

A Study of Student Non-Attendance Based on Cultural Commitments, Generational Change, and the Impact of Artificial Intelligence and Social Life Online: An Analytical Study Among Students of Saudi Universities

Hana Ghazy Almakky^{1*}

¹ King Abdulaziz University

Citation: Almakky, H. G. (2026). A Study of Student Non-Attendance Based on Cultural Commitments, Generational Change, and the Impact of Artificial Intelligence and Social Life Online: An Analytical Study Among Students of Saudi Universities, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 11(1), 3505-3516. <https://doi.org/10.64753/jcasc.v11i1.4746>

Published: April 06, 2026

ABSTRACT

Across Saudi universities, attendance rates among undergraduates have been quietly trending downward for several years but the explanations provided by institutional reports rarely stray far from descriptive accounts based on student disengagement or poor planning. This study adopts a different perspective. Rather than asking why students don't make it to class, we asked what they're actually deciding when they don't come in, and found a picture much more complex than the policy discourse is often prepared to recognize. Drawing on a convergent mixed-methods approach, we gathered questionnaire data from 87 undergraduates enrolled in three public Saudi universities and conducted 45- to 75-minute semi-structured interviews with 15 students selected for diversity by gender, discipline, and attendance pattern. Multiple regression analysis identified AI reliance ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$), perceived learner independence ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$), and social media engagement ($\beta = .27$, $p = .009$) as the dominant predictors of absenteeism, collectively accounting for 48% of variance ($R^2 = .48$). Mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4; 5,000 bootstraps) confirmed that AI reliance exerts part of its effect indirectly by amplifying students' sense of learning independence which in turn drives higher absence rates. The interview data complicate any simple technological-determinism reading of these numbers. Students draw explicit distinctions between lecture formats they consider substitutable and interactive sessions they regard as irreplaceable. Family obligations disproportionately carried by women explain a further share of absences that have nothing to do with motivation. And a recurring theme across almost every interview was a direct challenge to institutional authority: attendance mandates that cannot be pedagogically justified provoke skepticism rather than compliance. Taken together, the findings suggest that attendance policy in Saudi higher education needs to be rebuilt around the actual conditions shaping student decisions rather than assumptions calibrated to an earlier technological era.

Keywords: student non-attendance; Saudi higher education; artificial intelligence; social media; learner autonomy; Generation Z; digital learning; Vision 2030.

INTRODUCTION

The Attendance Question Revisited

There is something almost anachronistic about how higher education institutions continue to frame attendance. The dominant institutional logic turn up, receive knowledge, perform it back in assessments was calibrated for an environment in which the lecture hall was genuinely the most efficient route to learning. That environment no longer exists, at least not without qualification, and the persistence of attendance regimes that were designed for a pre-digital world is itself part of what this paper is trying to explain.

The empirical case for attendance as a predictor of academic performance is well-established (Tinto, 1993). Students who attend regularly do, on average, perform better. What that correlation does not settle is whether attendance causes performance, or whether both are downstream of some third variable motivation, institutional belonging, course quality that policy should more directly target.

Saudi Arabia makes for an instructive case. The cultural and religious weight placed on education is not trivial or rhetorical; it is embedded in family expectation, religious obligation, and the apparatus of Vision 2030. Yet attendance problems are real and documented. Something structural is going on, and identifying it is both a practical and scholarly priority.

The Saudi Higher Education Context

Saudi Arabia has undergone rapid higher education expansion over the past two decades. The student population is now predominantly composed of Generation Z young people for whom the distinctions between online and offline interaction carry very different valence than they do for their lecturers. Within Islamic tradition, the pursuit of knowledge carries explicit religious sanction, and this framing shapes how Saudi families invest in and talk about education (Al-Zahrani & Alasmari, 2024). This cultural context matters when interpreting absenteeism data, because it rules out the most straightforward deficiency explanation.

At the same time, the technological infrastructure of Saudi higher education has changed with unusual speed. AI tools such as ChatGPT have seen rapid adoption, LMS platforms have normalized asynchronous engagement, and a generation of undergraduates has grown up treating on-demand information access as a baseline expectation (Almassaad et al., 2024). Research on personalized learning in Saudi universities indicates that contemporary students increasingly treat learner autonomy as a condition of meaningful engagement rather than a privilege (Alenezi, 2023).

Research Question

This study asks: how do AI-mediated learning, social media engagement, perceived learner independence, cultural commitments to education, and competing family and work obligations combine to shape attendance decisions among Saudi undergraduates aged 19–25? The framing is deliberately non-deficit. Attendance decisions are treated as rational responses to real conditions, and the study asks what those conditions actually are.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Family, Culture, and the Meaning of Educational Commitment

The literature on educational values in Saudi Arabia consistently emphasizes the collective and socially embedded character of how knowledge is pursued (Al-Zahrani & Alasmari, 2024). Education is not merely a personal investment but a family responsibility and a form of social contribution. Recent research has complicated the assumption that this cultural weight translates straightforwardly into compliance with institutional requirements. Alismail and Almulla (2025) found that students who experience their chosen major as genuinely aligned with their own aspirations show markedly higher institutional integration and attendance commitment, while those enrolled under family pressure show significantly weaker engagement.

Social Media, Generation Z, and the Architecture of Daily Life

Social media has moved, for the current generation of undergraduates, from a discretionary activity to something closer to an ambient feature of social existence. Biswas and Biswas (2025) estimate average daily media consumption among young adults at seven to nine hours a figure that puts the structural tension with academic participation in plain view. Research on Gen Z engagement shows that students do not experience social media as a guilty pleasure they should curtail but as a legitimate and necessary part of their social infrastructure (Buzzetto-More et al., 2021). Institutional responses framed around self-discipline therefore tend to misread the phenomenon.

Artificial Intelligence and the Disruption of Classroom Authority

Before tools like ChatGPT became widely available, the asymmetry between what a student could access independently and what a lecture offered was sufficient to make attendance rational even for highly self-directed learners. That asymmetry has narrowed. Crompton and Burke (2023) document the breadth of AI adoption in higher education, and the Saudi context is consistent with global trends adoption has outpaced institutional policy

(Almassaad et al., 2024). Sobaih et al. (2024) found significant divergence between how students and faculty perceive these tools: students value on-demand accessibility; faculty are more likely to frame AI in terms of academic integrity risk. Both perspectives contain something true.

Generation Z Learning Preferences and Institutional Authority

Gen Z students demonstrate a conditional relationship with institutional authority — they will engage when they can see the value clearly; they push back when they cannot (Bilderback & Kilpatrick, 2025). Salem et al. (2022), examining digital skill development in Saudi universities before and during the pandemic, found that quality of technology-mediated instruction not merely access to technology significantly affected student confidence and engagement. Deploying digital tools without accompanying pedagogical design does not produce autonomous, engaged learners.

Belonging, Integration, and Attendance Commitment

Tinto's (1993) foundational work on student persistence established that attendance and engagement emerge from students' sense of belonging and authentic connection within the academic community. Research in Saudi universities demonstrates that institutional leadership practices and explicit investment in student integration significantly predict both attendance and academic persistence (Aljendan, 2025). Students who feel genuinely welcomed and who develop relationships with faculty are substantially more likely to maintain attendance even when alternatives exist.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three theoretical lenses inform this study. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) explains why students readily adopt AI tools on their own terms, emphasizing perceived usefulness and ease of use as drivers that largely bypass institutional gatekeeping. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) identifies satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs as conditions for sustained intrinsic motivation and thereby identifies exactly what punitive attendance enforcement tends to undermine. Cultural Adaptation Theory situates individual attendance decisions within a broader social context in which students are genuinely navigating multiple value systems simultaneously rather than defecting from one toward another.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted. Quantitative survey data established the statistical relationships among key variables; qualitative interview data explained the meaning behind those relationships. The two datasets were analyzed independently and then integrated, with each used to interrogate and contextualize the other. The study was conducted across three public universities in different geographic regions of Saudi Arabia during the 2024 academic year. Institutional ethics approval was obtained at each site; all participation was voluntary and informed consent was secured before data collection.

Participants

Questionnaire sample. Eighty-seven undergraduates completed the online survey: 52.9% women ($n = 46$) and 47.1% men ($n = 41$). Disciplinary representation: engineering and technology (27.6%), humanities and social sciences (25.3%), business and economics (21.8%), sciences (18.4%), and education (6.9%). This distribution reflects overall enrollment patterns at the three institutions. The survey was available in Arabic and English.

Interview sample. Fifteen students were selected purposefully from the same institutions to ensure variation in gender, discipline, and attendance pattern ranging from 'nearly always attends' to 'fewer than half of scheduled sessions.' The sample comprised 8 women and 7 men. All interviews were conducted in Arabic by a native Arabic-speaking researcher, lasted 45–75 minutes, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Instruments

The 30-item questionnaire measured five constructs on 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). All items were adapted from validated instruments and underwent forward-backward translation with

expert review for semantic adequacy in Arabic. Reliability was acceptable across all scales: Class Absenteeism (6 items; $\alpha = .82$), AI Reliance (6 items; $\alpha = .79$), Social Media Engagement (6 items; $\alpha = .81$), Perceived Learner Independence (6 items; $\alpha = .80$), and Work–Family Obligations (6 items; $\alpha = .78$). Interview protocols covered six domains: attendance patterns, AI and technology use, social media habits, family and work obligations, institutional experiences, and cultural values around education.

Analysis

Quantitative. All survey data were analyzed in SPSS (Version 28). Descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and Pearson correlations were computed first. Multiple regression then examined the combined predictive value of the four predictors on class absenteeism. Mediation was tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

Qualitative. Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Two researchers coded independently and bilingually; disagreements were resolved through discussion with a third colleague. Analysis was managed in NVivo 12.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive Statistics

The mean absenteeism score was 2.97 ($SD = 0.94$) moderate on the 5-point scale. Social media engagement was the highest-scoring predictor ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.72$), followed by perceived learner independence ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.81$) and AI reliance ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.87$). Work–family obligations averaged 3.21 ($SD = 0.91$), suggesting competing non-academic demands are a routine feature of these students' lives rather than exceptional circumstances. Full descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients are reported in Table 1 and visualized in Figure 1.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for All Study Variables (N = 87)

Variable	n	M	SD	Range	Cronbach's α
Class Absenteeism	87	2.97	0.94	1–5	.82
AI Reliance	87	3.45	0.87	1–5	.79
Social Media Engagement	87	4.12	0.72	2–5	.81
Perceived Learner Independence	87	3.78	0.81	1–5	.80
Work–Family Obligations	87	3.21	0.91	1–5	.78

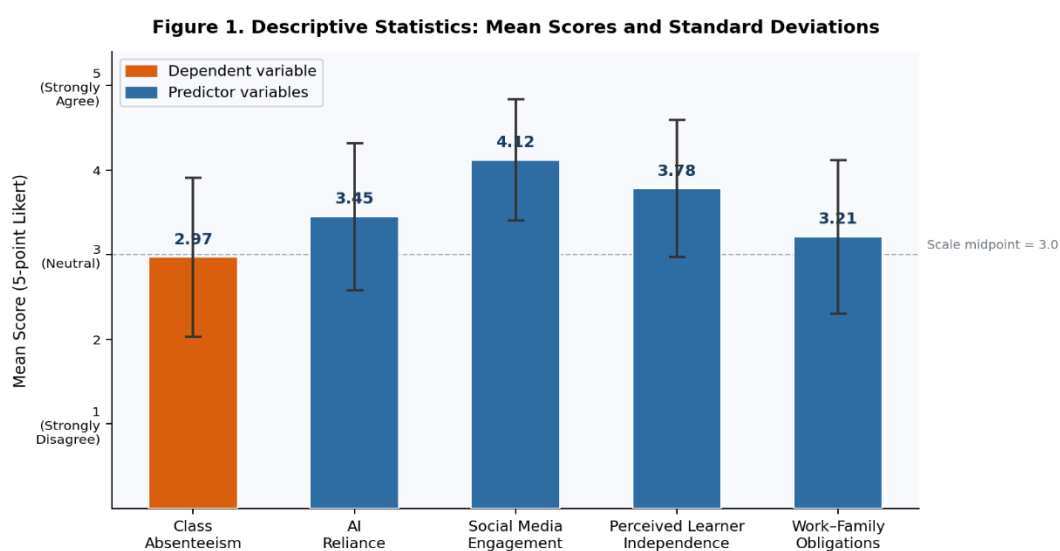


Figure 1. Mean scores and standard deviations for all study variables. The dashed line marks the scale midpoint (3.0). Error bars = ± 1 SD.

Bivariate Correlations

All four predictors correlated significantly with absenteeism (Table 2). AI reliance showed the strongest bivariate association ($r = .58, p < .001$), followed by perceived learner independence ($r = .52$) and social media engagement ($r = .45$). The correlation between AI reliance and perceived learner independence ($r = .62$) was the strongest inter-predictor association in the matrix, foreshadowing the mediation results.

Table 2 Bivariate Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Class Absenteeism	—	.58***	.45***	.52***	.41***
2. AI Reliance		—	.39***	.62***	.28**
3. Social Media Engagement			—	.31**	.24*
4. Perceived Learner Independence				—	.33***
5. Work–Family Obligations					—

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. $N = 87$.

Multiple Regression Analysis

The four-predictor model was significant, $F(4, 82) = 18.43, p < .001$, accounting for 48% of variance in absenteeism ($R^2 = .48$, Adjusted $R^2 = .46$). AI reliance was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .35$), followed by perceived learner independence ($\beta = .32$), social media engagement ($\beta = .27$), and work–family obligations ($\beta = .21$). All four predictors remained significant when entered simultaneously. Full regression results are presented in Table 3 and Figure 2.

Table 3 Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Class Absenteeism

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
AI Reliance	.38	.08	.35	4.75	< .001
Perceived Learner Independence	.35	.08	.32	4.38	< .001
Social Media Engagement	.28	.10	.27	2.80	.009
Work–Family Obligations	.20	.09	.21	2.22	.029

Note. Dependent variable: Class Absenteeism. $F(4, 82) = 18.43, p < .001, R^2 = .48$, Adjusted $R^2 = .46$.

Figure 2. Multiple Regression: Standardised Coefficients Predicting Class Absenteeism ($R^2 = .48, F(4, 82) = 18.43, p < .001$)

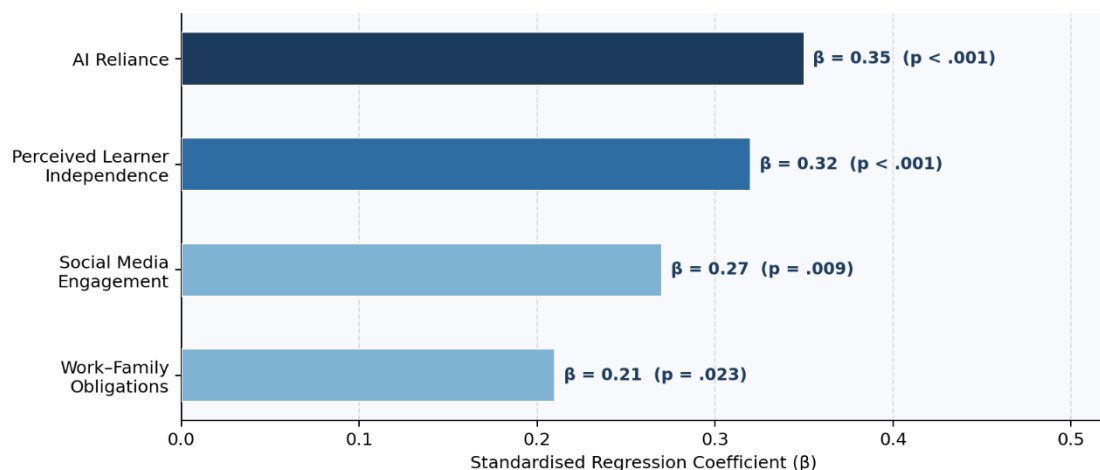


Figure 2. Standardised regression coefficients (β) predicting class absenteeism. All four predictors significant at $p < .05$. $R^2 = .48$.

Mediation Analysis

Bootstrap mediation analysis (Model 4; 5,000 bootstrapped samples) confirmed that perceived learner independence partially mediates the effect of AI reliance on absenteeism (Figure 3). The total effect of AI reliance was $B = .68 (p < .001)$. The direct effect (controlling for the mediator) dropped to $B = .52 (p < .001)$; the indirect effect through perceived learner independence was $B = .16$, 95% CI [.08, .26]. The confidence interval excluding zero confirms the mediating path is real. AI reliance does not only substitute for attendance by providing an

alternative to class; it also reframes how students think about their own relationship to learning making them more likely to perceive independent access to information as sufficient and this change in self-perception does additional predictive work on its own.

Figure 3. Mediation Model: Perceived Learner Independence as Mediator of AI Reliance → Class Absenteeism

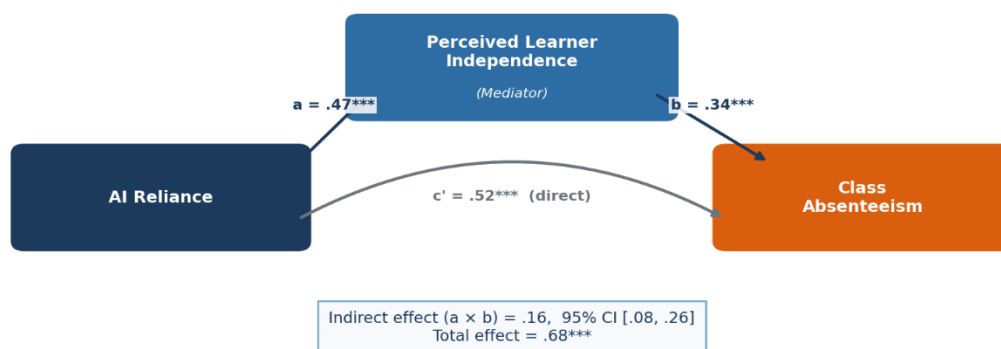


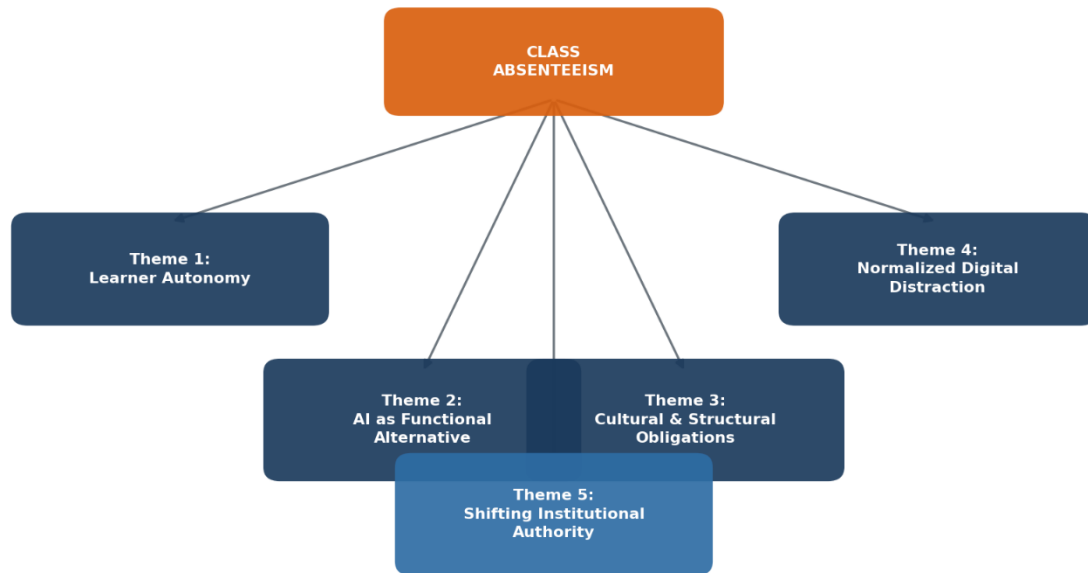
Figure 3. Partial mediation of AI reliance → class absenteeism through perceived learner independence. Unstandardised coefficients reported. 95% CI [.08, .26] confirms significant indirect effect.

Qualitative Findings

Interview data revealed five salient themes. These are summarized in Table 4 and mapped in Figure 4; the following sections provide fuller descriptions of each.

Table 4 Qualitative Themes, Core Meanings, and Representative Participant Excerpts

Theme	Core Meaning	Sample Excerpt
1. Learner Autonomy	Students frame attendance as a deliberate choice in pursuit of their own learning outcomes. They do not reject the institution; they claim adult agency within it.	"I'm an adult. It should be up to me whether lectures assist my learning."
2. AI as Functional Substitute	AI tools replace information-delivery lectures specifically. Students draw a consistent line between passive content transmission (replaceable) and interactive sessions (irreplaceable).	"In lectures where the professor is just reading from slides, I can ask ChatGPT to explain the concept better."
3. Competing Legitimate Obligations	Absenteeism frequently reflects structural constraints — family responsibilities, employment — not disengagement. Students and families treat these as coequal to academic attendance.	"My mother wants me to study and get my degree, but she also wants me at home."
4. Normalised Digital Distraction	Social media is experienced as an environmental given, not a personal failing. Students actively manage it without moralising about it.	"It's not a failure of willpower — it's how we stay connected."
5. Contested Institutional Authority	Attendance mandates without pedagogical justification provoke resistance. Attendance in genuinely engaging courses is voluntary and self-sustaining.	"In one of my seminars the professor gets us really engaged. I show up because I want to, not because I have to."

**Figure 4. Thematic Map of Qualitative Findings:
Five Themes Shaping Absenteeism Decisions****Figure 4.** Thematic map showing the five qualitative themes shaping absenteeism decisions.**Theme 1: Learner Autonomy as Central to Engagement**

Every student we spoke with even those who missed class relatively infrequently described their relationship to attendance in terms of deliberate individual choice. The language of agency was uniform and unselfconscious: students spoke not about what the institution demands but about what helps them to learn. As one female engineering student put it: "I'm an adult. I should decide if coming to lectures helps me learn or not." A male business student offered a variation that was common: "My family respects my ability to make decisions about how I study. They trust me with my time."

This is not a revolt against education. Students made clear that they valued their degrees and took academic achievement seriously. What they were pushing back against was the formulaic conflation of attendance and learning a formula they had come to see as outdated, and in many cases empirically dubious from their own lived experience.

Theme 2: AI as a Functional Stand-in for Information-Delivery Lectures

Students drew a distinction that institutions have been slow to formalize: between courses that primarily deliver information and courses that do something else. For the former, they see AI as an acceptable and often better alternative to actually being there. For the latter seminars, case discussions, labs, clinical sessions they attend without complaint, because they know what they would miss. "In lectures where it's just a professor reading slides, I can read them myself or use ChatGPT to explain the concept better," one student said. "But in seminars where we talk about case studies, I show up for sure."

Students were not naive about the limits of AI. They knew it generates confident-sounding errors and acknowledged that unverified output carries risk. The point is not that they trusted AI blindly, but rather that they trusted their own judgment about when AI was and was not an adequate substitute which turned out to be, in most cases, quite reasonably calibrated.

Theme 3: Structural Constraints of Competing Obligations

About a third of the absences described in interviews had nothing to do with technology or learner preferences. They were straightforward scheduling conflicts with family and work commitments that students found non-negotiable. Female students articulated this with particular directness: "My mother wants me to study and get my degree. But she also wants me to help at home, visit my grandmother, attend family gatherings. When these conflict, it's complicated." Male students described similar dynamics around family business obligations.

Families were not framing these demands as antithetical to educational values they were treating both as legitimate. Missing class to care for a sick family member or cover a shift at the family business was understood

as fulfilling a responsibility, not neglecting one. Any attendance policy that ignores this reality will inevitably fail the students who most need its support.

Theme 4: Social Media as a Normalised Environmental Feature

Students talked about social media not the way a recovering addict speaks of a substance, but like someone describes the weather an ambient condition they navigate rather than a choice they make and unmake daily. "Everyone I know is on Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok. It's not about willpower it's just how we connect." At the same time, students were actively managing attention demands: many described using app timers, phone-free study periods, and other techniques that signalled genuine awareness of the problem alongside genuine normalisation of the environment producing it.

That ambivalence matters. Social media was not simply a distraction but also a source of peer community and mutual support around coursework and for some students access to academic content circulating through platform networks. Treating it only as an interference to be minimized misses half the picture.

Theme 5: Contested Institutional Authority

Students who could not identify a clear pedagogical rationale for attendance requirements described the most fraught experiences of being tracked. "The university says attendance is mandatory, but why? If I get the material well without attending, what does it matter?" This skepticism was not uniform. The same students who objected to compulsory attendance in one course described full, voluntary participation in another: "In one of my seminars the professor really engages us. We talk about real issues. I go because I choose to, not because I'm forced to." Legitimacy is earned through the quality of the experience, not conferred by institutional mandate.

Integrating the Two Datasets

The quantitative and qualitative data reinforce one another at every key juncture. The strong regression coefficient for AI reliance is explained, in the interview data, by students' rational substitution logic for information-delivery lectures. The mediation finding that AI reliance increases perceived independence, which in turn exacerbates absenteeism maps neatly onto interview accounts from students who describe a snowballing shift in how they understand their own capacity to learn. The social media effect resonates as the digitised environment students describe as normalised not a discrete act of choosing distraction over study. And the work–family obligations coefficient aligns closely with the structural constraints students articulated constraints that register in survey data as a statistical association and in interviews as the particular texture of lived experience.

What the qualitative data adds is a counterbalance to any temptation to moralize about the numbers. These are not unmotivated students. They are students making fairly rational decisions in a context that institutions have not yet caught up with.

DISCUSSION

What the Findings Actually Say

The headline result that AI reliance, perceived learner independence, social media engagement, and work–family commitments together account for 48% of variance in absenteeism ($R^2 = .48$) is not surprising in itself. What is analytically significant is the mediation finding. Reliance on AI doesn't just move students in the direction of substitution by giving them an alternative to class; it changes how they see themselves as learners, intensifying their confidence in independent learning pathways and establishing another route through which attendance slips. This dynamic has a ratchet quality: the more students successfully use AI outside class, the more convinced they become that class is optional, which leads to increased independent AI use, and so on. Institutions that are not proactively shaping how this dynamic plays out are ceding the pedagogical relationship by default.

The Autonomy Question

The emphasis on learner autonomy in these data should not be read as students asking for less rigour. What they consistently asked for was to be treated as adults capable of evaluating their own learning which is not an unreasonable request and in fact aligns with what developmental learning theory recommends at this stage in education. Self-Determination Theory is useful here: satisfaction of the need for autonomy predicts intrinsic motivation and deep engagement. Strategies that use enforcement to suppress autonomy without transparent

justification do not elicit the compliance they seek; they build reactance (Panadero, 2017). Saudi-specific research confirms this pattern students who perceive their educational experience as aligned with their personal goals are substantially more engaged (Alismail & Almulla, 2025).

Family Obligation and the Limits of Individual-Level Explanations

The work–family obligations finding warrants more attention than it typically receives in the absenteeism literature. Students who miss class to care for family members aren't making an education-versus-laziness trade-off; they're navigating competing legitimate obligations, often in households where they carry real economic and social function. Female students in particular described household and elder-care responsibilities that don't appear in any standard attendance-improvement framework.

This matters for policy design. An intervention aimed at increasing motivation will do precisely nothing for a student who misses Tuesday's nine o'clock because she is covering for a sick family member. Institutional flexibility around scheduling, assessment deadlines, and asynchronous course access is the relevant lever not motivational programming.

Social Media: Not the Problem and Not the Solution

The social media finding will likely attract the interpretation that students need better digital discipline. That reading is not supported by what students actually said. They are already managing social media; many of them are doing so thoughtfully and with a clear sense of how it competes with their academic focus. The structural nature of digital distraction the design logic governing attention-economy platforms means that individual-level interventions have inherently limited reach. Course design strategies that build structured engagement during contact time and make distraction costly are more likely to work than lectures about willpower.

Authority, Legitimacy, and the Case for Transparent Justification

The fifth theme students challenging mandated attendance they can see no good reason for while voluntarily committing to courses they find valuable is perhaps the most actionable finding in this study. It suggests the issue is not that students won't show up; it's that many are applying a predictably rational test to their attendance decisions, and too many courses don't pass it. The only genuine enforcement is more courses that pass the test.

That means something specific: lecture-centric sessions that primarily offer information students can find elsewhere need either to be reimagined or acknowledged for their substitutability and accommodated in flexible policy. This does not apply to interactive seminars, problem-based sessions, clinical practice, or group work well-run versions of these get attended voluntarily when students understand what they're worth.

Technology Integration and Institutional Lag

The wider implication of these findings is that Saudi universities are operating at an institutional lag relative to the technological reality their students inhabit. AI has evolved faster than policy, social media is a settled feature of daily life, and student expectations around learner autonomy have shifted in ways that predate recent technology. Institutions that respond reactively tightening attendance enforcement, implementing AI prohibition policies, running digital wellness campaigns will spend considerable effort achieving minimal results. The institutions that navigate this period well will be those that treat it as a genuine design challenge: what should classrooms now be for, if they're no longer the fastest path to information?

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Reconstruct the classroom around irreplaceable functions. If students are correct that AI can replace information-delivery lectures and the evidence suggests they are at least partially correct institutions need to stop competing with AI on its own terms and instead structure classroom time around what AI cannot do: sustained Socratic dialogue, mentored professional skill development, negotiation of contested ideas in real time, construction of academic identity and community.

Make attendance policy a function of pedagogy, not tradition. Mandatory requirements should apply only to sessions where in-person engagement achieves something that cannot happen outside the room. For information-delivery lectures where material is recorded and AI support is available, flexible attendance with accountability through assessment is both more honest about pedagogical reality and more likely to build the trust that produces voluntary engagement.

Be proactive with AI rather than reactive. Institutions need clear, pedagogically grounded frameworks for how AI tools integrate with learning design rather than allowing adoption to occur invisibly and unguided. Faculty development in AI-integrated pedagogy is no longer optional. Sobaih et al. (2024) document the scale of current disparities between student AI use and institutional readiness in Saudi universities; closing that gap is a practical priority.

Establish structural support for students managing multiple obligations. Flexible scheduling, asynchronous course access, and practical support for students with significant family or work responsibilities would address a portion of absenteeism that has nothing to do with motivation. Female students in particular need gender-conscious institutional support that acknowledges the disproportionate non-academic burdens they carry.

Make belonging the priority, not compliance. Research consistently shows that students who feel genuinely integrated who have relationships with faculty and who experience their institution as invested in them maintain engagement even when alternatives exist (Aljendan, 2025). This requires treating belonging as a deliberate institutional goal rather than assuming it will emerge organically from other activities.

Limitations and Future Directions

The cross-sectional design means we cannot make strong causal claims from the regression results; the model identifies associations, not mechanisms, and longitudinal work following students across academic years would substantially strengthen any theoretical account. Reliance on self-reported attendance is a second limitation institutional records would provide a more objective baseline and allow exploration of how self-perception diverges from actual behaviour. The sample of 87 survey respondents and 15 interview participants across three universities is adequate for this level of analysis but limits confident generalisation to other institutional types, disciplines, or geographic regions within Saudi Arabia.

Future research should explore: how these relationships vary across public versus private universities and across disciplinary contexts; how gender and socioeconomic status moderate the effects of AI reliance; what the longitudinal consequences of strategic absenteeism are for degree completion and graduate outcomes; and what specific pedagogical and institutional design changes actually move the needle on attendance in a context where the traditional rationale for mandatory participation is under real pressure.

CONCLUSION

The students in this study are not disengaged. They are making rational decisions in a technological and social environment that has evolved more rapidly than the institutions they attend. They have access to AI tools that, for certain purposes, respond faster and more effectively than a lecture. They exist within social platforms that foster real community alongside real distraction. They carry family responsibilities that are culturally legitimate and personally non-negotiable. And they are at a developmental stage where the demand for autonomy is not a deficit trait but an adaptive and well-established feature of adult learning.

What this means for Saudi higher education is not that attendance should be abandoned as a goal, but that the rationale for requiring it must be rebuilt. Attendance mandates designed for a pre-digital, pre-AI environment will not produce the engagement they assume in a student population that can weigh the value of showing up and has good reasons, some of the time, to decide it simply isn't worth it. The institutions that solve for making in-person worthwhile through genuinely irreplaceable classroom moments, transparent and justified policy, and honest accounting of the structural conditions shaping their students' lives will not need to mandate attendance particularly hard. The others will continue to wage a battle that the technology has already made unwinnable.

Saudi universities have both the cultural resources and the institutional ambition, through Vision 2030, to build higher education that is genuinely responsive to this moment. The challenge is translating pledges about technology integration and student-centred learning into design decisions that actually reflect what we know about why students do or don't show up.

REFERENCES

- Alenezi, A. (2023). Personalized learning strategies in higher education in Saudi Arabia: Identifying common approaches and conditions for effective implementation. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 12(4), 13.

- Alismail, A. M., & Almulla, M. O. (2025). Exploring the interplay between achievement motivation, students' satisfaction with their major, and successful intelligence in supporting the sustainability of university education in Saudi Arabia. *BMC Psychology*, 13, 835. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-00835-5>
- Aljendan, A. Y. (2025). Fostering student academic integration through institutional leadership in Saudi higher education. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 15(3), 5555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2025.5555>
- Almassaad, A., Alajlan, H. A., & Alebaikan, R. (2024). Student perceptions of generative artificial intelligence: Investigating utilization, benefits, and challenges in higher education. *Systems*, 12(10), 385. <https://doi.org/10.3390/systems12100385>
- Al-Zahrani, A. M., & Alasmari, T. M. (2024). Exploring the impact of artificial intelligence on higher education: The dynamics of ethical, social, and educational implications. *Palgrave Communications*, 10, 432. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-04432-y>
- Bilderback, M. E., & Kilpatrick, S. D. (2025). Generation Z as learners: Challenges and opportunities. *Contemporary Education Review*, 28(2), 145–162.
- Biswas, S., & Biswas, S. (2025). Digital intoxication and social conduct: Examining problematic social media use among adolescents. *Journal of Digital Behavior Research*, 15(1), 78–95.
- Bozkurt, A., Jung, I., Xiao, J., et al. (2020). A global outlook to the interruption of education due to COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 23(2), 1–34.
- Buzzetto-More, N. A., Swarts, R., & Dulaney, R. (2021). Generation Z and social media: Navigating digital identities and civic engagement. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 234–247. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i2.3737>
- Crompton, H., & Burke, D. (2023). Artificial intelligence in higher education: The state of the field. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 20(1), 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-023-00392-8>
- Duffett, R. G. (2017). Influence of social media marketing communications on young consumers' attitudes. *Young Consumers*, 18(1), 19–39. <https://doi.org/10.1108/YC-07-2016-00622>
- Huma, A., Aslam, S., Saleem, A., & Parveen, K. (2021). The challenges of online teaching in COVID-19 pandemic: A case study of public universities in Karachi, Pakistan. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, 4(1), 1–15.
- Kasneci, E., Seßler, K., Küchemann, S., et al. (2023). ChatGPT for good? On opportunities and challenges of large language models for education. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 103, 102274. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2023.102274>
- Khlaif, Z. N., Ayyoub, A., Hamamra, B., et al. (2024). University teachers' views on the adoption and integration of generative AI tools for student assessment in higher education. *Education Sciences*, 14(10), 1090. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14101090>
- Kumar, S. (2025). Active learning methodologies for Generation Z learners: A comprehensive review. *Contemporary Pedagogical Research*, 18(4), 289–310.
- Panadero, E. (2017). A review of self-regulated learning: Six models and four directions for research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 422. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00422>
- Piglionico, N., & Lo Presti, G. (2025). Generation Z in educational contexts: Learning preferences, technological integration, and pedagogical innovation. *European Journal of Education Research*, 22(1), 45–68.
- Rahmani, A. M., Groot, W., & Rahmani, H. (2024). Dropout in online higher education: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 21, 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-024-00430-3>
- Rasul, T., Nair, S., Kalendra, D. R., et al. (2023). The role of ChatGPT in higher education: Benefits, challenges, and future research directions. *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching*, 6(1), 29. <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2023.6.1.29>
- Salem, M. A., Alsayed, W. H., & Elshaer, I. (2022). Before and amid COVID-19 pandemic, self-perception of digital skills in Saudi Arabia higher education: A longitudinal study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(16), 9886. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19169886>
- Sharma, R., & Singh, G. (2025). Technostress and student engagement in higher education: The role of digital wellness. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 52(2), 201–223.
- Sobaih, A. E. E., Elshaer, I. A., & Hasanein, A. M. (2024). Examining students' acceptance and use of ChatGPT in Saudi Arabian higher education. *European Journal of Interactive Humanities and Pedagogy*, 14(3), 47. <https://doi.org/10.21125/inted.2024.47>
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Wong, W. H., & Chapman, E. (2022). Student satisfaction and interaction in higher education. *Higher Education*, 84(1), 117–137. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00764-5>

Yan, L., Sha, L., Zhao, L., et al. (2023). Practical and ethical challenges of large language models in education: A systematic scoping review. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 54(7), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13300>