

Social Media Usage and the Academic Engagement of Junior High School Students in Northwestern Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing prevalence of social media among adolescents, limited research has examined its direct impact on academic engagement among Junior High School (JHS) students in underserved contexts. While prior studies have explored social media's effects on academic performance, procrastination, and peer interaction, few have investigated how students' digital behaviours influence engagement in learning activities, highlighting an important empirical gap. This study argues that social media exerts a dual influence, simultaneously enabling learning through collaboration and access to educational resources, while also fostering distraction and superficial learning. Guided by the research question, "How do social media use patterns and contextual factors shape the academic engagement of JHS students in the Wa Municipality?" the study adopted a qualitative approach. Data were collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled students, teachers, and parents. Thematic content analysis generated axial codes, subthemes, and main themes, including levels of social media use, academic benefits and disruptions, and regulatory gaps. Findings reveal that social media both supports learning and undermines attention and self-regulation. The study underscores the need for structured digital literacy programs, proactive adult mediation, and school-based policies to balance social media use. These insights contribute to understanding the nuanced role of social media in adolescent educational engagement and inform strategies for responsible digital integration in schools.

Keywords: Lexical Semantic, Meaning-Based Approach, Vocabulary Learning

INTRODUCTION

Student engagement is a critical aspect of educational success, reflecting the extent to which learners participate actively in classroom activities, discussions, and self-directed study (Carini et al., 2006; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017). Engaged students demonstrate attention, curiosity, and motivation, which are associated with improved academic performance, deeper understanding of content, and effective learning outcomes (Bundick et al., 2014; Tseer et al., 2025). Beyond academic achievement, engagement fosters collaborative learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, making it a valuable indicator of instructional effectiveness (Carini et al., 2006; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017). Recent observations in the Wa Municipality indicate that social media use is increasingly diverting students' attention from academic tasks. With widespread access to smartphones and internet connectivity, many students engage with platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube during school hours, often prioritising online interactions over classroom activities (Bundick et al., 2014). Teachers report that students frequently use their devices discreetly, while parents express concerns about declining focus and discipline (Rahman et al., 2020). This trend highlights the need for empirical research to investigate how social media influences Junior High School (JHS) students' academic engagement in this context.

Existing studies provide useful insights into the relationship between social media and academic variables but rarely address engagement directly. For instance, [Dabbagh and Kitsantas \(2012\)](#) found that heavy social media use correlates with lower GPA scores, while [Matzat and Vrieling \(2019\)](#) observed that frequent users prioritize online over traditional learning resources. [Alshuaibi et al. \(2018\)](#) highlighted social media's potential to enhance peer collaboration, and [Muslikah and Andriyani \(2018\)](#) noted its role in academic procrastination. However, these studies focus primarily on university or high school populations and do not examine the nuanced effects on engagement in JHS students. This study addresses that gap by exploring social media use and its perceived impact on academic engagement among JHS students in the Wa Municipality. It examines the level of social media use in school, context-specific factors shaping usage, and students' perceptions of its influence on learning. Insights from this research will inform theoretical frameworks in educational psychology and digital literacy while providing practical guidance for teachers, parents, and policymakers to promote responsible and academically productive social media practices. The study is structured into six sections: introduction, theoretical framework emphasizing the Uses and Gratification Theory, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion with policy recommendations.

Analytical Lens: Uses and Gratification Theory

The study adopted the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), a framework developed by [Katz et al. \(1974\)](#) that explores why and how individuals actively select media to satisfy specific needs. The theory posits that media users are not passive consumers but rather active participants who seek content that fulfills personal, social, or cognitive gratifications. UGT emphasizes the motivations behind media use, including entertainment, information seeking, social interaction, and identity formation, suggesting that the effects of media depend largely on users' goals, preferences, and the context in which media is consumed ([Katz et al., 1974](#); [Ruggiero, 2000](#))

Central to UGT is the argument that individuals choose media based on their anticipated gratifications and actively tailor their consumption to meet these needs. The theory identifies several types of gratifications, including cognitive needs such as learning and information acquisition, affective needs involving emotional experiences and relaxation, personal integrative needs relating to self-esteem and credibility, social integrative needs for connecting with family and peers, and tension release needs associated with escapism ([Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000](#); [Ruggiero, 2000](#)). In educational contexts, this translates into students selecting media that enhance learning outcomes, maintain peer relationships, or provide relief from academic pressures. UGT further contends that media selection is goal-oriented, purposeful, and influenced by demographic, social, and psychological factors, meaning that the same media can have different effects on different users depending on their motivations ([Ruggiero, 2000](#)). This active audience perspective distinguishes UGT from traditional media effects theories, highlighting agency, choice, and self-directed engagement ([Eyal & Rubin, 2003](#)). In educational research, UGT has been applied to examine students' engagement with digital technologies, social media, and e-learning platforms. Studies have shown that learners actively use online tools to access information, collaborate with peers, and supplement classroom instruction, while also seeking social or entertainment gratifications through digital media ([Gao, 2023](#); [McDonald & Glynn, 1984](#)). Researchers have used UGT to

analyse patterns of technology use, the motivations driving academic versus non-academic engagement, and how these choices affect learning outcomes (Alshuaibi et al., 2018; Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Matzat & Vrieling, 2019; Muslikah & Andriyani, 2018; Rahman et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2014). In the context of social media, UGT has provided a framework for understanding why students may simultaneously use platforms for study purposes and recreational interactions, offering insights into the duality of media's impact on academic behavior (Alshuaibi et al., 2018; Matzat & Vrieling, 2019; Muslikah & Andriyani, 2018).

Despite its widespread application, UGT has faced criticisms. Scholars argue that the theory assumes rational, conscious decision-making and overemphasizes user agency while underestimating structural, institutional, and technological constraints (Leung, 2014; Leung et al., 2015). Critics also highlight the difficulty of empirically measuring gratifications and the potential for social desirability bias in self-reported motivations. Nevertheless, the theory remains useful in contexts where user intention and selective engagement are central to understanding outcomes. The theory was adopted in this study because it directly aligns with the aim of exploring how and why JHS students use social media, and the resulting effects on their academic engagement. By framing media use as goal-directed, UGT facilitated the interpretation of findings across all four themes identified in the study. The first theme, *"Pervasive and Routine Use of Social Media,"* was understood through students' motivations to satisfy social interaction and entertainment needs. The second theme, *"Factors Influencing Social Media Use,"* reflected the role of accessibility, affordability, and peer influence in meeting cognitive and social gratifications. The third theme, *"Academic Benefits and Disruptions,"* highlighted the tension between educational and recreational gratifications, explaining the dual impact on learning outcomes. Finally, *"Weak Regulation and Limited Digital Guidance"* illustrated how structural constraints and insufficient mediation shape the gratifications students pursue, affecting their self-regulation and academic performance. Overall, UGT provided a coherent theoretical lens to analyze both the motivations behind media use and its nuanced implications for academic engagement, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in the Wa Municipality context.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm in order to generate in-depth understanding of students' experiences, perceptions, and practices regarding social media use and academic engagement. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because the study sought to explore subjective meanings, social interactions, and contextual influences that could not be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone (Bryman, 2008; Fletcher, 2017). Specifically, a descriptive phenomenological orientation was employed to document how students, teachers, and parents make sense of digital media use within everyday educational contexts. This approach enabled the researcher to move beyond surface-level descriptions and to examine the underlying motivations, tensions, and regulatory dynamics that shape academic engagement in digitally mediated environments. The target population comprised students in upper primary and junior high schools, classroom teachers, and parents within selected public basic schools. This population was purposively selected because these groups constitute the primary actors in students' academic and digital lives. Early adolescents were targeted because this

developmental stage represents a critical period in which digital habits, learning attitudes, and self-regulatory capacities are formed (Braun et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Teachers and parents were included to provide complementary perspectives on supervision, institutional regulation, and learning outcomes. The selection of public basic schools was justified because such institutions serve diverse socio-economic populations and reflect typical digital governance challenges in Ghanaian educational contexts. Purposive sampling was therefore used to identify information-rich participants who possessed direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002, 2014).

Participant recruitment followed a systematic and ethically informed process. Approval was first obtained from relevant educational authorities and school administrators. Following this, meetings were held with headteachers to explain the purpose, procedures, and ethical safeguards of the study. Teachers assisted in identifying students who actively used social media for both academic and non-academic purposes. Parents were recruited through school-parent associations and direct invitations. Participation was voluntary, and no form of coercion was applied. In total, the study involved thirty students, twelve teachers, and ten parents, a sample size considered adequate for achieving data saturation in qualitative inquiry (Lloyd, 2021). Written consent was obtained from adult participants, while parental consent and student assent were secured for minors. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. These methods were selected because they facilitate open-ended exploration while allowing the researcher to probe emerging issues in greater depth (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Individual interviews were conducted with teachers, parents, and education officials, while focus group discussions were organised for students to encourage peer interaction and collective reflection. An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature. Sample questions for students included: "How do you usually use social media when studying?" "What challenges do you face when using your phone for learning?" and "How do teachers or parents guide your online activities?" Teachers were asked questions such as: "How does students' social media use affect classroom learning?" and "What strategies do you use to regulate digital behavior?" Parents were asked: "How do you monitor your child's online activities?" and "What concerns do you have about social media and learning?" These tools ensured consistency while allowing flexibility for participants to express their views freely. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' permission and supplemented with field notes documenting non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Each session lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes. Data collection was conducted over a three-month period to allow sufficient time for rapport building and iterative reflection. The researcher engaged in regular memo-writing throughout the process to document emerging insights and reflexive considerations. This iterative approach enhanced analytical depth and reduced the risk of superficial interpretation.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach informed by grounded theory procedures, particularly open, axial, and selective coding (Chowdhury, 2015). First, verbatim transcripts were produced and read repeatedly to ensure familiarisation. During open coding, segments of text were labelled with descriptive codes such as "academic support," "digital distraction," "lack of supervision," "peer collaboration," and "copy-and-paste learning." In the axial coding phase, related codes were grouped into conceptual categories. For example, "constant notifications," "online chatting," and "video streaming" were clustered under the category

“attention disruption,” while “WhatsApp study groups,” “YouTube tutorials,” and “peer explanations” were grouped under “digital academic support.” These categories were further refined into subthemes such as “competing gratifications,” “weak regulatory structures,” and “self-regulation challenges.” Through selective coding, broader themes were developed, including “Dual Academic Role of Social Media” and “Weak Regulation and Limited Digital Guidance.” This systematic procedure ensured analytical rigor and theoretical integration. To enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, multiple strategies were employed. Credibility was ensured through triangulation of data sources by comparing student, teacher, and parent perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Semeraro et al., 2020). Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants for confirmation and clarification. Prolonged engagement in the field allowed the researcher to develop contextual understanding and trust. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail documenting methodological decisions, interview guides, coding frameworks, and analytical memos. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling, which helped minimize personal bias and ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants’ narratives. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures (Braun et al., 2016). The researcher’s positionality was critically examined throughout the study. As an educational researcher with professional experience in basic education, the researcher possessed insider knowledge of school practices and policy environments. While this facilitated access and rapport, it also carried the risk of preconceived assumptions. To address this, the researcher adopted a reflexive stance, continuously interrogating personal beliefs and their potential influence on data interpretation (Berger, 2015). Peer debriefing sessions were conducted with academic colleagues to challenge emerging interpretations and enhance analytical objectivity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study thematically, based on patterns that emerged from interviews and focus group discussions with students, teachers, parents, head teachers, and Ghana Education Service (GES) officials. The thematic presentation enables a focused and analytical understanding of how social media use shapes Junior High School (JHS) students’ academic engagement in the Wa Municipality. Four major themes were identified: (1) Routine and Pervasive Use of Social Media, (2) Socio-Economic and Institutional Drivers of Use, (3) Academic Benefits and Disruptions Associated with Social Media, and (4) Weak Regulatory and Guidance Structures.

Routine and Pervasive Use of Social Media among JHS Students

Findings indicate that social media use is deeply embedded in the everyday lives of JHS students in the Wa Municipality. Across all participant categories, students reported constant engagement with digital platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube both at home and within school premises. Despite official restrictions on mobile phone use, students routinely bring phones to school and access social media during lessons and breaks. Teachers, parents, and education officials confirmed that digital engagement has become normalised and difficult to control. Social media use is therefore not occasional or supplementary but constitutes a central component of students’ daily routines and social identities.

A student participant explained:

"For me, social media is part of my everyday life. When I wake up, the first thing I do is check WhatsApp messages and TikTok videos. Even in school, when the teacher is writing on the board or attending to another student, I quickly check my phone to see if there is a new message. Sometimes I know it is wrong, but it is difficult to stop because all my friends are online and we don't want to miss anything." (Student, FGD)

This statement reveals the habitual and compulsive nature of students' digital engagement. Social media use is embedded in students' daily routines, shaping their temporal organisation and attention patterns. The student's acknowledgement of wrongdoing alongside continued engagement suggests internal conflict between institutional expectations and personal gratification. This reflects a developing dependency on digital interaction for social belonging.

A teacher also observed:

"In almost every class, you will find students hiding their phones in their pockets or bags. Some of them pretend to be writing notes, but they are actually chatting. Even when we confiscate phones, new ones appear. It has become part of their lifestyle. Sometimes, you feel like you are competing with social media for their attention." (Teacher, Interview)

This highlights how digital engagement competes directly with instructional processes. Teachers experience diminished authority and reduced control over classroom attention. The metaphor of "competition" underscores the power of social media in shaping learning environments.

A GES official further stated:

"We receive reports from schools every term about phone confiscation. It is no longer an isolated issue. It cuts across schools and communities. Students now see phones as essential, not optional. Even when policies exist, enforcement is difficult because the culture has already changed." (GES Officer, Interview)

This reflects the systemic nature of the phenomenon. From the researcher's perspective, these accounts collectively demonstrate that social media has become culturally normalised within student life. Its routine use reflects a broader transformation in learning culture, where digital engagement increasingly mediates identity, peer relationships, and attention. The institutional environment has not evolved at the same pace, creating a regulatory and pedagogical gap. This gap allows digital practices to flourish unchecked, reshaping students' learning habits and priorities. These findings align with [Amankwah et al. \(2026\)](#) and [Mensah et al. \(2024\)](#), who documented high levels of social media engagement among Ghanaian youth. Similar patterns have been reported in African and global contexts, where mobile technologies are integrated into adolescent lifestyles ([Pfeiffer et al., 2014](#); [Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018](#); [Wang et al., 2025](#)). However, most previous studies focus on SHS and tertiary students. This study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating that pervasive digital engagement begins at the JHS level in underserved communities ([Muslikah & Andriyani, 2018](#); [Rahman et al., 2020](#); [Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018](#); [Vogel et al., 2014](#)). This study, therefore, provides new evidence that early adolescents in semi-urban and resource-limited settings exhibit digital habits comparable to those of older students in urban areas. This challenges assumptions that intensive social media use is limited to affluent or technologically advanced contexts. It highlights an early onset of digital dependency that may have long-term implications for learning trajectories. Uses and Gratification Theory explains these patterns by

positing that individuals are active participants in media consumption, making deliberate choices to satisfy specific psychological, social, and cognitive needs (Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000; Stark & Schneiders, 2022). In the context of students' social media use, these needs manifest as a desire for social interaction, peer recognition, entertainment, information seeking, and a sense of belonging within their social networks. Unlike passive media consumption, UGT emphasizes that users are goal-directed, selecting platforms and content that directly meet their personal and social gratifications. This study extends the theory by demonstrating that students' gratification-seeking behaviour persists even under restrictive institutional conditions, such as school policies limiting phone use or structured classroom environments. The findings suggest that psychological and social needs can override formal rules and regulatory frameworks, highlighting the potency of intrinsic motivations in shaping behaviour. Moreover, the study shows that social media fulfills multiple overlapping gratifications simultaneously, reinforcing habitual use and integration into daily routines. Consequently, the influence of gratifications derived from social media often exceeds that of institutional control, illustrating that students' media behaviour is shaped more by the pursuit of personal satisfaction and social connectivity than by external regulatory structures.

Socio-Economic and Institutional Drivers of Social Media Use

The findings reveal that students' social media use is strongly influenced by economic accessibility, parental practices, and institutional weaknesses. Affordable smartphones, low-cost data bundles, parental provision of devices, and inconsistent enforcement of school policies collectively create an environment that facilitates unrestricted access. These structural conditions normalise phone ownership and online engagement among students.

A student explained:

"These days, phones are not as expensive as before. My parents bought one for me because they want to contact me. Also, data is cheap, so even with little money, I can buy bundles. After school, I go online for many hours because it is easy and everyone is doing it." (Student, FGD)

This illustrates how affordability and parental support lower entry barriers to digital participation. Access is framed as both economically feasible and socially expected.

A teacher observed:

"Many parents think buying phones for children is helping them, but they don't check how the phones are used. Some parents are busy with work, so they leave everything to the child. As teachers, we try, but without parental support, it becomes difficult." (Teacher, Interview)

This reflects weak home-school collaboration in digital supervision.

A head teacher stated:

"We have rules, but enforcement is challenging. Students hide phones, and sometimes parents complain when phones are seized. Without clear backing from parents and authorities, our efforts are limited." (Head Teacher, Interview)

These accounts indicate that social media use is structurally produced rather than purely individual. From an analytical standpoint, technological affordability interacts with permissive parenting and weak institutional authority to create a permissive digital environment. This means that social media use is embedded within broader socio-economic transformations that outpace regulatory and pedagogical adaptation. These findings corroborate Mensah et al. (2024) and Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018), who linked affordability and parental practices to digital access. This study extends their work by

highlighting how these factors operate in semi-urban, underserved contexts. This study brings new insights by demonstrating that affordability alone is insufficient for educational benefit. Without parallel development in supervision and policy, access becomes a risk factor. This emphasises the importance of institutional capacity in mediating technological diffusion.

From the perspective of the Uses and Gratification Theory, individuals are viewed as active media users who consciously select and utilise media platforms to satisfy specific psychological and social needs such as entertainment, information-seeking, social interaction, and personal identity formation (Bracken & Lombard, 2001; Gao, 2023). The theory further argues that access to media technologies enhances users' ability to pursue these gratifications, since greater availability increases opportunities for engagement and choice (Ruggiero, 2000). In this sense, affordable smartphones and low-cost data bundles expand students' capacity to seek and obtain desired gratifications through social media platforms. Building on this theoretical position, the findings of the present study extend the Uses and Gratification framework by demonstrating that gratification-seeking behaviour is not driven solely by individual motivation but is significantly shaped by broader economic and institutional contexts. In the Wa Municipality, reduced device costs, parental provision of smartphones, and weak school regulatory mechanisms collectively amplify students' opportunities for continuous digital engagement. These structural conditions intensify students' pursuit of entertainment, peer interaction, and social visibility, thereby reinforcing patterns of media dependence. Consequently, gratification-seeking becomes embedded within everyday routines and social expectations rather than remaining a matter of personal choice. This suggests that the theory should be expanded to incorporate contextual and policy-related influences as central determinants of media use, particularly in underserved educational settings.

Academic Benefits and Disruptions of Social Media Use

Findings from this study reveal that social media plays a complex and contradictory role in shaping the academic engagement of Junior High School (JHS) students in the Wa Municipality. Participants consistently described social media as both an important academic support tool and a major source of distraction. On one hand, students use platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook to access learning materials, participate in group discussions, seek clarification on difficult topics, and collaborate with peers on assignments. On the other hand, these same platforms expose students to entertainment content, constant notifications, and non-academic interactions that disrupt concentration and reduce productive study time. Students, teachers, and parents unanimously acknowledged this dual role, emphasising that while digital platforms have expanded access to educational resources, they have also intensified tendencies toward procrastination, multitasking, and superficial learning. As a result, social media does not function solely as an educational enhancer or inhibitor; rather, it operates as a pedagogical paradox whose impact depends largely on students' self-regulatory capacities and the level of guidance they receive from adults and institutions.

A student participant provided a detailed account of his learning experience:

"When I have homework, I usually go to our class WhatsApp group to ask questions, and sometimes I watch YouTube tutorials to understand topics like Mathematics and Science. It really helps me because I don't always understand everything in class. But many times, when I go online to study, I see messages from friends, funny videos, and trending posts. I start watching them, and before I

realize, two or three hours are gone. Then I become tired and postpone my homework.” (Student, FGD)

This statement illustrates the internal struggle students experience between academic and entertainment gratifications. Although the student initially approaches social media with an academic purpose, competing digital stimuli quickly divert attention. This reflects a pattern of unplanned multitasking, where students oscillate between learning and leisure without clear boundaries. The inability to regulate transitions between academic and non-academic content suggests limited self-management skills, which are crucial for effective digital learning. A teacher participant expressed similar concerns:

“Some students now depend too much on the internet. When you give them an assignment, they just search and copy answers without trying to understand. Even in class, their phones are always vibrating with notifications. They are thinking about messages instead of listening. This affects their creativity, critical thinking, and confidence because they are no longer used to solving problems on their own.” (Teacher, Interview)

This observation highlights the emergence of surface learning practices facilitated by digital platforms. Rather than engaging deeply with content, students often prioritise speed and convenience over comprehension. The teacher’s emphasis on reduced creativity and confidence suggests that excessive reliance on online sources undermines independent thinking and intellectual autonomy. This raises concerns about the long-term development of cognitive skills among digitally immersed learners.

A parent further reinforced this perspective:

“My child uses his phone to look for notes and videos when studying, and I am happy about that. But I also notice that he gets distracted very easily. He will start with homework, then switch to TikTok or chatting. Sometimes he studies late into the night because he wasted time online. I worry that this habit is affecting his discipline and seriousness toward school.” (Parent, Interview)

The parents’ account reflects ambivalence toward digital learning tools. While appreciating their educational potential, the parent recognises how easily academic intentions are displaced by entertainment. The concern about declining discipline suggests that social media reshapes students’ time management practices, often at the expense of structured study routines. Collectively, these perspectives indicate that students lack adequate self-regulatory skills to manage competing online gratifications. This means that social media operates as a pedagogical double-edged sword. It expands learning opportunities while simultaneously weakening sustained academic engagement. The absence of structured digital literacy education and guided media use exacerbates this contradiction. Students are exposed to powerful digital environments without being equipped with the cognitive and moral tools necessary to navigate them responsibly. Consequently, learning becomes fragmented, episodic, and vulnerable to constant interruption.

These findings are consistent with [Kyei-Gyamfi \(2024\)](#), who reported that Ghanaian students frequently use social media for academic collaboration while struggling with distractions. Similarly, [Nyarko and Serwornoo \(2022\)](#) found that digital multitasking reduces students’ concentration and depth of understanding. Studies by [Pfeiffer et al. \(2014\)](#), [Shava and Chinyamurindi \(2018\)](#) and [Muslikah and Andriyani \(2018\)](#) also associate social media use with divided attention and lower academic performance. However, most existing studies focus on older students. This study confirms that these challenges are already pronounced at the JHS level, suggesting that vulnerability to digital distraction emerges earlier than previously

emphasised. This study contributes new knowledge by demonstrating that academic ambivalence toward social media is firmly established during early adolescence. Unlike previous research that emphasises SHS and tertiary students, the findings reveal that JHS learners already experience significant tension between academic and recreational digital use. This highlights the urgency of introducing digital self-regulation and literacy programmes at the basic education level rather than postponing interventions until later stages. Uses and Gratification Theory posits that individuals actively select media to satisfy needs such as information, entertainment, and social interaction (Katz et al., 1974). In this study, students use social media to meet academic, social, and emotional needs simultaneously. However, the findings extend the theory by showing that unresolved conflicts between competing gratifications weaken academic discipline. When entertainment and social bonding gratifications dominate, academic goals become secondary. This suggests that gratification-seeking is not always rational or balanced, especially among young learners with limited self-control.

Institutional and Parental Regulatory Gaps in Students' Digital Lives

Another major finding of this study is the widespread absence of effective regulatory and guidance mechanisms governing students' social media use. Participants revealed that schools lack comprehensive digital policies, teachers receive little training on digital citizenship, and parents have limited capacity to supervise online behaviour. As a result, students navigate digital spaces largely independently, relying on peers and online trends for behavioural norms. This regulatory vacuum creates conditions under which excessive and inappropriate social media use thrives. Rather than being guided toward responsible engagement, students are left to negotiate complex digital environments without adequate moral, cognitive, and social support.

A student candidly explained:

"At home and in school, nobody really checks what I do on my phone. As long as I don't disturb anyone, I am free. My parents are busy, and teachers only talk about phones when they catch you. So I decide for myself what to watch, who to chat with, and how long to stay online." (Student, FGD)

This statement reveals a high level of unsupervised autonomy. While autonomy is important for adolescent development, in this context, it reflects institutional neglect rather than intentional empowerment. The student's reliance on personal judgment in digital spaces suggests exposure to risks without adequate guidance.

A teacher acknowledged institutional limitations:

"We are not trained on digital guidance. When students misuse phones, we punish them, but we don't teach them how to use them well. There is no clear programme or materials to guide us. So most of the time, we just react when problems occur." (Teacher, Interview)

This reflects a punitive rather than educative approach to digital governance. Teachers lack professional development opportunities in digital citizenship, limiting their capacity to mentor students effectively.

A GES official further stated:

"There is no comprehensive digital policy for basic schools. Each school tries its own methods. We are responding to problems like addiction and misconduct instead of preventing them through proper guidelines and training." (GES Officer, Interview)

This highlights systemic policy gaps. From the researcher's perspective, digital regulation in the Wa Municipality is reactive, fragmented, and under-resourced. Institutions respond to crises rather than building preventive frameworks. This leaves students without coherent moral and behavioural reference points for digital conduct.

These findings strongly support [Kuuyelleh et al. \(2025\)](#) who reported weak digital governance structures in many Ghanaian schools, characterised by inadequate policies, limited enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient monitoring of students' online activities. Their study highlights how the absence of clear institutional guidelines and accountability systems allows students to engage freely with digital platforms without appropriate regulation. In such environments, learners are more likely to misuse digital technologies for non-academic purposes, thereby increasing their exposure to harmful content, cyberbullying, misinformation, and excessive screen time. This study reinforces their argument by demonstrating that ineffective digital governance continues to undermine efforts to promote responsible and productive media use in educational settings. Similarly, [Rasmussen et al. \(2020\)](#) emphasize that limited adult mediation, whether by teachers, parents, or school administrators, significantly increases young people's vulnerability to online risks. When adults fail to provide guidance, set boundaries, and model appropriate digital behaviour, students are left to navigate complex online spaces independently. This lack of supervision reduces learners' capacity to critically evaluate online content and manage their digital habits responsibly. As a result, students become more susceptible to addictive media use, exposure to inappropriate materials, and engagement in risky online interactions. Studies from diverse educational contexts indicate that inadequate monitoring encourages excessive social media engagement, online gaming addiction, and academic distraction ([Rahman et al., 2020](#); [Rasmussen et al., 2020](#)). Collectively, these findings suggest that strengthening digital governance frameworks and enhancing adult mediation are essential for fostering safe, balanced, and educationally beneficial media practices in schools. This study demonstrates that regulatory failure is structural rather than individual. It reflects deficits in policy formulation, teacher training, parental digital literacy, and institutional resources. By situating regulatory weaknesses within broader systemic constraints, the study moves beyond blaming parents or teachers and highlights the need for coordinated national interventions. Uses and Gratification Theory assumes that media users make rational and informed choices ([Katz et al., 1973](#); [Ruggiero, 2000](#)). However, this study shows that without guidance, students' gratification-seeking becomes excessive and poorly regulated. Young users lack the cognitive maturity and institutional support required for balanced media consumption. This challenges the theory's assumption of rational agency and suggests the need to incorporate developmental and regulatory dimensions into its framework.

Generally, the results of this study provide comprehensive evidence of the complex interactions between digital access, institutional regulation, adult mediation, and students' media use patterns within the educational context. The findings demonstrate that while digital technologies offer significant opportunities for enhancing learning, their educational potential is often undermined by weak governance structures, inadequate supervision, and limited policy enforcement. As revealed in the analysis, insufficient institutional frameworks and inconsistent adult guidance create environments in which students are more likely to engage in excessive and unregulated media use, thereby exposing them to academic, social, and

psychological risks. Furthermore, the results highlight that students' digital behaviours are not shaped solely by personal preferences but are strongly influenced by broader school policies, economic conditions, and sociocultural practices. The absence of coordinated digital management strategies allows gratification-oriented media consumption to flourish at the expense of academic engagement. At the same time, limited adult mediation restricts learners' ability to develop critical digital literacy skills necessary for responsible online participation. These findings underscore the importance of viewing digital media use as a shared responsibility among schools, families, and policymakers.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that social media use exerts a dual and complex influence on students' academic engagement, functioning simultaneously as a supportive learning resource and a potential source of academic disruption. The findings demonstrate that social media platforms facilitate access to educational information, peer collaboration, and academic support, thereby enhancing students' motivation and participation in learning activities. At the same time, excessive and poorly regulated use contributes to distraction, reduced concentration, superficial learning practices, and weakened self-regulation. This coexistence of academic benefits and disruptions confirms that social media is neither inherently beneficial nor detrimental; rather, its impact is shaped by contextual, institutional, and individual factors. In terms of scholarly contribution, this study extends existing literature by providing empirical evidence from a basic school context, where limited attention has been given to early adolescent digital engagement. By highlighting how gratification-seeking behaviours, weak regulatory frameworks, and insufficient adult mediation influence students' academic outcomes, the study deepens the theoretical understanding of media use within the framework of the Uses and Gratification Theory. It further demonstrates that academic ambivalence toward social media emerges early in students' educational trajectories, thereby expanding knowledge beyond secondary and tertiary education contexts. Regarding educational practice, the findings highlight the need for structured digital governance policies, ongoing parental and teacher mediation, and comprehensive digital literacy programmes. Schools and policymakers must move beyond restrictive approaches toward integrative strategies that promote responsible, purposeful, and academically oriented media use. By fostering balanced digital habits and critical engagement skills, educational stakeholders can maximise the instructional potential of social media while minimising its disruptive effects on students' academic engagement.

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