Factors Influencing Instagram Use among University Students in Tanzania: Evidence from Mbeya City Council

Faraja Philo Nyoni, Noel Julius Ntawigaya

Teofilo Kisanji University

DOI: https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1309000279

Received: 03 October 2026; Accepted: 08 October 2026; Published: 25 October 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examined the factors shaping Instagram use among university students in Mbeya City Council, Tanzania. Guided by Social Learning Theory, it used a pragmatist paradigm and a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. We collected quantitative data through an online five-point Likert-scale questionnaire completed by 395 students at Teofilo Kisanji University and Mbeya University of Science and Technology. We gathered qualitative insights through interviews with two Deans of Students and information provided by 16 lecturers. We analysed quantitative data using descriptive statistics and qualitative data thematically. The findings show that personal, social, informational, and platform- related factors shaped Instagram use. Personal interest appeared to influence initial adoption more than direct peer pressure: 60.0. 0% of students disagreed that they used Instagram because their classmates did. However, 45. 6% said they used the platform to keep up with peer trends. Entertainment was a prominent motive (54. 7%), while students also cited information seeking and academic engagement. In addition, 56. 2% reported following educational pages, and 51. 4% reported accessing or sharing learning materials. Platform features, such as Reels and Stories, along with the ease of sharing information, also encouraged use. These findings suggest that Instagram engagement reflects a combination of individual preferences, social influences, and platform affordances, rather than one dominant factor. The study provides context- specific evidence on Instagram use in Tanzanian higher education, an area that remains underexplored in Mbeya. It recommends that universities engage purposefully with the platform for academic purposes while strengthening students' information literacy and digital well- being. Because the study was cross-sectional, relied on self-reported data, and was conducted in an urban setting at two universities, its findings should be interpreted cautiously and not generalised to all Tanzanian university students. Further multi- site research could examine usage intensity, digital access, and the relationships between different motives and educational outcomes.

Keywords: Instagram, university students, social media use, Social Learning Theory.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Social media plays an important role in university students' everyday lives, influencing how they communicate, find information, maintain relationships and learn informally. Instagram is especially relevant: its visual content, short-form videos, Stories and interactive features support entertainment, information sharing and educational communication. However, its educational value depends in part on students' reasons for using it and how they integrate it into their academic routines. Intentional use may provide access to learning resources and opportunities for interaction, while excessive or poorly regulated use may take time away from studying and undermine concentration (Abbas et al., 2019; Junco, 2012; Iwamoto & Chun, 2020). Researchers should therefore avoid treating Instagram as inherently beneficial or harmful and instead examine what motivates students to use it in their specific educational contexts.

International research highlights this dual potential. Studies show that social media can support communication, collaboration, and access to educational resources, including when educators use Instagram to communicate instructionally and share content (Carpenter et al., 2020; Javier et al., 2024). In contrast, research has associated social media engagement with distraction, social comparison, and concerns about student well-being, especially when online activities compete with academic responsibilities (Drouin et al., 2018; Junco, 2012; Woods &

Scott, 2016). These findings suggest that understanding students' reasons for using social media is an important first step in determining how institutions can encourage purposeful engagement. However, findings from other countries may not fully explain Instagram use in Tanzania, where access conditions, institutional practices, and students' experiences may differ.

Across Africa, including East Africa, social media has drawn attention as a communication and learning resource. However, its educational implications depend on how students use it and the conditions under which they access it. For example, research in Kenya has examined the relationship between social media use and students' academic performance (Kamaku & Mberia, 2014). This evidence highlights the issue's relevance to African higher education but does not identify the factors that motivate Tanzanian university students to use Instagram. Differences in national contexts and platform-specific features therefore make context-sensitive research necessary.

In Tanzania, expanding digital connectivity has increased social media's potential to shape students' educational and social experiences. DataReportal estimated that Instagram's advertising tools indicated a potential audience of 4.10 million users in late 2025, equivalent to 5.8% of the country's total population. These figures estimate advertising reach, not verified counts of active users, and should therefore be interpreted cautiously (DataReportal, 2026). Existing studies in Tanzania have examined social media use for communication and learning, along with concerns about distraction and academic practices (Kayuni, 2023; Mbegani et al., 2022; Shao & Seif, 2014). Research on educational technology also highlights contextual factors such as internet connectivity, access to devices, and differences in digital competence (Butcher et al., 2024; Patrobas et al., 2023). However, much of this research considers social media or digital technology broadly rather than the specific motivations behind university students' use of Instagram.

This distinction matters because students may use Instagram for several overlapping reasons, including entertainment, keeping up with peers, seeking information, following educational content, and sharing learning materials. The relative importance of these motivations cannot be inferred from national connectivity statistics or studies of other platforms. Moreover, the literature reviewed for this study offers limited evidence specific to university students in Mbeya City Council. Without context-specific evidence, higher learning institutions have little empirical basis for understanding students' motivations or identifying practical ways to encourage educationally purposeful Instagram use. This study addresses that gap by examining the factors influencing Instagram use among students at selected higher learning institutions in Mbeya City Council, Tanzania. It focuses on the motivations and circumstances associated with platform use rather than establishing a causal effect of Instagram on academic performance.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT), which explains how people acquire and maintain behaviours by observing others, interpreting experiences, and responding to social and environmental influences. SLT is relevant to Instagram use because students are constantly exposed to content from peers, educators, public figures, and other users. Through these interactions, they may learn new practices, develop interests, seek social approval, or adopt particular patterns of online engagement. SLT therefore provides a useful framework for examining the personal, social, and platform-related factors associated with students' Instagram use. A central concept in the theory is observational learning, whereby people may acquire behaviours by observing models and the consequences of their actions. On Instagram, students may see classmates sharing information, educators posting educational content, and influencers promoting entertainment or lifestyle practices. This exposure may encourage students to follow similar accounts, share content, or join online trends. However, observation does not necessarily lead to imitation; students may interpret the same content differently according to their interests, experiences, and perceived benefits.

The theory also emphasises reinforcement and reciprocal interaction among individuals, their behaviour and their environment. On Instagram, positive social responses, entertainment, useful information and opportunities to interact may encourage continued use. Peer expectations and the desire to keep up with social trends may also drive engagement. At the same time, features such as Reels, Stories and content sharing create an environment in which these behaviours can be repeated and reinforced. Students' Instagram use can therefore

be understood as shaped by the interplay of personal motivations, social experiences and platform characteristics. Social Learning Theory also distinguishes between observing content and actively reproducing behaviour. For example, one student may follow educational pages and view learning materials without shari-

ng them or discussing them with classmates, while another may use the same platform to exchange academic information and communicate with peers. This distinction is relevant to the present study because following educational content and accessing or sharing learning materials may involve less active participation than academic communication. The theory therefore helps explain the different ways students engage with Instagram, rather than treating platform use as a single, uniform behaviour.

Despite its relevance, Social Learning Theory has limitations in the context of contemporary social media. It does not fully account for algorithmically recommended content, differences in internet access, data affordability, device availability, or institutional policies. Exposure to similar content also does not necessarily explain differences in students' motivations and patterns of use. The study therefore considers these contextual factors when interpreting the findings, treating them as measured variables only when the data support this. In this study, Social Learning Theory provides a framework for interpreting students' reported motivations for using Instagram, particularly entertainment, social influence, information seeking, academic engagement, and responses to platform features. It helps explain how personal preferences and social experiences may relate to engagement, while recognising that the study's descriptive, cross-sectional data cannot establish causal relationships. The theory therefore guides interpretation of the findings without assuming that observed patterns of use necessarily lead to specific educational or psychological outcomes.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS AND TOOLS

3.1 Research Philosophy, Approach and Design

The study adopted a pragmatist research philosophy, which supports selecting the methods best suited to answering the research question. It used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative evidence on students' reported motivations for using Instagram with qualitative perspectives from university personnel. In a convergent parallel design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed separately, then integrated to identify complementary findings and areas of convergence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Study Area, Population and Sampling

The study was conducted at Teofilo Kisanji University and Mbeya University of Science and Technology, both in Mbeya City Council, Tanzania. The target population included students, lecturers, and Deans of Students. Together, the universities had 17,747 students. Applying Slovin's formula with a 5% margin of error yielded a minimum student sample of approximately 392. In total, the study involved 395 students, 16 lecturers, and two Deans of Students, one from each university. As described in the original research procedures, the study used simple random and purposive sampling. The two Deans of Students were purposively selected because of their institutional responsibilities and knowledge of student affairs. Lecturers contributed additional professional perspectives on students' use of Instagram. Student participation was voluntary, and the questionnaire was distributed online. Therefore, the student findings primarily reflect respondents who could access and complete the online questionnaire and should be interpreted with this potential coverage and self-selection bias in mind.

3.3 Data Collection Tools and Quality Assurance

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire with five-point Likert-scale items, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The items assessed students' perceptions of factors influencing Instagram use and relevant background characteristics. The questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms. The study gathered qualitative data through interviews with the two Deans of Students, and 16 lecturers provided additional institutional perspectives. Fellow experts reviewed the research instruments, and the instruments were piloted before main data collection to improve item clarity, relevance, and suitability. The original study also reports using test–retest procedures and an internal-consistency assessment to evaluate

questionnaire reliability. The authors considered this evidence alongside the limitations of self-reported responses and online participation.

3.4 Data Analysis

The authors analysed quantitative data using descriptive statistics, mainly frequencies and percentages, to summarise students' questionnaire responses. Interview data were analysed thematically to identify recurring views and explanations about students' Instagram use. The study then compared and integrated the two sets of findings using a convergent parallel design. Results are presented in relation to the study's central research question and the main factors identified in the data. As the study used a cross-sectional design and primarily descriptive analysis, the findings describe reported patterns and perceptions rather than establish causal relationships.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study observed the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and responsible handling of participants' information. Responses were used for research purposes, and findings are reported in aggregate or by participant role, where appropriate, to minimise the risk of identifying individuals. Participation was voluntary, and participants could complete the online questionnaire without the researcher present. Any institutional permissions and ethical approvals obtained for the original study should be accurately identified in the final manuscript, in line with the target journal's requirements.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses factors influencing Instagram use among students at selected higher learning institutions in Mbeya City Council, Tanzania. The findings are organised around five themes: social influence and peer pressure; entertainment and personal use; information seeking; academic and educational use; and ease of use and platform features. Each theme combines quantitative findings from the student questionnaire with relevant qualitative evidence from interviews with Deans of Students. The findings are interpreted through Social Learning Theory and compared with relevant empirical literature. The discussion distinguishes between students' reported motives, institutional perspectives, and interpretations that warrant further investigation.

4.1 Social Influence and Peer Pressure

Table 4 shows students' responses on social influence and peer pressure as factors related to Instagram use. SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; N = neutral; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

Table 4: Social Influence and Peer Pressure

Statement	SD, n (%)	D, n (%)	N, n (%)	A, n (%)	SA, n (%)
I use Instagram since most of my classmates and friends are on it.	145 (36.7)	92 (23.3)	79 (20.0)	47 (11.9)	32 (8.1)
I feel compelled to keep up with trends and updates my peers share.	82 (20.8)	45 (11.4)	88 (22.3)	131 (33.2)	49 (12.4)
Using Instagram helps me feel like I belong with my peers.	79 (20.0)	69 (17.5)	99 (25.1)	94 (23.8)	54 (13.7)

Source: Field data, 2026.

The findings show that 60.0% of respondents disagreed that they used Instagram because most of their classmates or friends did, while 20.0% agreed. This suggests that, among the surveyed students, peer presence was not the primary self-reported reason for using the platform. However, 45.6% agreed that they felt a need to keep up with trends and updates shared by peers. Responses on whether Instagram helped students fit in with their peer groups were more evenly split: 37.5% agreed, 37.5% disagreed, and 25.1% were neutral. The interview evidence offers a useful institutional perspective on these patterns. A Dean of Students at University

A described Instagram as an important platform for campus engagement, scholarly collaboration, mental respite, visual event notifications and peer interaction (Dean of Students, University A, 15 July 2026). This account complements the questionnaire finding that peer-related trends matter to a substantial proportion of students, even though most respondents did not identify classmates' presence as their main reason for using Instagram. It suggests the platform serves several social and campus-related functions, and peer presence is not necessarily the primary reason students use it.

These findings align with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which explains how people learn and sustain behaviours by observing others and responding to social reinforcement. Students' interest in peer-shared trends may reflect how social observation contributes to their continued engagement with the platform. However, the cross-sectional design cannot establish whether peer influence came before or after individual adoption. As a result, the study cannot conclusively distinguish the factors that prompted students to start using Instagram from those that kept them engaged. The results also suggest that peer influence does not universally explain social media engagement. Masrom et al. (2024) identified social gratification and social presence as factors positively associated with excessive Instagram use. Their findings underscore the relevance of social motives, but address excessive use rather than students' specific reasons for initially adopting the platform. The present findings offer a more nuanced perspective: peer-related trends mattered to some students, but directly imitating classmates was not the dominant self-reported motive in this sample.

4.2 Entertainment and Personal Use

Table 5 summarizes students' responses about entertainment and personal use. SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; N = neutral; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

Table 5: Entertainment and Personal Use

Statement	SD, n (%)	D, n (%)	N, n (%)	A, n (%)	SA, n (%)
I use Instagram mainly for entertainment.	39 (9.9)	46 (11.6)	94 (23.8)	124 (31.4)	92 (23.3)
Instagram helps me relax after studying.	82 (20.8)	45 (11.4)	88 (22.3)	131 (33.2)	49 (12.4)
I use Instagram in my free time.	79 (20.0)	69 (17.5)	99 (25.1)	94 (23.8)	54 (13.7)

Source: Field data, 2026.

Entertainment emerged as a prominent self-reported reason for using Instagram. Overall, 54.7% of respondents agreed that they used the platform mainly for entertainment, while 21.5% disagreed. On whether Instagram helped them relax after studying, 45.6% agreed, 32.2% disagreed, and 22.3% were neutral. Views on using Instagram during free time were similarly divided: 37.5% agreed, 37.5% disagreed, and 25.1% were neutral. The interview evidence offers a qualitative link to the findings on entertainment and relaxation. The Dean of Students' description of Instagram as a source of "mental respite" suggests that an institutional respondent recognised the platform's recreational dimension. This perspective aligns with the 54.7% of students who said they used Instagram mainly for entertainment and the 45.6% who agreed that it helped them relax after studying. However, the interview reflects an institutional interpretation; it does not show that all students find Instagram relaxing or that it improves their well-being.

The findings are consistent with Masrom et al. (2024), who studied 285 university students and found positive relationships between entertainment, escapism, social gratification, and social presence and excessive Instagram use. They also found that excessive use was associated with academic impairment. This comparison is relevant because it suggests entertainment may motivate Instagram use, while excessive engagement may be linked to educational difficulties. However, the present study did not measure time spent using Instagram, excessive use, distraction, or academic performance. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to conclude that entertainment-focused use harmed students' academic outcomes in this sample. Similarly, Dada (2025), in a study of

undergraduate students at Lagos State University, reported that Instagram was more strongly associated with entertainment than academic benefit, compared with YouTube. This supports the view that

students may use different social media platforms for different purposes. Nevertheless, the importance of entertainment in the present study should be interpreted in the context of the participating institutions and not automatically generalised to all Tanzanian university students.

4.3 Information Seeking

Table 6 shows students' responses about using Instagram to obtain information: SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; N = neutral; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

Table 6: Information Seeking

Statement	SD, n (%)	D, n (%)	N, n (%)	A, n (%)	SA, n (%)
I use Instagram to stay informed about university activities.	61 (15.4)	52 (13.2)	79 (20.0)	121 (30.6)	82 (20.8)
Instagram helps me find new information that matches my interests.	41 (10.4)	41 (10.4)	71 (18.0)	140 (35.4)	102 (25.8)
I follow educational and professional content on Instagram.	41 (10.4)	39 (9.9)	99 (25.1)	124 (31.4)	92 (23.3)

Source: Field data, 2026.

The results suggest that information seeking was an important reason respondents used Instagram. Overall, 51.4% agreed that they used the platform to learn about university activities. This rose to 61.2% for discovering information related to their personal interests, while 54.7% agreed that they followed educational or professional content on Instagram. These findings suggest that students use Instagram not only for entertainment but also to discover information and communicate about university life. The Dean of Students' reference to visual event notifications and campus engagement offers a relevant institutional perspective on Instagram's potential for sharing university information. Alongside the questionnaire results, this perspective suggests that students may encounter campus announcements and information relevant to their interests through Instagram. However, the interview does not independently confirm the questionnaire percentages or establish how often students obtain official information through the platform.

Evidence from Tanzania offers a useful comparison. In their study of social networks and students' university choices at St Augustine University of Tanzania, Sojo et al. (2022) found that students used social media to learn about the university and identified Instagram as their preferred platform for university-related information. Although their study examined university choice rather than the broader range of information-seeking purposes considered here, it supports Instagram's relevance as an information channel in Tanzanian higher education. Dada (2025) examined information searching among 521 undergraduate students in Nigeria and found that platform use varied by platform and purpose. YouTube was more strongly associated with academic information and learning, while Instagram and TikTok were more closely associated with entertainment and creativity. By comparison, the present study found that a substantial proportion of respondents used Instagram to discover information and follow educational or professional content. These results suggest that Instagram's informational role may differ across institutions and user groups. The findings also have practical implications for university communication. Institutions could use official Instagram accounts to share verified announcements, event information, and educational opportunities. However, the effectiveness of this communication depends on the content's credibility, accessibility, and accuracy. Because the current study did not assess information-verification skills or the accuracy of information encountered, strengthening information literacy is a practical implication rather than a directly tested finding.

4.4 Academic and Educational Use

Table 7 shows students' responses about Instagram's educational uses. SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; N = neutral; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

Table 7: Academic and Educational Use

Statement	SD, n (%)	D, n (%)	N, n (%)	A, n (%)	SA, n (%)
I use Instagram to discuss schoolwork with my classmates.	78 (19.7)	72 (18.2)	82 (20.8)	111 (28.1)	52 (13.2)
I follow academic and educational pages on Instagram.	61 (15.4)	41 (10.4)	71 (18.0)	121 (30.6)	101 (25.6)
I use Instagram to access or share learning materials.	58 (14.7)	55 (13.9)	79 (20.0)	120 (30.4)	83 (21.0)

Source: Field data, 2026.

The findings indicate that respondents reported several educational uses of Instagram, although agreement varied across activities. About 56.2% agreed that they followed academic or educational pages, while 51.4% agreed that they used Instagram to access or share learning materials. By comparison, 41.3% agreed that they used the platform to discuss academic matters with classmates. Respondents therefore reported following educational pages more often than communicating directly with peers about academic matters. Qualitative evidence provides a relevant institutional perspective. The Dean of Students described Instagram as a platform for "scholarly collaboration", suggesting that it was viewed as having potential beyond entertainment and social interaction. This perspective complements the questionnaire findings that students followed educational pages and accessed or shared learning materials. However, the gap between following educational content and discussing academic matters with classmates suggests that exposure to academic material should not automatically be interpreted as active collaboration. The interview does not establish that formal scholarly collaboration was routinely conducted through Instagram at either university.

Tess (2013), reviewing social media use in higher education, noted that social media can create opportunities for communication, collaboration, and learning. However, evidence of its educational effectiveness has often relied on self-reported data and other limited measures. This matters for the present findings: students reported using Instagram for academic purposes, but the study did not directly assess learning gains or academic achievement. The findings therefore demonstrate reported educational engagement, not proven educational effectiveness. Erarslan (2019) studied Instagram as an educational platform for English as a Foreign Language learners, focusing on a specific learning purpose. This offers a useful comparison, as a platform's educational value may depend on how it is integrated into learning activities, rather than on platform use alone.

In the current study, students followed educational pages more often than they engaged in academic communication. This suggests that lecturers could create structured activities to encourage discussion, feedback, and collaborative learning. However, further research is needed to establish whether these activities improve educational outcomes. The results should also be considered alongside Masrom et al. (2024), who found that excessive Instagram use was associated with academic impairment. Their findings caution against assuming that all forms of Instagram engagement benefit learning. Because the present study did not measure excessive use or academic performance, it cannot establish whether reported educational uses outweighed potential distraction. Instead, it shows that students reported both academic and non-academic reasons for using the platform.

4.5 Ease of Use and Platform Features

Table 8 presents students' responses on ease of use and Instagram's platform features. SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; N = neutral; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

Table 8: Ease of Use and Platform Features

Statement	SD, n (%)	D, n (%)	N, n (%)	A, n (%)	SA, n (%)
I find Instagram easy to use.	31 (7.8)	59 (14.9)	119 (30.1)	121 (30.6)	65 (16.5)
Reels and Stories motivate me to use the platform.	42 (10.6)	63 (15.9)	97 (24.6)	126 (31.9)	67 (17.0)
Instagram makes it easy to share information with fellow students.	39 (9.9)	51 (12.9)	99 (25.1)	127 (32.2)	79 (20.0)

Source: Field data, 2026.

The results show that 47.1% of respondents found Instagram easy to use, while 30.1% were neutral. Overall, 48.9% agreed that Reels and Stories encouraged them to use the platform, and 52.2% said Instagram made it easy to share information with other students. These findings suggest that Instagram's visual and information-sharing features were relevant to students' reported engagement, although views on ease of use were less conclusive. The Dean's reference to visual event notifications supports this finding by highlighting the perceived value of visual communication for campus engagement. The questionnaire also shows that students valued the ease of sharing information. Taken together, the two sources suggest that Instagram's visual and interactive features may provide useful ways to circulate information and engage students with campus-related content. However, the interview does not establish that the Dean specifically used Reels or Stories, or that these features directly influenced students' behaviour.

Erarslan (2019) provides a relevant comparison, examining Instagram's educational use and platform affordances. More broadly, Tess (2013) argues that social media features can support educational communication, but their educational value depends on purposeful integration and evidence of outcomes. The present results support considering Instagram's features as one explanation for reported use, but they do not establish that specific features caused higher engagement or improved learning. The difference between agreement that Instagram is easy to use and agreement that Reels and Stories encourage use is also noteworthy. While 47.1% found Instagram easy to use, 48.9% said Reels and Stories encouraged them to use it. This modest difference should not be overstated, but it suggests that the appeal of specific features may warrant examination separately from general usability. The relatively high neutral response on ease of use (30.1%) also indicates that students did not express a uniformly positive view of usability. Because this study did not directly measure digital skills, internet connectivity, device access, or data affordability, these factors cannot be presented as established explanations for the responses.

4.6 Integrated Discussion

Taken together, the findings suggest that students at the two participating universities used Instagram for a mix of personal, social, informational and platform-related reasons. Entertainment was a prominent reported motive, while information seeking and educational engagement were also common. Students more often reported following academic pages and accessing or sharing learning materials than communicating with classmates about academic matters. Peer-shared trends influenced some students, although most respondents did not identify classmates as their main reason for using the platform. The Dean of Students' interview provides institutional context for these patterns, highlighting campus engagement, visual event notifications, peer interaction, scholarly collaboration and mental respite as perceived functions of Instagram. This qualitative perspective complements the questionnaire results but does not independently confirm the reported percentages. The quantitative data describe students' self-reported motives, whereas the interview reflects an institutional respondent's perspective on the platform's role.

The findings broadly align with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory. Through Instagram, students may encounter peers' activities, institutional information, educational content, and entertainment, creating opportunities for observation and social interaction. However, the study did not directly measure observational learning, reinforcement, or behavioural change. The theory therefore serves as an interpretive framework rather than a mechanism empirically tested by the present data. The findings also align with literature showing that

users' purposes shape social media use. Sojo et al. (2022) demonstrate Instagram's relevance for university-related information in Tanzania, while Masrom et al. (2024) show that entertainment and social gratification can be associated with excessive use and academic impairment. Dada (2025) similarly reports differences in how students use Instagram and other platforms for entertainment, creativity, and academic information. Together, these studies suggest that social media's educational significance cannot be

inferred from frequency of use or platform popularity alone.

A key implication is the distinction between accessing educational content and actively engaging in academic activities. While 56.2% of respondents followed academic or educational pages, only 41.3% used Instagram to discuss academic matters with classmates, suggesting that students reported different forms of educational engagement. Following educational content may provide useful information, but it does not necessarily involve discussion, collaboration, or evidence of learning. Higher learning institutions could therefore consider structured, purposeful uses of Instagram while remaining attentive to information quality, privacy, and digital well-being. Generally, the study offers a descriptive account of the factors students identified as relevant to Instagram use at two urban higher learning institutions in Mbeya City Council. It does not establish causal relationships between these factors and Instagram use or demonstrate effects on academic performance. Therefore, the findings should be understood as evidence of students' reported motives and perceived uses, not proof of educational outcomes.

4.7 Limitations of the Findings

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the quantitative data capture students' self-reported perceptions at a single point in time; they do not measure actual usage duration, logged platform activity, or changes in behaviour over time. Second, the qualitative component comprised interviews with two Deans of Students. While these interviews offer an institutional perspective, they cannot be assumed to represent the views of all students or staff. Although the study collected information from 16 lecturers, the reported distribution of their years of experience does not, on its own, demonstrate differences in Instagram use or educational practices. Such claims would require direct evidence from relevant interview responses, questionnaire items, or observation records. Similarly, observation findings should be reported only when documented records support the themes discussed. Finally, the study did not directly measure academic performance, excessive use, data costs, connectivity, device access, or digital skills. Therefore, its findings cannot establish whether Instagram use improved or undermined students' academic achievement. Further research across multiple institutions, with more extensive qualitative interviews, documented observation, and direct measures of platform use and learning outcomes, would provide a stronger basis for examining these relationships.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that a range of informational, educational, recreational, interpersonal, and platform-related factors shape Instagram use among students at selected higher learning institutions in Mbeya City Council, Tanzania. The findings challenge the assumption that students use Instagram solely for entertainment or social interaction. Students also use the platform to discover educational content, share learning materials, and access information relevant to university life. The coexistence of educational and recreational motives highlights the need to understand Instagram use in light of students' varied needs and purposes, rather than categorising the platform as inherently beneficial or detrimental to higher education. The study therefore finds that Instagram's educational value depends not only on students' access to the platform, but also on how they engage with its content and how higher learning institutions support its purposeful use. Although Instagram can complement academic communication and information sharing, the findings do not demonstrate that its use directly improves academic performance. Its contribution to higher education should therefore be understood in terms of its potential to support access to information, educational engagement, and communication, while recognising the importance of responsible and purposeful use. The study's central implication is that higher learning institutions

should adopt a balanced approach: build on Instagram's communication and educational potential while acknowledging its recreational uses and the need to keep students focused on their academic responsibilities.

5.2 Recommendations

Drawing on the study's findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are presented:

i. University management and relevant administrative units should use official Instagram accounts, when appropriate, to share accurate, timely information about academic activities, university events, and other matters affecting students' university experience.

ii. Academic staff should direct students to credible educational and professional content and, where appropriate, use the platform to share supplementary learning materials and information that supports formal teaching and learning.

iii. Students should be encouraged to manage their time on the platform, prioritise academic responsibilities, evaluate the credibility of online information, and distinguish educational activities from recreational browsing.

iv. Institutions should consider using Instagram features such as Stories and Reels to share relevant information in engaging ways, while maintaining alternative channels so students who don't use Instagram can still access essential university announcements.

v. Student-support units and academic departments should guide students in verifying information, protecting their privacy, interacting respectfully online, and participating responsibly in digital spaces. This guidance can help students use Instagram more effectively for both educational and personal purposes.

REFERENCES

1. Abbas, J., Aman, J., Nurunnabi, M., & Bano, S. (2019). The effects of social media on college students' cognitive grit and academic performance: Positives and negatives of online social networks. *Access*, 7, 35773–35787.
2. Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice-Hall.
3. Butcher, N., Moore, A., & Hoosen, S. (2024). *Digital transformation in higher education: Access, connectivity, and competence*. OER Africa.
4. Carpenter, J. P., Morrison, S. A., Craft, M., & Lee, M. (2020). How and why are educators using Instagram? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 96, Article 103149.
5. Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
6. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
7. Dada, O. (2025). Social media preferences among undergraduates: A comparative study of YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok for educational and entertainment purposes. *Journal of Digital Literacy in Higher Education*, 12(1), 45–59.
8. DataReportal. (2026). *Digital 2026: Tanzania*.
9. Drouin, M., Coupe, T., & Temple, J. R. (2018). Is text messaging ruining students' grammar Skills? A study of university students. *Reading and Writing*, 31(7), 1599–1611.
10. Erarslan, A. (2019). Instagram as an education platform for EFL learners. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 18(3), 54–69.
11. Iwamoto, D. H., & Chun, H. (2020). The emotional evolution of social media use among university students: Navigating academics and engagement. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 110, Article 106380.
12. Javier, R., Santos, M., & Cruz, T. (2024). Instructional communication through visual social media: Engaging the digital native generation. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 52(3), 312–330.

13. Junco, R. (2012). Too much face and not enough books: The relationship between multiple academic outcomes and Facebook use. *Computers & Education*, 58(1), 187–198.
14. Kamaku, P. W., & Mberia, H. (2014). The relationship between social media use and academic performance among university students in Kenya. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 4(9), 234–246.
15. Kayuni, J. (2023). Social media usage patterns and academic focus among university students in urban Tanzania. *Tanzania Journal of Development Studies*, 21(2), 89–104.
16. Masrom, M., Zainon, O., & Budi, S. (2024). Social gratification, entertainment, and the risk of academic impairment: Assessing excessive Instagram use among university students. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 19(1), 112–128.
17. Mbegani, F., Ndibalema, P., & Msanjila, S. (2022). Digital distractions or learning tools?
18. Perspectives on social media in Tanzanian higher learning institutions. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Sciences*, 11(1), 67–83.
19. Patrobas, M., Luhanga, E., & Mndeme, M. (2023). Assessing internet connectivity and digital competence gaps in Tanzanian higher education. *East African Journal of Education and Technology*, 6(2), 145–160.
20. Shao, M., & Seif, S. (2014). The impact of social networks on the academic practices of higher learning students in Tanzania. *International Journal of Computing and ICT Research*, 8(1), 34–45.
21. Sojo, A., Mussa, M., & Robert, S. (2022). Social networks and institutional choice: Evaluating the role of Instagram in university recruitment at St. Augustine University of Tanzania. *Tanzania Journal of Sociology*, 8(3), 201–218.
22. Tess, P. A. (2013). The role of social media in higher education classes: A real phenomenon or merely a passing fad? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(5), A60–A68.
23. Woods, H. C., & Scott, H. (2016). #Sleepyteens: Social media use in adolescence is associated with poor sleep quality, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. *Journal of Adolescence*, 51, 41–49.