

Digital Distraction Or Academic Ally? Rethinking Social Media In Student Life

Normy Rafida Abdul Rahman^{1*}, Nur Shahira Mohd Rais¹, Ahmad Zulhusny Rozali¹, Sabiroh Md Sabri², Mariatul Farhana Abdul Manaf³, Wan Nurulasiah Wan Mustapa¹

¹Faculty of Business and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Perlis, Perlis, Malaysia

²Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Perlis, Kampus Arau, Perlis, Malaysia

³School of Healthcare Management, KPJ Healthcare University, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: normy@unimap.edu.my

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores how social media use influences academic performance among final-year undergraduates at Universiti Malaysia Perlis. Three dimensions were examined: time spent on social media, social media addiction, and academic distraction. Using a cross-sectional survey of 235 students, data were analyzed through Pearson correlation and multiple regression. Results show that while all three factors individually correlate negatively with academic performance, only academic distraction remains a significant predictor when tested together. This highlights distraction rather than screen time or addictive tendencies as the most critical pathway through which social media undermines learning outcomes. The findings suggest that interventions should focus on reducing task-switching and off-task browsing during study sessions, rather than simply limiting overall usage. By identifying distraction as the key determinant, this study provides actionable insights for universities to design digital wellness strategies that help students balance technology engagement with academic success.

Keywords: Social Media Use, Academic Performance, Social Media Addiction, Academic Distraction, Time Spent on Social Media, Self-Regulation, University Students.

Introduction

Background of the Study

The rapid growth of social media has transformed how university students engage in academic and non-academic activities worldwide. Globally, 5.24 billion people were active users by early 2025, while in Malaysia, 28.68 million users representing 83.1 percent of the population

highlight the deep integration of digital platforms into students' daily lives. Evidence shows that social media use is linked to academic decline; for instance, Kus (2025) found a small but significant negative relationship between technology-related behaviors and student performance across 28 countries. Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1994) explains this through increased mental workload when students switch between academic tasks

and digital notifications, while Self-Regulation Theory (Zimmerman, 2000) suggests that weaker self-management skills heighten procrastination and reduce learning effectiveness. Despite extensive global research, local data remain limited, particularly among technical institutions in Northern Malaysia, underscoring the need for a focused study at Universiti Malaysia Perlis to examine how time spent, addiction, and distraction from social media affect academic performance.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite increasing awareness of digital wellbeing, excessive engagement with social media continues to undermine the academic focus of Malaysian university students. Nordin (2025) reported that most undergraduates spend two to six hours daily on social media, displacing valuable study time. This issue is compounded by short-form video platforms such as TikTok, which Xie et al. (2023) found to exacerbate academic procrastination through impaired attentional control. Beyond academic focus, social media addiction also disrupts student wellbeing more broadly; Zhao and Kou (2024) demonstrated that short video addiction reduces sleep quality, mediated by lower physical activity and heightened procrastination. Collectively, these behavioral pathways align with broader evidence that technology-related engagement is associated with a statistically significant decline in academic performance (Kus, 2025). However, localized data remain scarce, particularly among students in technical institutions in Northern Malaysia. Addressing this gap, the present study provides empirical evidence on how time spent, addictive tendencies, and academic distraction interact to affect performance, thereby guiding the Faculty of Business and Communication at Universiti Malaysia Perlis in developing targeted digital wellness interventions.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study aims:

1. To examine the influence of the total duration of time spent on social media on the academic performance of students.

2. To determine the predictive relationship between social media addiction and the academic performance of students.

3. To assess the impact of academic distraction resulting from social media use on the academic performance of students.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it examines how time spent on social media, addictive tendencies, and academic distraction jointly influence students' academic performance, offering empirical evidence to guide both learners and institutions. For students, the findings highlight the importance of self-regulation strategies, supporting Kus (2025) who advocates interventions that strengthen self-control and encourage moderation in technology use to enhance academic outcomes. The study also underscores the constructive potential of social media, as Ansari and Khan (2020) demonstrated that purposeful use for collaborative learning can improve engagement and performance. For lecturers and administrators, insights into academic distraction provide a foundation for designing more interactive and engaging classroom environments, addressing multitasking behavior identified by Nabung (2024) as a growing challenge. More broadly, this research contributes a localized case study that can inform digital wellness initiatives across Malaysian higher education, supporting policies that help students balance technology use with academic achievement and psychological wellbeing.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review draws upon two theoretical frameworks to explain how social media use influences academic performance among university students: Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). UGT posits that students engage with social media purposively to satisfy needs such as entertainment, social connection, and information seeking, with motives of use rather than exposure alone shaping academic outcomes. For instance, Bhatiasavi (2024) found that

purposive and entertainment value significantly predicted usage behavior, while Cuong et al. (2025) demonstrated that greater time devoted to non-academic motives reduces study time and negatively affects GPA. SCT complements this perspective by emphasizing reciprocal interactions among personal factors, environment, and behavior, with self-regulation and observational learning playing central roles. Ma et al. (2026) confirmed that lower self-control significantly predicted social media addiction among college students, underscoring the importance of self-regulation in digital engagement. Synthesizing both theories, this review highlights how differences in motivation and self-regulation jointly determine whether students' social media habits remain productive or become distracting, thereby reinforcing the relevance of time spent, addiction, and academic distraction as key predictors examined in this study.

2.2 Review of Previous Research

2.2.1 Time Spent on Social Media

Empirical evidence consistently highlights daily screen-time duration as a critical behavioural factor that displaces active study hours. Cuong et al. (2025) demonstrated that because students have a finite amount of time each day, greater engagement in non-academic social media activities reduces opportunities for studying, ultimately lowering GPA. This underscores that time is a limited resource, where every additional hour spent scrolling equates to an hour lost for revision or coursework. Supporting this, Aslan and Polat (2024) found that among Turkish university students, social media addiction correlated most strongly with time spent online, surpassing associations with loneliness or depression. This suggests that the duration of use plays a central role in shaping addictive behaviour, with prolonged engagement gradually shifting motives away from academic goals. Consequently, extended usage sets the stage for both addiction and distraction to emerge as compounding threats to academic performance, rather than isolated or independent issues.

2.2.2 Social Media Addiction

Research on social media addiction consistently shows that compulsive digital engagement undermines students' psychological wellbeing and academic functioning. Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, Ma et al. (2026) found that lower self-control significantly predicted social media addiction among college students, particularly when compounded by academic pressure, anxiety, and depression, indicating that addiction rarely occurs in isolation from broader emotional strain. Similarly, Bhatiasavi (2024), in a study of social media users in Bangkok, revealed that purposive and entertainment motives strongly predicted usage behavior, while self-discovery motives did not, suggesting that addiction is driven by specific gratifications actively sought by students rather than passive exposure. These findings highlight that addiction operates as a distinct pathway to academic decline, eroding self-regulation and reinforcing psychological rewards, rather than merely displacing study time. Consequently, social media addiction must be examined as a separate construct from time spent, as its impact on academic performance stems from deeper behavioral and emotional mechanisms.

2.2.3 Academic Distraction

Previous research consistently identifies digital devices as a primary source of interruption in university classrooms and self-study sessions. Deng et al. (2024), in a mixed-method study across three Chinese universities, found that digital devices were the leading cause of distractive multitasking, with students reporting that even the mere visibility of a phone without active use was sufficient to reduce focus. Similarly, Nabung (2024) highlighted multitasking during classroom instruction as a growing challenge to traditional pedagogical practices, as the integration of digital tools into everyday learning environments has normalized divided attention among students. These findings suggest that academic distraction is not solely a function of device presence but is closely tied to students' self-regulatory capacity in managing digital interruptions. This distinguishes

distraction as an independent predictor of academic performance, separate from time spent or addiction, underscoring its critical role in shaping learning outcomes (Rahman N. R. A. et al., 2023).

2.2.4 Social Media Use

Social media use, as a broader construct, reflects how students integrate digital platforms into their daily academic and social lives. Aslan and Polat (2024) found that many university students spend substantial time on social media, often exceeding levels associated with addictive tendencies, which in turn was linked to lower life satisfaction, higher depression, and reduced academic self-efficacy. Bhatiasavi (2024) further demonstrated that usage patterns are shaped by specific motives such as social enhancement and interpersonal connectivity, rather than mere exposure, indicating that students actively choose how and why they engage with these platforms. These findings suggest that social media use is not inherently detrimental; its academic impact depends largely on the purpose, intensity, and regulation of engagement. Consequently, examining time spent, addiction, and distraction as distinct yet interconnected dimensions provide a more nuanced understanding of how social media influences academic performance.

2.2.5 Academic Performance

Academic performance, commonly measured through GPA, is widely recognized as the outcome most vulnerable to self-regulatory failure in digitally saturated learning environments. Salari et al. (2025), synthesizing evidence from diverse international contexts, confirmed a consistent negative correlation between social networking addiction and academic achievement, demonstrating that this

pattern transcends cultural and educational boundaries. Similarly, Xu et al. (2022), in a study of 441 Chinese college students in China, found that social media overload significantly impaired academic performance, reinforcing the global trend that heavy digital engagement undermines learning outcomes. These findings highlight that academic success is not determined solely by students' innate ability or effort, but also by their capacity to manage competing digital demands. Consequently, examining time spent, addiction, and distraction as interconnected predictors is essential to understanding how social media use influences academic performance in higher education (Rahman N. R. A. et al. 2026).

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study illustrates the relationship between three independent variables: time spent on social media, social media addiction, and academic distraction, and the dependent variable, academic performance. Each variable is hypothesized to exert a direct influence on students' academic outcomes, reflecting distinct dimensions of social media engagement: the duration of use, the level of dependency, and the degree of interference with study focus. This model emphasizes that while these predictors are interrelated, they operate through separate pathways, thereby allowing for the identification of their unique contributions to academic performance. By integrating these constructs, the framework provides a structured basis for testing the study's hypotheses and underscores the importance of examining social media use not as a singular behavior, but as a multidimensional phenomenon with varying impacts on student achievement.

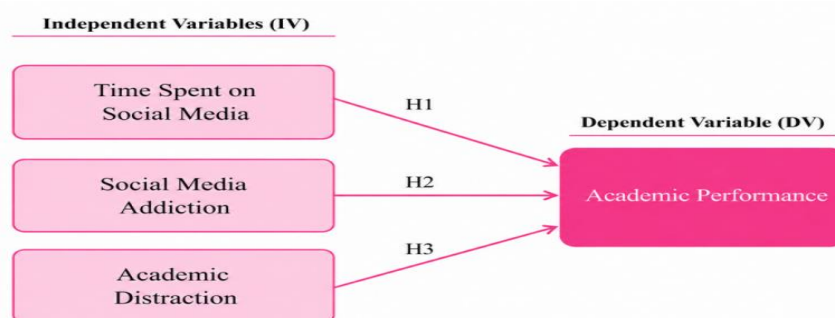


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework Model

3.0 Research Design

This study adopts a **quantitative, descriptive, and correlational survey design** to test the proposed hypotheses using numerical data collected from respondents and analysed statistically. Research design provides the structural framework that connects the sample, measures, and methods required to address the research questions (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006). A **cross-sectional approach** was employed, with data gathered at a single point in time appropriate for capturing current social media behaviour and its relationship with academic performance (Trochim & Donnelly, 2006). The **population** consisted of all final-year students enrolled in the International Business and Engineering Entrepreneurship programmes at the Faculty of Business and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Perlis, totalling 611 students. Referring to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for sample size determination, a minimum of 234 respondents was required, and 235 valid responses were successfully collected. A **purposive sampling technique** was applied, whereby the researcher utilised expertise to select participants based on identified variables and practical knowledge aligned with the study's inclusion criteria (Giri, 2024).

3.1 Questionnaire Scoring & Data Analysis

Responses were measured using a **five-point Likert scale**, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Statistical analyses were conducted using **SPSS Version 27**, incorporating both descriptive and inferential techniques. Specifically, **correlation analysis** and **multiple linear regression** were employed to examine the extent to which **time spent on social media,**

social media addiction, and academic distraction predict students' academic performance.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Reliability Analysis

Table 4.1 presents the reliability analysis for this study, demonstrating that the key constructs **Time Spent on social media, Social Media Addiction, Academic Distraction, and Academic Performance** exhibit strong internal consistency. Reliability was assessed using **Cronbach's alpha**, a measure of internal consistency that evaluates the interrelatedness of items within a scale (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The results indicate excellent reliability for all constructs: **Time Spent on social media ($\alpha = 0.931$), Social Media Addiction ($\alpha = 0.919$), Academic Distraction ($\alpha = 0.939$), and Academic Performance ($\alpha = 0.945$)**. Each value exceeds the threshold of 0.90, which Bland and Altman (1997) recommend for rigorous applications, and is well above the 0.70–0.80 range considered merely satisfactory for group comparisons. These findings confirm that the measurement instruments are both **reliable and robust**, ensuring accurate representation of the factors influencing students' social media behaviour and academic outcomes. The high reliability of the scales enhances the **validity of the study's findings**, particularly in examining how time spent, addiction, and distraction relate to academic performance. With dependable measurement tools, the study provides **credible insights** into these relationships, supporting the development of **evidence-based interventions** aimed at fostering healthier digital habits among university students.

Table 4.1: Overall Reliability Statistics for the Scale

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability Level
Time Spent on social media	0.931	Excellent
Social Media Addiction	0.919	Excellent
Academic Distraction	0.939	Excellent
Academic Performance	0.945	Excellent

4.2 Descriptive Analysis

4.2.1 Respondent Demographics

Tables 4.2 and 4.3 present the demographic profile of the 235 respondents, outlining key characteristics pertinent to the study of social media usage and academic performance among final-year students at Universiti Malaysia Perlis. The sample comprises a slightly higher proportion of female students (51.9%, $n = 122$) compared to male students (48.1%, $n = 113$). Respondents are drawn from two academic programmes: International Business (59.6%, $n = 140$) and Engineering Entrepreneurship (40.4%, $n = 95$). In terms of academic achievement, a majority of students (52.8%, $n = 124$) report a CGPA between 3.00 and 3.66, while 35.7% ($n = 84$) fall within the 3.67–4.00 range. A smaller proportion (8.5%, $n = 20$) hold a CGPA between

2.50 and 2.99, and only 3.0% ($n = 7$) record below 2.50, reflecting a generally high-performing cohort. With respect to digital engagement, 43.4% ($n = 102$) indicate that their primary use of social media is for academic purposes. The remainder cite non-academic motivations, including entertainment (28.1%, $n = 66$), social interaction (17.9%, $n = 42$), and information seeking (10.6%, $n = 25$). Daily usage patterns further underscore the pervasive role of digital platforms: 34.5% ($n = 81$) spend 1–3 hours per day on social media, 30.2% ($n = 71$) report 3–5 hours, 26.0% ($n = 61$) exceed 5 hours, while only 9.4% ($n = 22$) limit their use to less than 1 hour. These findings highlight the deep integration of social media into students' routines and provide a critical context for examining its academic implications.

Table 4.2: Demographic Information

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	235	1	2	1.52	0.50
Faculty	235	1	2	1.40	0.49
CGPA Range	235	1	4	1.79	0.72
Primary Purpose	235	1	4	1.96	1.02
Daily Time Spent	235	1	4	2.73	0.95

Table 4.3: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Demographic	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	113	48.1
	Female	122	51.9
Faculty	Bachelor of Business (International Business) with Honours	140	59.6
	Bachelor of Business (Engineering Entrepreneurship) with Honours	95	40.4
CGPA Range	3.67–4.00	84	35.7
	3.00–3.66	124	52.8
	2.50–2.99	20	8.5
	Below 2.50	7	3.0

Primary Purpose	Academic	102	43.4
	Entertainment	66	28.1
	Socializing	42	17.9
	Informative	25	10.6
Daily Time Spent	< 1 hour	22	9.4
	1–3 hours	81	34.5
	3–5 hours	71	30.2
	> 5 hours	61	26.0

Table 4.4: Descriptive Analysis of the Variables

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Time Spent on Social Media	235	1.40	5.00	3.25	1.25
Social Media Addiction	235	1.20	5.00	3.18	1.18
Academic Distraction	235	1.00	5.00	3.16	1.20
Academic Performance	235	1.40	5.00	3.58	1.14

Table 4.4 presents the descriptive analysis of the three independent variables Time Spent on social media, Social Media Addiction, and Academic Distraction together with the dependent variable, **Academic Performance**. The findings reveal that Time Spent on social media recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.25$), followed closely by Social Media Addiction ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.18$) and Academic Distraction ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.20$). These results suggest that respondents generally perceive their social media engagement, dependency, and distraction as moderately above the midpoint of the scale. The relatively similar standard deviations across these variables indicate a comparable spread of responses, reflecting considerable diversity in usage intensity among students, ranging from minimal to heavy digital engagement. For the dependent variable, Academic Performance achieved the highest mean score overall ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.14$), suggesting that respondents generally viewed their academic performance

positively despite their social media involvement. However, the presence of notable variability highlights that even within a high-performing cohort, individual outcomes differ substantially. This diversity in scores across all four variables provides the statistical variance necessary for subsequent inferential analysis, enabling the study to meaningfully examine how differing levels of time spent, addiction, and distraction relate to variations in students' academic performance.

4.2.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 4.5 presents the results of the correlation analysis, revealing strong and statistically significant relationships among the study's key constructs: Time Spent on Social Media, Social Media Addiction, Academic Distraction, and Academic Performance. All three predictors exhibit significant negative correlations with Academic Performance, with Academic Distraction showing the strongest association ($r = -0.572$, $p < .001$), followed by Social Media

Addiction ($r = -0.550$, $p < .001$) and Time Spent on social media ($r = -0.524$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that higher levels of distraction, addiction, and time spent on social media are consistently linked to lower academic performance. In addition, the three independent variables demonstrate very strong positive intercorrelations, with the strongest observed between Time Spent on social media and Social Media Addiction ($r = 0.921$, $p < .001$). This suggests that these constructs represent closely

interconnected behaviours rather than entirely distinct dimensions. Collectively, these results underscore the need to address social media engagement holistically, as its components are mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, the strength and direction of these correlations provide a robust foundation for subsequent multivariate regression analysis, enabling the study to assess the unique contribution of each predictor to academic performance.

Table 4.5: Pearson Correlations Between Key Variables

		Time Spent on Social Media	Social Media Addiction	Academic Distraction	Academic Performance
Time Spent on Social Media	Pearson Correlation	1	.921**	.908**	-.524**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	235	235	235	235
Social Media Addiction	Pearson Correlation	.921**	1	.919**	-.550**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001	<.001
	N	235	235	235	235
Academic Distraction	Pearson Correlation	.908**	.919**	1	-.572**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001		<.001
	N	235	235	235	235
Academic Performance	Pearson Correlation	-.524**	-.550**	-.572**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	
	N	235	235	235	235

Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.2.3 Regression Analysis (ANOVA)

Table 4.6 demonstrates that the regression model is statistically significant in predicting Academic Performance based on the three independent variables: Time Spent on Social Media, Social Media Addiction, and Academic Distraction. The ANOVA results yield an F-statistic of 38.152 ($df = 3, 231$) with a p-value of less than .001, confirming that the model explains a meaningful

proportion of the variance in students' academic performance and that this outcome is highly unlikely to have occurred by chance. The regression mean square (33.753) substantially exceeds the residual mean square (0.885), indicating that the variance in academic performance is largely attributable to the combined predictors rather than random error. These findings validate the overall model as both appropriate and reliable for examining the impact

of social media engagement on academic outcomes. Moreover, they provide a statistically sound basis for interpreting the individual regression coefficients in the subsequent analysis,

thereby enabling a deeper understanding of the unique contribution of each predictor to students' academic performance.

Table 4.6 ANOVA Results

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. (p)
1 Regression	101.260	3	33.753	38.152	<.001
Residual	204.365	231	0.885		
Total	305.625	234			

4.3 Discussion of Findings

This study examined the relationship between time spent on social media, social media addiction, academic distraction, and undergraduate academic performance within the higher education context. The findings provide several important insights into how digital engagement influences students' academic outcomes, particularly by distinguishing between mere usage patterns and the more immediate behavioural interference caused by distraction.

The analysis revealed that **time spent on social media** did not significantly predict academic performance. This aligns with prior studies such as Chandrasena and Ilankoon (2022), who found no significant relationship between daily hours spent on social media and GPA among health sciences students in Sri Lanka, and Takieddin et al. (2022), who reported similar results among medical students in Saudi Arabia. These findings suggest that duration of use alone is not a sufficient indicator of academic outcomes. Instead, the nature of social media engagement—whether for academic purposes or entertainment—appears to be more critical. In the present study, once other variables were considered, time spent lost its predictive significance, reinforcing the idea that usage quality matters more than quantity.

Similarly, **social media addiction** was not found to have a direct effect on academic performance. This is consistent with Landa Blanco et al. (2024), who reported that addiction influenced academic engagement indirectly through factors such as

depression and low self-esteem. Chandrasena and Ilankoon (2022) also observed that addiction was associated with reduced sleep and disrupted study routines, but not directly with GPA. Naushad et al. (2025) further highlighted that addiction correlated strongly with procrastination, though procrastination explained only part of the relationship. Collectively, these findings suggest that addiction exerts its influence through emotional and behavioral pathways rather than directly impairing academic achievement.

In contrast, **academic distraction** emerged as the only factor that significantly predicted academic performance. This finding is strongly supported by prior research. Limniou (2021) demonstrated that multitasking with multiple applications during lectures negatively affected performance, while Pérez-Juárez et al. (2023) found that engineering students in Spain perceived digital distractions as detrimental during laboratory sessions. Martin et al. (2025), in a systematic review, concluded that personal performance issues were the most frequently reported consequence of digital distraction, accounting for two-thirds of outcomes examined. These studies collectively confirm that distraction, rather than general usage or addiction, is the primary mechanism through which social media undermines academic performance.

Taken together, the findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between **time spent**, **addiction**, and **distraction**. While time spent and addiction alone do not directly predict

academic outcomes, distraction consistently emerges as the critical factor impairing performance. This highlights the need for higher education institutions to address digital distraction specifically, rather than focusing solely on reducing usage time or labelling students as “addicted.” By targeting distraction, interventions can more effectively safeguard academic performance while acknowledging that social media also serves legitimate academic and social functions.

5.0 Conclusions

5.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study advances **Uses and Gratifications Theory** and **Social Cognitive Theory** by showing that academic distraction, not time spent or addiction, is the key predictor of academic performance. This supports El-Metwally et al. (2025), who emphasized that *how* students use social media matters more than *how much*. By distinguishing between exposure (time), dependency (addiction), and behavioral effects (distraction), the study adds conceptual clarity. Practically, universities should focus on reducing distraction and strengthening students’ focus and self-control rather than restricting social media outright. Lecturers can raise awareness of

distraction’s impact, while students benefit from managing interruptions during study.

5.2 Recommendations

Universities should implement **digital wellness programmes** that build focus and self-regulation, echoing Zeerak et al. (2024). Lecturers can adopt clearer classroom policies, as Aloteibi et al. (2024) found educator awareness improves outcomes. Interventions should be grounded in behavioural theory (Fatima et al., 2025). For students, simple strategies such as disabling notifications during study can directly reduce distraction, the strongest predictor of performance.

5.3 Summary and Conclusion

This study examined social media use and academic performance among final-year students at Universiti Malaysia Perlis. Findings show that **academic distraction**, not time spent or addiction, most strongly affects performance. This highlights that the *quality* of social media use during study is more important than its *quantity*. Efforts to improve outcomes should therefore focus on minimizing distraction and fostering concentration, helping students, lecturers, and administrators create a more supportive learning environment in the digital age.

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