

BEYOND ENTERTAINMENT: ANALYZING THE INFORMATIONAL UTILITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AMONG YOUTH

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Article Details

Received on 14 May, 2026

Accepted on 17 June, 2026

Published on 19 June, 2026

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ABSTRACT

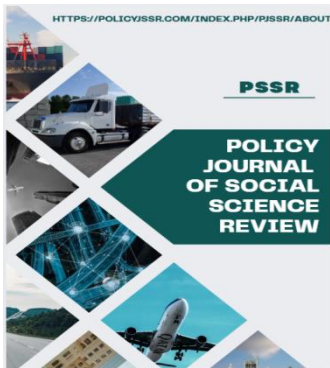
This research investigates the dual-usage patterns of social media platforms among teenage students in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, focusing on the tension between entertainment-seeking and information-gathering behaviors. In the contemporary digital landscape, teenagers are increasingly reliant on social media for both academic survival and social leisure. However, the prevalence of high-stimulation, short-form content raises concerns regarding academic distraction and the credibility of digital information. The study employed a descriptive survey research design, utilizing a structured questionnaire to collect data from a purposive sample of students across various disciplines, including Nursing, Pharmacy, Arts, Computer Science, Engineering and Mass Communication. The findings reveal a significant Functional Split in platform preference: while TikTok and Instagram serve as the primary hubs for entertainment, YouTube remains the dominant and most trusted platform for educational tutorials and lectures. Notably, a new trend emerged with students increasingly utilizing Generative AI tools like ChatGPT and Meta AI for rapid information retrieval. Results indicate that a majority of the participants spend more than four hours daily on social media for entertainment, suggesting a high risk of Attention Residue that potentially hinders deep academic focus. Despite this, students perceive social media as a vital tool for personal development and informal learning, particularly in bridging the resource gap. The research concludes that while social media is an indispensable educational asset for the youth, there is an urgent need for formal digital literacy training. Recommendations include the integration of curated digital repositories by universities and the promotion of algorithmic awareness among students to better manage the balance between leisure and learning.

Keywords: Social Media, Entertainment, Information, Digital Literacy, YouTube Learning, TikTok

Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627



Introduction

In the last decade or so the global landscape of communication has undergone a seismic shift due to the expansion of social media platforms. In Pakistan, this digital revolution has been particularly impactful among the youth. According to recent statistics, Pakistan has one of the fastest-growing internet-using populations in South Asia, with a significant majority being under the age of 30 (George et al., 2023; Kemp, 2025). For teenagers and youth, social media is no longer just a pastime, it has now become an essential environment for social interaction, identity formation and also increasingly, academic survival.

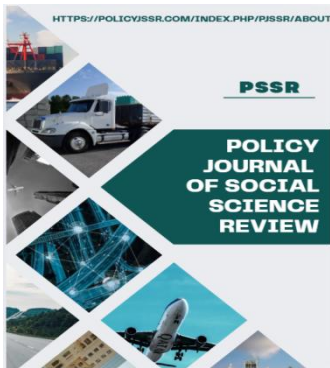
In the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and specifically its capital city, Peshawar, the integration of digital tools into daily life has created a unique social phenomenon. Peshawar, a city known for its deep-rooted cultural traditions, is now home to a generation of digital natives who navigate global platforms like TikTok, Instagram, X and YouTube alongside their traditional educational pursuits. For teenager college students, this transition to higher education coincides with an increased autonomy in how they use their smartphones. They are at a crossroads where the infinite scroll of entertainment constantly competes with the rigorous demands of their new academic programs.

College students in Peshawar, are navigating a complex digital landscape where social media serves as a primary tool for both information gathering and entertainment. Short videos, reels, and memes, often dominates student screen time, sometimes exceeding four hours per day. Furthermore, there is a critical uncertainty regarding the trustworthiness and reliability of the information accessed on these platforms, which can hinder personal and academic development. This study seeks to investigate how teenagers in this region balance these conflicting digital behaviors and to what extent social media usage truly supports their educational growth versus serving as a source of distraction.

This research is significant because it addresses a specific knowledge gap in the regional academic literature of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Most studies on social media usage focus on metropolitan centers like Karachi, Lahore or Islamabad, however, the student body in Peshawar is unique, often comprising individuals from diverse districts such as Peshawar, Abbotabad, Dera Ismail Khan, Swat, Mardan, Chitral and the merged tribal districts (erstwhile FATA).

For educators and policymakers, this study provides crucial evidence on which platforms students actually trust. If students are ignoring traditional websites in favor of YouTube tutorials or AI tools

Policy Journal of Social Science Review



ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

like ChatGPT, the curriculum must adapt to these habits. For parents and the community, the study sheds light on the reality of screen time, moving the conversation away from general criticism toward a more nuanced understanding of how digital tools can be used for Informational Leapfrogging.

The primary source of information for a student in Peshawar is now shifted from traditional books to Search Engine and the Social Feed. This shift has profound implications for how knowledge is consumed. In our survey data, we see students moving toward Visual Learning via YouTube and Instant Querying via AI. This study is grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), developed by Blumler and Katz. This theory suggests that users are not passive recipients of media but are active agents who choose specific media to satisfy specific needs. In the case of Peshawar's students, they use social media to satisfy two primary needs: Surveillance (gathering information/learning) and Diversion (entertainment/stress relief). This framework allows us to understand why a student might use TikTok for one hour to decompress and then switch to LinkedIn or YouTube to prepare for a career.

Literature Review

The shift from traditional educational methods to digital-first is a global phenomenon, yet its manifestation in

developing regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Boyd (2014) posits that teenagers today inhabit networked publics, where social media serves as the primary site for identity construction. In Pakistan, Siddiqui and Singh (2016) observe that while the digital revolution offers unprecedented connectivity, it also creates a dual-reality for students who must navigate conservative societal norms alongside the liberal, globalized content of platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

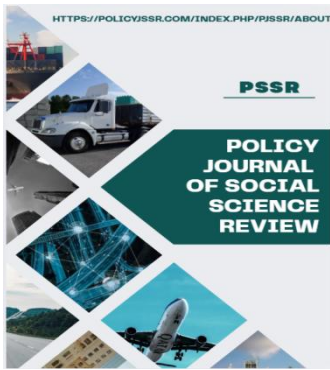
The foundational framework for this study is the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). Blumler and Katz (1974) argued that media users are goal-oriented. Recent expansions of this theory by Whiting and Williams (2013) identify seven primary gratifications for social media use, which includes social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, expression of opinions and surveillance. For college students in Peshawar, the entertainment gratification frequently overlaps with information seeking, leading to what Marwick & boyd (2011) calls context-collapse, where the brain struggles to distinguish between leisure and cognitive labor.

Social media platforms are designed using persuasive technology. Fogg (2009) explains that features like the infinite scroll are engineered to maximize time-on-app. Keep scrolling on social media apps creates a significant hurdle for academic focus.

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627



Leroy (2009) introduces the concept of Attention Residue, suggesting that when a student switches from watching a TikTok meme to a YouTube chemistry tutorial, their cognitive performance is diminished because a portion of their attention remains stuck on the previous entertainment. This is further complicated by Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). Przybylski et al. (2013) found that students high in FoMO are more likely to check social media during lectures leading to poorer academic outcomes.

While TikTok dominates leisure, YouTube has emerged as a critical educational tool. Moghavemi et al. (2018) found that visual learning via YouTube significantly aids in the retention of complex concepts compared to text-based learning. In Pakistan, Raza et al. (2020) noted that university students use YouTube to bypass the language barrier often found in English-medium textbooks, seeking out Urdu or Pashto explanations of global curricula. However, Kay (2020) warns that over-reliance on video tutorials can lead to illusory competence, where students feel they understand a topic because the video was engaging, but they cannot perform the tasks independently.

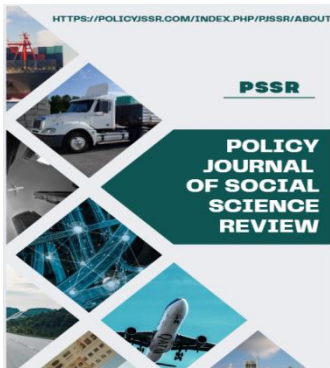
As information becomes more accessible, its credibility becomes more questionable. Metzger (2007) argues that digital natives often prioritize design credibility over message credibility. This is particularly

dangerous in the age of Generative AI. Dwivedi et al. (2023) highlight that while tools like ChatGPT provide instant answers, they can hallucinate facts, creating a new challenge for the students who may lack the critical thinking skills to verify AI-generated data.

The heavy usage of social media, often more than 4 hours daily has documented psychological costs. Twenge (2017) links the rise of gadgets usage to increased rates of depression and anxiety and among youth. In a study specifically focusing on Pakistani youth, Malik et al. (2021) found a direct correlation between excessive social media use and procrastination behavior among students. This is intensified by the Dopamine Loop created by short-form videos. Hou et al. (2019) argue that the rapid stimulation of apps like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook Reels, YouTube Shorts can shorten attention spans, making long-form academic reading feel boring or impossible.

Literature regarding Khyber Pakhtunkhwa suggests that social media acts as a leveling field. Jan et al. (2017) observed that the smartphone is the only portal to global research for the students in remote areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Yet, Ahmad and Murad (2020) point out that Digital Literacy is often confused with Digital Access. While Peshawar's students can navigate an app, they often lack the formal

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

training to evaluate source reliability or protect their digital privacy.

Methodology

This study employs a Descriptive Survey Research Design using a Quantitative-Dominant Approach. The descriptive design was chosen because it allows the researcher to accurately portray the habits, platforms and perceptions of a specific group. A structured questionnaire was distributed among more than 600 college students who were at the age of 17 to 19. The study captures a detail picture of digital life, allowing for the categorization of data into two distinct streams, Entertainment and Information.

A Convenience and Purposive Sampling technique was utilized. The students were selected based on their accessibility in Peshawar. This method was effective for this specific research as it targeted individuals who are at teenage and at the verge of University life, making them the ideal demographic for studying shifts in digital habits. Although the study was centered in Peshawar but the participants represented a diverse geographic spread, including students from Swat, Mardan, Swabi, Chitral, Kohat, Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber, Mohmand, Bajour and the Kurram, providing a broad view of the digital habits across the province. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their personal details would be kept confidential.

The questionnaires were administered both in-person (face-to-face) and digitally. The in-person interaction allowed researchers to clarify questions for the participants, ensuring a higher rate of completion and more accurate responses.

The data collected from the surveys were analyzed using Descriptive Statistics. Frequency Analysis, used to determine which platforms (TikTok vs. YouTube) were used most often. The data was cross-tabulated to compare the time spent on entertainment versus the time spent on information gathering. Ethical standards were strictly maintained throughout the study. No student was coerced into participating. Furthermore, the study avoided asking sensitive personal questions, focusing strictly on digital consumption habits.

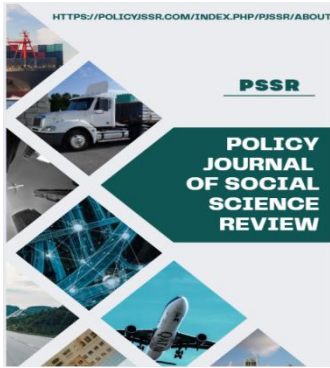
Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to map the digital landscape of college level teenage students in Peshawar and analyze how they navigate the dual-purpose nature of social media. The findings reveal a generation that is not merely using social media but is deeply integrated into it. The data indicates that for teenagers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, social media has moved beyond a luxury and has become a fundamental infrastructure for both socialization and academic survival. The high frequency of usage of social media has been reported by many participants. It

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

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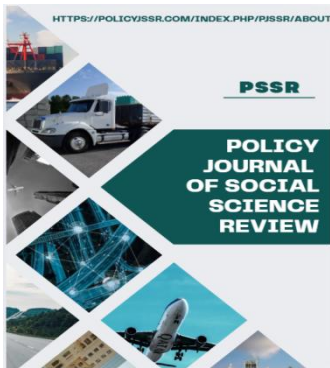
suggests that the digital space is the primary third place for students, existing between the home and the Educational Institute.

A critical theme identified in the data is the Functional Divergence of platforms. Students in Peshawar exhibit a highly disciplined approach to platform selection based on their immediate goals. The dominance of TikTok and Instagram for entertainment reflects a shift toward visual and ephemeral content. Short-form videos such as Reels, shorts, TikToks and memes provide a quick dopamine hit, serving as a necessary stress-relief mechanism for students. This is transitioning into the rigorous environment of college life. In the local context, memes also serve as a form of cultural shorthand, allowing students to navigate local social issues through humor. Conversely, when the focus shifts to information and learning, YouTube remains the undisputed leader among all the leading social media platforms. The preference for YouTube over other platforms for reliable information highlights a specific need for long-form, explanatory content. For a student in the city like Peshawar, where classroom resources might sometimes be limited, a 15-minute YouTube tutorial on a complex subject like Pharmacy or Nursing (programs frequently mentioned in the survey) is perceived as more valuable than a textbook.

AI is now getting popular among the students for learning purpose. An unexpected but vital finding in the discussion is the mention of ChatGPT and Meta AI by students. While the survey was originally designed to track traditional social media, the inclusion of AI tools in the Information section by the participants marks a significant shift in the Peshawar educational landscape. This suggests that the search-and-browse method of Google or Facebook is being replaced by the query-and-response method of Generative AI. For teenage students, the ability to get instant and summarized answers for their assignments represents a significant evolution in digital information seeking. However, this also raises questions for future research regarding the impact of AI on critical thinking and original research among Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's youth.

The complex areas of this study is the contradictory relationship students have with digital trust. The data shows a Skepticism Paradox, students spend 3 to 4+ hours daily on these platforms, yet a significant portion remains Neutral or Skeptical about the trustworthiness of the content. In the specific context of Peshawar, where misinformation can have real-world social consequences, this skepticism is a healthy sign of digital literacy. This hierarchy of trust suggests that students are not passive consumers, they are active filters, constantly weighing the credibility

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

of a source before applying it to their academic or personal lives.

For many students in Peshawar, social media is the only way to stay updated on university schedules, departmental news, and peer-to-peer support. The reported usage of more than 4 hours for entertainment among some participants cannot be ignored. This heavy time investment suggests a potential displacement effect, where time that should be spent on self-study or physical activity is lost to the infinite scroll. However, students perception that social media helps their studies indicates that they believe the educational gains outweigh the time lost to memes.

The geography of this study plays a role, in these regions social media often bridges the gap between traditional educational structures and global knowledge. For a student in a rural or tribal district, social media is a leveling field that provides the same access to information as a student in a major metropolitan city. The data suggests that for the youth of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, social media is a tool for Digital Leapfrogging, allowing them to bypass traditional resource shortages by accessing national and international level experts and tutorials via their smartphones. The reliance on Snapchat for personal connection and TikTok for entertainment reflects a need for social validation and peer belonging. While students report that

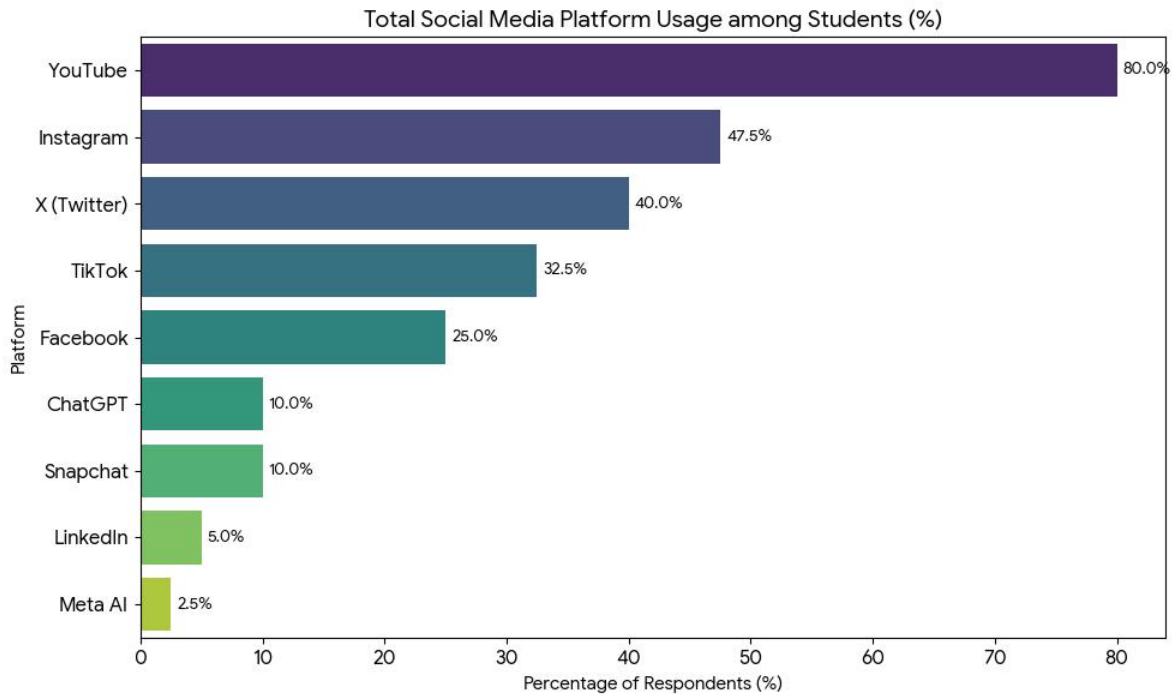
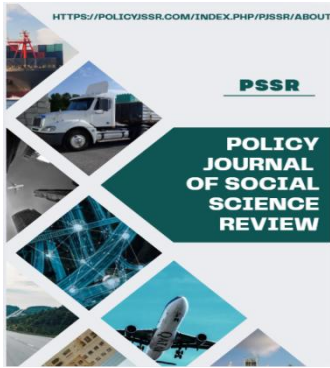
social media helps in personal development, there is a risk that this development is heavily curated by algorithms. While the students are gaining technical knowledge, their reliance on digital platforms for leisure might be narrowing their real-world social interactions, a trade-off that is common in the current digital age but particularly visible in the tight-knit social fabric of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The data portrays student in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as a Pragmatic Digital Native. They are aware of the risks of distraction and the presence of misinformation, yet they have integrated these tools so deeply into their lives that a return to traditional, non-digital learning seems impossible now. The study confirms that social media is no longer just a site or app they visit, but it is the environment in which they live, learn and grow.

The quantitative analysis of platform engagement reveals a significant hierarchy in digital consumption among teenage college students. YouTube stands as the cornerstone of the student digital experience, with an 80% total penetration rate (Graph 01). However, when disaggregated by gender, the data suggests a Usage Specialization, while 88.9% of male students utilize YouTube, the preference among female students is more evenly split between YouTube and Instagram, both standing at 61.5%.

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ISSN Print: 3006-4627



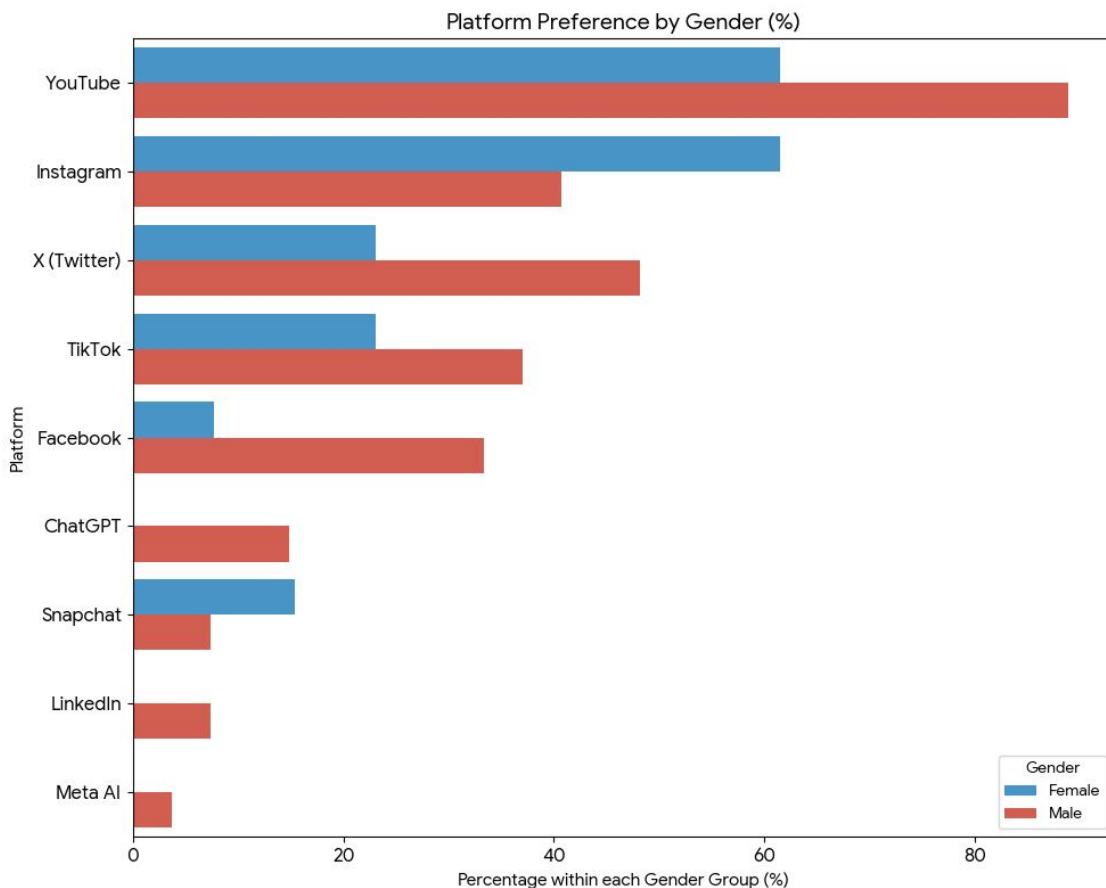
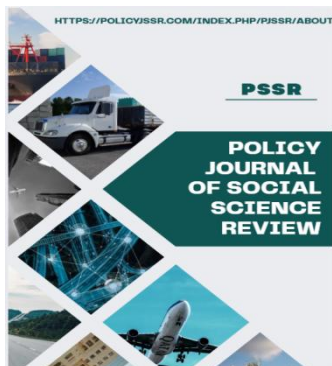
This indicates that female students in this cohort favor platforms that blend high-aesthetic visual storytelling with social networking, whereas male students lean more heavily toward video-intensive, tutorial-based environments. The 40% usage rate for X (Twitter) and the emergence of ChatGPT (10%) primarily among male respondents is point to a growing Information Utility trend. Social

media is no longer merely a tool for passive entertainment but a critical infrastructure for real-time news and academic problem-solving of the students. This shift is particularly vital in the context of Peshawar’s academic landscape, where students are increasingly bypassing traditional search engines in favor of platform-specific algorithms to fulfill their informational needs.

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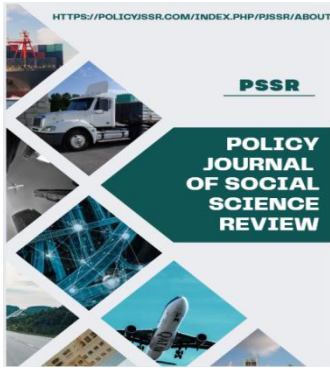
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The comparative analysis of gender-based preferences (Graph 02) highlights a distinct divergence in platform selection and digital priorities between male and female students. Data reveals a significant gap in the usage of text-heavy or public discourse platforms, X (Twitter) and Facebook show a heavy male bias, with female engagement in these areas being significantly lower. Interestingly, the survey results for Snapchat show a reversal of this trend,

where female students with 15.4% show a higher relative preference than their male counterparts with only 7.4%, likely due to the platform’s emphasis on private, ephemeral communication. The exclusive reporting of ChatGPT and AI tools by male students in this sample indicates a gendered adoption gap in emerging technologies. These findings imply that digital literacy programs in Peshawar must be tailored to these differing engagement

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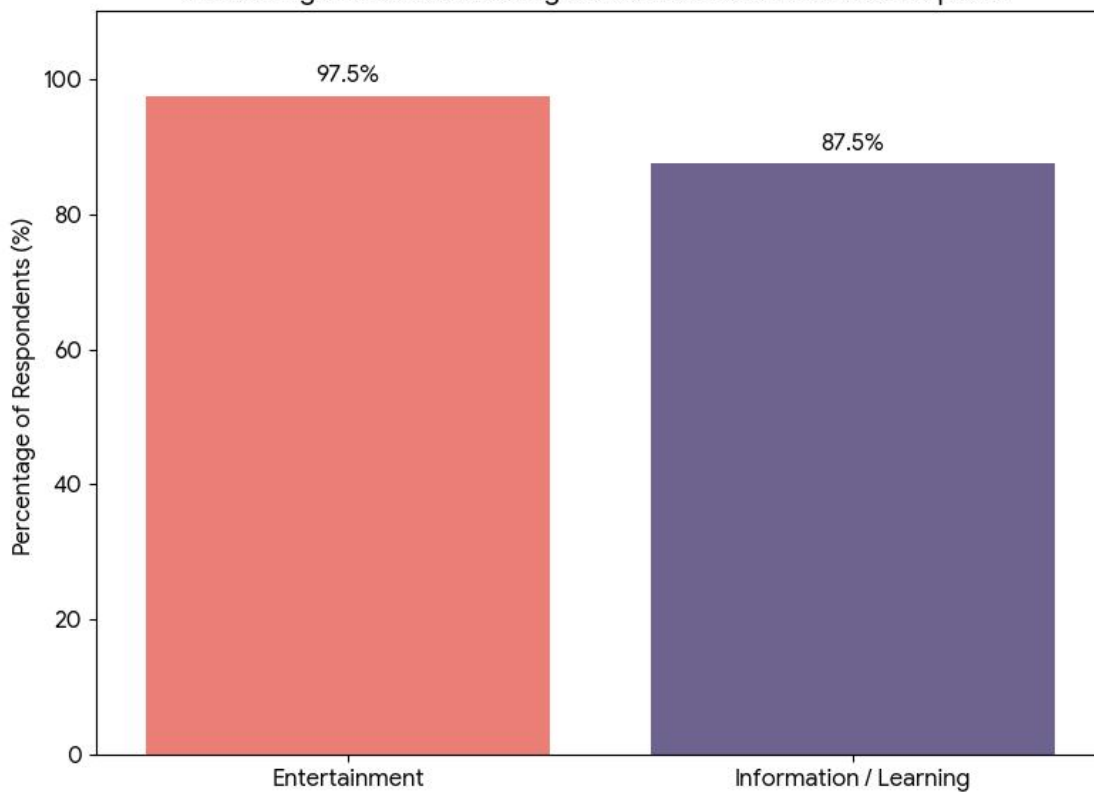


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ISSN Print: 3006-4627

styles, acknowledging that male students are currently more utility-driven while female students prioritize visual-sociala integration.

Percentage of Students Using Social Media for Different Purposes



The analysis regarding the primary intent behind social media usage reveals a significant trend of Digital Convergence, where the boundaries between leisure and learning have become increasingly blurred. According to the collected data, a near-universal 97.5% of students engage with social media for entertainment purposes, such as consuming short-form reels, memes and music. However, the most striking finding is that 87.5% of the same cohort

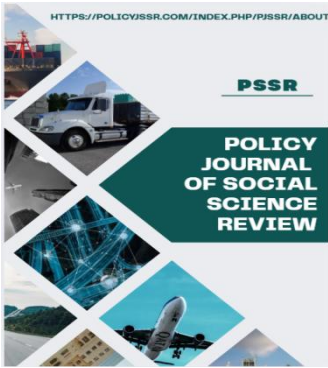
also utilizes these platforms as a vital source of information and learning.

This narrow 10% gap between entertainment and information-seeking suggests that social media has evolved into a hybrid infrastructure in the local academic environment. Students are not merely passive consumers of entertainment, they are now active information-seekers who leverage the same platforms to clarify complex academic concepts, find tutorials,

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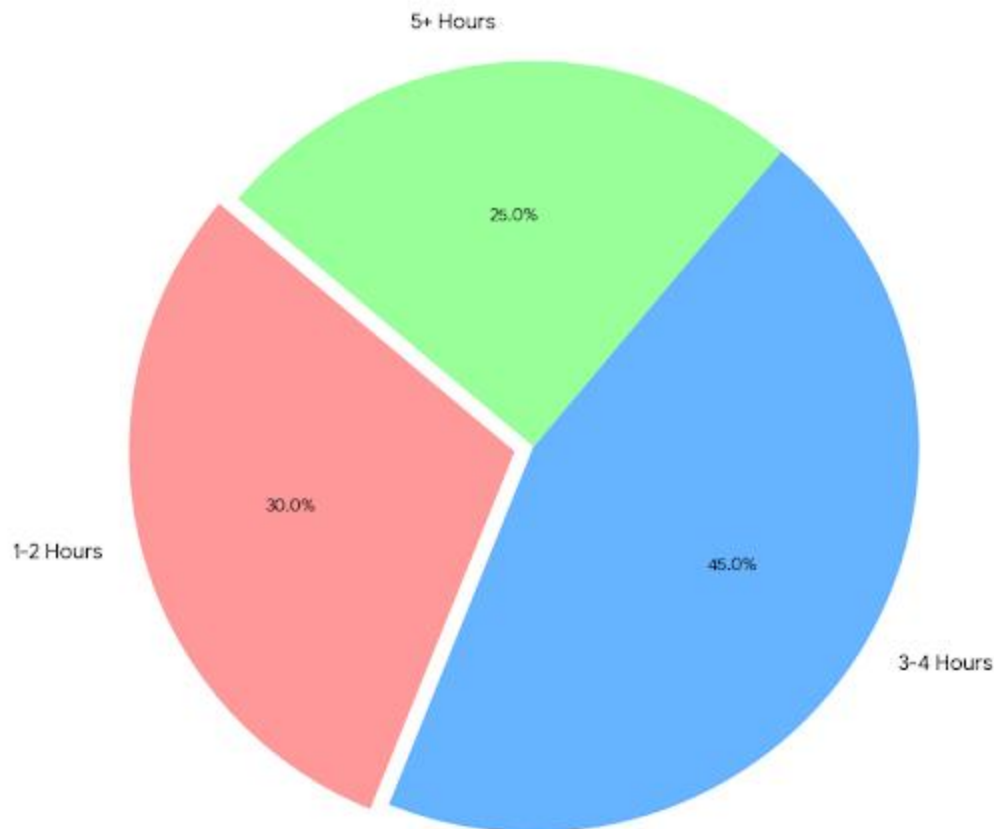
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and stay updated on global technology trends. The high percentage of learning-based usage 87.5 indicates that social media serves as a Shadow Curriculum, providing resources that may be more accessible or easier to understand than

traditional classroom materials. For educational stakeholders in Peshawar, this data proves that social media is an indispensable academic asset that if it is managed with proper digital literacy.

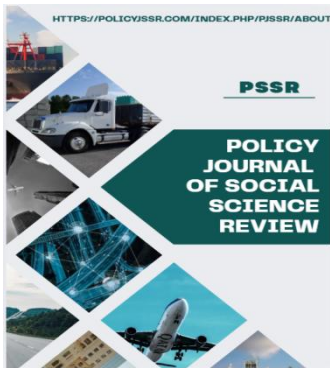
Daily Time Spent on Social Media (n=40)



The study analyzed the temporal aspect of digital engagement beyond platform preference. As illustrated in the chart, the plurality of students 45% spend between 3 to 4 hours daily on social media. This

suggests that for nearly half of the College Students, social media is not a peripheral activity but it is a core component of their daily life. While comparatively a smaller segment 30% maintains a more restricted

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

usage of 1 to 2 hours, the fact that every fourth of the respondents spend more than 5 hours a day on these social media platforms, which is a significant finding. This high level of engagement underscores the necessity for digital wellness modules within the university curriculum to ensure that such extensive usage does not negatively impact students' sleep patterns or academic focus.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the complex intersection of social media usage for entertainment and information gathering among college students in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. After analyzing the data collected from various departments it is evident that social media has ceased to be a peripheral activity and has become the central nervous system of a student's academic and social life.

The study concludes that there is a Binary Digital Existence among the youth of Peshawar. On one hand, platforms like TikTok and Instagram serve as a massive Digital Playground, where memes and short-form reels dominate. On the other hand, YouTube and emerging AI technologies like ChatGPT act as Digital Classrooms. This research successfully identified that while students spend a significant portion of their day, often exceeding 4 hours in the pursuit of entertainment, they maintain a high level

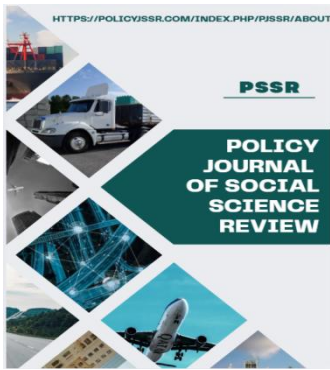
of intentionality when it comes to their education.

Furthermore, study highlights a critical Trust Disparity. Despite the heavy reliance on these platforms, students are not blind consumers. The skepticism expressed regarding the trustworthiness of social media information, paired with the high credibility assigned specifically to YouTube. This behavior indicates that students in the Peshawar region are developing an organic form of digital gatekeeping. They correlate the quality of content production with its academic value. The study confirms that social media is perceived as a beneficial tool for personal and academic development, provided the user can navigate the inherent distractions of the infinite scroll.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the patterns of social media usage among college students in Peshawar. The findings lead to several key conclusions:

- Social media has evolved beyond a leisure activity. With 87.5% of students using these platforms for information and learning, social media now serves as a parallel classroom for students.
- With an 80% adoption rate, YouTube is the most influential digital platform in the student's life, functioning as the go-to source for tutorials and complex concept clarification.

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ISSN Online:3006-4635

ISSN Print: 3006-4627

- There is a clear divergence in how genders occupy digital spaces. Female students show a high affinity for Instagram with 61.5%, whereas male students dominate more public-discourse platforms like X (Twitter) and Facebook.
- Digital engagement is no longer an occasional activity but a lifestyle as 70% of the students spending more than 3 hours daily on social media. This high frequency necessitates a shift in how universities communicate with their students.

Based on the data analysis and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed for students, educators, and university administrations:

- Since 87.5% of the students using social media for information, so universities and Higher Education Institutions should offer Digital Literacy workshops. These sessions should cover how to verify information on YouTube and X (Twitter) to avoid academic misinformation.
- Institution should move beyond traditional notice boards. Since 80% of students are on YouTube and nearly half are on Instagram, official announcements and supplementary educational content should be shared via these high-reach visual platforms.
- The data showed that AI adoption specifically ChatGPT and Meta AI is

currently male-dominated. Educational institutions should specifically encourage female students to explore AI tools to ensure they are not left behind in the evolving digital economy.

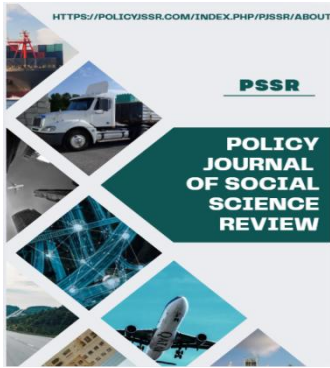
- University counseling centers should promote Digital Detox or Productive Usage campaigns as 25% of students spending over 5 hours daily on screens. These campaigns will help students balance their academic responsibilities with their digital lives.

This study focused on college students while in future, researchers should conduct a longitudinal study to see how social media habits change as students move toward their final year and enter the professional job market.

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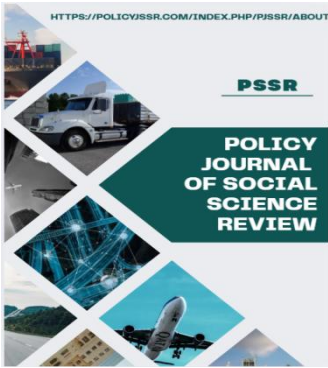
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