Learning or Distraction? Explaining TikTok and Snapchat Use among Communication Students through the Affordance–Motivation–Context Heuristic

Abubakar Sufyanu Saidu Al-Sadique[1], Adamkolo Mohammed Ibrahim[2*], Umaru A. Pate[3]

[1]Federal Polytechnic, Bauchi, 743001, Nigeria
[2]University of Maiduguri, Borno, 600104, Nigeria
[3]Bayero University, Kano, 700201, Nigeria

Abstract. Platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat are increasingly used not only for entertainment but also as informal environments where students observe communication trends, learn visual storytelling techniques, and experiment with digital content creation. However, the academic implications of these platforms remain debated because they can simultaneously support learning while also creating distractions. This study aims to examine how communication students use TikTok and Snapchat and to explain the relationship between learning opportunities and academic distraction through the Affordance–Motivation–Context (AMC) heuristic. This research employed a qualitative exploratory approach involving communication students who actively use short-form social media platforms. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and reflective observations about students' media practices in academic and everyday contexts. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of platform use, student motivations, and the influence of technological features on media engagement. The findings reveal three main insights. First, TikTok and Snapchat create a paradoxical outcome in which learning benefits and academic distractions coexist. Students often use these platforms to gain inspiration for digital communication practices, yet they may also experience attention fragmentation due to continuous content streams. Second, platform affordances such as algorithmic recommendations, automatic playback, and creative editing tools significantly shape user behavior. Third, the outcomes of social media use depend on students' motivations and the educational environment. Students who approach these platforms for creative or professional development tend to experience more positive learning outcomes.

Keywords: Affordance–Motivation–Context heuristic; Short-form social media; Student digital behaviour; TikTok and Snapchat; Media affordances; Higher education

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*Corresponding author's email: adamkolo@unimaid.edu.ng, Telp. +2348035166526

1.   Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital media technologies has significantly transformed the landscape of higher education, particularly within communication and media studies (Ajani et al., 2024; Demeter, 2018; Li, 2025; Luo & Zhu, 2025; Natale, 2021). Ideally, social media platforms should function not merely as tools of entertainment but as meaningful environments that support the development of professional competencies and digital literacy among students (Bozzola et al., 2022; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat offer features that enable users to create, edit, and distribute multimedia content with relative ease. For communication students, these platforms can potentially operate as informal learning laboratories where they experiment with storytelling, visual communication, and audience engagement. For instance, students studying broadcast journalism may practice short-form reporting using mobile video formats, while those in advertising programs may experiment with creative brand narratives designed for short attention spans. In this ideal scenario, social media platforms become extensions of the classroom that encourage creativity, collaboration, and applied media practice.

Within contemporary media pedagogy (Haubold, 2019; Tomczyk, 2021), the integration of digital platforms into learning processes aligns with the concept of experiential and participatory learning. Students are no longer passive recipients of information but active producers of digital content who learn through experimentation and interaction with real audiences. Platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat allow students to engage with contemporary communication cultures by observing trends, analyzing audience responses, and testing new forms of visual storytelling (Markey et al., 2025; Vandenbosch et al., 2025; Woodward et al., 2025). For example, a student specializing in digital communication may produce educational videos explaining communication theories, while another student might create short documentaries about local social issues. Such practices demonstrate how digital platforms can facilitate practical skill development in areas such as media production, content strategy, and digital storytelling. Ideally, these platforms can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge gained in academic environments and the rapidly evolving communication practices that characterize the modern media industry.

Despite this pedagogical potential, the existing literature reveals a more complex and sometimes contradictory pattern regarding student engagement with social media. Many scholars argue that short-form video platforms simultaneously function as tools for creativity and sources of distraction (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). While some students use these platforms to learn new editing techniques or observe successful content strategies, others engage primarily for entertainment and social interaction. This duality has led researchers to describe the phenomenon as a form of digital ambivalence in which educational opportunities coexist with significant risks of distraction. A common example occurs when students initially open an application to gather inspiration for creative projects but subsequently spend extended periods browsing algorithmically recommended videos unrelated to their academic tasks. Consequently, time that might otherwise be devoted to coursework or research becomes absorbed by continuous streams of entertainment content.

Empirical research in communication and media studies further supports this ambivalent pattern. Several studies have demonstrated that short-form social media platforms contribute to the development of practical media competencies, including video editing, visual storytelling, and audience engagement strategies. At the same time, other

studies indicate that frequent engagement with these platforms can foster compulsive behaviors, such as repeated application checking, prolonged screen time, and reduced concentration during academic activities. For instance, surveys conducted among university students frequently report that users perceive social media as both a source of creative inspiration and a significant source of distraction during study hours. This coexistence of positive and negative outcomes suggests that the relationship between social media use and academic engagement is far more complex than simple causal explanations based on duration of use alone.

Although the body of literature on student social media use has grown rapidly over the past decade, many studies remain primarily descriptive in nature. Researchers often focus on measuring how frequently students access social media platforms or how many hours they spend online each day. While such data provide useful baseline information, they rarely explain why similar patterns of platform use can produce very different outcomes among students. Some individuals may develop valuable professional skills through digital experimentation, while others may experience academic disruption or psychological fatigue. These divergent outcomes indicate that factors beyond simple usage frequency must be considered when analyzing the impact of social media on student behavior. In particular, previous studies have rarely examined how technological design features, individual motivations, and institutional environments interact to shape user experiences.

This limitation highlights an important research gap within contemporary communication scholarship. Much of the existing research tends to isolate specific variables such as user motivation, psychological outcomes, or technological affordances without considering the complex interaction between them. However, the ways students engage with platforms like TikTok and Snapchat are shaped by multiple overlapping influences. Platform algorithms determine which content becomes visible, user motivations influence why individuals access certain types of media, and institutional contexts such as academic culture or digital literacy programs affect how students interpret and regulate their own media practices. Without a framework capable of integrating these dimensions, explanations of social media use remain fragmented and insufficient for understanding the full complexity of student digital behavior.

Addressing this research gap is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. From a theoretical perspective, a more comprehensive analytical framework is required to explain how benefits and risks associated with social media use can emerge simultaneously within the same user population. From a practical standpoint, universities and communication programs increasingly face the challenge of integrating digital media into educational environments while minimizing its disruptive potential. Understanding the mechanisms through which students engage with social media platforms can therefore inform the development of more effective digital literacy programs, curriculum design strategies, and institutional policies. Such insights are particularly valuable in communication studies, where familiarity with contemporary media platforms is often considered an essential component of professional training.

In response to these challenges, this study introduces the Affordance–Motivation–Context (AMC) heuristic as a conceptual framework for explaining student engagement with TikTok and Snapchat (Cheng & Cao, 2024; Choy & Schlagwein, 2016; Haqqu et al., 2025). The AMC heuristic integrates perspectives from Uses and Gratifications theory and Social Learning theory to examine how platform features, user motivations, and institutional contexts interact to produce specific outcomes. By applying this framework,

the study aims to explain why the use of short-form social media among communication students can simultaneously lead to the acquisition of valuable media production skills and the emergence of academic distraction. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the broader field of digital media studies by offering a theoretically grounded explanation of the paradoxical role that social media platforms play in contemporary higher education.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to understand how communication students use short-form social media platforms, particularly TikTok and Snapchat, within academic and everyday contexts (Al-Dwairi et al., 2024; Candra Susanto et al., 2024; Whiting & Williams, 2013). A qualitative approach was selected because the research aimed to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of their social media practices rather than measure behavior through numerical indicators. Qualitative research allows researchers to capture the complexity of media engagement, especially when studying phenomena that involve motivations, habits, and contextual influences. In the context of this study, the qualitative approach was particularly useful for examining how students simultaneously experience social media as a learning resource and as a potential distraction. By focusing on personal experiences and narratives, the study was able to reveal patterns of engagement that might not be visible through purely quantitative methods.

The participants of this study consisted of undergraduate communication students who actively use TikTok and Snapchat as part of their daily digital media practices. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who possess relevant experience related to the research topic. The selection criteria included students who were enrolled in communication-related programs, regularly accessed short-form social media platforms, and had experience using these platforms for both entertainment and learning-related purposes. This sampling strategy ensured that the participants were able to provide meaningful insights into how social media platforms intersect with communication learning processes. The participants represented different academic interests within communication studies, such as digital broadcasting, advertising, and media production, allowing the study to capture diverse perspectives on digital media engagement.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews and reflective discussions regarding students' social media use (Longhurst, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide flexibility for participants to share their experiences while still allowing the researcher to guide the conversation toward specific research themes. During the interviews, students were asked about how frequently they use TikTok and Snapchat, the types of content they consume, the motivations behind their platform engagement, and whether they perceive these platforms as helpful or distracting in relation to their academic activities. Additional questions explored how students observe communication techniques, storytelling styles, and audience engagement strategies through social media content. These interviews allowed the researcher to obtain detailed narratives about how students navigate the boundaries between entertainment, creativity, and academic exploration within digital environments.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying patterns and themes within textual data. The analysis process

began with data familiarization, in which interview transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to understand the overall patterns of responses. Next, the researcher conducted an initial coding process to categorize statements related to social media affordances, user motivations, learning practices, and experiences of distraction. These codes were then organized into broader themes that reflected recurring patterns across participants' responses. Through this process, the study identified several major themes, including the coexistence of learning benefits and distraction, the influence of platform affordances on engagement behavior, and the moderating role of student motivations and institutional context. The thematic analysis allowed the researcher to connect individual experiences to broader conceptual patterns related to digital media use.

To ensure research credibility and analytical rigor, several qualitative validation strategies were applied throughout the research process. First, the researcher maintained detailed documentation of data collection and coding procedures to enhance transparency. Second, findings were interpreted by comparing participant narratives with existing theoretical frameworks in media and communication studies, including affordance theory and uses and gratifications perspectives. This theoretical triangulation helped strengthen the interpretation of the findings and ensured that the analysis remained grounded in established communication research traditions. By combining systematic thematic analysis with theoretical interpretation, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how communication students interact with short-form social media platforms and how these interactions shape both learning opportunities and academic challenges.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Coexistence of Learning Benefits and Academic Distraction in Short-Form Social Media Use

The first major finding of this study highlights the paradoxical nature of short-form social media use among communication students (Chen & Xiao, 2022), particularly in relation to the platforms TikTok and Snapchat. These platforms simultaneously function as informal learning environments and sources of academic distraction, producing a dual outcome in students' educational experiences. In the context of communication studies, social media platforms provide opportunities for students to engage directly with contemporary media practices that extend beyond traditional classroom instruction. For example, communication students frequently observe how digital creators structure their content, how visual narratives are developed within short durations, and how audiences respond to different forms of storytelling. Through repeated exposure to such practices, students gradually acquire practical skills that are relevant to the modern media industry. A student specializing in digital journalism, for instance, may learn how to present complex information in a concise visual format, while another student focusing on advertising may analyze how viral marketing strategies capture attention within the first few seconds of a video.

Furthermore, these platforms contribute to the development of practical digital production skills that are increasingly important in contemporary communication professions. TikTok and Snapchat provide integrated tools for video editing, audio synchronization, visual effects, and interactive storytelling (Kim et al., 2022; Sood, 2022). Communication students often experiment with these features to produce their own content, thereby learning by doing rather than relying solely on theoretical instruction. For example, a student in a broadcasting program might practice framing techniques and

narrative sequencing by producing short news-style videos, while a student in a digital marketing course might experiment with persuasive messaging strategies in short promotional clips. Such activities demonstrate how social media platforms can function as informal creative laboratories where students refine their technical and creative competencies through direct engagement with digital media environments.

However, the same technological characteristics that support creative exploration also contribute to patterns of digital distraction and fragmented attention. Short-form social media platforms are designed around algorithmic recommendation systems that continuously provide users with personalized streams of content. These algorithms analyze user preferences, viewing history, and interaction patterns in order to present videos that are likely to maintain user engagement for extended periods. As a result, students who initially access TikTok or Snapchat for educational inspiration often find themselves browsing entertainment content for longer durations than intended. For instance, a student who opens TikTok to study editing techniques might quickly become absorbed in unrelated trending videos recommended by the algorithm. Over time, this pattern can lead to a reduction in focused study time and contribute to the phenomenon of digital distraction in academic environments.

The coexistence of these contrasting outcomes illustrates what this study describes as the coexistence paradox of short-form social media use. In this paradoxical condition, the same digital environment that facilitates creative learning also encourages prolonged engagement that can interfere with academic concentration. Communication students may simultaneously experience skill development and time fragmentation within the same usage session. For example, while analyzing successful video creators may improve students' understanding of digital storytelling techniques, the continuous flow of recommended content can shift their attention away from purposeful learning toward passive consumption. This dual dynamic demonstrates that the impact of social media on learning cannot be evaluated solely in terms of usage frequency or duration. Instead, the outcomes of platform engagement depend on how students interact with the technological structures embedded within digital media systems.

From a broader perspective, this finding suggests that the educational potential of social media platforms cannot be understood without considering the structural design features that regulate user engagement. Algorithmic recommendation systems, autoplay functions, and infinite scrolling interfaces are intentionally designed to maximize user attention and platform retention. While these mechanisms can expose students to diverse creative ideas and communication practices, they also increase the risk of excessive engagement that disrupts academic productivity. Therefore, the coexistence of learning opportunities and academic distraction reflects the complex interaction between platform design and user behavior. Understanding this interaction is essential for educators and researchers seeking to integrate social media into educational environments in ways that maximize its pedagogical benefits while minimizing its potential to undermine students' academic focus.

Table 1 The Coexistence Paradox of TikTok and Snapchat Use among Communication Students

Dimension	Learning Benefits	Academic Distraction
Skill Development	Students develop practical skills such as video editing, storytelling, and audience engagement.	Time spent browsing reduces time available for structured academic tasks.

Dimension	Learning Benefits	Academic Distraction
Media Exposure	Students observe creative trends, digital communication strategies, and successful content formats.	Continuous exposure to entertainment content leads to prolonged consumption.
Creative Practice	Platforms function as informal laboratories for experimenting with digital media production.	Students may shift from purposeful learning to passive entertainment viewing.
Platform Features	Editing tools, filters, and interactive features support creative content creation.	Algorithmic recommendations and autoplay features encourage continuous browsing.
Learning Environment	Social media expands learning beyond traditional classrooms into digital ecosystems.	Frequent notifications and content streams disrupt academic concentration.

Table 1 illustrates the dual impact of TikTok and Snapchat on communication students by comparing the learning benefits and distraction risks associated with short-form social media use. On one side, the platforms support skill development, creative experimentation, and exposure to contemporary digital communication practices. These features allow students to gain practical experience with media production and digital storytelling techniques that are highly relevant to modern communication industries. On the other side, the structural design of these platforms—particularly algorithmic recommendations, autoplay functions, and continuous content streams—encourages prolonged engagement that may disrupt academic concentration. The coexistence of these two dimensions highlights the paradoxical nature of social media use in educational contexts, where the same technological environment can simultaneously promote creative learning and generate academic distraction.

3.2. Platform Affordances Play a Central Role in Shaping Student Behavior

The second major finding of this study emphasizes the crucial role of platform affordances in shaping how communication students interact with short-form social media platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat. In media studies, the concept of affordances refers to the technological features embedded within digital systems that enable and constrain particular forms of user behavior. These features include algorithmic recommendation systems, autoplay functions, interactive editing tools, filters, augmented reality effects, and ephemeral messaging structures. Such technological components are not neutral elements of platform design; rather, they actively structure how users discover content, how long they remain engaged with the platform, and how frequently they return to it. For communication students, these affordances create an environment in which creative experimentation and media exploration become accessible through simple and intuitive digital interfaces. For instance, TikTok's editing tools allow students to produce visually compelling content without requiring advanced technical knowledge, thereby encouraging them to experiment with storytelling techniques and digital aesthetics.

One of the most influential affordances within these platforms is the algorithmic recommendation system, which determines how content is distributed and consumed. TikTok's well-known "For You Page" algorithm continuously curates personalized content streams based on user preferences, viewing history, and interaction patterns (Vera &

Ghosh, 2025). This mechanism enables communication students to encounter a wide variety of creative content in a relatively short time. For example, a student interested in digital storytelling might quickly discover innovative narrative structures used by successful creators, while another student studying visual communication might observe how different lighting, framing, or editing techniques influence audience engagement. In this sense, algorithmic recommendations can function as an informal learning mechanism that exposes students to diverse communication practices beyond the scope of traditional academic instruction. By observing successful digital creators, students gain insights into contemporary media trends, audience preferences, and the evolving aesthetics of short-form communication.

In addition to recommendation systems, creative production tools embedded within TikTok and Snapchat also contribute to shaping student behavior. These platforms provide integrated features such as video trimming, sound synchronization, visual filters, and augmented reality effects that allow users to produce professional-looking content with minimal technical effort. Communication students frequently utilize these tools to experiment with different forms of visual storytelling and content presentation. For instance, a student studying broadcasting may create short news segments to practice presentation skills, while a student focusing on digital marketing might design promotional videos to test persuasive communication strategies. Through such experimentation, students develop practical competencies in digital media production that complement their formal academic training. The accessibility of these tools reduces technical barriers to content creation and encourages students to participate actively in digital communication cultures.

However, the same affordances that facilitate creativity and learning also contribute to patterns of repetitive and immersive media consumption. Features such as autoplay video sequencing and infinite scrolling interfaces reduce the cognitive effort required to continue browsing content. Instead of making deliberate decisions about what to watch next, users are automatically presented with new videos that align with their interests. This design encourages continuous engagement and increases the likelihood that users will spend extended periods on the platform. For communication students, this dynamic often blurs the boundary between purposeful media analysis and recreational entertainment. A student who initially accesses TikTok to study editing techniques may quickly become absorbed in unrelated content suggested by the algorithm. Over time, this pattern can lead to prolonged browsing sessions that extend far beyond the student's original learning objectives.

This finding demonstrates that the outcomes of social media engagement cannot be explained solely by individual motivations or levels of self-discipline. Instead, the technological architecture of digital platforms plays an active role in shaping user behavior. Platform affordances guide how information is presented, how attention is captured, and how engagement is sustained over time. In the context of communication education, this means that students' interactions with social media are partially structured by the design logic embedded within the platforms themselves. Consequently, the learning–distraction dynamic observed among communication students emerges from the interaction between user intentions and technological design features. Recognizing the influence of platform affordances is therefore essential for understanding how digital media environments shape contemporary patterns of student learning, creativity, and attention.

Table 2 Key Platform Affordances and Their Influence on Communication Students

Platform Affordance	Description	Learning Implications	Potential Distraction Effects
Algorithmic Recommendation	Personalized content delivered based on user behavior and interaction patterns.	Exposes students to diverse storytelling styles, editing techniques, and media trends.	Encourages prolonged browsing and excessive content consumption.
Autoplay Video Sequencing	Videos automatically play one after another without requiring manual selection.	Allows continuous observation of creative practices and communication formats.	Reduces conscious control over viewing time and encourages binge-watching.
Creative Editing Tools	Built-in features for video editing, sound effects, filters, and visual enhancements.	Enables students to practice digital storytelling and experiment with media production.	May encourage excessive focus on entertainment-oriented content creation.
Ephemeral Communication	Content that disappears after a short period, common in Snapchat interactions.	Promotes spontaneous communication and creative experimentation.	Encourages frequent checking and repeated platform engagement.
Infinite Scrolling Interface	Continuous feed of content that can be browsed without clear stopping points.	Provides exposure to a wide range of communication styles and audience responses.	Leads to time fragmentation and reduced academic concentration.

Table 2 illustrates how different platform affordances embedded within TikTok and Snapchat shape both the learning opportunities and distraction risks experienced by communication students. Technological features such as algorithmic recommendation systems, autoplay video functions, and creative editing tools allow students to observe contemporary media practices, experiment with digital storytelling techniques, and gain practical production skills. At the same time, the same design elements also encourage continuous engagement by minimizing the cognitive effort required to consume new content. Features like infinite scrolling and personalized recommendations create an immersive environment that can easily extend beyond intentional learning activities. As a result, platform affordances simultaneously facilitate creative exploration and reinforce patterns of prolonged media consumption. This dual influence demonstrates that students' digital behavior is not determined solely by individual motivation but is strongly shaped by the technological architecture of the platforms they use.

3.3. Student Motivations and Institutional Context Moderate the Outcomes of Social Media Use

The third major finding of this study demonstrates that the effects of TikTok and Snapchat use among communication students are strongly influenced by individual

motivations and the broader institutional context in which students engage with digital media. Social media platforms do not produce uniform outcomes for all users; rather, the consequences of platform engagement depend on why students use these technologies and how their academic environments guide digital behavior. Communication students approach TikTok and Snapchat with diverse motivations that include entertainment, social interaction, creative experimentation, and professional skill development. These motivations shape how students interpret and utilize the affordances offered by digital platforms. For example, a student who intentionally uses TikTok to analyze successful content creators may treat the platform as a learning resource, while another student may view it primarily as a source of relaxation and social connection. As a result, identical technological environments can produce very different learning outcomes depending on the user's underlying purpose.

Students who engage with TikTok and Snapchat primarily for creative exploration and professional development tend to experience more positive educational outcomes. In these cases, the platforms function as informal training environments where students observe contemporary communication strategies and apply them in their own media production activities. Communication students often study viral content patterns, analyze audience reactions, and replicate storytelling techniques used by popular creators. Through this process, they develop practical competencies such as visual framing, narrative pacing, editing techniques, and audience targeting strategies. For instance, a student specializing in digital marketing may analyze how influencers structure promotional content to capture audience attention, while a broadcasting student may examine how creators deliver concise and engaging news-style narratives within short video formats. Such activities demonstrate how motivation-driven engagement can transform social media platforms into valuable tools for professional skill development.

In contrast, students whose motivations are primarily related to entertainment consumption or social validation are more likely to experience negative academic consequences. When the primary objective of platform use is relaxation or the pursuit of online recognition, engagement patterns often shift toward passive content consumption rather than purposeful analysis or creative production. This behavior is frequently accompanied by compulsive checking patterns, where students repeatedly open social media applications to monitor notifications, comments, or new content. Over time, such habits can disrupt academic concentration and reduce the time available for structured learning activities. For example, a student who frequently checks Snapchat messages during study sessions may experience fragmented attention and decreased productivity. This finding indicates that user motivations significantly influence how digital media environments shape cognitive focus and learning behavior.

Beyond individual motivations, institutional context also plays a critical moderating role in determining the outcomes of social media use among students. Universities and communication programs that actively incorporate digital media literacy into their curricula often provide students with frameworks for critically analyzing online content and managing their digital engagement habits. In such environments, students are encouraged to reflect on how algorithms influence information exposure, how media narratives are constructed, and how digital platforms shape public communication practices. For instance, communication courses may include assignments requiring students to analyze trending TikTok campaigns, evaluate storytelling strategies used by influencers, or create educational content for digital audiences. Through these structured

learning activities, students learn to engage with social media platforms more consciously and strategically.

Conversely, educational environments that lack structured digital literacy initiatives may leave students more vulnerable to the distracting features of algorithmically driven media platforms. Without guidance on how to critically engage with digital media, students may struggle to distinguish between productive learning activities and passive entertainment consumption. As a result, the technological affordances of platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat particularly personalized recommendations and continuous content streams may dominate user behavior. This study therefore concludes that the outcomes of social media engagement cannot be explained solely by platform design. Instead, they emerge from the interaction between technological affordances, individual user motivations, and the institutional context in which digital practices occur. Understanding this interaction is essential for developing educational strategies that maximize the learning potential of social media while minimizing its disruptive effects on academic performance.

Table 3 The Influence of Student Motivation and Institutional Context on Social Media Outcomes

Dimension	Description	Positive Outcomes	Negative Outcomes
Creative and Professional Motivation	Students use platforms to analyze content strategies and improve media production skills.	Development of storytelling abilities, video editing skills, and audience engagement strategies.	Minimal risk when engagement is structured and purposeful.
Entertainment Motivation	Students primarily seek relaxation or leisure activities through short-form videos.	Temporary stress relief and social enjoyment.	Increased time consumption and reduced focus on academic tasks.
Social Validation Motivation	Students aim to gain recognition, likes, and social approval online.	Opportunities for identity expression and social networking.	Compulsive checking behavior and heightened dependence on online feedback.
Institutional Digital Literacy Support	Universities provide training on critical media analysis and responsible platform use.	Improved digital literacy, critical thinking, and strategic media engagement.	Reduced risk of excessive or unregulated social media use.
Limited Institutional Guidance	Lack of structured educational programs addressing digital media use.	Limited integration of social media into learning processes.	Higher vulnerability to distraction and unproductive engagement patterns.

The table 3 illustrates how the outcomes of TikTok and Snapchat use among communication students depend on the interaction between user motivations and institutional contexts. When students approach social media with creative or professional motivations, the platforms often support skill development and digital literacy. In contrast, motivations centered on entertainment or social validation tend to encourage passive consumption and compulsive engagement behaviors that may disrupt academic concentration. Institutional environments also play an important moderating role. Universities that integrate digital literacy education into their curricula equip students with the ability to critically analyze platform content and regulate their engagement habits. Conversely, institutions that lack structured guidance may leave students more susceptible to the distracting features of algorithmically driven media platforms. This interaction demonstrates that the impact of social media on student learning is not determined by technology alone but emerges from the combined influence of user intentions, platform design, and educational context.

3.4. Understanding Social Media Use Among Communication Students

The findings of this study highlight a complex relationship between short-form social media use and academic engagement among communication students. Rather than functioning purely as entertainment platforms, TikTok and Snapchat operate simultaneously as learning environments and sources of distraction. This duality reflects a broader transformation in the contemporary digital communication ecosystem, where informal digital spaces increasingly intersect with formal learning contexts. The coexistence of learning opportunities and academic disruption identified in this study aligns with earlier research on digital media multitasking and attention fragmentation. Rosen, Lim, Carrier, and Cheever (2011) demonstrated that students frequently alternate between academic tasks and social media platforms, producing what they describe as "continuous partial attention," a condition where users divide cognitive focus across multiple streams of information. Within communication education, this phenomenon becomes particularly relevant because students often perceive social media not merely as leisure tools but also as professional learning resources.

From a theoretical perspective, the coexistence of educational benefits and distraction can be understood through the concept of media affordances. The term "affordance," originally introduced by James J. Gibson (Gibson, 2014; Lombardo, 2019), refers to the action possibilities provided by an environment to its users. In digital media studies, affordances describe how technological features enable or constrain particular forms of interaction. TikTok's short-video format, editing tools, and algorithmic content distribution afford opportunities for rapid creative experimentation. Communication students, for example, may observe viral storytelling techniques and immediately test them through their own content production. This dynamic transforms social media platforms into informal laboratories of communication practice. However, the same affordances that support creativity also encourage prolonged engagement, illustrating how technological design can simultaneously facilitate productive and disruptive behaviors.

The second major finding of this study emphasizes the central role of platform affordances in shaping user behavior. TikTok's "For You Page" algorithm and Snapchat's ephemeral messaging design represent structural features that guide how users navigate digital environments. According to Sundar (2015) in the Modality–Agency–Interactivity–Navigability (MAIN) model, technological cues embedded within digital interfaces

influence users' perceptions, motivations, and engagement patterns. Automatic video playback, infinite scrolling, and algorithmic personalization reduce the cognitive effort required to continue consuming content, thereby increasing user immersion. Communication students may initially access TikTok to analyze visual storytelling techniques but may gradually transition toward entertainment-oriented browsing due to these platform cues. Thus, user behavior cannot be understood solely through individual intention; it must also be analyzed in relation to the technological architecture that structures digital interaction.

These findings also resonate with the broader concept of the "attention economy." Bruineberg (2025)argued that in digital environments, attention becomes a scarce resource actively competed for by media platforms. TikTok and Snapchat are designed to maximize user attention through rapid content turnover, visual stimulation, and algorithmic relevance. For students, the educational value of these platforms emerges precisely within this attention-driven environment. Communication students learn by observing how creators capture audience interest within seconds, how narrative hooks operate, and how visual framing influences viewer retention. Yet the same mechanisms that teach students about audience engagement also compete with their academic concentration, illustrating the inherent tension between learning and distraction in algorithmically driven media systems.

The third finding highlighting the role of student motivations and institutional context can be interpreted through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory. Originally developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (Krstić & Domazet, 2025; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2025), this theory suggests that individuals actively select media based on their needs, motivations, and desired outcomes. Students who approach TikTok and Snapchat with professional or creative motivations tend to experience more constructive outcomes. For instance, communication students interested in digital marketing often analyze viral content structures to understand audience targeting strategies. Conversely, students whose primary motivations involve entertainment or social validation may experience more disruptive engagement patterns, including compulsive checking behaviors and reduced academic focus. Thus, the outcomes of social media use are strongly shaped by the purposes guiding user interaction.

Motivation can also be further understood through Self-Determination Theory proposed by Olafsen (2024). This framework suggests that human behavior is influenced by intrinsic motivations such as curiosity, creativity, and mastery, as well as extrinsic motivations such as social recognition or external rewards. Students who engage with social media platforms for creative exploration may experience intrinsic satisfaction through experimentation with storytelling techniques or visual editing. In contrast, students motivated by social approval metrics such as likes, views, or follower counts may develop more compulsive usage patterns. These differences explain why some students perceive TikTok as a valuable professional learning tool while others experience it primarily as a source of distraction.

Institutional context also plays a significant moderating role in shaping how students interact with digital platforms. Universities that incorporate digital media literacy into their curricula often equip students with analytical frameworks for understanding algorithmic media environments. Hobbs & Jensen (2022) emphasizes that media literacy education encourages individuals to critically evaluate media structures, recognize persuasive techniques, and develop reflective consumption habits. When communication programs explicitly integrate social media analysis into coursework such as assignments

involving content analysis of viral videos or the creation of short-form media campaigns students are more likely to approach platforms strategically rather than passively. In such contexts, TikTok and Snapchat can function as pedagogical tools rather than purely recreational platforms.

At a broader level, the interaction between technological affordances, user motivations, and institutional guidance reflects what media scholars describe as "algorithmic culture." Striphas (2015) argues that algorithms increasingly shape cultural participation by influencing what content becomes visible and how users navigate information environments. For communication students, this algorithmic structure becomes both a learning object and a learning environment. Students observe how algorithms amplify certain storytelling styles, aesthetic formats, or emotional cues. Simultaneously, they become subjects of the same algorithmic systems that influence their attention patterns. This dual position both observer and participant helps explain why short-form social media platforms generate both educational insights and cognitive distractions.

Taken together, the findings of this study demonstrate that the educational implications of TikTok and Snapchat cannot be reduced to simple narratives of either benefit or harm. Instead, these platforms represent hybrid environments where learning, creativity, entertainment, and distraction coexist within the same technological ecosystem. The outcomes experienced by communication students emerge from the interaction between platform design, individual motivations, and institutional support structures. Understanding this interaction is essential for educators seeking to integrate digital media into communication curricula. Rather than discouraging social media use entirely, universities may benefit from guiding students toward more reflective and purposeful engagement with these platforms, transforming potential distractions into opportunities for critical learning and professional development.
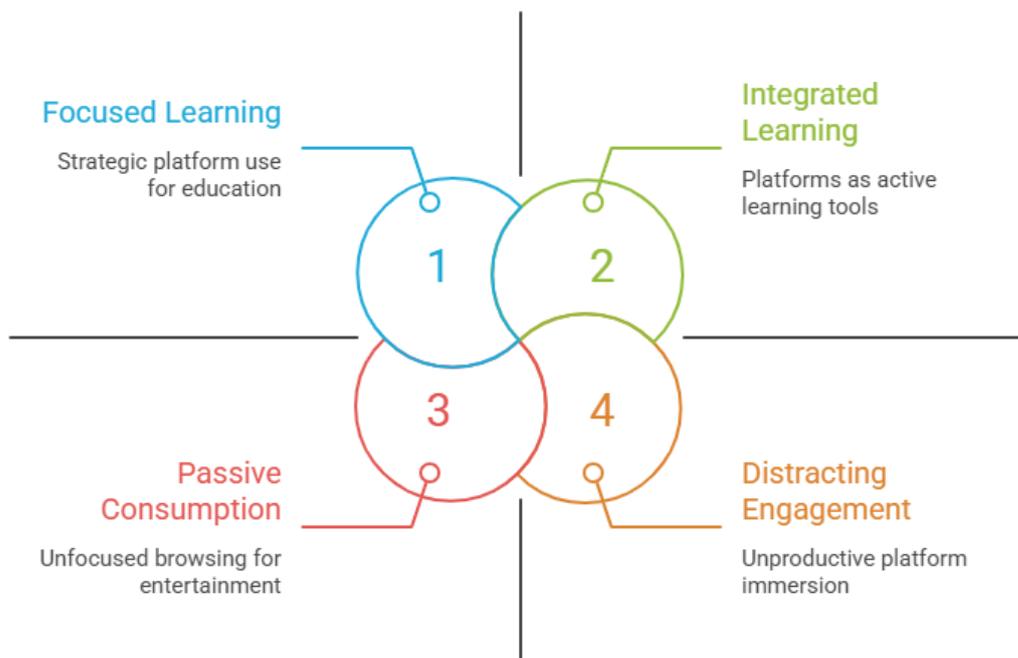
Figure 1 Navigate Social Media Learning

Figure 1 illustrates how communication students navigate social media use within learning contexts through four main patterns namely Focused Learning, Integrated Learning, Passive Consumption, and Distracting Engagement. In Focused Learning, students intentionally use platforms such as TikTok or Snapchat to observe communication techniques, storytelling styles, or digital media trends for academic purposes. Integrated Learning represents a deeper stage where social media becomes an active learning tool, allowing students to create content, practice communication skills, and apply classroom knowledge in real digital environments. In contrast, Passive Consumption occurs when students browse content mainly for entertainment without a clear learning purpose. Meanwhile, Distracting Engagement refers to excessive platform immersion driven by algorithmic content streams, which can reduce academic focus and productivity. Overall, the figure shows that social media use among communication students can lead to either productive learning or distraction depending on how the platforms are used and the motivations behind their use.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the use of TikTok and Snapchat among communication students produces complex and multidimensional outcomes. The findings reveal that short-form social media platforms simultaneously function as informal learning environments and sources of academic distraction. On one hand, students utilize these platforms to observe contemporary communication trends, learn visual storytelling techniques, and experiment with digital content creation. These activities allow students to develop practical communication skills that are highly relevant in today's digital media landscape. On the other hand, the same platforms also encourage prolonged engagement due to algorithmic recommendation systems and continuous content streams, which can fragment students' attention and interfere with academic concentration. As a result, social media use among communication students reflects a coexistence of productive learning and distracting engagement rather than a single dominant outcome.

The discussion of these findings highlights the importance of examining social media behavior through the interaction between technological affordances, user motivations, and institutional context. The study confirms that platform design features—such as personalized content feeds, automatic playback, and creative editing tools—strongly shape how students engage with digital media. At the same time, students' motivations influence whether these affordances are used for learning exploration or entertainment consumption. Furthermore, the broader educational environment also plays a moderating role. Institutions that integrate digital media literacy and encourage critical engagement with social media tend to help students transform these platforms into productive learning spaces. Therefore, the educational implications of TikTok and Snapchat cannot be explained solely by individual self-control or platform design, but rather by the dynamic relationship between technology, motivation, and educational practices.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations that open opportunities for future research. The research focuses primarily on communication students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to students from other academic disciplines who may use social media differently. In addition, the study relies on qualitative insights that emphasize subjective experiences rather than large-scale behavioral data. Future studies could expand this research by employing mixed-method approaches, including surveys, digital trace analysis, or experimental designs to measure the impact of short-form social media on learning outcomes more systematically. Further research could also

explore cross-cultural comparisons, investigate other emerging platforms, and examine how educational institutions can design pedagogical strategies that transform social media environments into more intentional and productive spaces for digital learning.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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