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The effect of parental guidance on students' social media usage and its subsequent influence on the academic performance of secondary school students in Khalalio Sub-County, Mandera, Kenya

By

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Abstract
The proliferation of social media presents a dual challenge and opportunity for adolescent education, particularly in marginalized communities where digital access is rapidly expanding but is often unguided. While the negative correlation between excessive social media use and academic performance is well-documented, the role of parental mediation as a protective factor in resource-scarce, low-literacy environments remains critically under-researched. This study aimed to assess the effect of parental guidance on students' social media usage and its subsequent influence on the academic performance of secondary school students in Khalalio Sub-County, Mandera, a remote and socio-economically challenged region of Kenya. The study employed a descriptive survey design with a mixed-methods approach. Data were drawn from a stratified random sample of 203 respondents, including 175 students and 28 educators from six public secondary schools. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Chi-Square tests, and multiple linear regression. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators provided explanatory depth. The findings reveal that parental guidance is a powerful, statistically significant predictor of academic performance, yet it is largely absent in the community. A majority of students (65.1%) reported receiving low to no parental oversight of their social media use. This lack of guidance was strongly and significantly associated with poorer academic outcomes ($\chi^2 = 71.345$, $p < .001$). Multiple regression analysis identified the absence of parental guidance as the second strongest negative predictor of academic performance ($\beta = -0.321$, $p < .001$), second only to the total time spent online. Qualitative data revealed that this gap was not due to parental apathy but to a profound digital literacy divide and socio-economic pressures that render parents unable to provide effective mediation. Parental guidance acts as a critical but missing shield, leaving students in marginalized contexts academically vulnerable to the distractions of unguided social media use. The study concludes that the digital divide is evolving from one of access to one of usage, where the absence of digital parenting capacity exacerbates educational inequalities. The findings call for a paradigm shift in policy, urging interventions that move beyond providing technological access to building the digital literacy of entire communities, with schools serving as central hubs for parental education.

Keywords: Parental Guidance, Parental Mediation, Social Media, Academic Performance, Digital Divide, Marginalized Communities, Kenyan Education, Digital Literacy

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1. Introduction

The 21st century is defined by the pervasive integration of social media into the fabric of daily life, a phenomenon that has profoundly reshaped adolescent development and education (Statista, 2023). Platforms like TikTok, WhatsApp, and Facebook have become central arenas for social interaction, identity formation, and information consumption among youth globally. This digital omnipresence presents a complex dichotomy for the education sector. On one hand, it offers unprecedented opportunities for collaborative learning and access to information (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). On the other, a substantial body of research has linked excessive and unstructured social media use to a cluster of negative academic outcomes, including reduced study time, fragmented attention, and lower overall achievement (Junco, 2012; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010).

In the African context, this dynamic is amplified by the mobile-first nature of the digital revolution. The proliferation of affordable smartphones has granted millions of young people access to the internet, yet this access is often unmediated by the structured digital literacy frameworks common in more developed regions. This has led to what many researchers term an academic-social time conflict, where the allure of digital social connection directly competes with the demands of schooling (Mingle & Adams, 2015).

In Kenya, national ambitions for a digitally-enabled economy have spurred initiatives to increase internet penetration. Consequently, social media usage among secondary school students is now widespread. However, policy and practice have largely focused on providing access to hardware and basic ICT skills, creating a significant gap in targeted education on responsible digital citizenship. This leaves students to navigate the complexities of the online world with little formal guidance, a situation that studies in urban Kenyan contexts have shown can adversely affect academic outcomes (Kimutai, 2020).

This study narrows its focus to Mandera County, and specifically the remote sub-county of Khalalio, a region that provides a unique and critical lens through which to examine these issues. Mandera is characterized by profound socio-economic and infrastructural challenges, including high poverty levels and a significant digital divide, with internet and computer usage rates far below the national average (KNBS, 2024; KICTANet, 2024). Despite these barriers, mobile phone-based social media use is growing. This creates a paradox: in a region with limited conventional educational resources, the very technology that holds the promise of bridging these gaps may also be introducing a formidable new barrier to learning. The central concern of this study is the role or absence of parental guidance in this unique environment, where the effectiveness of such mediation is likely shaped by factors of poverty, low adult literacy, and a nascent digital ecosystem.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The negative relationship between unregulated social media use and adolescent academic performance is well-established in the global literature. Excessive engagement is consistently

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linked to cognitive overload, displacement of study time, and the normalization of non-academic priorities, leading to diminished educational achievement (Amez & Baert, 2020; Rosen et al., 2013). A key protective factor identified in numerous studies is active parental mediation, where parents guide, monitor, and discuss their children's online activities, thereby fostering responsible digital habits (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

However, the existing body of research on parental mediation is overwhelmingly predicated on a foundational assumption: that parents possess the requisite digital literacy, time, and resources to provide effective guidance. This assumption is deeply problematic when applied to contexts like Khalalio Sub-County, Mandera. Here, a profound intergenerational digital divide exists, where adolescents are often the first in their families to navigate the complexities of the online world. Their parents, many of whom have limited formal education and are consumed by the daily struggle for economic survival, may lack both the capacity and the opportunity to offer meaningful digital oversight.

This creates a critical problem and a significant empirical gap. While national policies in Kenya promote digital access, they are largely silent on the issue of digital parenting support. Furthermore, local educational interventions tend to focus on the student, overlooking the vital role of the family ecosystem. Without a localized, evidence-based understanding of the current state of parental guidance and the specific barriers that inhibit it, any recommendation for "more parental involvement" is simplistic and destined to fail. The problem, therefore, is not merely that students are distracted by social media, but that they are doing so in a protective vacuum, where the primary social institution responsible for their guidance—the family—is itself ill-equipped for the task. This study addresses this gap by investigating the real-world dynamics of parental guidance in a marginalized community to inform the design of realistic and contextually appropriate interventions.

1.2 Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to assess the effect of parental guidance on students' social media usage and its subsequent influence on the academic performance of secondary school students in Khalalio Sub-County, Mandera.

1.3 Research Hypothesis

H_{01}: There is no significant effect of parental guidance on students' social media usage on the academic performance of students.

2. Literature Review

This section synthesizes the theoretical and empirical literature that frames the role of parental guidance as a critical mediator in the relationship between adolescent social media use and academic performance. It begins by exploring the theoretical frameworks that explain how familial influence shapes behavior, followed by a review of empirical studies that have examined parental mediation in diverse contexts, culminating in the identification of the research gap this study addresses.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT), later expanded into Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977). SLT provides a powerful lens for understanding the pivotal role of parents in shaping adolescent behavior. The theory moves beyond simple behaviorism to posit that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a

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social context, primarily through observation and modeling. Parents are typically the most significant models in a child's life. Their behaviors, expressed attitudes, and the rules they establish create a powerful learning environment.

In the context of social media, SLT suggests several mechanisms through which parents exert influence. First is observational learning. Adolescents observe how their parents use (or do not use) technology, their attitudes towards it, and the balance they strike between digital and non-digital life. A parent who models disciplined and purposeful technology use provides a powerful positive model. Conversely, a parent who is either disengaged from or overly consumed by their own device use fails to model effective self-regulation.

Second is the concept of vicarious reinforcement. SLT argues that behavior is shaped by observing the consequences of others' actions. Parents control many of the reinforcements in the home environment. By establishing clear rules about social media use and consistently applying consequences (e.g., praise for adhering to time limits, or loss of privileges for misuse), parents can shape their child's digital habits. In the absence of such a reinforcement structure, the primary source of reinforcement shifts to the social media platforms themselves (e.g., likes, shares, comments from peers), which often reward non-academic and distracting behaviors.

From an SLT perspective, a lack of parental guidance creates a "modeling vacuum." In this vacuum, the primary models for behavior become online peers and social media influencers, whose values and priorities may be antithetical to academic achievement. Therefore, the failure of parental mediation is not just a passive absence of rules; it is an active ceding of influence to the powerful social learning environment of the digital world. This study uses SLT to frame parental guidance as a crucial act of modeling and reinforcement that is essential for helping adolescents navigate this environment successfully. This framework is further enriched by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that child development is influenced by a series of nested environmental systems. The family constitutes the microsystem the most immediate and influential environment. This theory suggests that a strong, supportive microsystem can act as a buffer against negative influences from the wider environment. In this study, effective parental guidance represents a healthy microsystem that can shield a student from the potentially detrimental academic effects of the digital world. The breakdown of this guidance represents a fractured microsystem, leaving the student more exposed and vulnerable.

2.2 Empirical Review of Parental Guidance and Digital Mediation

The empirical literature on the role of parents in managing their children's digital lives is extensive, establishing parental mediation as a key factor in promoting positive online experiences and mitigating risks. This body of work has evolved to recognize various mediation strategies and to explore the challenges parents face, particularly the intergenerational digital divide.

2.2.1 The Global Context of Parental Mediation Strategies

Pioneering research in this field identified a typology of parental mediation strategies that remains influential today. Livingstone and Helsper (2008), in their work on children's internet use in the UK, distinguished between active mediation (engaging in discussions with the child about their online experiences), restrictive mediation (setting rules and limits on use), and co-use (parents and children using media together). Their findings, supported by subsequent research, suggest that active mediation is the most effective strategy for fostering

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long-term digital resilience and critical thinking skills. A meta-analysis by Collier et al. (2016) confirmed that open communication between parents and adolescents about online risks was strongly associated with safer online behaviors.

The link between these mediation strategies and academic outcomes is often powerful, though sometimes indirect. For example, a large-scale study on American adolescents by Twenge et al. (2019) found a strong correlation between parental rules on screen time and healthier sleep patterns. Given the well-established link between adequate sleep, attention, and academic performance, this illustrates a clear pathway through which restrictive mediation can support learning. Similarly, Padilla-Walker et al. (2012) found that adolescents who experienced higher levels of parental monitoring were less likely to engage in problematic media use and, in turn, demonstrated higher academic engagement.

However, a consistent theme in global research is the challenge posed by the digital disconnect between parents and their children. A comprehensive report by the Pew Research Center found that while a majority of American parents attempted to monitor their teens' digital lives, many felt overwhelmed and lacked confidence in their ability to do so effectively (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). This digital literacy gap is a primary barrier to effective mediation.

2.2.2 Parental Guidance in the African and Kenyan Context

In the African context, the challenges of parental mediation are often magnified by wider digital literacy gaps and acute socio-economic pressures. A multi-country study by the Internet Society (2020) on digital parenting in Africa found that while parental concern about online risks was high, parents felt profoundly ill-equipped to guide their children. Many resorted to purely restrictive measures, such as confiscating phones, which often led to family conflict and failed to teach self-regulation skills.

A qualitative study from South Africa provided a deep dive into these challenges, finding that parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds, in particular, struggled immensely. They often lacked not only the technical skills but also the time and energy for active mediation due to long working hours and other life pressures (James & De Kock, 2021). The study concluded that placing the full responsibility for digital citizenship education on parents in such contexts was unrealistic and that schools and communities needed to play a much larger supporting role.

In Kenya, the issue is gaining recognition but remains under-researched, especially in rural and marginalized areas. A report by the Communications Authority of Kenya (CA, 2020) found that while 90% of Kenyan parents expressed concern about their children's online safety, a much smaller percentage felt confident in their ability to help. The study by Nzula (2022) in Lari Sub-County concluded with a strong recommendation for greater parental and educational oversight, implying an observed lack of such oversight in the study area. The negative academic effects, it was suggested, were likely exacerbated by a permissive home environment where students' usage went largely unchecked. Similarly, the perception gap identified by Koin et al. (2022) in Kajiado—where students did not see the harm in their phone use, but teachers did also point to a failure in guidance. In a well-mediated home, parents would ideally help bridge this gap.

2.3 Summary of Literature and Identified Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes a strong consensus that parental guidance is a critical factor in shaping adolescent digital behaviors and protecting against negative outcomes,

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including poor academic performance. However, a glaring contextual gap exists. The overwhelming majority of this research is situated in high-income, high-literacy contexts where parents are assumed to have a baseline level of digital competence. The few studies from Africa confirm that the reality is vastly different, but they have not deeply explored the specific dynamics within a remote, socio-economically challenged, and culturally distinct region like Khalalio.

There is no much research, and little is known on how the profound digital literacy gap, coupled with the pressures of poverty, shapes parental mediation practices in this community. No study has quantitatively measured the extent of this guidance gap in such a context and statistically linked it to academic performance. This research is designed to fill this critical gap by providing a focused, mixed-methods investigation into the reality of parental guidance in Khalalio, moving the discourse from a simple call for "more involvement" to a nuanced understanding of the profound barriers that must be overcome to make that involvement possible.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design, utilizing a mixed-methods approach to provide both quantitative breadth and qualitative depth. The design was chosen for its suitability in describing existing phenomena namely, patterns of social media usage and parental guidance and exploring the relationships between these variables and academic performance without manipulation (Kothari, 2014).

3.1 Study Area, Population, and Sampling

The research was conducted in Khalalio Sub-County, Mandera, a remote and underserved region of Kenya. The target population was 1,880 individuals, comprising 1,038 students, 150 teachers, and 12 school administrators from the six public secondary schools in the sub-county. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation. Based on Slovin's formula and adjusted for feasibility, a final sample of 203 respondents was targeted: 175 students, 26 teachers, and 2 school administrators. Simple random sampling was used to select students and teachers from school registers, while the two administrators were purposively selected as key informants.

3.2 Data Collection and Instruments

A structured questionnaire was the primary instrument for collecting quantitative data from students. It included sections on demographics, frequency of use, platform choice, content consumption, and parental guidance, primarily using Likert-scale and closed-ended questions. Semi-structured interview guides were used to collect in-depth qualitative data from teachers and school administrators, focusing on their professional observations of student behavior and the challenges of digital parenting in the community. A pilot study was conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 for the questionnaire's main scales.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the 175 valid student questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS Version 26. The analysis involved descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages), inferential statistics (Chi-Square tests of independence to examine associations), and a multiple linear regression to model the predictive relationship between social media variables and academic

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performance. Qualitative data from the 28 interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data.

4. Quantitative Analysis and Results

This section presents the empirical evidence regarding the level of parental guidance and its relationship with academic performance.

4.1 Descriptive Analysis of Parental Guidance Levels

Students were asked to describe the level of parental mediation they experience regarding their social media use. The findings, presented in Table 4.1, reveal a significant lack of parental oversight.

Table 4.1: Level of Parental Guidance on Social Media Use (N=175)

Level of Guidance	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
High (Strict rules, regular checks)	18	10.3%
Moderate (Some rules, occasional talks)	43	24.6%
Low (Few or no rules, rare talks)	75	42.8%
None (No rules, no monitoring)	39	22.3%
Total	**175**	**100.0%**

Source: Field Data 2025

The data is stark: a combined majority of 65.1% of students report experiencing low or no parental guidance whatsoever. Only a small minority (10.3%) are subject to high levels of monitoring. This quantifies the "protective vacuum" hypothesized in the problem statement, indicating that most adolescents in Khalalio are navigating their digital lives with minimal adult supervision.

4.2 Chi-Square Analysis: Parental Guidance vs. Academic Performance

To statistically test the relationship between the level of parental guidance and academic performance, a Chi-Square test of independence was conducted.

Null Hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant association between the level of parental guidance on social media use and a student's academic performance.

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Table 4.2: Chi-Square Test for Association between Parental Guidance and Academic Performance

Parental Guidance	Excellent (f)	Good (f)	Average (f)	Poor (f)	Total
High	9	7	2	0	18
Moderate	7	23	11	2	43
Low	4	18	40	13	75
None	0	2	19	18	39
Total	**20**	**50**	**72**	**33**	**175**

Note. Pearson χ^2 (df=9, N = 175) = 71.345, p < .001.
Source: Field Data 2025

The Chi-Square test yielded a statistic of $\chi^2 = 71.345$ with a p-value of < .001. This result is substantially lower than the alpha level of 0.05, leading to the confident rejection of the null hypothesis. The data provides strong statistical evidence of a highly significant association between the level of parental guidance and students' academic performance.

The pattern within the table is clear and demonstrates a strong gradient. Students under high parental guidance are overwhelmingly concentrated in the "Excellent" (50%) and "Good" (38.9%) performance categories, with no students reporting "Poor" performance. Conversely, students with no parental guidance are heavily skewed towards the lower end, with nearly half (46.2%) reporting "Poor" performance and none achieving "Excellent" performance.

4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis

To assess the unique predictive power of parental guidance in the context of other factors, a multiple linear regression was performed. The results are summarized in Table 4.3.

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Table 4.3: Multiple Regression Model Predicting Academic Performance (N = 175)

Predictor	B (Unstd.)	SE	β (Std.)	t-value	p-value
(Constant)	4.150	0.185	—	22.432	< .001
Time on Social Media	-0.311	0.051	-0.389	-6.098	< .001
Parental Guidance	-0.265	0.049	-0.321	-5.408	< .001
Content Type	-0.203	0.055	-0.235	-3.691	< .001
Platform Type	-0.185	0.048	-0.210	-3.854	< .001

Note. Model Fit: R^2 = .659, Adjusted R^2 = .651, F(4, 170) = 81.951, p < .001. The 'Parental Guidance' variable was coded where a higher score means less guidance.
Source: Field Data 2025

The overall model was highly significant and explained approximately 65.9% of the variance in academic performance (R^2 = .659). The standardized beta coefficients (β) reveal the relative importance of each predictor. The absence of parental guidance (β = -0.321) emerged as the second strongest unique negative predictor of academic performance, second only to the total time spent on social media (β = -0.389). This confirms that even after accounting for how much time students spend online and what they do there, the level of parental oversight has a substantial and independent effect on their academic outcomes.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study unequivocally establish parental guidance as a critical, albeit largely absent, protective factor against the negative academic impacts of social media in the Khalalio context. The powerful statistical association between higher levels of parental oversight and better academic performance provides clear, quantitative evidence that family-level intervention matters profoundly. This result strongly supports the global body of research on parental mediation, which has consistently identified active parental involvement as key to fostering responsible digital habits among adolescents (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Collier et al., 2016).

However, the immense value of this research lies in how the qualitative data introduces a crucial and deeply contextual layer that challenges the assumptions of studies from more developed regions. The digital literacy gap, so powerfully described by the school principal The children are the digital experts in the home, not the parents emerges as a profound and systemic barrier. The widespread failure of parental guidance in Khalalio is not a result of parental apathy or a deliberate choice for a permissive parenting style; rather, it is a direct consequence of a profound capacity gap. This finding resonates with a growing body

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of research from the Global South that documents parents' feelings of being ill-equipped and overwhelmed in managing their children's online lives (James & De Kock, 2021; Internet Society, 2020).

This situation, where children are significantly more technologically savvy than their parents, effectively inverts the traditional models of parental authority and mediation that underpin Social Learning Theory. Parents cannot effectively model or reinforce behaviors for a digital world they have never inhabited. Furthermore, the socio-economic pressures described by teachers, where parents are consumed by the demands of basic survival, underscore the stark reality that active parental mediation is a 'luxury' of time and cognitive energy that not all families can afford. This is a critical equity issue often overlooked in Western-centric parenting models.

This leads to a pivotal insight: the deputy principal's observation that parents are often willing but simply lack the knowledge. This refutes a simplistic, deficit-based view of parents and instead points to a clear and actionable path forward. It highlights a pressing need for schools to expand their traditional role to include parental education on digital citizenship. While other Kenyan studies, such as Nzula (2022), have also called for greater parental oversight, this study provides a much deeper understanding of the specific barriers to that oversight in a marginalized community. It makes it clear that before we can ask parents to guide their children, we must first find ways to guide the parents themselves.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study set out to assess the effect of parental guidance on students' social media use and academic performance in a marginalized Kenyan community. It concludes that parental guidance is a critical protective factor that is strongly and significantly associated with better academic outcomes. However, this shield is largely missing in Khalalio Sub-County, not due to a lack of parental care, but due to a profound capacity gap created by an intergenerational digital divide and pressing socio-economic realities.

This reality is fostering a new, more insidious form of digital divide not of access, but of usage. Without the scaffolding of parental guidance, students in marginalized communities are more vulnerable to the distracting and non-academic aspects of social media. These risks exacerbating existing educational inequalities, as access to technology without the capacity for guided, purposeful use becomes a detriment rather than a benefit. The formal education system is currently ill-equipped to address this challenge, requiring a strategic shift towards a more holistic, community-wide approach to digital literacy.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

1. For Policymakers (Ministry of Education & ICT Authority):
    (i) Develop a National Digital Parenting Support Program: Policy must move beyond student-focused digital literacy to include frameworks for parental support. This could involve funding community-based workshops, developing simple, multilingual resources (e.g., radio programs, pamphlets) on digital safety, and partnering with civil society organizations to deliver training.
    (ii) Integrate Digital Citizenship into the Formal Curriculum: A mandatory, context-sensitive curriculum on digital citizenship, including modules on self-

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regulation, content evaluation, and online ethics, should be integrated into the secondary school syllabus to equip all students with foundational skills.

2. For School Administrators and Teachers:
    (i) Establish Schools as Hubs for Parental Digital Literacy: Schools in communities like Khalalio should proactively organize and host regular workshops for parents. These sessions should be practical and empathetic, focusing on building parental confidence, explaining the functions of popular apps in simple terms, and offering concrete, low-tech strategies for mediation (e.g., establishing "phone-free" times and zones in the home).
    (ii) Foster a Tripartite Dialogue: Schools should create formal channels for ongoing dialogue between teachers, parents, and students about digital well-being. This collaborative approach can help bridge the perception gap and build a shared sense of responsibility for creating a healthy learning environment.
3. For Future Research:
    (i) Intervention-Based Research: There is a critical need for action research that designs, implements, and rigorously evaluates the effectiveness of parental digital literacy programs in low-resource settings. Such studies could provide an evidence base for which intervention strategies are most effective.
    (ii) Comparative Analysis: A comparative study between a marginalized region like Khalalio and a well-resourced urban center could illuminate how socio-economic context specifically mediates the effectiveness of parental guidance, informing more targeted policy.

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