connection among platform affordances, cognitive processes, and student wellness. It is important to understand how connection transforms into captivation in order to design interventions for healthier digital behaviours. Enhancing pedagogies of digital literacy education; implementing self-regulation strategies; redesigning platform features that are more supportive than exploitative of attention mechanisms. This study adds to ongoing discussions that center upon the cognitive effects caused due to social media. Moreover, it also makes a case for the need for the collaboration of schools, the government and social media companies.

Keywords: *Cognitive absorption; Social media engagement; Immersion; Students*

Introduction

In this era of digitalization, social media has become a part of every university student's life. It has altered the way they communicate, learn and analyse. All these platforms, from Facebook and Instagram to TikTok and YouTube, are no longer just a communication tool. They have transformed into an engaging digital space that can grab endless attention. Students can become so absorbed in their interactions with other students on social media that they develop a cognitive absorption (Bombaes et al., 2023).

The continuous engagement in social media by adolescents and youth is seen as a concerning factor affecting the cognitive process, memory and attention (Hao, 2025). Studies suggest that regular contact with digital devices disrupts the working memory of students, affecting the ability to remain focused (Hao, 2025). Furthermore, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat now play roles in the students' social schemas by creating curated realities (Rathnayake, 2025).

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They shape the perceptions, behaviours, and the self-concept of individuals. It is important for teachers, policymakers and students to gain insight on how students get attached to and immersed in these platforms.

The Rise of Social Media among Students

A big chunk of the information users find online is the product of social media. Social media is an information network created to share content that the internet users demand. The internet is home to social media that facilitates tracking and measuring shares, comments and views. According to Azizi et al. (2019) online community building with others is possible through this platform, where people can express ideas and connect with strangers.

A younger generation mainly use the social media (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Students generally try to actively participate online during their classes (Khan, 2018). The internet is a fascinating medium that is free, easy, and dynamic and runs with minimal regulations. Based on Sezen (2018), it creates a stress-free atmosphere, which leads to social bonding and offers a way to express themselves easily. Individuals in their teens, who use social media for various tasks on a daily basis, post pictures on Instagram (and other similar applications), upload videos on YouTube and Dailymotion, network on Facebook and LinkedIn, post information on Twitter and game on Second Life. The individual's self-concept is based on the feedback of the audience that the individual receives. They consider their own values thereby affect their self-esteem. The way individuals judge and perceive themselves can affect their mental health, social interactions, and self-esteem (Smith et al., 2014).

Cognitive Absorption

Personal interests may be considered a key driver of deep processing. According to studies, user engagement improves drastically when social media content corresponds with the users' individual taste (Singh 2025). Social media platforms use algorithms to curate immersion by filtering what an individual gets to see. As a result, it leads to what the researchers call 'tuned advertising', which resonates with the users (Deng, 2025).

The extent to which content and individual interests align governs whether, according to flow theorists, the users reach an optimal state of cognitive engagement (Lina et al., 2024). When a person encounters content that aligns with their values, they are more likely to engage deeply with that platform.

The quality of social interactions is crucial to your thinking. According to studies, social media engagement works in three different dimensions which are cognitive, affective and behavioural and brings together various activities to cause a deep sense of immersion (Khalid, 2025). Users are psychologically invested on platforms with peer-to-peer and community interactions that are meaningful.

The social interaction framework is very important. According to Cha et al. (2024), when people have quality interactions and connect with others, the cognitive load associated with information processing becomes lighter, resulting in greater immersion. Thoughtfully designed social features that foster authentic connections appear to enhance cognitive focus rather than detract from it.

Objectives

This research aims to:

- a) To recognise social media platforms and their impact on the students
- b) To explore the psychological effects of scrolling
- c) To identify the factors influencing immersion
- d) To study the challenges and concerns and strategies for healthy engagement

Rationale of the Study

This review highlights significant shortcomings in the current research regarding students' cognitive absorption when using digital platforms. Recent research frequently mixes cognitive absorption with broader concepts like general engagement, multitasking, or attention issues, leading to confusion in understanding. Current measurement methods are disjointed, primarily depending on self-reports and engagement metrics, while failing to combine subjective immersion with objective attention data (Lobo-Quintero et al., 2024). The majority of the evidence available is correlational and cross-sectional, which restricts our ability to fully grasp the causal relationships between platform features, attention, and academic outcomes. The landscape of research remains inconsistent across various platforms, particularly with the rapidly evolving, algorithm-driven feeds like TikTok and Reels, which have yet to be thoroughly examined. The exploration of contextual and cultural moderators is still lacking, and the suggested interventions are yet to undergo rigorous empirical testing and tailored design for absorption. This study strategically tackles existing gaps by distinctly defining cognitive absorption, creating targeted, evidence-based interventions.

Social Media Platforms and Their Impact

Social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have transformed how people communicate and connect with each other (Smith & Smith, 2024). The increase in active social media users has resulted in a proportional decrease in other communications like phone calls, emails, and face-to-face conversations. Older forms of media are also in the trend such as books, television, and films. Social networks are websites that provide an array of possibilities for generating a public or semi-public identity in cyberspace, establishing a personal connection to a broader network or a collection of connections that range in closeness, and exploring and interacting with the personal networks of others (Boyd et al., 2007). According to the latest analysis from Kepios, there are now 5.24 billion social media user identities around the world. That figure represents 63.9 per cent of the global population. Over the past year, the global total has increased by 4.1%, equivalent to 206 million more user identities (Kemp, 2025).

- **Instagram**

Students have made Instagram their most preferred social media platform. Initially Navandar et al. (2019) states that Instagram is accepting the square format of the picture, but in the recent time, it has removed the restriction on the diverse range of choices made especially for the content type and the size. As a result of this freedom, there is increase in the easy and entertaining visual content due to which Instagram is

on the rise. Instagram has kept images and short videos at its top priority, which is enticing for users to engage with and enjoy content that enhances their experience on the platform.

- **Facebook**

Facebook is the typical example of social media practised as part of information and communication media. The students interact with Facebook throughout the day at different intervals and it is effortlessly engaged in almost all actions with the laptop or smartphone (Komarenko, 2016). This platform can help with classwork, communication and social coordination. With many features and a wide user base, Facebook can be a great tool for educational activities of greats. The availability of information right at one's fingertips encourages easy engagement, allowing students to return to the platform whenever they feel the need for a little distraction, a short break or an easier solution to complex homework questions (Heller, 2019).

- **Snap Chat**

This app is quite popular among the youth and young adults. You can share a photo or a video through a story or direct messaging on Snapchat with an internet-enabled device, for example, your smartphone (Vaterlaus et al. 2016).

- **TikTok**

This Social Media App allows users to watch, share, create short videos and also go live. The platform lets users arrange for 15 seconds, 60 seconds, or greater than one minute long videos. TikTok's recommendation system has become increasingly sophisticated so as to boost user-generated short and ultra-short videos according to the user's creativity and video preference in a seamless manner. The algorithmic recommendation system creates continuous video playback loops, promoting re-watching, and increasing the interval between attention and dopamine release, resulting in more profound psychological immersion (Qin et al., 2023).

Psychological Effects of Scrolling

Unlike now in the past internet retrieval was done for specific search terms to resolve specific problems. Thanks to the algorithm, we scroll uselessly on our phones to find ourselves on topics that we didn't think we'd be interested in, but are. Scrolling syndrome or "zombie scrolling syndrome" (Birdsong, 2020) refers to an incessant scrolling behaviour that lacks a specific purpose or tangible benefit. With the advent of the digital age, marketers and businesses have been looking for ways to tap into believers through persuasive techniques in order to keep the users hooked for vested interests. The online marketplace benefited significantly from the emergence of this syndrome. Online platforms that attract the most daily engagement provide the greatest profitability. This describes the methods used by online businesses to get users of their social networking site to engage each day (Anderson & Wood, 2020). According to Montag et al. (2019), flow refers to a favourable state characterized by heightened productivity, where challenge and skills are perfectly matched to the task at hand.

The experience of flow invokes an alteration of the sense of time. Also, the lack of a clear end goal on social networking sites can indeed have negative repercussions. Scrolling endlessly on social networking sites draws the users into a trance.

The Role of Cognitive Absorption in Social Media Content

According to Lin & Lu (2000) as well as Deng et al. (2010), information systems have been found to endow users with cognitive absorption. Users interact with an information system with a purpose and are often faced with the challenges of technology. Users should have adequate skills to utilize an information system and harness the necessary mental energy for engaging in the tasks which lead to increased concentration of the activities (Deng et al, 2010). People tune out distractions in their environment and keep themselves engaged with an information system. They can lose track of time when using the information system (Agarwal & Karahanna, 2000). As per Agarwal and Karahanna (2000), technology takes the appropriate actions that suits users' input on information systems quickly and relevantly. Thus, users feel in charge of their interaction with technology. This technology ignites curiosity and increases enjoyment by means of interesting visual interfaces and new forms of interaction. (Deng et al., 2010) When people continue using an information system to accomplish their goals while enjoying doing so, it becomes a self-fulfilling experience. The combination of personal feelings and knowledge experiences achieve intrinsic motivation through classic absorption.

In addition, cognitive absorption should be considered as a usage dimension in behavioral studies related to information systems. According to Chen and Ku (2013), Users' cognitive absorption and motivation affect their performance quality and quantity. This study claims that cognitive absorption is a precursor to behavioural outcome of social media.

Factors Influencing Immersion

Cognitive immersion in social media refers to the deep psychological engagement and sense of presence users experience when interacting with digital platforms.

- **Personal Interests and Content Alignment**

People engage deeply with content aligned to their personal interests. Research indicates that social media content that appeals to an individual's unique taste and interest can boost engagement (Singh, 2025). The algorithms that social media platforms use to curate content heighten user immersion by tailoring experiences to their behaviour. This leads to what researchers' term as "tuned advertising", which flows seamlessly and engages the user (Deng, 2025). The fit between content and personal preference is important. When users find a good fit, they reach the optimal cognitive engagement state, which flow theorists often refer to (Lina et al., 2024). When people see the content and material that fits their interests, ideas and make up for their values, they will take greater pains to engage and commit with the platform.

- **Creating connection and engaging cognitively**

The quality and nature of social interactions play a critical role in cognition. According to studies, social media engagement works on different levels cognitive, affective and

behavioural which combine together to create a deeper engagement (Khalid, 2025). When users engage in real inputs between real people with their peers and the community, the relationship is meaningful.

The structure of social interactions is highly important. High-quality interactions and closeness to others alleviate cognitive load for better information processing and deeper immersion (Cha et al., 2024). This suggests that well-designed social features that strengthen social bonds can enhance attention instead of damaging it.

- **Cultural Context as a Moderating Force**

Drawn from the work of Gordesli et al. (2024), the culture impacts the way agents behave cognitively immersed in Virtual Reality. Studies examining cultural dimensions have demonstrated that individualism-collectivism orientations are important predictors of engagement patterns. In collectivist cultures, individuals are more likely to use social media to connect with people in their community, so their engagement level is far more profound than people from individualistic cultures who tend to use social media differently.

Additionally, a greater knowledge of storytelling conventions and narrative structures positively impacts immersion. The Two-Dimensional Flow Framework suggests that if a film's story content is aligned with the cultural background and storytelling practices of its viewers, it enhances the film's relatability and narrative continuity. Cognitive immersion may also receive a boost from narrative continuity. On the other hand, cultural misalignment can lead to disengagement stemming from negative feelings (Deng, 2025).

Notifications as Cognitive Disruptors

Social media notifications and alerts are distracting in today's digital world affecting how social media users engage with online content. Many different factors influence this relationship including individual differences, platform design features and cognitive capacity.

Alerts rob the user of focus and cognitive engagement. Constant notifications from social media platforms can distract and disengage users, as study shows (Bilderback, 2024). The impact is shown to have a substantial effect on education and the workplace. It refers to the extra mental taxing caused by something outside of one's head. In other words, outside factors. It found that with notifications exposure, this cognitive load increases significantly (Roswendi & Gong, 2025). Cognitive disruption works in multiple layers of sophistication. Receiving notifications reduces the synchrony of attention and increases cognitive load (Sieg et al., 2025).

The Role of Algorithms in Content Delivery

Social media algorithms utilize advanced technology to analyze huge amounts of data about users to determine which content is most likely to appeal to each person (Apostol et al., 2024). There are a few essential things.

- **Data Collection:** Algorithms compile insights about user interaction such as which posts they like, which accounts they follow, and how long they spend consuming

different types of content.

- **Content Analysis:** The content analysis gives an insight into the subject matter and context of the content. As noted by Reshetnikova et al. (2025), machine learning algorithms can extract text and image features from posts for classifying them. LinkedIn post perform better with organic reach when they contain visual content. Algorithms favour content types that encourage engagement (Agrawal, 2025).
- **Predictive Personalization:** Using collected information, algorithms generate a special model for each user based on his/her interests and preferences. As per Mou (2024), platforms can develop personalized content like news feeds, friends, and ads.

The Impact on User Engagement

The primary goal of algorithm-driven content delivery is to increase user engagement. When platforms show us things we like, we're more likely to tap the like, comment, and share buttons. According to research, AI powered personalization can significantly affect user engagement rates as compared to content without personalization (Apostol et al., 2024).

Platforms such as TikTok allows users to deliver easy and captivating content in an interactive format which is very beneficial in enhancing consumer preferences and purchase intention (Sohid et al., 2024). The creation of a montage of short-form video platforms has helped in the algorithmic curation of aspects like visual storytelling and narrative compression. The transformation of these platforms into effective tools of influence and communication in a participatory and algorithmic media ecology.

Challenges and Concerns

Despite the benefits of personalization, the use of algorithms in content delivery raises several significant concerns:

- **Privacy:** The large-scale collection and use of personal information for custom algorithms raises major privacy concerns. It's hard to give customers what they want while confidentially not disclosing private information (Guess et al., 2023).
- **Algorithmic Bubbles and Echo Chambers:** When people connect or engage with people from particular places or backgrounds, the algorithm in their content will suggest similar people from similar backgrounds (Conte et al., 2024). Sometimes, powerful influencers may join as interlopers to influence public opinion. Ultimately some of the influencers and ultimately the public will not indulge in any reasoning to assess the credibility of some of the arguments and when there will be a reliance on heuristics or shortcuts, there is menace to the overall process of democracy. The algorithms create a bubble and influence the people. The design of platforms like TikTok has been criticized for creating algorithmic bubbles that might shape user behaviour and conversations around mental health.
- **Misinformation:** The same mechanisms that entice users to consume personalized content can rapidly disseminate misinformation. When it leads to high levels of engagement, algorithms may promote false or misleading content. Concerns over the impact of social media on public dialogue and the urgent need to share information

more responsibly have come about due to this misinformation (Metzler & Garcia, 2023).

- **Transparency and Control:** People are often unaware of how algorithms control their online activities. Thus, not being privy to this information can make the users feel frustrated and helpless. Users need more control over the data they add and the content they see to combat the negative effects of algorithmic curation (Marinoni et al., 2024).

Strategies for Healthy Social Media Engagement / Understanding the Challenge

Social media is rather ironic; it connects us, gives access to information and lets us make things. Still, overuse may cause anxiety, depression, social comparison issues, and that all too common feeling of missing out (Jing & Chunbo, 2025). It is important to develop strategies for meaningful, balanced engagement (Eitan & Gazit, 2024).

- **Purposeful Time Management**
Studies indicate that targeted social media interaction yields better results than hours of scrolling. A level of directed use and limiting one's daily engagement to around 3 hours or less is associated with improved mood and less anxiety (Hunt et al., 2021). Setting clear boundaries and rules for usage (e.g. checking social media at set times instead of having free access) is beneficial for mental health (Vossen et al., 2024).
- **Curating Content Environment**
The quality of our feed directly affects our mental health. Rather than consuming content, we should follow accounts that help and inspire us instead of those which create feelings of comparison (Eitan & Gazit, 2024). Creating 'affinity spaces' that bring people together around shared interests and positive values rather than creating content mainly for engagement (Jones, 2022).
- **Developing Digital Literacy and Critical Thinking**
By developing critical thinking skills, we are able to evaluate the credibility of information and avoid manipulation. Essential skills include: checking information before you share it; recognizing messages that provoke an emotional response; understanding how algorithmic personalization works and how it influences what you see; differentiating between authentic content and manufactured personas (Jones, 2022).
- **Practicing Mindfulness and Awareness**
Interventions that focus on mindfulness can help effectively reduce social media addiction as well as enhance the control over attention. If we can learn to identify our emotional triggers such as comparison and fear of missing out, we can override unhealthy reflexes (Eitan & Gazit, 2024).

Implications for Educators and Institutions

The media absorption of educational content is known as cognitive absorption. Creating too much of it could lead to trouble for educational media. Research provides valuable insights for educational institutions that wish to address this problem.

- **Self-Regulation and Executive Function Development**

Educational interventions should improve students' self-regulation skills and executive functions (Gkora & Christou, 2023). According to research, executive functions like attention control, emotional control and metacognitive practices play an important role in managing social media. When schools prioritize teaching student's cognitive skills along with their use of technology responsibly, students learn to handle their use of technology. In addition, a compound and parallel organization can implement strategies that will improve cognitive control processes with structured learning experiences (Kassie, 2024).

- **Digital Literacy as a Foundational Strategy**

An effective strategy includes comprehensive digital literacy education that involves much more than technical skills. Teachers need to equip students with the following skills: the ability to critically assess online content; an understanding of how social media sites work, as well as their use of algorithms; (Prakash & Kant, 2025) an awareness of their own cognitive vulnerabilities to overuse; and understanding how they get cognitively hooked.

Research indicates that students with more nuanced digital literacy have a better understanding of problematic use trends (Sufyan et al., 2025). Incorporating digital literacy initiatives into the main curriculum is pertinent since it covers the cognitive, affective, and social level of using the media (Maisuroh et al, 2024).

- **Institutional Policy and Time Management Framework**

Institutions need to have well-defined policies restraining use of Social Media and not just access. Key techniques include.

- Instead of an outright ban, schools may implement scheduled access time throughout the school day.
- Introduction of solutions for Device management systems against excess usages tracking and control.
- Multi-level interventions of traditional classroom studies supported with an innovative app and active involvement of family in learning (Kumari et al., 2026).

Studies show that self-control cushions the negative effects of social media use on academic performance. Students with stronger self-regulation skills tend to have lesser adverse effects on their academic performance and well-being.

- **Addressing Underlying Psychological Factors**

Teachers should be aware that high cognitive absorption can often imply unmet psychological needs. Institutions can address this by Bakker and Mostert (2024).

- Strategies that can help reduce fear of missing out (FoMO) and dampen negative social comparison.
- Developing programs for training emotion regulation and coping skills.
- The collaboration between family and community.

- **Contemplative and Reflective Practices**

The implementation of mindfulness-based interventions in schools can help children become more aware of their social media consumption. To encourage students to reflect on their purpose of using social media and the impact on them is called metacognitive practice. Such practice has proven to be very effective at reducing compulsive use (Arana-Rodríguez et al., 2025).

- **Content Strategy and Platform Modification**

The following can be supported by institutions and educators: Age-appropriate design standards to protect young users; assessments and evidence-based interventions; transparency of algorithms and algorithmic audits; and altering features of platforms that promote over-engagement (autoplay, notifications, infinite scroll, etc.).

- **Students should be educated and not punished**

Utilize rigorous research methods to assess specific interventions, monitor effectiveness through data and evidence, modify interventions in light of evidence about what works locally, and place more emphasis on protective factors (coping skills, resilience) than merely restricting use (Lim, 2024).

Conclusion

A study of the cognitive absorption of students in social media shows that it a multidimensional phenomenon that offers great opportunities as well as challenges to classroom learning. The way students connect with social media platforms works in very complex neurological processes by means of presence, engagement and social validation to experience deeply immersive experiences (Rouis et al., 2017). When learners get absorbed in a technology this is called cognitive absorption. Social media can play a collaborative learning role like other media (e.g. mobile, etc.). Its actions can enhance access to educational resources. Further, it acts as a medium for creative expression. Social media, on the other hand, can also use technology in a distracting role. Also, it can impose costs of fragmented attention on the user. It can also reduce academic performance.

Yet, if know the reasons behind the connection and attraction to websites and social media, they can use them productively. The answer is not to stop using social media entirely. Instead, we can harness digital literacy for students to know when they are getting cognitively hooked, and to develop self-regulatory processes that make social media use match with one's academic and personal development goals. Schools must help students understand the media. They should help them by including media literacy into their lessons and promoting a healthier digital experience.

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