

Research Paper

## Time Spent on Social Media and Application Usage Patterns: A Survey on University Students

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### ABSTRACT

Due to the quick rise in smartphone ownership and affordable internet access, university students are using social media extensively, which has influenced their communication styles, recreational pursuits, and information consumption. The current study used a quantitative, descriptive survey design to look at university students' usage patterns and social media time. Objective phone-based screen-time reports derived from device "Screen Time/Digital Wellbeing" features were used to supplement the structured online questionnaire used to gather data from a sample of university students between the ages of 18 and 25. Comparative analyses examined gender-based disparities in time allocation, and descriptive statistics were used to compile overall usage levels and application-wise trends. The results showed that students used social media for several hours every day, with messaging and video-sharing apps making up the largest share of usage. Functional variations in platform use for communication, entertainment, and information seeking were represented in distinct application-wise patterns. The validity of usage estimates beyond self-report alone was reinforced by the inclusion of objective screen-time data. The results show how important social media is to college students' everyday lives and stress the value of time-management techniques, digital wellbeing programs, and awareness campaigns to encourage responsible technology use.

**Keywords:** *Social media use; Screen time; Application usage patterns; University students; Digital wellbeing*

Unprecedented increases in smartphone ownership and internet connectivity over the past ten years have drastically changed how young adults interact, learn, and pass the time. Social media platforms have developed into multipurpose ecosystems that facilitate communication between people, the expression of one's identity, entertainment, and information consumption. Among the most active users of social media sites are university students, who are at a developmental stage marked by increased peer orientation and exploratory behaviour. Due to smartphones' widespread use, people may now stay connected at all times, which makes it possible to use social networking apps often and for extended periods of time throughout the day.

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Received: March 19, 2026; Revision Received: March 27, 2026; Accepted: March 31, 2026

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In the Indian context, the expansion of affordable mobile data plans has further accelerated social media adoption among students. Platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram serve interpersonal communication and social networking needs, while YouTube supports entertainment and informational consumption. Although social media can foster social connectedness and access to educational resources, excessive and unregulated use has been linked with attentional difficulties, sleep disturbances, procrastination, and diminished academic engagement (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Importantly, aggregate measures of “time spent on social media” obscure meaningful differences between platforms, as distinct applications fulfil different psychological needs. Therefore, application-wise analysis is essential to develop nuanced insights into digital behaviour patterns among university students. The present study aims to provide a detailed examination of time spent on social media and application usage patterns using a survey-based approach supplemented by objective screen-time data.

### *Rational*

University students' everyday lives now revolve around social media due to the ubiquitous availability of smartphones and internet access. Using social networking sites for a variety of objectives, including communication, entertainment, education, and stress release, young adults are among the most frequent users. Long-term screen usage and its possible behavioural and psychological effects have drawn criticism, despite social media's many practical advantages. Numerous studies have already been conducted on social media use, however many of them only employ self-reported usage figures, which may not be accurate. Using objective screen-time data from university populations, few studies have also looked at application-specific usage patterns.

The current study was carried out to investigate application usage trends among college students and to provide an accurate assessment of the amount of time spent on social media each day. This study aims to provide trustworthy and context-specific insights that may guide awareness, balanced digital habits, and future research in academic contexts by combining objective phone-recorded screen-time data with survey responses.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **Conceptualization of Social Media Use Among University Students**

Social media refers to internet-based platforms that enable users to create, share, and interact with content and with one another (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media has permeated academic, social, and recreational settings among college students. YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp are examples of platforms that serve as hybrid venues for information searching, entertainment, and communication. The **Uses and Gratifications Theory** posits that individuals actively select media to satisfy needs such as social connection, escapism, identity expression, and information acquisition (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). This paradigm clarifies why various applications predominate in various areas of students' everyday lives. Video-sharing sites serve informational and entertainment purposes, whereas messaging apps are usually employed to preserve interpersonal relationships.

### **Prevalence and Intensity of Social Media Use**

Large-scale surveys consistently show that young adults are the most active social media users. The Pew Research Center reported that a majority of individuals aged 18–29 years use multiple social media platforms daily, often engaging in repeated short sessions across the day (Pew Research Center, 2022). We observed that university students commonly spend several hours per day on social networking platforms, reflecting habitual integration into

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daily routines (Kuss and Griffiths, 2017). Multitasking and fragmented attention have been linked to prolonged involvement, especially during academic activities. Nevertheless, the level of use varies by platform type and purpose, highlighting the significance of application-specific analysis as opposed to only depending on aggregate screen-time metrics.

### **Time Spent on Social Media and Associated Outcomes**

Social media usage has been studied in connection to wellbeing, sleep quality, and academic achievement. They reported a negative association between mobile phone use and academic performance, suggesting that higher screen time may interfere with sustained attention and study habits (Lepp, Barkley, and Karpinski, 2015). We further noted that excessive engagement can foster habitual or problematic patterns of use, particularly when platforms are used for mood regulation or escapism (Kuss and Griffiths, 2017). On the other hand, moderate use has been associated with perceived closeness and social support, suggesting that the effects of screen time depend on both usage duration and intent. These results emphasise the importance of differentiating between engagement types that are fruitful and those that are not.

### **Application-Specific Usage Patterns**

Platform affordances shape how users engage with social media. Visually oriented and algorithm-driven platforms (e.g., Instagram and YouTube) are designed to maximize engagement through infinite scrolling, autoplay, and personalized recommendations, which can prolong viewing sessions (Montag et al., 2019). By encouraging frequent, quick conversations spread out throughout the day, messaging apps increase screen time by encouraging high-frequency checking behaviours. (Andreassen et al., 2016) demonstrated that different platforms are associated with distinct motivational profiles, with social networking sites linked to interpersonal needs and video platforms to entertainment and information seeking. Understanding the distribution of total screen time across functional areas hence requires application-wise analysis.

### **Gender Differences in Social Media Use**

Gender differences in social media engagement have been reported across multiple studies. I found that female students tend to use social networking sites more for relationship maintenance and emotional expression, whereas male students are more likely to engage with content consumption and entertainment-oriented platforms (Barker, 2009). They reported that females generally exhibit higher engagement with social networking applications, while males demonstrate greater usage of video-based platforms (Andreassen et al., 2016). Different gratifications sought from digital media and gendered socialisation processes may be reflected in these patterns. For comparison studies in university samples, gender-specific application-wise time allocation is still a crucial factor.

### **Indian Context: Social Media Use Among University Students**

In India, rapid digitization and low-cost data plans have driven substantial growth in social media usage among young adults. We highlighted concerns regarding technology overuse in Indian youth, emphasizing implications for prevention and intervention (Andreassen et al. (2016). They reported that Indian college students commonly spend several hours daily on social media, with WhatsApp and Instagram emerging as dominant platforms for communication and social networking (Bisen and Deshpande, 2018). More recent Indian studies indicate that prolonged social media use is associated with sleep disturbances and reduced academic engagement among college students (Gopakumar et al., 2023). However,

the accuracy of comprehending usage patterns is limited by the fact that many Indian research rely on self-reported estimations and lack comprehensive application-wise time allocation.

### Objective Versus Self-Reported Measurement of Screen Time

There are disparities between self-reported and objectively assessed screen usage, according to an expanding corpus of studies. They demonstrated that self-report scales often underestimate actual usage when compared with device-recorded metrics (Ellis et al., 2019). More precise evaluation of daily and weekly usage trends is made possible by objective metrics like "Screen Time" and "Digital Wellbeing" features, which offer detailed, application-level data. Including objective measures improves the validity of results pertaining to application usage patterns and social media time spent while also fortifying scientific rigour.

### Research Gap and Rationale for the Present Study

Despite a wealth of international research on college students' usage of social media, there are still a number of gaps in the Indian context. First, few studies offer both overall screen time and specific application-by-application usage patterns. Second, recollection bias restricts accuracy when self-report measures are used. Third, when using objective phone-based data in Indian populations, comparison studies across demographic characteristics (such as gender) are still lacking. By using a descriptive survey that integrates self-reported data with objective screen-time reporting, the current study fills in these gaps by looking at **time spent on social media and application usage patterns among university students.**

## METHODOLOGY

### *Objectives*

1. To assess the average time spent on social media by university students.
2. To identify the most frequently used social media applications.
3. To examine application-wise usage patterns.
4. To compare usage patterns across gender (if applicable).

### *Hypotheses*

- **H<sub>01</sub>**: There is no significant difference in the amount of time spent on different social media applications among university students.
- **H<sub>02</sub>**: There is no significant relationship between screen time and social media usage patterns among university students.

### *Research Design*

The current study examined the usage patterns and quantity of time spent on social media by university students using a quantitative, descriptive survey research approach. Because it allows for the quick collection of data from a large sample and facilitates statistical analysis of usage trends and patterns, a survey approach was judged appropriate. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' social media behaviour, the study focused on assessing both self-reported social media usage and objective phone-based usage statistics.

### *Survey Measures*

- **Screen Time of College Students**: Objective phone-based data and self-reported daily usage categories (e.g., less than 1 hour, 1–2 hours, 2–4 hours, and more than 4

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hours) were used to measure screen time. To improve accuracy, participants were told to look at the "Screen Time/Digital Wellbeing" function on their device and indicate the average amount of time they spend using screens each day (in minutes or hours).

- **Time Spent on Social Media Applications:** Application-wise reporting of average daily use (in minutes/hours) for popular platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube) was utilised to measure the amount of time spent on social media applications. Participants gave unbiased duration estimates by consulting their phone's app-by-app screen-time logs.
- **Social Media Usage Patterns:** Items on the most popular apps, how often users check social media, and the main uses (communication, entertainment, and academic/informational) were utilised to evaluate usage trends. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the responses in order to determine the most popular platforms and typical engagement patterns among college students.

### ***Sample***

The sample for the present study consisted of university students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

- **Sample Size:** 100
- **Age Range:** 18–25 years
- **Sampling Technique:** **Convenience sampling** was used, as participants were selected based on accessibility and willingness to participate.

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

#### **Inclusion Criteria**

- University students aged between 18 and 25 years
- Students who actively use at least one social media application
- Students who provided informed consent

#### **Exclusion Criteria**

- Students below 18 years of age
- Participants who did not complete the questionnaire fully

Participants who refused to share phone usage data.

### ***Tools Used for Data Collection***

#### **1. Socio-Demographic Information Sheet**

Demographic information, including age, gender, course, and year of study, was gathered via a self-created questionnaire.

#### **2. Social Media Usage Survey**

A structured Google Form questionnaire was designed to assess:

- Types of social media applications used
- Frequency of application usage
- Average daily time spent on social media
- Purpose of social media use (communication, entertainment, academic use, etc.)

#### **3. Objective Phone Usage Data Sheet**

Participants were asked to refer to their smartphone's **Screen Time / Digital Wellbeing** feature and report:

- Daily time spent on each social media application

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- Weekly usage patterns
- Most frequently used applications

This method enhanced data accuracy and reduced self-report bias.

### RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

#### Descriptive Statistics (Screen Time in Hours)

Objective phone data was used to calculate daily screen time (in hours). The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Time Spent on Social Media (Hours)*

Statistics	Screen Time (Hours)
Mean	2.75
Median	2.41
Standard deviation	2.46
Minimum	0
Maximum	8.6

University students spent an average of 2.75 hours a day on social media. But a high standard deviation suggests that usage patterns vary widely, with some students using social media infrequently and others using it excessively.

#### Application Usage Patterns

The single most popular social media app was reported by the participants.

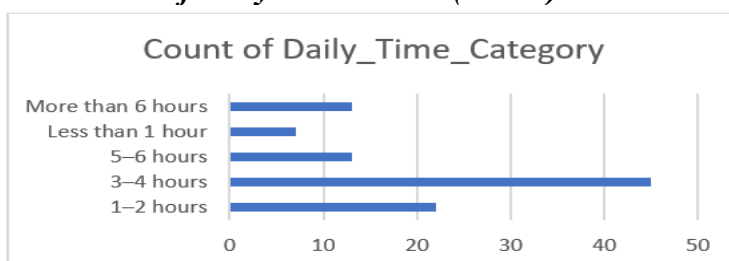
*Table 2 Most Used Social Media Application*

Application	Frequency	Percentage
Instagram	52	52%
WhatsApp	20	20%
YouTube	18	18%
Snapchat	4	4%
Other Apps	3	3%
LinkedIn	2	2%
Twitter (X)	1	1%

The most popular social media app among college students is Instagram, which is followed by YouTube and WhatsApp. This suggests a predilection for platforms that emphasise communication and visual appeal.

**Time Spent Trends on Social Media:** Based on phone data, participants indicated how much time they spent on screens on average each day.

#### *Distribution of Daily Screen Time (Hours)*



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On social media, the majority of students said they used it for 2-4 hours per day. The fact that fewer students used it for more than 6 hours a day suggests that some of the sample may utilise it excessively or problematically.

### *Purpose of Social Media Use*

Students gave a variety of reasons for using social media.

**Table 3 Purpose of Social Media Use**

Purpose	Observation
Communication	High
Entertainment	Very High
Academic Use	Moderate
News/Information	Moderate
Professional Networking	Low

Social media was most commonly used for communication and entertainment, while fewer people reported using it for academic or professional objectives.

## **DISCUSSION**

The current study used objective phone-recorded screen-time data in conjunction with survey responses to investigate university students' usage patterns and time spent on social media. Students used social media for an average of 2.75 hours a day, according to the statistics, with significant variation ranging from little to 8.6 hours. This variation is consistent with earlier research showing that use of social media varies greatly among people and reflects the diverse character of digital engagement among young adults (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Particularly among university populations, the existence of a subset reporting more than six hours of daily interaction points to heavy usage patterns that could indicate regular or potentially harmful participation.

The prevalence of Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube as the most popular apps is in line with current trends in young adults' digital usage. Social media sites are made to encourage communication, exchange of material, and ongoing participation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Instagram and other algorithm-driven, visually appealing platforms promote extended use through interactive features and personalised material, which may lead to longer daily screen times (Montag et al., 2019). The useful integration of digital platforms into student life is demonstrated by messaging apps like WhatsApp, which continue to be essential for sustaining peer contact, academic cooperation, and interpersonal communication.

Social media use was found to be mostly for entertainment, with communication and stress alleviation coming in second and third. The Uses and Gratifications theory, which contends that people deliberately choose media to meet their psychological and social needs, is in line with these findings (Katz et al., 1974). Social media can be used by students for social interaction, mood regulation, relaxation, and distraction. According to earlier studies, maintaining relationships and having fun are two of the main reasons why teenagers and young adults do what they do (Barker, 2009). Digital platforms may be used as coping techniques for both personal and academic stresses, as evidenced by the reported use of social media for stress alleviation.

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The wide range of daily usage is also consistent with studies suggesting that excessive social media use may have negative behavioural and psychological effects. Long-term social media use has been linked to addictive tendencies, according to studies (Andreassen et al., 2016; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). This is especially true when the platforms are used for mood adjustment or emotional control. Features like notifications, reward-based feedback systems, and limitless scrolling are made especially to hold users' interest and promote frequent interaction (Montag et al., 2019). The prevalence of high-frequency users indicates the significance of tracking digital consumption patterns, even though the current study did not directly test addiction or psychological discomfort.

The findings are more credible due to the inclusion of objective phone-recorded screen-time data. The need of objective measurement techniques is highlighted by research showing that self-reported smartphone usage frequently underestimates real behaviour (Ellis et al., 2019). By using screen-time information straight from participants' smartphones, the current study improves accuracy in calculating daily engagement levels and lessens recollection bias.

The quick rise in young social media use in India can be attributed in part to easier access to reasonably priced internet services. Previous studies conducted in India have shown that worries about excessive technology use and its possible effects on wellness are growing (Sharma & Benegal, 2015). Furthermore, research on Indian college students has connected excessive social media use to abnormalities in lifestyle and sleep patterns (Gopakumar et al., 2023). The results of this study corroborate the finding that Indian university students utilise social media extensively and incorporate it into their daily lives (Bisen & Deshpande, 2018).

The study's average daily usage is in line with other general survey results that show young individuals are among the most active digital users (Pew Research Center, 2022). However, the substantial variability highlights the significance of encouraging balanced technology use, even while moderate consumption may represent typical engagement in today's digital culture. According to Lepp et al. (2015), excessive smartphone use has been linked to poorer academic performance and attentional issues, which may have academic repercussions for frequent users.

Overall, the results show that university students use social media for a variety of purposes, including communication, entertainment, information, and emotional control. The findings support the Uses and Gratifications approach's theoretical usefulness in comprehending digital behaviour (Katz et al., 1974). From a practical standpoint, the findings point to the necessity of digital literacy campaigns, awareness campaigns, and interventions that acknowledge the beneficial aspects of social networking sites while encouraging thoughtful use.

In conclusion, by combining self-reported usage patterns with objective screen-time data, the current study adds to the expanding body of research on university students' use of social media. The predominance of entertainment-driven interaction and the existence of high-frequency users highlight the significance of balanced digital habits, even though the average usage was moderate. These results support the need for more research on social media's impact on students' academic performance and well-being, both internationally and in India.

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### **Acknowledgment**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Kazmi, N. & Sharma, S. (2026). Time Spent on Social Media and Application Usage Patterns: A Survey on University Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 14*(1), 2799-2807. DIP:18.01.279.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.279