

Social media addiction and its association with interpersonal communication skills among university students

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ABSTRACT

Social media addiction has become a significant mental health concern among university students, with studies indicating that approximately 30% to 40% of students exhibit signs of addiction. This phenomenon affects emotional well-being and social interaction. This study aims to assess the levels of social media addiction and communication skills (verbal, non-verbal, and written) among students at the University of Baghdad and explore their correlation, alongside sociodemographic variables. A quantitative, correlational study was conducted from November 22, 2024, to April 1, 2025. A convenient sample of 200 undergraduate students from four colleges was surveyed. Data collection tools included the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale and the Communication Skills Scale, and data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. A moderate level of social media addiction was observed in 57% of students ($M \pm SD = 17.66 \pm 4.965$), and 92% exhibited moderate communication skills ($M \pm SD = 95.32 \pm 11.118$). The study found a weak positive correlation between social media addiction and communication skills ($r = 0.18$, $p = 0.013$). The mean social media addiction score was $M = 17.66$, with a standard deviation of $SD = 4.97$. While a slight positive correlation exists, sociodemographic factors did not significantly influence communication skills. Educational programs should consider strategies to improve both social media management and students' communication skills. The study recommended developing an intervention program to help students manage their social media use and implementing a training program to enhance communication skills across all student groups.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become deeply embedded in the daily lives of university students worldwide, reshaping patterns of interaction, information exchange, and self-expression (Butler, 2024). While these platforms offer opportunities for connectivity, collaboration, and learning, growing concern has emerged regarding excessive and uncontrolled use, often conceptualized as social media addiction (Al-Samarraie et al., 2022). Characterized by compulsive engagement, preoccupation, and difficulty in regulating usage despite adverse consequences, social media addiction has been associated with psychological, academic, and social challenges (Zhang et al., 2024). In the university context, where interpersonal communication skills are critical for academic success and professional development, understanding the implications of excessive social media use has become increasingly important (Sivakumar et al., 2023).

The theoretical background suggests that persistent and excessive engagement with social media may influence cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes related to communication (Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023). Digital platforms often provide immediate gratification, curated self-presentation, and asynchronous interaction, which can alter users' expectations of social exchange (Zhao, 2025). Over time, reliance on mediated communication may reduce opportunities to practice spontaneous, face-to-face interactions that require active listening, empathy, interpretation of non-verbal cues, and adaptive verbal expression (Hagen et al., 2024). Such patterns may contribute to diminished competence in real-world communication, particularly in verbal and non-verbal domains that rely heavily on contextual and relational cues (Abdallah et al., 2024).

Social Learning Theory offers an additional explanatory framework for understanding this relationship. According to this theory, individuals acquire behaviors and communication styles through observation, imitation, and reinforcement (Li et al., 2023). Social media environments reward certain forms of expression—such as brevity, visual emphasis, and emotionally charged content—through likes, shares, and comments (Chan et al., 2025). These reinforcement mechanisms may shape communication patterns, gradually replacing traditional interpersonal practices with digitally mediated exchanges (Wang et al., 2022). As students increasingly internalize norms modeled online, their communication habits in offline settings may also be influenced, potentially affecting the quality and depth of interpersonal interactions (Hu & Huang, 2024).

Despite the global expansion of research on social media use, limited empirical evidence exists regarding its association with interpersonal communication skills among university students in Middle Eastern contexts, particularly in Iraq. University students in Baghdad represent a population navigating rapid digital transformation alongside evolving academic and social demands. Assessing the prevalence of social media addiction within this group and examining its relationship with communication competencies across verbal, nonverbal, and written domains can provide valuable insight into how digital behaviors intersect with educational and social development (Tetik et al., 2025). Moreover, considering sociodemographic variables such as gender, academic grade, study type, and college specialty may help identify vulnerable subgroups and contextual influences (Mathis et al., 2022).

This study aims to measure the prevalence of social media addiction among university students in Baghdad, evaluate their interpersonal communication skills across multiple domains, and analyze the correlation between these variables while accounting for relevant sociodemographic factors. By generating context-specific evidence, the study seeks to inform targeted educational interventions that encourage balanced digital media use and strengthen communication competencies (Naeem & Mushibwe, 2025). The findings are intended to support the development and implementation of practical strategies within the 2025 academic year, contributing to healthier media habits and more effective interpersonal engagement among university students (Zainuddin et al., 2024).

METHOD

Study Design

A quantitative, correlational design was chosen for this study because it allows the examination of relationships among two or more variables—in this case, social media addiction and communication skills. This approach is suitable because it enables us to explore the strength and direction of the correlation between these two variables within a university student

population. Given that the goal is to assess how social media addiction might relate to communication abilities, a correlational design is ideal for identifying patterns and associations without manipulating variables, which would be more challenging and less ethical in this context. Additionally, this design is commonly used in educational psychology and health studies where examining relationships between behaviors and skills is essential.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at four colleges at the University of Baghdad: the College of Nursing, the College of Arts, the College of Sciences, and the College of Engineering. These colleges were selected because they represent a diverse range of academic disciplines, ensuring that the sample reflects the broader university population. The inclusion of different faculties also allows us to account for variations in communication skills that may arise from academic discipline or study type. For example, students in the College of Nursing might have curricula that are more communication-focused. At the same time, those in the College of Engineering may engage less in verbal communication, providing a comprehensive view of how social media addiction may affect students across disciplines.

A convenience sampling method was used to select participants. Students were approached during class hours, and those who were available and willing to participate were invited to complete the questionnaires. This sampling method was chosen due to the practical limitations of accessing all students across the university and the need for a feasible yet representative sample. While convenience sampling is not ideal for ensuring generalizability, it was deemed appropriate for the initial exploration of this relationship within a specific university context.

Instruments

The Social Media Addiction Scale measures the level of social media addiction among participants. It consists of six items that assess the frequency and compulsiveness of social media use. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Rarely (1) to Always (5). Sample questions include: "I often feel the urge to check social media even when I have other tasks to do" and "I feel anxious or upset when I cannot access social media." The scale provides a total score, with higher scores indicating greater addiction.

The Communication Skills Scale is designed to assess various communication competencies, including verbal, non-verbal, and written communication. It contains 30 items and is also rated on a 5-point Likert scale from Rarely (1) to Always (5). Sample questions include: "I express myself clearly in group discussions" and "I listen attentively when others are speaking." The total score can be categorized into three levels: Poor (30-70), Moderate (70.1-110), and Good (110.1-150).

Data Collection

The data were collected via self-administered questionnaires. Students were provided with paper copies of the instruments during class hours and instructed to complete them independently. The researchers ensured that participants understood the questions and had sufficient time to respond. After completing the questionnaires, the students returned them directly to the researchers in sealed envelopes to maintain confidentiality.

To minimize social desirability bias, participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and that there were no right or wrong answers. Additionally, the instructions

emphasized that students should answer honestly and without concern for how their responses might be perceived. This approach is crucial in self-reported studies, especially when dealing with topics such as addiction, where there may be a tendency to underreport undesirable behaviors.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics, levels of social media addiction, and communication skills scores. Inferential statistics, including Pearson's correlation coefficient, were used to examine the relationship between social media addiction and communication skills. Additional tests, such as t-tests or ANOVA, were used to assess differences in communication skills across sociodemographic groups. At the same time, a regression analysis was conducted to examine potential predictors of communication skills, including social media addiction and sociodemographic variables.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Baghdad, ensuring that the study met all ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. All students were provided with an informed consent form that explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, as participants' personal information was not recorded, and all responses were anonymized. Data were stored securely and were only accessible to the research team. These ethical measures were designed to protect participants' rights and ensure the integrity of the research process.

RESULT

Table 1. Distribution of the students according to their demographic and academic characteristics

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	90	45.0
	Female	110	55.0
Academic grade	First	42	21.0
	Second	58	29.0
	Third	65	32.5
	Fourth	35	17.5
Study type	Morning	156	78.0
	Evening	44	22.0
Specialty of college	Scientific	88	44.0
	Humanistic	44	22.0
	Medical	68	34.0
Total		200	100.0

The Table (1) shows that 55% of the students are females and 45% are males, with a higher proportion seen in the third academic grade (32.5%) and the second grade (29%). 78% of them are from morning studies. The specialty of college is scientific (44%), followed by medical (34%) and humanistic (22%).

Table 2. Distribution of the students according to variables related to use of social media accounts

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Having Laptop	No	122
	Yes	78
Having smartphone	No	0
	Yes	200
Having Account	No	1
	Yes	199
Hours of using the account	3 hours	46
	4 – 6 hours	111
	7 – 9 hours	43
Total	200	100.0

The Table (2) reveals that only 39% of students have a laptop, all students have smartphones (100%), and 99.5% of students have accounts on different platforms (100%). (55.5%) of the students spend 4–6 hours using these applications.

Table 3. Distribution of the students according to type of social media account (N=200)

Account	No	Yes
	Frequency (Percentage)	Frequency (Percentage)
Facebook	63 (31.5)	137 (68.5)
Twitter	143 (71.5)	57 (28.5)
Instagram	13 (6.5)	187 (93.5)
Google Plus	47 (23.5)	153 (76.5)
YouTube	12 (6.0)	188 (94.0)
WhatsApp	22 (11.0)	178 (89.0)
Pinterest	100 (50.0)	100 (50.0)

The Table (3) indicates that most students use various platforms; the most frequent uses are Instagram (93.5%), YouTube (94%), WhatsApp (89%), Google Plus (76.5%), and Facebook (68.5%). Twitter was used less frequently (28.5%), and Pinterest was used by 50% of the students.

Table 4. Overall assessment of social media addiction among students

Social Media Addiction	Frequency	Percentage	M	SD	Assessment
Low	50	25.0	17.66	4.965	Moderate
Moderate	114	57.0			
High	36	18.0			
Total	200	100.0			

M: Mean for total score, SD: Standard Deviation for total score
Low= 6 – 14.33, Moderate= 14.34 – 22.67, High= 22.68 – 30

Table 4 revealed that undergraduate students demonstrate a moderate level of social media addiction, as indicated by a mean score of M = 17.66 and a standard deviation of SD = 4.97. The correlation between social media addiction and communication skills was found to be weak but statistically significant (r = 0.18, p = 0.013).

Table 5. Overall assessment of communication skills among students

Communication Skills	Frequency	Percentage	M	SD	Assessment
Poor	3	1.5			
Moderate	184	92.0	95.32	11.118	Moderate
Good	13	6.5			
Total	200	100.0			

M: Mean for total score, SD: Standard Deviation for total score
Poor= 30 – 70, Moderate= 70.1 – 110, Good= 110.1 – 150

The Table (5) indicates that the majority of undergraduate students (92%) demonstrate a moderate level of communication skills, with a mean score (M±SD) of 95.32 ± 11.118.

Table 6. Correlation between social media addiction and communication skills among students

Correlations		(SMA)	(CSs)
Social Media Addiction (SMA)	Pearson Correlation	1	0.176*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.013
	N	200	200
Communication Skills (CSs)	Pearson Correlation	0.176*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.013	
	N	200	200

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 6 indicates a positive correlation (r = 0.176, p = 0.013) between social media addiction and communication skills among students. While the correlation is statistically significant (p < 0.05), its small effect size suggests that increased social media addiction is only slightly associated with higher communication skills.

Table 7. The relationships among communication skills among students with their sociodemographic characteristics

Variable	Chi-square	df	P-value	Sig.
Gender	43.936	2	0.559	Not significant
Academic grade	166.114	6	0.052	Not significant
Study type	36.263	2	0.848	Not significant
College specialty	102.463	4	0.214	Not significant

Table 7 reveals that there is no significant relationship between undergraduate students' communication skills and their sociodemographic characteristics: gender, academic grade, study type, and college specialty.

DISCUSSION

The descriptive analysis of students reveals that more than half are female, while the remaining are male, suggesting a gender imbalance in the student population. The academic grade distribution showed that the highest proportion of students was in the third and second grades, suggesting higher enrollment or retention rates in these grades than in others. The findings show that the majority of students are enrolled in morning studies, and most students come from scientific disciplines, followed by medical and humanistic colleges. This distribution suggests a preference for, or greater availability of, morning classes, particularly in scientific colleges. It also reflects trends in student interest, admission policies, or workforce demands in

these fields. Students generally prefer classes during the Middle of the day, with some opting for evening classes (Tshibangu, 2025).

Regarding technology use, the findings indicate that although only about half of the students own laptops, all students possess smartphones, highlighting the widespread accessibility of mobile technology. Additionally, a majority of students spend 4–6 hours daily on social media platforms, with Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Google Plus, and Facebook being the most frequently used platforms (Allahverdi, 2022). This suggests that while laptops may not be as widely owned, smartphones have become an essential tool for digital engagement among students (Hidayat, 2024). The findings reflect the increasing reliance on mobile technology for daily communication and entertainment (AL-Zoubi, 2023).

Table 4 revealed that most undergraduate students exhibit a moderate level of social media addiction, indicating frequent but controlled usage. A small proportion of students reported high addiction, suggesting excessive or problematic engagement with social media platforms. This trend highlights the need for awareness and interventions to promote balanced social media use, as excessive engagement can negatively impact academic performance and well-being (Ünlü et al., 2025). Similar findings in clinical settings have shown that emotional intelligence can mitigate burnout, indicating that coping mechanisms may help manage the adverse effects of social media addiction (Zewude et al., 2024). A study involving undergraduate students exhibited a moderate to high level of social media addiction, which is consistent with the findings of this study (Roy & Musfika, 2025).

Table 5 indicates that the majority of undergraduate students demonstrated moderate levels of communication skills. This suggests that while students have the functional ability to communicate effectively, there is still room for improvement in areas such as verbal expression, active listening, and interpersonal interactions. Enhancing these skills could support their academic and professional development (Ansari et al., 2022).

The correlation analysis shows a positive relationship between social media addiction and communication skills, albeit with a small effect size. This suggests that increased social media use is only weakly associated with better communication skills, possibly because of frequent online interactions. However, the small effect size suggests that this association is minimal and may not have a substantial practical impact. Other factors, such as personality traits, could play a more significant role in shaping students' communication abilities (Martín-Raugh et al., 2025).

Although this study found a positive correlation between social media addiction and communication skills, the literature generally suggests a negative relationship between social media addiction and communication abilities. Most studies argue that social media addiction reduces face-to-face interaction, which is crucial for the development of interpersonal skills (Mendonça et al., 2025). However, some studies highlight the potential benefits of social media, particularly when used responsibly. For instance, social media can facilitate communication between students and instructors and provide opportunities for networking and collaboration (Chowdhury, 2024).

Table 6 shows no significant relationships between communication skills and sociodemographic characteristics, including gender, academic grade, study type, and college specialty. This suggests that communication abilities remain relatively consistent across these student groups, implying that factors beyond demographics, such as personal experiences, social interactions, or educational training, may play a more significant role in shaping these skills (Dauber & Spencer-Oatey, 2023). communication skills may not be significantly affected by

demographic characteristics but are influenced more by personal and environmental factors (Svyntozelska et al., 2025).

Research has shown that students in different fields of study, such as health education, may exhibit stronger communication skills, suggesting that the field of study or college specialty may influence communication competence (Borowczyk et al., 2023). Similar research among healthcare workers has shown that workplace factors and individual attitudes strongly influence behaviors such as vaccine uptake and preventive practices (Atekoja et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study found that university students at the University of Baghdad exhibit moderate levels of social media addiction and communication skills. A statistically significant, though weak, positive correlation was found between social media addiction and communication skills, suggesting that higher levels of social media use are slightly associated with improved communication abilities. However, the effect size was small, indicating that other factors likely contribute more significantly to the development of communication skills. Sociodemographic variables, such as gender, academic grade, study type, and college specialty, did not have a significant relationship with communication skills in this study, implying that factors beyond these variables, such as personal traits or educational interventions, may be more influential.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals. Educators should consider incorporating digital literacy programs that not only address responsible social media use but also develop face-to-face communication skills. By emphasizing the importance of balancing online and offline interactions, students can leverage digital communication tools without compromising their interpersonal communication abilities. Mental health professionals could implement interventions aimed at managing social media addiction, particularly for students displaying high levels of addiction, to reduce potential negative impacts on their emotional well-being and communication effectiveness. Policymakers should consider creating guidelines that promote balanced media use and ensure that students receive adequate support for developing strong communication skills across different contexts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest regarding this investigation.

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