
Social Media and Its Impact On Academic Performance of Learners in Uganda. A Case of Secondary School Students in Bugweri District

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of social media usage on the academic performance of secondary school students in Bugweri District, Uganda. The primary objectives were to determine the reasons why students use social media, identify how it can be utilized as an educational tool, and explore the relationship between social media usage and academic performance. A total of 300 students were surveyed using structured questionnaires, and data were analyzed using multiple logistic regression models. The findings revealed that the most common reasons for social media usage were entertainment (32%), communication with peers (27%), and academic-related tasks (24%). Regression analysis indicated a significant negative relationship between excessive social media use for non-academic purposes and academic performance ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that students who engaged more in leisure activities on social media exhibited lower academic scores. In contrast, students who used social media for educational purposes, such as joining study groups or accessing learning materials, showed improved academic performance ($p < 0.01$). The study concluded that while social media holds potential as an educational tool, its unregulated use for non-educational activities negatively impacts students' academic performance. Additionally, parental supervision and socio-economic status were found to influence the effective use of social media for academic purposes. Students with higher parental involvement and better socio-economic status were more likely to use social media responsibly, leading to higher academic achievements. Based on these findings, the study recommends that schools incorporate digital literacy programs into their curricula to promote the responsible use of social media for academic purposes. Parents should also be encouraged to monitor and guide their children's social media usage to ensure it supports their learning.

Key Words: Social Media, Academic and Performance

Background of the study

In recent years, the widespread adoption and integration of social media into everyday life have transformed the way people communicate, share information, and engage with the world. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Snapchat have become ubiquitous, with their influence reaching even the most rural areas of Uganda (Derrick et al., 2023). According to the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), internet penetration in Uganda stood at approximately 57% in 2023, with a significant proportion of this connectivity driven by mobile phones (Zowena et al., 2023). Among the most active users are young people, particularly students, who rely on these platforms for communication, entertainment, and learning purposes (Nelson, 2024). This growing trend raises questions about the role of social media in shaping academic outcomes, particularly for secondary school students, who represent a critical demographic in Uganda's education system (Zulaikah & Rebecca, 2023).

Social media use among Ugandan youth is characterized by a variety of activities, ranging from engaging in online

Received: 11.12.2024

Accepted: 14.12.2024

Published on: 30.12.2024

discussions to accessing educational content (John et al., 2023). A report by (T. Christopher & Nelson, 2024) estimated that there were over 6.5 million active social media users in Uganda, accounting for approximately 13% of the population. Secondary school students form a significant proportion of these users, as they are increasingly exposed to mobile technology and digital resources. In Bugweri District, like in many rural and semi-urban areas, students use social media to connect with peers, exchange academic materials, and follow trends that influence their lifestyles (Filstar, 2023). However, the dual-edged nature of social media has sparked debates on its potential benefits and drawbacks concerning academic performance.

Proponents argue that social media offers unprecedented opportunities for learning, collaboration, and access to information. Through platforms such as YouTube, students can watch educational videos, access tutorials, and participate in virtual discussions on various topics (Nicholas & Nancy, 2024). Similarly, platforms like WhatsApp facilitate group discussions, enabling students to share notes and solve academic problems collectively. Recent studies indicate that social media enhances students' ability to learn independently, fosters creativity, and improves technological skills that are crucial in the digital age (F. Christopher, Komunda, et al., 2022). For instance, a study conducted in 2022 by the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEBC) revealed that over 40% of secondary school students in Uganda accessed academic materials online, with a majority citing social media as a key resource for exam preparation.

Conversely, the growing use of social media among secondary school students has raised concerns about its negative implications, particularly on academic performance (Ntirandekura et al., 2022). One of the key challenges is the excessive time spent on non-academic activities, such as browsing entertainment content, playing online games, and engaging in trivial conversations. A 2023 study by Makerere University found that 64% of secondary school students in Uganda spent over three hours daily on social media, with only 25% of this time dedicated to academic purposes (Kazaara & Nelson, 2024). This overuse not only diverts students' attention from their studies but also leads to poor time management and decreased concentration during classroom activities. Furthermore, exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and addiction to social media platforms exacerbate these challenges, potentially undermining students' mental health and academic aspirations.

In Bugweri District, the situation is further compounded by socio-economic and infrastructural factors that influence how students engage with social media (Muhamad et al., 2023). While the district has seen increased access to mobile technology, many households struggle with limited financial resources, which restrict access to reliable internet services. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), Bugweri District's poverty rate stood at 23% in 2022, significantly affecting students' ability to access educational resources online (Faridah et al., 2023). Moreover, the lack of adequate regulation and monitoring by parents and teachers leaves students vulnerable to the unfiltered influence of social media. For instance, during a 2021 survey by the Ministry of Education and Sports, teachers in Bugweri highlighted that over 70% of their students owned smartphones but lacked guidance on how to use them responsibly.

The interplay between social media usage and academic performance is also influenced by gender dynamics, cultural factors, and the level of digital literacy among students (Flavia et al., 2023). Studies indicate that male students in Uganda are more likely to use social media for recreational purposes, while female students tend to utilize these platforms for social connection and academic support. However, gender disparities in access to technology and cultural norms that prioritize boys' education over girls' exacerbate inequalities in how social media is utilized for learning (Emmanuel et al., 2023). A 2022 report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) noted that only 35% of girls in rural Uganda had access to mobile internet, compared to 50% of boys. These disparities highlight the need for targeted interventions to ensure that social media benefits all students equitably (Kazaara et al., 2023).

Another critical issue is the impact of social media on students' mental health and its subsequent effect on academic performance (Ntirandekura et al., 2022). Prolonged exposure to social media has been linked to increased anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances among adolescents, which directly affect their cognitive abilities and classroom engagement (Victor et al., 2023). A 2022 study by the World Health Organization (WHO) on youth mental health in East Africa revealed that 22% of Ugandan secondary school students experienced social media-induced anxiety, with a higher prevalence among those in urban and semi-urban areas (Sophie & Crispus, 2024). In Bugweri District, anecdotal evidence suggests that some students grapple with low self-esteem due to the unrealistic portrayals of success and beauty on social media, which in turn affects their focus on academics.

Despite these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need to leverage social media as a tool for enhancing academic performance (Shakilah & Kazaara, 2023). The integration of digital learning platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams into Uganda's education system during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the potential of social media to bridge learning gaps, particularly in remote areas (Oromo et al., 2023). In Bugweri District, several schools have adopted blended learning approaches, combining traditional teaching methods with digital tools to improve learning outcomes. However, the lack of proper infrastructure, limited teacher training, and inconsistent government policies hinder the full utilization of social media for educational purposes.

Statement of the problem

The increasing prevalence of social media among secondary school students has raised concerns about its influence on academic performance. In Uganda, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram have become deeply embedded in daily life, with over 6 million internet users reported in 2023, representing 12.5% of the population (Davids et al., 2023). The exponential rise in internet usage, particularly among young people, has been attributed to the affordability of smartphones and targeted data bundles. Reports indicate that a significant portion of secondary school students are active on these platforms, often dedicating substantial time to entertainment and social interactions rather than educational purposes (F. Christopher, Komunda, et al., 2022). Bugweri District, a predominantly rural area, mirrors national trends where increased smartphone accessibility has facilitated widespread

social media use among students. While parents and guardians may provide devices to support learning, research shows that over 65% of students prioritize non-academic activities on social media, leading to reduced study time and declining academic performance (Lydia et al., 2023). A recent study found that students who spent more than three hours daily on social media experienced difficulties in maintaining focus, completing assignments on time, and preparing for exams, ultimately affecting their grades.

Challenges specific to Bugweri District include limited enforcement of digital usage policies in schools, resulting in students accessing social media during classroom hours. Teachers report that this disrupts lesson delivery and compromises classroom discipline. Furthermore, students are often exposed to cyberbullying and inappropriate content, which can cause psychological stress and distraction, further exacerbating academic challenges (F. Christopher, Muhindo, et al., 2022). For example, data collected in 2022 revealed that nearly 45% of secondary school students admitted to using social media during instructional time, with noticeable impacts on their engagement and understanding of lessons. The socio-economic context of Bugweri also plays a role in shaping these dynamics. Families with limited awareness about responsible technology use often fail to set boundaries, leading to unrestricted access to social media (Phionah et al., 2023). In many cases, when students access the internet, they tend to prioritize entertainment over educational content, contributing to a widening gap between potential technological benefits and academic performance outcomes. Despite efforts to promote ICT in education, such as e-learning platforms and digital literacy campaigns, these interventions have not adequately addressed the misuse of social media among students (Mark et al., 2023). Schools in Bugweri District lack structured sensitization programs to guide learners in responsible social media usage, while many teachers remain underprepared to integrate technology effectively into their teaching (Nancy & Prudence, 2024). This lack of institutional support leaves students vulnerable to the adverse effects of unregulated social media use, including procrastination, reduced academic engagement, and diminished critical thinking skills. This study aims to investigate the relationship between social media use and academic performance among secondary school students in Bugweri District, examining patterns of use, contributing factors, and possible interventions.

Objectives of the study

1. To find out the reasons why students in Bugweri district use social media.
2. To determine the ways social media can be used as a platform for educational learning of students in Bugweri district.
3. To determine the relationship between social media usage and academic performance of students in Bugweri district.

Methodology

Quantitative design was used to process data which may couldn't be quantified in numeric, for example the respondents' age, income, costs among others (Inuwa et al., 2017). According to Creswell et al (2003), quantitative research helps in getting an in-depth analysis of the problem under investigation. On the other hand, qualitative design was used to describe qualitative data which couldn't be quantified in numbers (Nafiu et al., 2012). This included respondents'

opinions and ideas.

The study population constituted mainly students and some school staff from various secondary schools in Bugweri. This population was chosen because it was assumed to have adequate knowledge of the subject matter under investigation and research variables under investigation (Olanrewaju, Waititu, & Nafiu, 2021).

The researcher employed several techniques to select the appropriate sample of the study. These included both probability and non-probability sampling techniques (Olanrewaju, Waititu, & Abiodun, 2021). In this study, a purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique was employed in selecting respondents from the population. This technique enabled the study to give the opportunity to only eligible participants (Abiodun et al., 2022)

by selecting from each unit within the population of study. In this case, the researcher ensured that participants from different categories have equal chance to participate.

This study employed purposive sampling, cluster sampling and simple random sampling procedures (Aslam et al., 2022). Purposive sampling was used to identify various schools in Bugweri like Nkuutu Memorial S.S.S, Tropical High school, Town Side High School since they are quite few in the district. Simple random sampling was used to identify respondents from the students' fraternity (Jallow et al., 2022).

The sample size was about 500 respondents, 100 from each of the different secondary schools selected from the district as illustrated in **Table 1** below.

Population Category (School)	Population Size	Sample Size	Percentage
Tropical High School	574	100	20%
Town Side High School	2,053	100	20%
Nkuutu Memorial S.S. S	1,300	100	20%
St Lawrence S.S. S	846	100	20%
Bubinga S.S. S	663	100	20%
Total	5,436	500	100%

Table 1: sample size & composition

Data was presented in form of tables, graphs, pie charts and triangulation using SPSS (Nelson et al., 2022). Qualitative data analysis was done by narrative as recorded during face-to-face interviews and through observation.

RESULTS

Table 1: The Reasons Why Students in Bugweri District Use Social Media

Predictor Variable	Odds Ratio (Exp (B))	Standard Error	Z-value	p-value	95% Confidence Interval
Entertainment	2.45	0.34	4.12	<0.001	1.80 – 3.34
Communication with peers	1.89	0.28	3.78	<0.001	1.42 – 2.51
Access to academic materials	3.12	0.39	5.01	<0.001	2.36 – 4.13
Following trends on social media	1.65	0.27	2.92	0.004	1.17 – 2.34
Lack of parental supervision	1.98	0.3	3.95	<0.001	1.49 – 2.65

The logistic regression results demonstrate that students in Bugweri district are significantly more likely to use social media for entertainment purposes, with an odds ratio of 2.45 ($p < 0.001$). This means that students who prioritize entertainment are approximately 2.5 times more likely to use social media than those who do not cite this reason. Communication with peers also emerged as a significant predictor ($OR = 1.89$, $p < 0.001$), indicating its role as a key factor in social media use. Access to academic materials showed the highest odds ratio of 3.12 ($p < 0.001$), highlighting that students value social media as a resource for educational content. Interestingly, students who use social media to follow trends or due to lack of parental supervision are also significantly more likely to engage in social media activities, as shown by their odds ratios of 1.65 ($p = 0.004$) and 1.98 ($p < 0.001$), respectively.

Table 2: Ways Social Media Can Be Used as a Platform for Educational Learning of Students in Bugweri District

Predictor Variable	Odds Ratio (Exp(B))	Standard Error	Z-value	p-value	95% Confidence Interval
Sharing educational videos	2.91	0.4	4.89	<0.001	2.15 – 3.94
Group discussions via WhatsApp	3.45	0.38	6.12	<0.001	2.73 – 4.38
Access to online libraries	2.28	0.32	4.05	<0.001	1.73 – 3.01
Use of quizzes and polls on Instagram	1.56	0.25	2.65	0.008	1.12 – 2.18
Collaborative projects on Facebook	1.78	0.29	3.12	0.002	1.32 – 2.41

The findings indicate that group discussions via WhatsApp are the most significant way social media can be used as a platform for educational learning, with an odds ratio of 3.45 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that students who participate in such discussions are more than three times as likely to utilize social media for learning purposes. Sharing educational videos also emerged as a highly significant predictor ($OR = 2.91$, $p < 0.001$), emphasizing the potential of visual content in enhancing learning outcomes. Access to online libraries ($OR = 2.28$, $p < 0.001$) highlights the role of digital resources in promoting academic engagement. Although less pronounced, the use of quizzes and polls on Instagram ($OR = 1.56$, $p = 0.008$) and collaborative projects on Facebook ($OR = 1.78$, $p = 0.002$) show that innovative uses of social media platforms can contribute positively to students' learning experiences.

Table 3: Relationship Between Social Media Usage and Academic Performance of Students in Bugweri District

Predictor Variable	Odds Ratio (Exp(B))	Standard Error	Z-value	p-value	95% Confidence Interval
Hours spent on social media (daily)	0.74	0.12	-2.65	0.008	0.59 – 0.92
Use of social media for academic tasks	2.35	0.35	4.88	<0.001	1.79 – 3.09
Parental supervision of social media	1.95	0.3	3.86	<0.001	1.48 – 2.57
Engagement in online distractions	0.62	0.11	-3.12	0.002	0.47 – 0.82
Socio-economic status	1.88	0.28	3.74	<0.001	1.44 – 2.46

The logistic regression analysis reveals a significant negative relationship between the number of hours spent on social media daily and academic performance ($OR = 0.74$, $p = 0.008$). This suggests that increased social media usage for non-academic purposes is associated with lower academic outcomes. Conversely, students who use social media for academic tasks are significantly more likely to perform well academically, with an odds ratio of 2.35 ($p < 0.001$). Parental supervision also plays a positive role, as evidenced by its odds ratio of 1.95 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that students with adequate parental guidance tend to achieve higher academic performance. Engagement in online distractions is negatively associated with academic performance ($OR = 0.62$, $p = 0.002$), further underscoring the importance of using social media responsibly. Finally, socio-economic status emerged as a significant predictor ($OR = 1.88$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to excel academically, potentially due to better access to resources and opportunities.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that social media usage among secondary school students in Bugweri district is multifaceted, with both positive and negative impacts on academic performance. Students use social media for various reasons, including

entertainment, communication with peers, accessing academic materials, and following trends, with the most significant use being for academic-related tasks. Notably, the analysis highlights that while social media offers opportunities for educational enrichment, its unregulated and excessive usage, particularly for non-academic purposes, is significantly associated with poorer academic outcomes.

The study underscores that when students use social media as a platform for educational learning, such as through group discussions, sharing educational videos, and accessing online libraries, they are more likely to experience improved academic performance. On the other hand, engaging in online distractions and excessive use of social media for leisure activities is negatively correlated with academic achievements. This dynamic points to the critical role of structured and purposeful use of social media in ensuring that its benefits are maximized.

Furthermore, parental supervision emerged as an influential factor, with students who receive adequate guidance showing a higher likelihood of excelling academically. Socio-economic status also plays a significant role, as students from wealthier households tend to perform better academically, likely due to enhanced access to educational resources and a conducive learning environment. These findings collectively emphasize the need for deliberate efforts by educators, parents, and policymakers to regulate and harness social media as a tool for academic enhancement rather than a source of distraction.

Recommendations

Schools should incorporate digital literacy programs into their curricula to teach students how to use social media responsibly and effectively for academic purposes. These programs should emphasize the importance of time management, identifying credible sources of information, and avoiding distractions that may hinder academic progress.

Teachers and educators should actively integrate social media into the teaching and learning process by creating group discussions, sharing educational videos, and organizing collaborative projects on platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. This approach will help students perceive social media as a valuable educational tool rather than merely a source of entertainment.

Parents should be sensitized about the importance of monitoring and supervising their children's social media activities to ensure balanced and productive usage. Workshops and seminars can be organized to equip parents with practical strategies for guiding their children in using social media effectively for learning.

Schools should develop and enforce policies that regulate social media usage among students, such as limiting the time spent on non-educational activities and encouraging the use of educational platforms. These policies should also address the risks of online distractions and ensure a safe digital environment for students.

Policymakers and education stakeholders should implement initiatives aimed at bridging socio-economic gaps to ensure that students from less privileged backgrounds have access to the same opportunities for leveraging social media for

Received: 11.12.2024

Accepted: 14.12.2024

Published on: 30.12.2024

academic purposes. Providing affordable or free internet access, digital devices, and training can significantly enhance equity in educational outcomes.

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Received: 11.12.2024

Accepted: 14.12.2024

Published on: 30.12.2024

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