



Soft Skills in a Digital Frame: Exploring the Educational Prospects of Social Media Platforms for University Students: Mohamed First University as a Case Study

Hanae Zahout

Mohamed First University, Oujda, Morocco

Email: hanaezahout20@gmail.com

Imane Moulay Rachid

Mohamed First University, Oujda, Morocco

Rachida Nasri

Mohamed First University, Oujda, Morocco

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Abstract

As digital connectivity becomes an essential component of students' academic and social lives, social media platforms offer innovative opportunities for developing essential soft skills. This research investigates the way university students at Mohamed First University employ platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube to enhance their soft skills, including communication, creativity, teamwork, self-confidence, and digital professionalism. A qualitative case study at Mohamed First University employed an online questionnaire comprising both open-ended and closed-ended questions, enabling the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The findings indicate that students intentionally utilize social media to cultivate soft skills that enhance their academic and professional development. Participants indicated that activities such as content development, online collaboration, and participation in academic or professional communities enhanced their communication abilities, creativity, teamwork, self-assurance, and digital professionalism. Platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube have been recognized as environments for self-expression, professional networking, and the dissemination of academic or creative work, thereby fostering enhanced confidence and more effective interpersonal communication. The findings additionally underscore the importance of universities providing guidance to students on the ethical and intentional utilization of social media, as well as incorporating digital literacy and soft skills development into higher education curricula.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the world has experienced continuous changes, particularly during the AI era, across various sectors, including Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These institutions have undergone substantial transformations, chiefly due to continuous technological advancements that have revolutionized curriculum implementation techniques (Qolamani & Mohammed, 2023). The emergence of digital platforms, including artificial intelligence, social media, data analytics, and Learning Management Systems (LMS), has transformed education.

The digital revolution in higher education extends beyond the mere integration of digital tools; it encompasses curriculum reforms that foster learners' soft skills such as critical thinking, digital literacy, and problem-solving, equipping students for life in the digital age. This transition offers significant opportunities but also poses challenges for students, educators, and stakeholders in higher education institutions (Roehl, Reddy, & Shannon, 2013).

Significantly, the digital revolution of the 21st century has transformed higher education globally. The expansion of internet access, the widespread availability of smartphones, and the rise of influential social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube have reshaped students' communication, socialization, learning processes, and professional identity formation (Shaikh, Ali, & Al-Maamari, 2022). Social media has evolved beyond entertainment and informal interaction; educational institutions are increasingly exploring ways to use these platforms for pedagogical purposes, student engagement, networking, personal branding, and skill development (López-Carril, Anagnostopoulos, & Parganas, 2024; Kumari, Shivgotra, & Bansal, 2025).

Simultaneously, there has been increasing global recognition of soft skills, namely communication, teamwork, leadership, creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy, as essential complements to technical expertise. As workplaces become more dynamic and collaborative, employers seek graduates who possess not only technical knowledge but also the ability to adapt, communicate effectively, collaborate, and engage in lifelong learning (FAQIR, Amzil, & El Haddad, 2023; Heliyon, 2023). Research shows that graduates lacking these competencies face disadvantages in employability (Khartoui, 2025).

In the context of Moroccan higher education, these global trends have prompted reforms and empirical investigations. National initiatives emphasize integrating soft skills into curricula to enhance graduate employability (Khartoui, 2025). Faculty perspectives at institutions such as Moulay Ismail University and the University of Fez in Morocco highlight strong support for combining soft skills training with technical education (Asserraji, Aboudi, & Asserraji, 2024). Additionally, experiential learning approaches have been shown to significantly improve students' communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills (FAQIR, Amzil, & El Haddad, 2023). El Mountassir (2023) further argues that soft skills development has become a pedagogical necessity in Moroccan higher education.

However, despite these efforts, the specific role of social media platforms in supporting soft skills development remains underexplored in the Moroccan context. Existing studies provide limited insight into how platforms such as Instagram and YouTube contribute to students' personal and professional growth (López-Carril, Anagnostopoulos, & Parganas, 2024; Kumari, Shivgotra, & Bansal, 2025).

This gap motivates the present study, which aims to examine how Moroccan university students use social media to develop soft skills and how these informal practices connect with formal learning.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How are soft skills developed by Mohamed First University students using social media platforms?

- What challenges and opportunities emerge from integrating social media into educational contexts?

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory case study at Mohamed First University to investigate students' lived experiences and reflective practices in digital environments. The objective is to deeply understand how students use social media for learning, communication, and personal development. The findings aim to contribute to the growing body of research on digital pedagogy and soft skills development while offering practical insights for higher education policymakers. To delimit the scope, the study focuses on students at Mohamed First University in Morocco, specifically examining the platforms Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

2. Literature Review

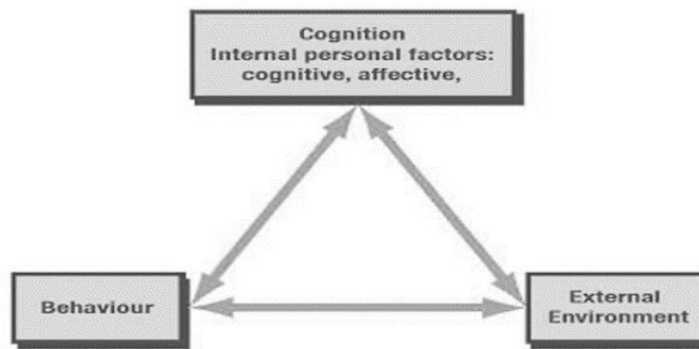
Prior to examining the central aspects of this research, it is essential to initially define several significant terms constructed by prominent scholars in this field to establish a clear foundation for the study. Starting with interpersonal skills, Charles R. McConnell (2004) describes interpersonal skills as the essential skills involved in dealing with and relating to other people largely on a one-on-one basis (p. 178). These competencies encompass verbal and written communication, collaboration, self-assurance, and leadership abilities.

The second significant keyword is "digital literacy"; it can be regarded as an overarching term encompassing a continuum of meanings, ranging from the ability to operate digital devices or software to the capacity to consume and generate digital content and to actively engage in digital communities (Alexander, Adams Becker, & Cummins, 2016). This definition conceptualizes digital literacy as a spectrum, progressing from mere tool usage to meaningful participation within digital communities. Another definition of digital literacy, as provided by Pangrazio (2020), is that it encompasses the range of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that enable individuals to utilize digital technologies effectively, critically, and responsibly. This definition emphasizes critical thinking and responsible application. Additionally, UNESCO (2018) offers the following definition of digital literacy: it encompasses the skills to access, manage, comprehend, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and produce information securely and effectively through digital technologies, supporting employment, quality jobs, and entrepreneurship. This includes competencies often described as computer literacy, ICT literacy, information literacy, and media literacy.

Soft skills are essential for the development of human capital and workforce success (Lippman et al., 2015, p. 2). An important definition of soft skills is provided by Cimatti (2016): "Soft skills" refers to personal transversal competencies such as social skills, language and communication abilities, teamwork capabilities, and other personality traits that define interpersonal relationships (p. 97). This definition emphasizes competencies that are transferable across various contexts. Another definition offered by Robles (2012) states that soft skills are personal attributes that improve an individual's interactions, job performance, and career development (pp. 453–454). A growing body of evidence indicates that these qualities surpass academic or technical skills in their capacity to predict employment and earnings, among other outcomes (Kautz, Heckman, Diris, ter Weel, & Borghans, 2014).

Another crucial term that needs to be defined is "social network sites." Following Boyd and Ellison (2007), social network sites are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 211). This definition emphasizes networked connections and relationships, characterizing social media as a platform for profile creation, networking, and interaction. Social media platforms provide university students with opportunities to cultivate essential soft skills through observation and intentional participation. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977; see Figure 1) posits that students develop interpersonal, communication, and leadership skills through the observation of peers, mentors, or influencers online, emulating their behaviors, and obtaining feedback in social media contexts.

Figure 1: Social Learning Theory Model (Bandura, 1977)



Adapted from Social learning theory by A. Bandura, 1977, Prentice Hall.

Simultaneously, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) emphasizes the active role of students in selecting and using these platforms to fulfill personal and professional needs, including enhancing digital literacy, participating in collaborative projects, and building professional networks. Collectively, these theories suggest that intentional and interactive engagement with social media can cultivate essential skills such as communication, creativity, collaboration, and digital professionalism, which support students' academic, professional, and civic engagement.

Recent research underscores that social media can significantly contribute to the development of soft skills in university students when engagement is intentional and structured. Li, Chen, and Man (2024), in their study *Understanding the Influence of Social Media on University Students' Communication Skills in Digital Information Environment*, demonstrated that active engagement in content creation, discussions, and collaborative interactions on social media platforms improves communication skills, particularly among students with higher levels of digital literacy. The study indicates that digital literacy and social cognitive learning positively mediate the relationship between the frequency and type of social media engagement and communication skills. These findings highlight the role of social media in enhancing both digital literacy and social cognitive learning as key mechanisms for improving communication skills. Furthermore, the authors suggest that educational institutions and policymakers should prioritize the development of students' digital literacy and communication skills in relation to social media use.

Moreover, Goyal and Jamuna (2019), in their study *Influence of Social Media on the Soft Skills for Learners and Practitioners: A Study*, found that social media engagement enhances communication, interpersonal, and self-confidence skills, particularly when students share ideas and creative work online. Collectively, these studies indicate that social media can serve as an effective tool for soft skills development when it is used in a structured and guided manner, rather than for passive or superficial engagement.

In the following section, the study's methodology will be presented, including the data collection methods employed and the main findings of the research.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative case study methodology to examine the usage of social media platforms by Mohamed First University students in developing soft skills, including communication, teamwork, creativity, digital professionalism, and self-confidence. To address the research questions, we used an online survey, with the primary participants being students from all faculties at Mohamed First University. The case study approach was chosen as it

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facilitates a comprehensive examination of students' authentic practices and perceptions within their natural academic and social environments.

Research Context and Participants

The study was carried out at Mohamed First University in Oujda, Morocco. The target population comprised undergraduate students from various academic programs, majors, and faculties to guarantee diversity in social media utilization and digital practices. Participants were chosen via purposive sampling, concentrating on students who actively utilize platforms like Instagram and YouTube for academic, professional, or creative endeavors. Participation was optional, and informed consent was acquired from all participants. No personally identifiable information was gathered.

Data Collection Instrument: Questionnaire

Data were obtained exclusively via a structured online questionnaire. We opted for both open-ended and closed-ended questions to gather both qualitative and quantitative data from the respondents. The study is intended for students from diverse faculties and majors; consequently, the questions were articulated in three languages: Arabic, French, and English, to ensure precise and candid responses from the participants. The survey was segmented into three sections:

The initial section comprises questions regarding demographic information, including age, gender, field of study, and utilized social media platforms.

The second section comprised questions related to patterns of social media usage, including frequency, purpose, and types of involvement: content creation, interaction, or passive consumption.

The final section comprised both open-ended and closed-ended questions with regard to the perceived development of soft skills, employing a five-point Likert scale to assess students' perceptions of enhancements in communication, teamwork, creativity, problem-solving, leadership, and self-confidence through social media activities.

The questionnaire was disseminated electronically via university communication channels and class WhatsApp groups to promote extensive participation and to target students already active in digital environments.

4. Findings

The research gathered responses from 56 university students representing various faculties and disciplines at Mohamed First University.

Figure 2: Distribution and Number of Participants by Gender

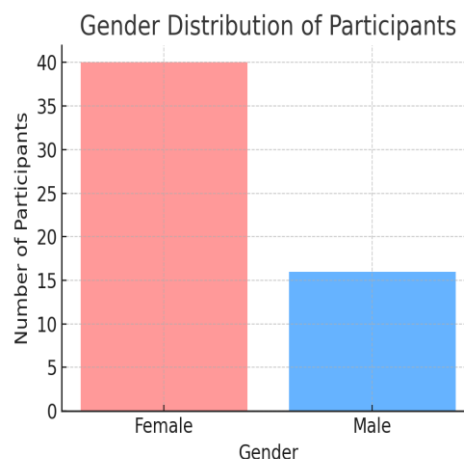
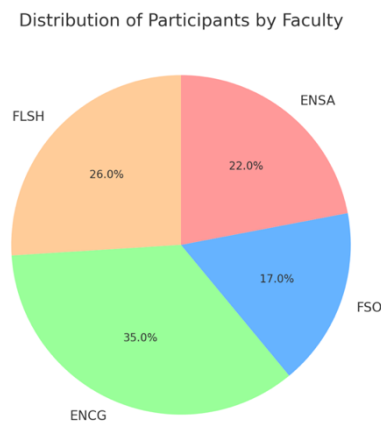


Figure 3: Distribution of Participants by Faculty



There are 40 females and 16 males, as shown in Figure 2, with ages ranging from 18 to 28 years. Of the participants, 26% are from the Faculty of Literature and Human Sciences (FLSH), 35% from the National School of Commerce and Management in Oujda (ENCG), 17% from the Faculty of Science (FSO), and 22% from the National School of Applied Sciences of Oujda, as demonstrated in Figure 3. The findings illuminate students' perceptions and utilization of social media platforms, primarily Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, for the enhancement of soft skills, including communication, creativity, teamwork, self-confidence, and digital professionalism.

Utilization of Social Media for Academic and Professional Aims

Based on the main findings, approximately 92% of respondents indicated that they utilize social media not only for entertainment and communication but also for academic and professional objectives, such as following professional pages, engaging with educational content, learning new languages, and viewing skill development videos. The most beneficial platforms identified were YouTube for tutorials and learning languages, LinkedIn for networking and professional opportunities, and Instagram for creativity and personal branding.

Communication and Interpersonal Competencies

The majority of students reported that engaging with others on social media via comments, group discussions, and messaging enhances their communication skills. Approximately 76% indicated that social media enhanced their confidence in articulating opinions in public or academic settings. Additionally, certain students expressed that social media platforms, particularly Instagram, facilitate connections with individuals not only from Morocco but also from various regions worldwide, including Europe and the United States. This interaction enhances their communication with people of diverse cultural, social, and religious backgrounds, thereby fostering an increase in cultural awareness and an understanding of the differences among people and cultures, as well as promoting the ability to embrace these changes.

Illustration from spontaneous responses:

"Reposting content and taking part in group discussions made me feel more comfortable talking in front of other people."

"Through social media, particularly Instagram, I connected with people from different backgrounds. I was amazed to find plenty of new insights; for example, practices considered normal in my culture may not be seen the same way in others. Also, social

media helped with the development of my communication skills and gave me the courage to engage in conversations with new people."

Creativity and Content Creation

According to the main findings, students recognized the use of creativity as one of the most advanced skills. Instagram was specifically noted for facilitating creativity via photo and video editing, storytelling, and visual communication methods. Approximately 64% indicated that they enhanced their creativity through the creation or design of digital content.

Teamwork and Cooperation

According to 52% of respondents, social media enhanced their collaborative work capabilities with peers through group projects, shared documents, and community pages. Students identified WhatsApp and Facebook groups as instruments for task coordination and resource sharing pertaining to academic projects.

Digital Professionalism and Career Readiness

LinkedIn was significantly linked to the cultivation of professional identity. Participants indicated that establishing a profile, networking with professionals, and accessing job or internship opportunities enhanced their comprehension of the professional landscape. Students characterized LinkedIn as a platform that "enhances their proximity to the labor market."

Difficulties and Adverse Elements

Although the majority perceived social media favorably, several disadvantages were identified: distraction and time wasting (noted by multiple respondents); comparison and pressure arising from digital visibility; and concerns regarding the reliability of information derived from unverified content creators. These concerns indicate that although social media facilitates the development of soft skills, adequate digital literacy is crucial for managing distractions and assessing the quality of information.

5. Discussion

This study's results demonstrate that social media platforms actively contribute to the development of soft skills for university students. Respondents reported using platforms such as Instagram and YouTube for entertainment and to improve their communication, creativity, collaboration, and digital professionalism. The findings corroborate the conclusion of Li, Chen, and Man (2024) that purposeful and significant engagement on social media improves communication skills and digital literacy. Participants in the current study indicated that engagement in academic and professional environments, particularly via LinkedIn and YouTube, enhanced their self-confidence and refined their communication skills. Furthermore, LinkedIn provided them with clearer perspectives on the local and global job market.

Correspondingly, findings from Goyal and Jamuna (2019) demonstrated that social media enhances students' interpersonal skills and confidence in disseminating creative or academic content, aligning with participants' opinions that managing posts and interacting with audiences facilitated their public expression of ideas. The current data indicates that Instagram and YouTube are regarded as platforms for fostering creativity via visual content creation, whereas WhatsApp and Facebook continue to serve as vital instruments for collaboration and teamwork in academic endeavors. This corresponds with current research indicating that collaborative interactions in digital environments enhance team communication and project coordination.

Students recognized challenges including distraction, time management issues, and exposure to unreliable information. These concerns reflect the warnings articulated in the literature, especially the necessity for critical digital literacy and guided utilization to optimize advantages and minimize negative outcomes. Consequently, although social media provides

avenues for developing soft skills, its efficacy is dependent upon the intentional and responsible usage by students.

6. Conclusion

This study illustrates that social media can enhance the acquisition of various soft skills vital for academic achievement and employability, such as communication, creativity, collaboration, self-assurance, and digital professionalism. LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube have emerged as the preeminent platforms for facilitating professional networking, fostering creative expression, and enhancing knowledge acquisition. At the same time, the study emphasizes that people require digital literacy and responsible use to avoid distractions and misuse. Social media serves as a potent informal learning environment that, when utilized strategically, equips students for the requirements of the contemporary labor market and improves their preparedness for professional contexts.

Limitations of the Research

This research has fundamental limitations. The findings are derived from a constrained sample size of 56 respondents. Consequently, questionnaires offer a restricted range of information. Students may not have provided truthful responses, leading to a poor portrayal of some information. The research would have been more complex, insightful, and exhaustive had there been sufficient capacity to analyze additional students and educators from a wider range of grades and institutions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should consider augmenting the sample size to improve the study's reliability. Incorporating additional students and professors from diverse universities into the research would augment the reliability of the findings. This research pertains exclusively to specific faculties of one university. A larger cohort of respondents from diverse universities would produce a more representative and dependable sample, advantageous for augmenting participant numbers and investigating further issues concerning the role of social media platforms in enhancing higher education students' soft skills.

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Authors Biography

Hanae Zahout is a PhD candidate at Mohamed First University, affiliated with the Applied Communication in Context (ACC) Laboratory. Her research interests include inclusive education, the internationalization of higher education, and soft skills development.

Imane Moulay Rachid is a PhD candidate at Mohamed First University, affiliated with the Applied Communication in Context (ACC) Laboratory. Her research focuses on inclusive education and diaspora studies.

Dr. Rachida Nasri is an Associate Professor of English at the National School of Commerce and Management (ENCGO). Her teaching and research interests focus on applied English studies, particularly in the areas of language education, communication, and professional development.