

# Original Research Article

## The Applicability of Social Media Platforms for Academic Purposes: A Case of Selected Higher Learning Institutions in Tanzania

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The increasing use of social media in academic settings has raised questions about its potential to support student learning. Recent studies examined the impact and usage of social media platforms in other parts of the world, but Sub-Saharan Africa remains unattended. This study examines the applicability of social media platforms for academic purposes in colleges and tertiary institutes in Tanzania.

**Aim:** To investigate the use of social media platforms for academic purposes. The study aims to identify frequent social media platforms used for academic purposes, identify male-female statistical usage distribution, and identify the applicability of social media platforms for academic purposes.

**Study design:** The study employed a cross-sectional approach known for efficiency, wide application, and a snapshot of the population, as well as a quantitative approach to provide more reliable and generalizable results.

**Place and Duration of Study:** The study was conducted across six (6) regions in Tanzania: Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, Mbeya, Kilimanjaro, Mwanza, and Singida between July and December 2023.

**Methodology:** The study involved 318 college students, including undergraduate, diploma, and technician certificate students. It used purposeful sampling among college students and both offline and online questionnaires, with a response rate of 90%. Data were analyzed using SPSS 25, and Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to determine the reliability and internal consistency of the items. The significance of the parameter difference in this study was analyzed using Analysis of Variance. A multiple linear regression model was used to assess the applicability of social media platforms for academic purposes in higher learning institutions.

**Results:** The study found that WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram are the most commonly used social media platforms for academic purposes. A multiple linear regression model revealed that social media usage explains 57.9% of the variance in students' academic matters, with a statistically positive significance ( $p < 0.005$ ).

**Conclusion:** The study suggests that social media platforms can effectively support student learning, particularly in sharing assignments, handouts, and homework. It implores that social media platforms can be blended with conventional learning approaches to enhance student participation during their learning trajectory.

*Keywords: Social media; Internet; Academic purposes; Higher learning; Tanzania.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, the Internet has evolved from connecting computer networks and became a means of connecting people across the globe. Similarly, it can be seen that the Internet is more than just a means of searching for information. The Internet can connect individuals for business, making new friends, bringing back old and long-lost

relatives, or both. A current example of communication technologies facilitated by the Internet and commonly used by students is social media, also known as social networking sites (Mushtaq & Benraghda, 2018).

Carr & Hayes, (2015) define social media as “*Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.*” Over the past few years, the growth of social media has changed how the Internet is experienced by most end users (Raut & Patil, 2016). It is documented that, the influence of social networking is vital in every aspect of our lives including political, economic, and educational (Ahmed et al., 2016).

By June 2023, Tanzania is estimated to have 34 million Internet users (TCRA, 2023). Tanzania was inhabited by 4.9 million social media users, making up 7.4% of the population by January 2023 (Kemp, 2023). A report by the Tanzania Communication Regulatory Authority (TCRA) of 2023 indicated the top 5 Internet services with the most bandwidth usage in gigabytes (GB) as YouTube (50.18 million), Facebook (49.49 million), TikTok (million 33.57), WhatsApp (33.30 million), and Twitter (14.98 million). This entails that the top 5 most used platforms in Tanzania are YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Twitter. However, specific usage for academic purposes, especially among higher-learning students, is still unknown.

Today, social media usage among the youth is growing exponentially and becoming more popular among students (Jamil et al., 2020). Students revealed that social media improves study quality, helps in doing a project with online group discussion, helps to release stress, to meet new friends, improves technological skills, interacts with peers, shares ideas, study material, gets the latest news, gets relief from academic stress, for long-distance communication and to build skills (Siddhartha et al., 2020). Recently, there has been a rapid growth of social media sites and their prevalence in the lives of university students, which changed their communication patterns (Butt, 2020). The growing number of such sites and the increasing demand for social media creates a need to examine the purposes of social media site usage among students (Kolhar et al., 2021).

Alwagait et al., (2015) explored the impact of using social media on students' academic performance. The study surveyed university students in Saudi Arabia and explored the most popular social networking among students. Results from this study indicated no direct relationship between social media usage and students' academic performance. Time management is the leading factor that accounts for the negative performance of students, in addition to social media usage (Alwagait et al., 2015). (Ali et al., 2017) explored the latest advancements in social media usage for academic purposes and the phenomenon of distractions. The study established the importance of social media platforms for academic purposes and the perceptions of distractions. Abdullahi et al., (2019) evaluated the positive and negative effects of social media on the academic performances of undergraduate students. The study found that using social media can negatively affect students' performance. The study suggests that students must be advised of the dangers of addiction to social networking, and sites that can add value to academic work and research should be introduced.

Sivakumar, (2020) found that students who utilize WhatsApp demonstrate higher academic performance than their counterparts. Furthermore, the study concluded that there is no discernible disparity between the extent of usage of various social media platforms and students' academic performance. However, it is worth noting that the study did not specifically identify which social media platforms are predominantly utilized by students for academic purposes. According to Siddhartha et al., (2020), students utilize social media for various purposes, such as sharing resources and gaining access to information. Furthermore, the study reveals that students believe they can acquire more excellent knowledge and access learning resources through social media. Notably, Siddhartha et al., (2020) find that YouTube is the most commonly used social media platform for obtaining information. YouTube has even established a specialized channel called Teacher Tube, which allows teachers to upload instructional materials and offers valuable resources for students. Although evidence exists in the field of education regarding the benefits of social media for students, there remains a dearth of research specifically investigating students' preferred social media platforms.

Chukwuere, (2021) conducted a study involving 300 undergraduate first-year students and found that about 61.2% (199 students) believe that social media platforms positively impact their academic performance. Participants also suggested that social media platforms improve learning, participation, collaboration, and student engagement. In addition to this, social media platforms also facilitate communication between students and lecturers. Al Sawy & Al-Madani, (2021) assessed social media's impact on university students' academic achievement. Results from the study revealed that a wide range of students at the university are highly interested in using social media for academic achievement and communicating with faculty members. Similarly, the study concluded with a proposal to increase the activation of social media as an essential tool for improving the rate of academic achievement among university students.

Bamba et al., (2022) investigated students' usage of social networks. The study involved 450 students from Abidjan, and more than 64% of the respondents had ages ranging from 10 to 25 years. Results of this study show that half of the students work on social network platforms through mobile phones and devices, and WhatsApp is a leading platform. Furthermore, almost half of the students spend 2-5 hours online, and more than one-third spend more than 5 hours daily searching for reference materials on YouTube.

However, research on the impacts or application of social media platforms on the academic performance of higher-learning students in Sub-Saharan African countries is still limited. Therefore, this study examines the applicability of social media usage for students' academic purposes. The study was conducted among students of selected higher learning institutions in Tanzania. Results can be used as a benchmark for further assessments of the impact of social media usage among developing countries and the globe. More specifically, we sought to answer the following questions:

1. What social media platforms do higher learning students most use for academic purposes?
2. What is the male-female statistics contribution when using social media platforms for academic purposes?
3. Are social media platforms applicable to students' academic purposes?

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: The next section clarifies the materials and methods. The results of this research are presented in the subsequent section, followed by a discussion of their implications in the discussion section. Finally, the last conclusion section gives conclusive remarks and recommendations for future works.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

### 2.1 Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional design to provide a snapshot of the subject within resource-limited conditions (Kesmodel, 2018). A quantitative approach provided more objective, reliable, and generalizable results (Yannis & Nikolaos, 2018). Relevant data was collected once between July and December 2023 before being analyzed and reported.

### 2.2 Study area

The study was conducted across six (6) regions in Tanzania: Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, Mbeya, Kilimanjaro, Mwanza, and Singida. A purposeful sampling technique was used to select the areas since they house the majority of higher learning institutions in Tanzania. Respondents were students from higher learning institutions ranging from National Technical Award (NTA) level 4 to 8. Participants were informed about the objectives of this study before data collection.

### 2.3 Data collection approach

Physical and online questionnaires were used to collect the data from respondents. An online questionnaire was developed through the Survey Monkey platform and shared through a hyperlink. All questions were mandatory, and English was used for better understanding. An online questionnaire was distributed electronically among participants using WhatsApp. The study population is composed of 140,000 students for levels 4 – 6 and 130,000 students for levels 7 – 8. The sample size  $n$  was calculated by using the formula:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1 - p)}{E^2}$$

The confidence level,  $Z$ , was set to 95%, the margin error  $E$  to 5%, and the proportion  $p$  to 50%. The sample size was expected to be approximately 385. 420 questionnaires were sent to recipients; 378 were returned, signifying a 90% response rate. After selecting filled questionnaires and removing duplicates, 318 responses qualified to be featured for results in this research.

Participants were urged to respond accurately and honestly and carefully read the questions. The questions assessed respondents' education level, institution, and geographical location, as well as frequently used social media platforms and the use of social media platforms for academic purposes.

### 2.4 Data analysis

Data were summarized, coded, and analyzed using SPSS 25. Descriptive statistics of the selected variable, such as mean and standard deviation, were evaluated. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to determine the reliability and internal consistency of the items. The significance of the parameter difference in this study was analyzed using Analysis of Variance. A Multiple Linear Regression model was used to assess the applicability of social media platforms for students' academic purposes in higher learning institutions.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Presentation of the findings

##### 3.1.1 Demographics

This study involved a total number of 318 respondents from the selected higher learning institutions in Tanzania. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of respondents in terms of sex, age group, and level of education. Results indicate that 180 respondents (56.6%) were male and 138 (43.4%) were female. Most respondents were ranked between the 26 – 35 age group, accounting for 159 respondents (50%). One hundred ten respondents (35%) indicated that they were pursuing their first degree at the time of this research.

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Sex of respondents</b>		
Male	180	56.6
Female	138	43.4
Total	318	100
<b>The age group of respondents</b>		
18 – 25	129	41
26 – 35	159	50
36 – 45	28	9
46 – 60	2	1
Total	318	100
<b>Level of education of respondents</b>		
Basic technician certificate (NTA Level 4)	36	11
Technician certificate (NTA Level 5)	99	31
Ordinary diploma (NTA Level 6)	73	23
Undergraduate (NTA Level 7 & 8)	110	35
Total	318	100

Undergraduate students use social media platforms the most, with 34.6%, followed by technician certificates, with 31.1%. The least use basic technician certificate students, with 11.3%. On average, more male students use social media for academic purposes than their female counterparts. The male dominance is also evident from the respondents' statistics. Furthermore, female students dominate Instagram, 87.5%, and Facebook, 53.1%. Conversely, male students dominate in using X (formerly known as Twitter) with 73.9%, YouTube with 59.1%, and WhatsApp with 58.4%.

##### 3.1.2 Frequently used social media platforms for academic purposes

Results from this study indicate that WhatsApp is the most used social media platform for academic purpose matters. A total of 149 respondents (47%) indicate they frequently access WhatsApp to obtain information regarding lectures, assignments, discussions, and study materials. Similarly, 88 respondents (28%) primarily use YouTube to access academic information and improve learning outcomes. Table 2 summarizes the commonly used social media platforms.

**Table 2. Commonly used social media platforms for academic purposes**

Platform	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	49	15
Instagram	8	3
X (formerly known as Twitter)	23	7
WhatsApp	149	47
YouTube	88	28
Others	1	0
Total	318	100

Descriptive statistics of the selected variables reveal that average respondents agree to use WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook for academic purposes. Similarly, respondents indicate that social media usage, on average, impacts students' academic performance. However, respondents indicate a neutral response on average regarding the use of Instagram and Twitter for educational purposes. Table 3 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the variables in this study.

**Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the variables**

Platform	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Facebook	318	1	5	4	0.853
Instagram	318	1	5	3	0.873
X (formerly known as Twitter)	318	1	5	3	1.164
WhatsApp	318	1	5	4	1.065
YouTube	318	1	5	4	1.077
Academic performance	318	1	5	4	0.937

The reliability and internal consistency of the items in this research were determined using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The results indicate that the scale is reliable and internally consistent (*Cronbach's Alpha coefficient = 0.908*).

### **3.1.3 The applicability of social media usage for academic purposes of students**

The applicability of social media usage for academic purposes was accessed using five platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube. The results from a Multiple Linear Regression model indicate that students' academic purposes (outcome) were explained by social media usage (predictor) by 57.9%. The predictor variables were found to have a statistically positive significance ( $p < 0.005$ ) on the outcome. Table 4 summarizes the model results that assess the applicability of social media usage on students' academic performance.

The data in Table 4 shows that WhatsApp usage significantly positively affects students' academic use ( $beta = 0.369; p = 0.000$ ). This implies that a unit increase in WhatsApp usage improves students' academic activities by 36.9%. Likewise, using YouTube positively influences academic usage ( $beta = 0.266; p = 0.000$ ). This means academic activities improved by 26.6% following a unit increase in YouTube usage. Facebook usage has a significant positive effect on the academic purposes of students ( $beta = 0.175; p = 0.000$ ) in much the same way.

However, Table 4 results indicate that using Instagram and Twitter has no statistically significant and positive effect on students' academic activities ( $beta = 0.055, p = 0.295; beta = 0.050, p = 0.191$ ). These results suggest that using social media for academic purposes may improve students' performance.

**Table 4. The applicability of social media usage for academic purposes**

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF
Facebook	0.175	0.049	0.175	3.535	0.000	0.078	0.272	0.542	1.844
Instagram	0.055	0.052	0.055	1.050	0.295	-0.048	0.157	0.490	2.042
Twitter	0.050	0.038	0.050	1.310	0.191	-0.025	0.125	0.912	1.096
WhatsApp	0.369	0.059	0.369	6.279	0.000	0.253	0.484	0.385	2.596
YouTube	0.266	0.056	0.266	4.743	0.000	0.156	0.376	0.423	2.365
Multiple R	0.765								
R Square	0.586								
Adjusted R	0.579								
F Value	88.2								
P Value	< 0.001								

## **3.2 Discussions**

### **3.2.1 Social media usage among higher-learning students**

This study found that higher learning institutions use social media platforms to access and share academic purpose information. WhatsApp is the leading platform for students, indicating that they often communicate with instructors and others. Next to WhatsApp, students frequently use YouTube and Facebook to access academic purpose information. This research suggests that the least used social media platforms for academic purposes are Instagram, Twitter, and the rest.

Social media platforms also share assignments, handouts, and homework among students. Respondents indicated that social media platforms assist in completing tasks and assignments. This implies that social media platforms can be blended with conventional learning approaches to enhance student participation during their learning trajectory. Social media platforms are essential for student learning.

Other researchers have identified commonly used social media platforms as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter (Akakandelwa & Walubita, 2018) in Zambia; Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook in the United States (Knight-McCord et al., 2016); WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube in Turkey (Kircaburun et al., 2020). However, results from these studies presented the general usage of social media platforms for networking purposes. This study focused on academic purposes.

### **3.2.2 Social media usage and academic performance**

This study identified the usage of social media accounts for students' academic activities. Results indicate that social media platforms may assist students in preparing for subjects they learned. Students utilize social media platforms for group discussion and completing assignments once issued. This transforms academic activities into something easily accessible and enjoyable.

Results from this study indicate that male students are more likely to use social media platforms than their female counterparts. This may have several implications for higher-learning students. First, male students have more internet access and computer-like devices used to reach social media platforms. Second, female students tend to share information about academic purposes with close friends, eliminating individual access for demand. However, the present study could not include qualitative research to respond to these variations between male and female students.

Other studies have reported that social media poses a dual impact on students' academic achievement (Talaue et al., 2018). Social media platforms can catalyze student-centered and collaborative learning (Mwalimu et al., 2017). Another researcher found that social media usage for academic purposes is not a significant predictor of academic performance (Lau, 2017). Alwagait et al., (2015) outlined no linear relationship between social media usage and academic performance. Others suggested a negative impact of social media usage on academic performance (Giunchiglia et al., 2018).

Results from this study and the existing body of knowledge suggest that social media usage's impact on academic performance can be interpreted in three ways. First, if social media usage is explicitly for academic purposes, it significantly impacts academic performance. Second, general usage of social media platforms may sometimes have no impact or linear relationship with academic performance. Third, social media usage for non-academic purposes significantly negatively impacts academic performance.

### **3.2.3 Implications of the findings**

This study identified the frequently used social media platforms for academic purposes. Results indicate that WhatsApp mainly facilitates communication between learners and instructors. This implies that students and lecturers can adopt WhatsApp as a formal way of communication during their studies. Students' academic activities can be enhanced through WhatsApp by sharing information about lectures, assignments, study materials, and planning discussions. Using social media platforms for academic usage may significantly and positively impact students learning. This further suggests the integration of social media platforms with conventional learning approaches to further enhance students learning. Other studies have identified the positive attitude of students towards usage of social media despite existing few barriers (V. Sharma, 2020). This further suggests that integrating social media platforms to be among educational tools guarantee successes and receive positive response from students. Educational institutions are urged to adopt innovative tools offered by technology in education to enhance global acceptance, tolerance, and communication (Sharma, 2021; V. K. Sharma et al., 2023).

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The present study was designed to examine the applicability of social media on student's academic activities in higher learning institutions. This study has identified the social media platforms commonly used by students in Tanzania for academic purposes. The study also identified the male-female statistics contribution when using social media platforms to access academic purpose information. Lastly, the study assessed the applicability of social media platforms to students' academic purposes. The results suggest that social media usage has a significant positive impact on academic activities. Other studies have identified a negative relationship between social media usage and academic performance. Other researchers have not established a link between social media usage and academic performance. Overall, this study

strengthens the idea that when social media platforms are integrated as components of the learning process, they can significantly improve students' academic performance.

Continued efforts are needed to make social media usage more accessible to learners and trainers for academic purposes. Higher learning institutions must strive to excel in utilizing social media platforms to promote collaborative learning. Technology giants and mobile communication companies must collaborate with higher learning institutions to facilitate the application of social media platforms for academic purposes. Students and learners may have limited access to such uses without internet subscriptions. Such effort may act as a catalyst for integrating social media platforms for student-centered and collaborative learning and, consequently, improve the academic performance of higher-learning students. Education policies in Tanzania should acknowledge social media platforms as aids to better learning. This shall formalize social media applications in the teaching industry and attract more stakeholders and practitioners.

Unfortunately, the study did not include a qualitative study to explore further the relationship between social media usage and academic purposes. Despite its limitations, the study certainly adds to our understanding of the applicability of social media platforms to student-centered and collaborative learning. What is now needed is a cross-national study involving both qualitative and quantitative techniques to study the relationship between social media usage and student academic performance.

### **Definitions, Acronyms, Abbreviations**

**NTA:** National Technical Award

**SPSS:** Statistical Package for Social Sciences

**TCRA:** Tanzania Communication Regulatory Authority

### **COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER:**

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests OR non-financial interests OR personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### **DISCLAIMER (Artificial intelligence)**

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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