

Instagram as a Socio Digital Space: Academic Engagement among Postgraduate Students

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of social media has transformed the academic and social lives of students, with Instagram emerging as a key digital platform in higher education. Originally designed for photo sharing, Instagram now functions as a medium for academic communication, knowledge exchange, professional networking, and social interaction. This study examines Instagram as a socio-digital space that mediates the academic engagement of postgraduate students in Belagavi City, Karnataka, from a sociological perspective. A descriptive research design was adopted, using both primary and secondary data. Findings indicate that respondents perceive Instagram as a valuable resource for accessing educational materials, sharing academic information, collaborating with peers, and maintaining social relationships. At the same time, they report that excessive use contributes to distraction, reduced academic concentration, ineffective time management, and increased dependence on digital media. These results reflect the experiences of respondents in the selected study area and should not be generalised to all postgraduate students. Sociologically, Instagram operates as a digital space that shapes learning practices, identity formation, communication patterns, and social relationships. The study concludes that Instagram's implications are dual-edged, contingent on the purpose and pattern of use, and recommends promoting digital literacy, responsible social media practices, and balanced online engagement to maximise educational benefits while minimising adverse effects among postgraduate students.

Keywords: Instagram; Socio-digital space; Academic engagement; Postgraduate students; Digital literacy.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented digital transformation that has reshaped nearly every aspect of human life. From the ways in which people communicate and build relationships to the manner in which they access knowledge and participate in society, digital technologies have become deeply embedded in everyday experiences. Among these technological innovations, social networking sites (SNS) have emerged as one of the most influential developments, connecting millions of individuals across geographical and cultural boundaries. Within this expanding digital landscape, Instagram has established itself as one of the world's most popular social media platforms. With over one billion active users globally, it offers a visually engaging space where people share photographs, videos, stories, and ideas, creating opportunities for communication, creativity, self-expression, and information exchange. As Instagram continues to shape modern social interactions, it has also become a platform where users constantly compare themselves with carefully curated representations of others' lives, raising important questions about its broader social and educational implications (Lup *et al.*, 2015).

Over the last two decades, generations have grown up with smartphones, high-speed internet, and social media as a normal part of everyday life. For

these young people, Instagram is more than a networking application; it has become an extension of daily routines, influencing how they learn, communicate, express themselves, and construct their identities. Educational content, professional networking, creative inspiration, and collaborative learning now exist alongside entertainment and social interaction on the same platform. However, this continuous digital engagement also presents significant challenges. The platform's design, characterised by infinite scrolling, personalised recommendations, real-time notifications, and algorithm-driven content, often encourages prolonged use that can interfere with productive activities. Previous studies have shown that excessive Instagram use contributes to reduced attention span, disrupted study routines, poor time management, and procrastination, ultimately affecting academic performance. At the same time, constant exposure to idealised images and lifestyles may intensify social comparison, increase the "fear of missing out" (FOMO), and contribute to anxiety, stress, and reduced psychological well-being, factors that indirectly influence students' motivation, concentration, and learning outcomes (Twenge *et al.*, 2018).

These wider global and generational developments are increasingly visible within higher educational institutions in India, including those in Belagavi

City, Karnataka. Postgraduate students, who are expected to engage in independent learning, critical thinking, academic writing, and research, rely extensively on digital platforms for both educational and personal purposes. Instagram has become a space where students share academic information, discover learning resources, participate in discussions, and develop creative ideas beyond the traditional classroom. At the same time, concerns remain regarding whether frequent engagement with the platform affects their study habits, concentration, academic discipline, and overall educational experience. By exploring their socio-economic backgrounds alongside their patterns of Instagram use, the study seeks to understand how a globally influential social media platform is experienced within a local academic setting and how it shapes the educational lives, learning practices, and academic experiences of postgraduate students in Belagavi.

HISTORY OF THE INSTAGRAM

Instagram was released on the App Store on October 6, 2010, by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger as a mobile application designed for photo sharing. Initially derived from Systrom's earlier project, Burbn, Instagram emphasised simplicity, allowing users to apply filters and share images instantly. Within 24 hours of its release, the app attracted 25,000 users, signalling the growing demand for visual social networking (Eldridge, 2025). By December 2010, Instagram had surpassed one million users, and by September 2011, it reached 10 million users. Its rapid growth led to Facebook's acquisition in April 2012 for approximately \$1 billion, marking a significant milestone in social media consolidation (Eldridge, 2025). By 2022, Instagram reported over two billion monthly active users, cementing its position as one of the most influential social media platforms globally (Eldridge, 2025).

Following the acquisition, Instagram expanded its features to include video sharing (2013), Stories (2016), Instagram Television (IGTV, 2018), and Reels (2020), positioning itself as a competitor to Snapchat and TikTok (Fuciu, 2019). Academically, Instagram has been studied as a transformative platform in digital communication. Scholars highlight its role in shaping visual culture, influencing industries such as fashion, travel, and food, while also serving as a central tool for influencer marketing and brand engagement (Fuciu, 2019). At the same time, concerns have been raised about its impact on

mental health, digital addiction, and identity construction, making it a focal point for sociological and psychological research (Ssalunke & Jain, 2022).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study explores the impact of Instagram on postgraduate students' academic experiences, shedding light on their unique challenges and opportunities in adapting to Instagram-driven learning environments in Belagavi City. By examining Instagram usage patterns and perceptions, the research emphasises the need for educational frameworks that promote equity, accessibility, and digital literacy among students. It highlights how Instagram, as a socio-digital space, can enhance personalised learning, academic engagement, and overall educational experiences. The findings are particularly relevant for designing context-sensitive interventions that address socio-economic disparities in digital access and encourage responsible, educationally meaningful use of social media among postgraduate students.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is designed to analyse how Instagram, as a socio-digital space, mediates students' academic engagement.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of the first author's doctoral study titled 'Impact of Social Media on Students: A Sociological Study'. The study was designed initially to collect data from 100 postgraduate students during the 2025–2026 academic year. However, owing to the limited fieldwork period of 30–45 days, it was possible to interview only 83 postgraduate students, comprising 43 female and 40 male respondents. To ensure equal gender representation and facilitate balanced gender-based comparisons, the final sample was restricted to 80 respondents, consisting of 40 male and 40 female postgraduate students selected from higher educational institutions in Belagavi City, Karnataka, India. Throughout this paper, postgraduate students are referred to as respondents.

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected using a structured interview schedule administered through a purposive random sampling technique. Secondary data were obtained from books and research articles. The collected data were systematically coded, classified, and analysed

using appropriate statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarise the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and perceptions of Instagram. To examine the association between gender and the categorical variables relating to Instagram usage and its educational impact, the Chi-square test was employed. This statistical test was considered appropriate for determining whether any observed differences between male and female respondents were statistically significant.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Pekpazar, A., Aydın, G. K., Aydın, U., Beyhan, H., and Arı, E. (2021), in the study titled '*Role of Instagram addiction on academic performance among Turkish university students: Mediating effect of procrastination*', found that Instagram addiction significantly impacts procrastination, which in turn negatively affects academic performance. While Instagram addiction does not directly affect academic performance, its relationship with academic performance is fully mediated by procrastination. This highlights that students addicted to Instagram are more prone to procrastinate their academic duties, leading to a decline in their academic performance. The study's implications suggest that universities should focus on promoting social media literacy and developing students' self-control and organizational skills to mitigate the negative effects of Instagram addiction and procrastination on academic success. The findings also provide empirical evidence for the mediating role of procrastination in the relationship between Instagram addiction and academic performance.

Mircea Fuciu's (2019), in the paper entitled '*The rise of Instagram – evolution, statistics, advantages and disadvantages*', provides a comprehensive literature review on social media, focusing on Instagram's evolution and its impact on individuals and businesses. The study highlights Instagram's significant role as the second-largest online social media platform, with over 1 billion users and 200 million daily active users. Fuciu details key statistics, including user demographics (65 per cent of Facebook users are under 35, and Instagram's gender split is 52 per cent female, 48 per cent male), average time spent (28 minutes daily on Instagram), and its growing importance for marketing, with over 200 million users visiting business profiles daily. The paper emphasizes Instagram's visual nature, leading to

high engagement, viral marketing potential, and targeted audience reach through features like contests and product photos.

The implications of this study are significant for companies and marketers. It underscores the necessity for businesses to understand Instagram's user profile, optimal posting times for various industries, and the types of content that resonate most with followers, such as customer-centric and employee-centric posts. The paper also touches upon the rise of 'influencers' as a new advertising medium, with US companies dedicating substantial budgets to them. However, it also cautions about disadvantages like technological limitations, copyright issues, fake accounts, and the growing concern of social media addiction. This research serves as a valuable guide for developing effective Instagram-based marketing strategies, stressing the importance of active and regular posting to maximize engagement.

Foroughi, B., Griffiths, M. D., Iranmanesh, M., and Salamzadeh, Y. (2021), in the study, titled '*Associations between Instagram addiction, academic performance, social anxiety, depression, and life satisfaction among university students*', highlight the significant impact of Instagram on university students. The research found that recognition needs, social needs, and entertainment needs positively contribute to Instagram addiction. Conversely, information needs were not a significant predictor. Instagram addiction was shown to negatively affect academic performance and life satisfaction, while positively correlating with social anxiety and depression. A key implication is the moderating role of physical activity, which was found to reduce the influence of social and entertainment needs on Instagram addiction, suggesting it as a protective factor against problematic use. The study emphasizes the need for interventions that promote physical activity to mitigate the adverse effects of Instagram addiction on students' mental health and academic success.

Carbonell-Colomer, Marchena-Giráldez, and Bernabéu-Brotóns (2025), in the article entitled '*Social media and functional deterioration: indicators of problematic use in university students*', investigated social media usage patterns and problematic use among university students, identifying Instagram as one of the most frequently used platforms. The study revealed that while women tend to use Instagram to maintain personal relationships and self-image, men also show

significant daily use of the platform. Notably, Instagram was identified as the most frequently deleted social network, with 34.10 per cent of participants uninstalling it, often due to time loss, dislike of content, and psychological discomfort. This highlights Instagram's dual role as both a popular platform and a source of significant negative impact, leading to its deletion. The implications of this study underscore the need for targeted prevention strategies and further research into the specific risks associated with Instagram use, particularly concerning psychological dependence and loss of productivity, to mitigate its potential for problematic use among young adults.

Lup; Trub; and Rosenthal (2015), article titled '*Instagram #instasad?: Exploring associations among Instagram use, depressive symptoms, negative social comparison, and strangers followed*', explore the associations among Instagram use, depressive symptoms, negative social comparison, and the number of strangers followed. The study found that more frequent Instagram use was marginally positively associated with depressive symptoms, and positive social comparison was significantly negatively associated with depressive symptoms. A key finding is that the number of strangers followed significantly moderated the association of Instagram use with social comparison and the indirect association with depressive symptoms. Specifically, at the lowest levels of strangers followed, more frequent Instagram use was linked to more positive social comparison. Conversely, at the highest levels of strangers followed, more frequent Instagram use was directly associated with greater depressive symptoms. These findings suggest that Instagram use has negative associations for people who follow many strangers but positive associations for those who follow fewer strangers. The implications highlight the importance of understanding how the number of strangers one follows influences the psychological impact of social networking, particularly regarding negative social comparisons and mental well-being. The authors emphasize the need for further research to explore these dynamics more deeply and help users navigate social networking for positive development.

Walid Abdulkadir Osman (2025), in the study titled '*Social media use and associated mental health indicators among University students: a cross-sectional study*', found that Instagram accounted for 7.1 per cent of the total social media usage among university students. While the study

highlights that a significant proportion of students (84.7 per cent) spent more than three hours daily on social media, with Facebook being the most widely used platform (30.6 per cent), it does not delve into the specific impacts of individual platforms like Instagram on mental health indicators. The broader implications of the study, however, are significant: extensive social media use negatively impacts students' psychological well-being, leading to issues such as sleep disturbance, mental exhaustion, social isolation, and anxiety. This underscores the critical need for responsible social media usage, institutional guidelines, and educational initiatives to help students manage their social media time and foster healthy habits to mitigate adverse effects.

Arjmand, R., Hoseinpour, B. G., and Amani, M. (2026), in the article entitled '*Structural equation modelling of the relationship between Instagram addiction and academic performance, with the mediating role of critical thinking and the moderating role of academic self-efficacy*'. Study reveals a significant negative association between Instagram addiction and academic performance among medical students, indicating that higher levels of Instagram addiction are linked to lower academic performance. Excessive engagement with social media platforms like Instagram can lead to addiction-like behaviours, negatively impacting academic outcomes and higher-order cognitive processes such as critical thinking. The research highlights those academic self-efficacy acts as a significant moderator, buffering the adverse effects of Instagram addiction on academic performance. However, critical thinking, while positively correlated with academic outcomes, did not mediate the relationship between Instagram addiction and academic performance. The implications suggest a crucial need for educational interventions to enhance students' self-efficacy, promote mindful social media use, and integrate critical thinking development into medical curricula to optimize academic success and digital well-being.

Nayak, Bhati, Mohanty, and Nanda (2025), in the study titled '*Scroll or study? Social media usage and academic orientation of postgraduate students across academic stream*', investigated the relationship between social media usage and academic orientation among postgraduate students. While the study mentions Instagram as one of the platforms that has become integral to everyday life, it does not specifically highlight its unique impact or provide detailed findings on Instagram's

role compared to other social media platforms. The research primarily focuses on social media usage in general, concluding that there is a significant negative correlation between social media usage and academic orientation among postgraduate students. The study also found a significant difference in social media usage between arts and science postgraduate students, with science students tending to utilise social media more. The implications suggest that excessive, non-academic social media use can lead to distraction, procrastination, reduced academic focus, and diminished study efficiency. Therefore, students should be guided towards effective and purposeful utilization of social media to enhance academic engagement rather than undermine it.

Alhajjaj, H. A., Shredam, A. M., Al-halalat, K. I., and Tarawneh, H. H. (2025), in the article titled, '*Social media and its impact on university students: An analytical study*', highlight that Instagram is a highly used social media platform among university students, ranking first in preferred applications at 33.33 per cent, closely followed by Snapchat at 35.83 per cent. This preference for visually-oriented platforms reflects students' inclination towards quick, image-based content. The study's implications underscore that social media, including Instagram, is deeply

integrated into students' daily routines, serving both recreational and academic purposes. While students frequently use these platforms for sharing experiences and information, a significant portion of their time is also dedicated to non-academic activities, leading to potential distractions and reduced study time. The research suggests that understanding these usage patterns is crucial for educators to develop strategies that leverage social media for academic support while minimizing its negative impacts on concentration and time management.

Despite growing research on Instagram addiction, academic performance, and psychological well-being, most existing studies examine its effects in a broad or non-specific manner, with limited attention to Instagram as a distinct socio-digital space influencing students' academic engagement. In particular, there is a need for context-specific research that examines how Instagram mediates the academic lives of postgraduate students through everyday practices of distraction, comparison, and digital participation. Accordingly, the present study addresses this gap by focusing on how Instagram, as a socio-digital space, mediates students' academic engagement, with specific reference to the lived experience of postgraduate students in Belagavi City.

FINDINGS

Table: 1: Socio-economic Background of the Respondents

		Boys	Per cent	Girl	Per cent	Total	Per cent
Gender		40	50.00	40	50.00	80	100.00
Location	Urban	17	42.50	22	55.00	39	48.75
	Rural	23	57.50	18	45.00	41	51.25
Age Composition	21	14	35.00	18	45.00	32	40.00
	22	08	20.00	11	27.50	19	23.75
	23	09	22.50	07	17.50	16	20.00
	24	06	15.00	04	10.00	10	12.50
	25	02	05.00	00	00.00	02	02.50
	26 or above	01	02.50	00	00.00	01	01.25
Religion	Hindu	37	92.5	35	92.50	72	90.00
	Islam	01	02.50	02	05.00	03	03.75
	Jain	02	05.00	03	07.50	05	06.25
Marital Status	Unmarried	40	100.0	35	87.50	75	93.75
	Married	00	0.00	5	12.50	05	06.25
Monthly Income of the Family	Below Rs.10,000	13	32.50	14	35.00	27	33.75
	Rs.10,001-Rs.20,000	5	12.50	10	25.00	15	18.75
	Rs.20,001-Rs.30,000	8	20.0	7	17.50	15	18.75
	Rs.30,001 and above	14	35.0	9	22.50	23	28.75

Source: Field Survey

Table 1 presents the socio-economic profile of the respondents, with an equal distribution of 40 boys and 40 girls. This deliberate balance ensures that gender-based comparisons are meaningful and that observed differences are not due to sampling imbalance. Both groups are thus positioned similarly in terms of numerical representation, allowing the analysis to focus on substantive differences in background rather than on unequal group sizes.

With regard to location, a slightly higher proportion of respondents overall resided in rural areas (51.25 per cent) compared to urban areas (48.75 per cent). Among boys, 57.50 per cent came from rural backgrounds and 42.50 per cent from urban areas, whereas among girls, 55.00 per cent were from urban locations and 45.00 per cent from rural areas. This pattern suggests that boys in the sample are more likely to originate from rural households, while girls are somewhat more urban-based. From a sociological perspective, this distribution reflects differentiated access to educational opportunities and digital infrastructure across space; rural boys may face more infrastructural constraints, while urban girls may have relatively better access to devices, networks, and institutional resources, which can shape their engagement with Instagram and other digital platforms.

In terms of age composition, the majority of respondents in both groups fall within the 21–23 year range, which is typical for postgraduate education. Boys and girls are similarly distributed across these ages, indicating that they occupy a comparable stage of the life course, consistent with Arnett’s notion of “emerging adulthood” as a period of identity exploration, academic transition, and intensive peer interaction (Arnett, 2000). This shared age profile suggests that both male and female respondents are embedded in similar generational experiences of digital media, including the normalisation of smartphone and social media use in their everyday academic lives.

The religious composition of the sample shows that 90.00 per cent of the respondents are Hindu, followed by smaller proportions of Jain and Muslim respondents. This pattern is consistent across boys and girls, reflecting the broader socio-cultural context of the study area. Such homogeneity in religious background indicates that, for this sample, religious affiliation is less likely to generate major differences in Instagram use or academic engagement, although it provides

an important cultural context within which digital practices and educational aspirations are shaped.

Regarding marital status, all boys in the sample are unmarried (100.00 per cent), while a majority of girls are unmarried (87.50 per cent), with 12.50 per cent married. This difference, though numerically small, hints that a subset of female postgraduate students may be negotiating Instagram use and academic responsibilities alongside marital roles. Sociologically, this points to gendered expectations around marriage and education in early adulthood, where married women may experience additional time pressures and role obligations, potentially influencing their patterns of digital engagement and study routines.

The distribution of monthly family income reveals socio-economic diversity among both boys and girls. Overall, 33.75 per cent of respondents belong to families earning below Rs. 10,000 per month, while 28.75 per cent come from families earning Rs. 30,001 and above, with the remaining respondents falling into the intermediate income categories. Among boys, a relatively higher proportion appears in the upper income bracket (Rs. 30,001 and above), whereas among girls there is a more even spread across the lower- and middle-income groups. These variations suggest that both male and female students occupy different positions within the local class structure, which may influence access to digital devices, quality of internet connectivity, and the ability to leverage Instagram for academic purposes. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of capital, students from higher-income families are likely to possess greater economic and digital capital, enabling more seamless integration of Instagram into their learning practices, while those from lower-income households may face constraints that shape not only how often they connect but also what they can do online (Bourdieu 1986).

Taken together, the socio-economic profile indicates that boys and girls in this study share many structural features—age, level of study, predominant religious background—while also differing in important ways in terms of location, marital status, and family income. These similarities and differences form the social context within which Instagram is used, interpreted, and incorporated into academic engagement, and they help to explain why digital practices cannot be understood solely as individual choices but must be situated within broader patterns of gender, class, and spatial inequality.

Table: 2: Chi-Square Test: Impact of Instagram on Respondents

Purposes	Boys (N=40)	Per cent	Girls (N=40)	Per cent	Total (N=80)	Per cent	Chi- Square	p-value
Reduced Attention Span	29	72.50	30	75.00	59	73.75	0.065 ^a	0.799
Procrastination Tendencies	24	60.00	26	65.00	50	62.50	0.213 ^a	0.644
Disruption of Study Habits	20	50.00	23	57.50	43	53.75	0.453 ^a	0.501
Decline in Reading and Writing	21	52.50	27	67.50	48	60.00	1.875 ^a	0.171
Mental Health Impacts	27	67.50	30	75.00	57	71.25	.549 ^a	0.459
Social Comparison	15	37.50	19	47.50	34	42.50	.818 ^a	0.366
Pressure to Maintain an Online Persona	23	57.50	19	47.50	42	52.50	.802 ^a	0.37
Impact on Sleep Quality	23	57.50	24	60.00	47	58.75	.052 ^a	0.82
Potential for Mobile Addiction	21	52.50	24	60.00	45	56.25	.457 ^a	0.499
Limited Peer-Academic Collaboration	21	52.50	25	62.50	46	57.50	.818 ^a	0.366
Economic and Opportunity Cost	24	60.00	27	67.50	51	63.75	.487 ^a	0.485
Inspiration for Creativity	24	60.00	24	60.00	48	60.00	.000 ^a	1
Real-World Application	21	52.50	26	65.00	47	58.75	1.289 ^a	0.256

Source: Field Survey

Table 2 presents respondents' perceptions of the academic and personal impacts of Instagram use, disaggregated by gender. Overall, the findings reveal that both boys and girls recognise Instagram as a platform that simultaneously offers educational benefits and generates significant academic and psychological challenges. In most categories, the percentages for boys and girls are very close, and the Chi-square analysis shows that none of these gender differences are statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). This indicates that male and female postgraduate students share broadly similar experiences of Instagram's effects on their academic lives.

Reduced attention span emerges as the most widely reported concern, acknowledged by 72.50 per cent of boys and 75.00 per cent of girls, resulting in an overall proportion of 73.75 per cent. This suggests that both groups perceive Instagram as a major distraction that fragments their concentration while reading, writing, or preparing for examinations. From a sociological perspective, this points to a shared transformation in students' "study habitus": sustained, focused engagement with academic tasks is increasingly replaced by intermittent attention shaped by notifications, short videos, and algorithmically curated content. Boys and girls alike thus experience Instagram as reconfiguring the temporal and cognitive organisation of their learning practices.

Procrastination tendencies are also widely reported, with 60.00 per cent of boys and 65.00 per cent of girls indicating that Instagram encourages them to delay academic responsibilities. This small difference in percentages is not statistically significant, but it suggests that girls may be slightly more likely to identify procrastination as a consequence of their Instagram use. Sociologically, these patterns illustrate how platform design, oriented toward continuous engagement and immediate entertainment, undermines the time discipline required by formal education. Both male and female respondents recognise that time spent scrolling displaces time that could be invested in academic work, reflecting an awareness of the opportunity costs associated with digital leisure.

In relation to **disruption of study habits**, 50.00 per cent of boys and 57.50 per cent of girls report that Instagram interferes with their established study routines. Similarly, **decline in reading and writing** is perceived by 52.50 per cent of boys and 67.50 per cent of girls, yielding an overall proportion of 60.00 per cent. Although the gender differences are not statistically significant, the higher percentage among girls may indicate greater concern about the shift from text-based academic engagement to visually oriented, short-form content. This aligns with broader discussions of digital culture in which deep reading and extended writing are increasingly displaced by

quick, image-centred communication, affecting both male and female students but perhaps being more keenly felt or acknowledged by girls in this sample.

Mental health impacts are reported by 67.50 per cent of boys and 75.00 per cent of girls, totalling 71.25 per cent. This suggests that a majority of respondents, regardless of gender, experience Instagram as influencing their psychological well-being, whether through anxiety, stress, or reduced self-confidence. **Social comparison** is recognised by 37.50 per cent of boys and 47.50 per cent of girls, and **pressure to maintain an online persona** by 57.50 per cent of boys and 47.50 per cent of girls. These findings indicate that both boys and girls engage in, and are affected by, curated self-presentation and peer comparison, though the specific emphases vary slightly by gender. Drawing on Goffman's concept of the presentation of self and Festinger's theory of social comparison, Instagram can be understood as a shared stage on which both male and female students negotiate identity, seek recognition, and measure themselves against peers, often with emotional costs.

Regarding **sleep quality** and **mobile dependence**, 57.50 per cent of boys and 60.00 per cent of girls report negative impacts on sleep, while 52.50 per cent of boys and 60.00 per cent of girls perceive a potential for mobile addiction, with overall proportions of 58.75 per cent and 56.25 per cent, respectively. These patterns show that late-night Instagram use and increased reliance on mobile devices are common experiences across genders. Sociologically, this reflects the colonisation of everyday life by digital platforms, where the boundaries between study, leisure, and rest are blurred, and both boys and girls experience disruptions to bodily rhythms, face-to-face interaction, and productive time use.

At the same time, respondents also identify **positive dimensions** of Instagram use. **Inspiration for creativity** is reported by 60.00 per cent of both boys and girls, and **real-world application** by 52.50 per cent of boys and 65.00 per cent of girls, with an overall proportion of 58.75 per cent. This indicates that a substantial majority of respondents view Instagram as a source of creative ideas and practical knowledge that can be connected to academic or professional contexts. From a sociological standpoint, Instagram functions here as a reservoir of cultural and symbolic capital: students use it to discover new perspectives,

follow academic pages, learn about opportunities, and integrate classroom learning with broader social and professional worlds.

The finding on **limited peer-academic collaboration**—reported by 52.50 per cent of boys and 62.50 per cent of girls (57.50 per cent overall)—suggests that while Instagram is widely used for communication, it does not always translate into sustained academic collaboration. This may reflect a tension between social and academic uses of the platform, where the social dimension often dominates. **Economic and opportunity cost**, recognised by 60.00 per cent of boys and 67.50 per cent of girls, further reinforces the perception that Instagram can drain time and attention from academically productive activities, with similar implications for both genders.

The Chi-square values for all variables range from 0.000 to 1.875, with p-values consistently above 0.05, indicating that none of the observed gender differences are statistically significant. This means that although there are minor variations in percentages, boys and girls broadly share the same pattern of perceptions regarding Instagram's impacts. In sociological terms, Instagram appears as a relatively gender-neutral socio-digital space in this cohort, where both male and female postgraduate students encounter similar configurations of opportunities and risks. This shared pattern underscores the importance of viewing Instagram's academic and psychological implications not as isolated individual issues, but as collective experiences shaped by the wider digital environment of higher education and the broader social transformations of the network society.

DISCUSSIONS

"We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us." — Marshall McLuhan (2023). This insight is particularly relevant for understanding Instagram's role in the academic and social lives of postgraduate students. The findings of the present study indicate that Instagram is not merely a communication platform; it functions as a socio-digital space through which students access information, interact with peers, construct identities, and organise their everyday academic practices. At the same time, the platform's visual design, personalised content, notifications, and continuous scrolling features may shape students' attention, study routines, social comparisons, and well-being. The following discussion interprets these findings from a sociological perspective,

with particular attention to academic engagement, digital culture, identity, and social inequality.

Reduced Attention Span

The findings indicate that a large majority of respondents perceived Instagram as contributing to reduced attention span. Boys and girls reported similar perceptions, and the gender difference was not statistically significant. This suggests that fragmented attention is a shared experience among postgraduate students in the present study.

Instagram's notifications, short videos, Reels, and algorithmically selected content encourage frequent shifts in attention. Students may initially access the platform for educational information but remain engaged for longer than intended. From a sociological perspective, this pattern reflects the transformation of students' study habits in the digital age. Sustained reading, writing, and concentrated academic work may increasingly be replaced by brief and interrupted periods of attention shaped by the fast-paced rhythm of digital media. This reflects the network-society perspective, in which everyday life is increasingly organised through continuous information flows and digital interaction (Castells, 2011; Nie, 2001).

Procrastination Tendencies

More than half of the respondents perceived that Instagram encourages procrastination. Although girls reported slightly greater concern than boys, the gender difference was not statistically significant. This indicates that procrastination is a common concern among both male and female postgraduate students.

Students may begin using Instagram for academic information or communication but continue scrolling through personalised entertainment content, thereby delaying assignments, presentation preparation, reading, or examination study. From the perspective of the attention economy, such patterns should not be understood solely as individual weakness; they are also shaped by platform features that encourage continuous engagement and instant gratification. The perceived opportunity cost of Instagram use further shows that students recognise that time spent on the platform may reduce time available for academic work, rest, and face-to-face interaction. This interpretation is consistent with research highlighting the relationship between problematic social networking use, self-regulation, and academic responsibilities (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Disruption of Study Habits

A substantial proportion of respondents perceived that Instagram disrupts their study habits. While girls reported slightly higher concern than boys, the difference was not statistically significant. This suggests that frequent checking of Instagram, notifications, and repeated interruptions can interfere with regular study schedules among students of both genders.

Postgraduate study requires planned routines, independent reading, research activity, and sustained academic engagement. However, regular interruption by social media can make it difficult to maintain concentration and complete academic tasks efficiently. From a sociological perspective, this shows how digital culture increasingly shapes the everyday routines of young adults, including the organisation of time, communication, and learning practices (Livingstone, 2009).

Reading, Writing, and Academic Engagement

A substantial proportion of respondents perceived that extensive Instagram use affects their reading and writing habits. Girls expressed somewhat greater concern than boys, but the difference was not statistically significant. This finding suggests that visual and short-form communication may influence students' engagement with lengthy academic texts and extended writing tasks.

Instagram is organised around images, short videos, captions, and rapid interaction. These forms can support creativity and quick information sharing, but they differ from the sustained reading and analytical writing required in postgraduate education. The findings point to a broader shift in digital culture, in which visual and immediate forms of communication may compete with deep reading and reflective writing. Frequent engagement with fragmented online content may influence concentration and information-processing practices (Carr, 2020).

Mental Health Impacts

The findings show that many respondents perceived Instagram as affecting their psychological well-being. Girls reported slightly higher concern than boys, but the difference was not statistically significant. This suggests that the emotional implications of Instagram use are shared across gender categories in the present study.

Constant exposure to carefully curated images of academic success, lifestyles, appearance, travel, and personal achievements may encourage comparison with peers. Such comparison can

contribute to anxiety, stress, reduced self-confidence, and lower academic motivation. These findings are consistent with Festinger's theory of social comparison, which explains how individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others, as well as research linking social-media comparison with self-esteem and psychological well-being (Festinger, 1954; Vogel *et al.*, 2014).

Social Comparison and Online Persona

The study further indicates that respondents experience social comparison and pressure to maintain an online persona. Although girls reported somewhat higher social comparison and boys reported somewhat higher pressure to maintain an online persona, these differences were not statistically significant. This indicates that both boys and girls participate in the process of presenting, monitoring, and evaluating online identities.

From a sociological perspective, Instagram is a space of identity construction and social interaction. Students often present selected aspects of their personal, social, and academic lives through posts, stories, photographs, and videos. In Goffman's terms, Instagram functions as a "front stage" where individuals manage impressions and seek recognition from peers. Likes, comments, followers, and views may become forms of social approval, encouraging users to present idealised versions of themselves and their lives (Goffman, 1978).

Sleep Quality, Mobile Dependence, and Opportunity Cost

More than half of the respondents perceived that Instagram affects sleep quality and may contribute to mobile dependence. Boys and girls reported broadly similar experiences. These findings suggest that Instagram use may extend into late-night hours and influence students' daily routines, rest, and preparedness for academic activities.

Sociologically, this reflects the increasing presence of digital technologies in everyday life. The boundaries between study, leisure, social interaction, and sleep become blurred when students remain continuously connected through mobile devices. Instagram can expand communication and access to information, but constant connectivity may also reduce opportunities for rest, reflection, and face-to-face interaction. The issue is therefore not only access to digital technology but also the patterns, purposes, and consequences of its use. This

supports the argument that digital inequality involves differentiated uses of technology and their unequal social consequences (DiMaggio *et al.*, 2004).

Creativity, Learning, and Real-World Application

The study also identifies positive dimensions of Instagram use. A substantial proportion of respondents perceived Instagram as a source of creative inspiration and real-world learning. Boys and girls reported similar views, indicating that both groups recognise the educational potential of the platform.

Instagram can support students in discovering educational content, practical ideas, professional opportunities, social issues, and creative resources. It can also help students connect classroom learning with wider social and professional contexts. From a sociological perspective, Instagram may function as a source of cultural and digital capital, enabling students to acquire information, develop skills, and participate in wider knowledge networks. However, the finding that many respondents perceived limited peer-academic collaboration indicates that the academic potential of Instagram is not always fully realised. While students communicate through the platform, this interaction may remain primarily social rather than becoming sustained academic collaboration.

Gender and Shared Experiences

The Chi-square analysis indicates that none of the observed differences between boys and girls are statistically significant. Although minor percentage variations are visible across some categories, male and female postgraduate students broadly share similar perceptions regarding Instagram's academic benefits and challenges.

This suggests that Instagram functions as a relatively gender-neutral socio-digital space in relation to the perceived impacts examined in this study. Both boys and girls experience similar concerns relating to attention, procrastination, study habits, social comparison, sleep, and mobile dependence, while also recognising the platform's potential for creativity and learning. However, this does not mean that boys and girls use Instagram in identical ways. Future qualitative research may explore differences in content preferences, self-presentation, online interaction, and motivations for using the platform.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Instagram has a dual role in postgraduate students' lives. It

can support creativity, information sharing, practical learning, and social interaction, while also contributing to distraction, procrastination, comparison, reduced concentration, and disruption of everyday routines. From a sociological perspective, these experiences should not be viewed merely as individual outcomes. They are shaped by platform design, peer expectations, socio-economic circumstances, and broader processes of digital transformation in higher education.

SUGGESTIONS

The findings show that Instagram has both educational value and potential risks for postgraduate students. While it can support creativity, access to information, and professional awareness, excessive or unplanned use may affect concentration, study habits, sleep, and psychological well-being. The following suggestions aim to promote balanced, responsible, and academically meaningful use of Instagram among postgraduate students:

Improve equitable digital access

Higher educational institutions should strengthen digital infrastructure by providing reliable campus Wi-Fi, digital library access, and device or internet support for economically disadvantaged students. Such measures can reduce rural–urban and income-based inequalities in access to online learning resources.

Build digital literacy and time management

Institutions should conduct workshops on responsible social media use, time management, screen-time control, and digital well-being. Students should be guided to use notifications, focus modes, and app-time limits to reduce distraction, procrastination, and disruption of study routines.

Use Instagram for academic engagement

Departments and faculty members can use official Instagram pages to share academic information, research updates, educational videos, conference notices, internships, scholarships, and career opportunities. This can help students use Instagram more purposefully for learning, creativity, and professional development.

Promote digital well-being

Colleges should organise counselling, awareness programmes, and peer-support activities addressing social comparison, late-night use, mobile dependence, and online identity pressure. Students should be encouraged to maintain

balanced screen time and participate in offline academic and social activities.

Encourage further research

Future research should include larger and more diverse samples from different disciplines and locations. Qualitative studies may further explore students' everyday experiences of Instagram, academic engagement, identity formation, and digital well-being.

The institutions should not treat Instagram only as a distraction or only as an educational resource. Its academic value depends on students' digital literacy, patterns of use, institutional support, and access to resources. By promoting equitable access, purposeful engagement, and digital well-being, higher educational institutions can help students maximise Instagram's educational benefits while minimising its adverse effects.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined Instagram as a socio-digital space mediating academic engagement among postgraduate students. The findings indicate that Instagram has moved beyond its original role as a photo-sharing platform and has become part of students' everyday academic and social lives. Respondents identified its usefulness for accessing educational resources, sharing information, developing creativity, maintaining social relationships, and connecting learning with practical and professional contexts. At the same time, the study shows that Instagram's educational potential is accompanied by important challenges. A substantial proportion of respondents perceived reduced attention span, procrastination, disrupted study habits, decline in reading and writing, mental health impacts, sleep disturbance, mobile dependence, social comparison, and pressure to maintain an online persona. These findings demonstrate that Instagram is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently harmful. Its influence depends on the purpose, intensity, timing, and pattern of use. The study also highlights the importance of socio-economic context. Differences in family income, place of residence, and digital access may shape students' capacity to use Instagram effectively for academic purposes. Thus, digital inequality should be understood not only as unequal access to devices and connectivity but also as unequal opportunities to develop digital skills, manage online time, and convert digital engagement into academic benefit.

The absence of statistically significant gender differences indicates that boys and girls in the present sample broadly share similar perceptions of Instagram's educational benefits and risks. Although minor percentage variations are visible, Instagram appears to affect academic engagement and everyday routines across gender categories in comparable ways. In line with McLuhan's insight that tools also shape those who use them, the findings suggest that Instagram influences how postgraduate students allocate time, sustain attention, construct identities, interact with peers, and engage with academic work. Therefore, institutions should not treat Instagram only as a source of distraction or only as a learning resource. Instead, they should promote digital literacy, equitable access, responsible use, academic integration, and digital well-being. Through balanced and purposeful engagement, Instagram can become a more meaningful support for postgraduate students' academic development and social participation.

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