



## The impact of social media use on students' behaviour change in Tanzanian tertiary institutions

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**Recommended References:** Sanga, F. E. (2025). The impact of social media use on students' behaviour change in Tanzanian tertiary institutions. *African Quarterly Social Science Review*, 2(3), 44–52. <https://doi.org/10.51867/AQSSR.2.4.5>

### ABSTRACT

Technological advancements worldwide have led to the rise of social media as a tool for learning and social interaction across gender and age groups, often through YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. However, little is known about how it impacts students' behavioural changes in tertiary institutions. Therefore, this study examined the effect of social media on students' behaviour in tertiary institutions. It was guided by the Equation Theory, which suggests how people treat computers, television, and new media like real people and places. The theory was significant in this study because the effects of treating social media as real people determine the effects of social media on students' behaviour through their daily interactions with such platforms. This study employed a descriptive research design. The study employed a sample of 398 students from 10 tertiary institutions in Dar es Salaam. Data were collected through online questionnaires, follow-up interviews, and observation. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis techniques, while quantitative data was reviewed through descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The results showed that social media had a positive and significant effect on students' behavioural changes in tertiary institutions. Social media has improved their study habits, dressing styles, eating habits, communication, relationships, and purchasing behaviour. These changes have improved their academic performance and social well-being. However, the abandonment of African traditional culture in dressing and food has created a need for policy interventions that purposefully regulate social media use to sustain its benefits while also mitigating its detrimental effects through a legal framework. It is proposed that building students' capacity serves as a strong and effective institutional approach to encourage responsible social media use. Future research could explore the effects of social media among adult employees and graduates and see if online behaviour during higher education carries over to the workforce.

**Keywords:** Behaviour Change, Social Media Use, Students, Tertiary Education Institutions

### I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the emergence of social media can be traced back to the 1950s, when phone phreaking was used to enhance free, unauthorized telephone call access, which paved the way for social networking sites in the 1990s (Gupta, 2020). That means social media began about 75 years ago, when these youth in tertiary education were not yet born. Currently, there are several social media platforms, notably Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, connecting people and enhancing their interaction worldwide (Mujiwat & Laili, 2013). It has become a means of communication and networking across age, gender, race, education level, and geographical locations (Ramzan et al., 2023). The expanding use of social media in the world has gone beyond social interaction to a teaching and learning tool in educational institutions (Throuvala et al., 2021). Apart from the positive use of social media among students, it has become a destructive bomb, where approximately 30% to 40% of students in the developed world have experienced cyber-attacks through social media use (Livingstone, 2020). That means, social media is a developmental and detrimental platform if not well-regulated.

In the context of developed countries, social media use has been associated with cyberbullying and declining academic performance (Ramzan et al., 2023; Throuvala et al., 2021; Livingstone, 2020). That means social media use influences social evils, without which they could not have happened. The same experience is evident in developing countries where social media use among higher education students has increased due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, to bridge the social distancing control measures in the lockdown, as evidenced in South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya (Okafor & Mwangi, 2021; Chikandiwa, 2020). This means, social media provided an alternative teaching and learning avenue when learners were physically separated from each other and from educational settings due to the pandemic.

In the context of Tanzania, the increasing use of social media among students is seen for both social networking and academic issues (Sserunkuuma et al., 2023; Manyerere, 2021). The recent data show that nearly 35% of higher education students have reported being affected negatively by the irresponsible use of social media (Masele & Rwehikiza, 2024). That means, higher education students have become the most victims of social media use instead

of capitalizing on the advantageous position, hence a need for this study to assess the impact of social media use on students' behaviour in tertiary education institutions in Tanzania, specifically in the Dar es Salaam Region.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Globally, social media has been in use for about 70 years (Gupta, 2020). That means, social media has lived longer to reach adulthood age currently. Most of the previous studies have focused on the negative effects of social media, which were indecent dressing styles among students, causing eating disorders among students in higher education institutions (Ramzan et al., 2023; Throuvala et al., 2021; Livingstone, 2020; Ibrahim, 2020; Gunes & Dremirer, 2023; Kashaija, 2021). That makes social media be regarded as a medicinal warning 'put away from the reach of children'. However, little is known about its effects on students' behaviour change in tertiary institutions, where students are a bit lower aged compared to their counterparts, more mature university students. That literature gap hampers policy intervention to regulate its use, which creates a practical gap as well.

### 1.2 Research Objective

To assess the effects of social media use on students' behaviour change in tertiary institutions.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

The study was guided by media equation theory postulated by Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass which explains how people treat computers, television, and new media like real people and places (Reeves & Nass, 1996). The theory was significant in this study because the effects of treating social media as real people determine the effects of social media on students' behaviour change through their daily interactions with such platforms (Oetken, 2024). The nature of this study requires the theory of this nature, because the nature of social media use in tertiary institutions is congruent with media equation theory, as such a group of people who treat social media like people are likely to face the effects.

### 2.2 Empirical Review

Globally, social media was developed to meet the needs of adult people (The US Surgeon General's Advisory on social media and Youth Mental Health, 2023). However, they have developed into a teaching and learning tool in higher education in the developed world: China, Poland, Spain, Turkey, and the United States of America (Purgat et al., 2017). The literature review on social media use in developing countries indicates the five main uses: social, political, economic, education, and health, as evidenced in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, which means social media has multiple uses across sectors (Sultana, 2011).

It has brought negative experiences in relation to human behaviour (Nalongo, 2024). A study by Nesi et al. (2021) assessed the effects of social media use on students' behaviours, and the negative effects were found on cyberbullying and psychological torture, among higher education students in the United States of America. The study found that the excessive use of Facebook and Instagram platforms contributed to the emotional stress among students, most of them females, hence a need for an intervention strategy to moderate their use and effects.

The study in Indonesia on the impact of social media on changing behaviour patterns among Generation Z found that the excessive use of social media results in neglecting their social environment, committing suicide, and cyberbullying (Mujiwat & Laili, 2013). On the other hand, Alvi (2021) evaluated the influence of social media on students' academic outcomes and showed that the extremely use of social media instigated higher education students' tendencies of procrastination, decreased their academic performance, and raised the indicators of depression and anxiety. The study recommended the initiatives to control social media use in higher education to rescue the youth generation at risk.

In Nigeria, the study indicates that several students in higher education have ethical and unethical use of social media (Adetimirin, 2024). In Kenya, the study identified the influence of social media use on behaviour change among university students. The study indicated that students learn unethical behaviour by imitating what they see on social media, hence a need for an intervention programme to enhance ethical social media use among higher education students (Ndung'u et al., 2023).

For the case of Tanzania, the study explored the most commonly used social media platforms in academic institutions as WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly known as Twitter and Instagram (Mashauri & Kandengukila, 2025). The responsible social media use among students was said to improve their academic performance. The study on examining the use of social media on students' academic life revealed that most of the students of Buhare Community Development Training Institute, Musoma, Mara, Tanzania were familiar with the variety of social media platforms and the majority of them trusted the information shared through social media

(Mbegani et al., 2022). The study, which assessed the effects of social media use on behaviour change among higher education students, found a positive and significant effect of social media use on students' unethical behaviour, such as misinformation and cyberbullying, hence a need for social media use policy and institutional guidelines to enhance the responsible use of social media in higher education (Ponera & Mubuyaeta, 2023).

Similarly, Masele and Rwehikiza (2024) observed the misuse of social media among higher education students, hence proposed capacity building to enhance students' ability to manage the negative impact of social media use. Another study on the influence of social media use on students' academic performance established that irresponsible social media use among students affects their academic performance due to time wasted accessing irrelevant information, hence the need to be regulated (Nkolimwa, 2024). The reviewed literature on previous studies indicates a literature gap about the impact of social media use on students' behaviour change in tertiary education institutions.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Description of Study Area

The study was conducted in tertiary institutions in the Dar es Salaam region, which is the country's city centre and business hub. The choice of Dar es Salaam was instigated by its nature and character as the heart of technological advancement, urban life, and commercial hubs, attracting people, business, and production. It is the largest city and commercial centre, which offers a technological life in different spheres of life; hence, assessing the impact of social media use on students' behaviour became easy and relevant.

#### 3.2 Research Design

This study employed descriptive research design. This research embraced a descriptive research design, as is appropriate for examining the impact of social media use on students' behaviour change in Tanzanian tertiary institutions. It enables the researcher to generate a detailed and systematic description of existing phenomena without manipulating variables. This design helps in capturing attitudes of responders, perceptions, and behavioural patterns related to social media use, providing a clear understanding of how different platforms influence students' conduct, communication styles, and social interactions within an academic setting.

#### 3.2 Population

Tertiary institutions in Tanzania enroll students completing secondary education, most of them aged between 18 to 25. These youth and adolescent students' digital hence with a desire to join and use a variety of social media platforms. Therefore, the choice of this group was significant because they are the main users and victims of social media (Mujiwat & Laili, 2023).

#### 3.3 Sample Size

The study sample was 398 Tertiary Institutions students, calculated through the Yamane formula from the estimated population of 100,000 Tertiary Institutions students enrolled in the Dar es Salaam region.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{100,000}{1 + 100,000(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = 398$$

Whereby:

n - The sample size

N - Population of study

e - Error estimate(e) =5%

Therefore, the study involved a total of 398 students from 10 higher learning institutions in the Dar es Salaam region, Tanzania.

#### 3.4 Sampling Techniques and Data Collection

The study used a convenience sampling technique to reach 398 respondents from an estimated population of 100,000 Tertiary Institutions students in the Dar es Salaam region. The technique was chosen because of its strength in reducing bias, thereby improving the validity and reliability of the study findings for generalization. Online questionnaires created with Google Forms were shared in WhatsApp groups of ten Tertiary Institutions in the Dar es Salaam region. When the responses reached 398, which was the target sample size, the Google Form was closed, and



the data were exported to SPSS Version 25 for analysis. The quantitative data were verified with a follow-up interview with students who volunteered for the semi-structured interview. The researcher interacted with some students in their tertiary institutions for observation purposes to verify the questionnaire and interview results.

### 3.5 Measurement of the Variables

The dependent variable, students’ positive behaviour change in tertiary institutions in the Dar es Salaam region, was measured by evaluating student responses in relation to the study style, dressing style, eating habits, communication behaviour, relationships, and purchasing habits. The independent variable, social media use, was operationalized by a five-point Likert scale from 1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Moderately Agree, 4: Agree, to 5: Strongly Agree. For instance, Nesi et al. (2021) adopted a similar measurement framework in their study on university students in the United States, utilizing detailed surveys to capture both quantitative dimensions of social media use. Respondents rated their level of agreement with the indicators for all four variables using a five-point Likert-like scale, where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 5 indicated "strongly agree."

#### 3.5.1 Model of Fit Testing

To assess the effects of social media use on students’ behaviour change in tertiary education, the study developed a model  $SU = \beta_0 + \beta_1SS + \beta_2DS + \beta_3EH + \beta_4CB + \beta_5RH + \beta_6PB + \epsilon$ , where SU stood for social media use. SS for study style, DS for dressing style, EH for eating habits, RH for relationship habits, CB for communication behaviour, and PB for purchasing behaviour. A diagnostic test was conducted for a model of fit; the result is presented in Table 1. It indicates that the linear regression model developed in this study was statistically significant and fit for the study, as the R-squared was 75% and the adjusted R-squared was 75%, which means social media use among tertiary education students affects their behaviour by 75%, and only 25% relies on other factors. The Durbin-Watson test results 1.704, which lies between the acceptable values 1.5 to 2.5, hence the absence of autocorrelation among variables (Shahanga & Kasambala, 2023). Similarly, the prob for statistics was 0.0, which is below 0.5, hence the model fit for the study (Shahanga & Kasambala, 2024).

**Table 1**  
*Model Diagnostic Test Results*

R-Squared	75%
Adjusted R-squared	75%
F-statistics	25.132
Prob(F-statistics)	0.00000 <sup>b</sup>
Durbin-Watson Test	1.704

#### 3.5.2 Multicollinearity Test

The multicollinearity test was analyzed for social media effects on students' behaviour change in tertiary education. Results in Table 2 reveal that the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) for all of the variables under study ranged from 1.106 to 1.315, and the general average of VIF for all variables was 1.179, which was below 10. The tolerance level (1/VIF) ranged from 0.705 to 0.952, and the average was 0.875, which is generally above 0.1. This means all the explanatory variables used in this study were free from multicollinearity (Shahanga et al., 2023).

**Table 2**  
*Multicollinearity Test Results*

Variables	VIF	Tolerance
Study style	1.214	0.877
Dressing style	1.092	0.931
Eating habit	1.315	0.901
Communication behaviour	1.278	0.705
Relationship habit	1.106	0.952
Purchasing behaviour	1.074	0.884
<b>Average</b>	<b>1.179</b>	<b>0.875</b>

#### 3.5.3 Validity Test

To ensure validity, the questionnaire and interview guide were shared in a panel discussion with two research experts with a doctoral degree and experience in social science research. Questions were discussed in relation to the objectives and modified to adequately address the study objectives. Then, the tools were subjected to 10 students of



one tertiary institution for pretesting. The results indicated that, English language was a challenge to some of the respondents, so the tools were translated into the Kiswahili language for easy understanding. The tools in the Swahili language were also administered to another group of ten students, whose responses assured the clear understanding and freedom of the respondents to respond correctly to all the items.

### 3.5.3 Reliability

A Cronbach’s alpha test was conducted for all variables of the study to ensure the reliability. The results presented in Table 3 indicate that all the study variables had an alpha of 0.7 or above, hence acceptable or excellent as the rule of thumb is (Shahanga & Kasambala, 2023;2024).

**Table 3**  
*Scale Test for Reliability Analysis Results*

Measurement Scale	Cronbach’s Alpha	Remarks
Social media use	.74	Acceptable
Study style	.82	Excellent
Dressing style	.79	Acceptable
Eating habit	.69	Acceptable
Language use	.84	Excellent
Relationship habit	.72	Acceptable
Purchasing behaviour	.77	Acceptable

## IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Descriptive Results

Descriptive statistics for the study variables included mean, standard deviation (S.D.), and Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ). Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for the study variables based on 398 respondents. The responses indicated a mean score ranging between 0.37 and 0.42, which is above the average mean of 3.0 in a five-point scale, and a standard deviation ranging between 0.728 and 0.907, hence the positive effects of social media use on students' positive behaviour change in Tertiary Institutions. The results further indicate that social media use has influenced students’ change in dressing styles. The physical observation of tertiary students verifies these changes, particularly in smart descent dressing, matching dress colours and shoes, handbags, and belts. Also, social media has influenced them to change their eating habit. The physical observation indicates that most of the students in tertiary institutions during meal time queue for chicken chips and not for ugali or rice, the common food eaten in their homes. About the communication behaviour, they prefer recording and posting voice notes and video clips, making conference calls and video meetings rather than physical meetings, and purchasing habits online rather than in physical shops. That means social media has become a changing agent for students’ behaviour.

**Table 4**  
*Descriptive Analysis Results*

Variables	Mean	SD	( $\alpha$ ).
I use social media	0.41	0.854	.89
I use social media as a learning tool	0.36	0.752	.81
I have known various dressing styles through the use of social media	0.37	0.895	.82
I have changed my eating habits due to social media use	0.39	0.899	.79
I have learned how to communicate due to social media use	0.40	0.901	.74
I have established a new relationship through social media use	0.42	0.728	.86
I use my social media to purchase things online	0.38	0.907	.77

### 4.2 Regression Results

To assess the effects of social media use on students’ positive behaviour change in tertiary institutions, the study conducted a descriptive statistics analysis through the linear regression model. The regression coefficient for social media use on student behaviour varied from one variable to another. One study style was ( $\beta = 0.18, p < .003$ ); dressing style ( $\beta = 0.057, p < .016$ ); eating habit ( $\beta = 0.112, p < .052$ ); communication behaviour ( $\beta = 0.015, p < .041$ ); relationship habit ( $\beta = 0.213, p < .031$ ) and on purchasing habit ( $\beta = 0.148, p < .024$ ) as summarized in table 5. The results suggest a positive and significant effect of social media use on students’ positive behaviour change in tertiary education institutions. The results imply that the increasing use of social media influences the behaviour

change positively and significantly; therefore, social media needs to be regulated to capitalize on the positive effects on behaviour change.

**Table 5**

*Linear Regression Analysis Results*

Variables	Coefficients	t-statistics	Sig	Decision
(Constant)	0.21	0.554	0.54	
I have learnt how to study through social media use	0.18	0.907	0.003	Accepted
I have known various dressing styles through the use of social media	0.057	0.95	0.016	Accepted
I have changed my eating habits due to social media use	0.112	0.899	0.052	Accepted
I have learned how to communicate due to social media use	0.015	0.201	0.041	Accepted
I have established a new relationship through social media use	0.213	0.228	0.031	Accepted
I use my social media to purchase things online	0.148	0.907	0.024	Accepted

$$SU = \beta_0 + \beta_1SS + \beta_2DS + \beta_3EH + \beta_4LU + \beta_5RH + \beta_6PB + \epsilon$$

a. Predictors: (Constant), study style (SS), dressing styles (DS), eating habits (EH), communication style (LU), relationship habit (RH), purchasing behaviour (PB).

b. Dependent Variable: Social Media Use (SU).

### 4.3 Qualitative Results

The qualitative results included interview and observation results conducted with students within their tertiary educational institutions.

#### 4.3.1 Interview results

Triangulating the regression results, the follow-up interview was conducted with 20 students, two from each institute of study, a male and a female. Their responses on how social media affects students' behaviour in tertiary institutions. Their responses were:

*"Most of us girls joining tertiary institutions come with behaviour learnt from our parents or community. Once we join these institutions and own a smartphone, we learn to eat chips instead of ugali, dress like white ladies rather than African women, and purchase online rather than in physical shops".* (Interview response from female students of Institute A, July 2025).

A male respondent added:

*"Social media has both positive and negative effects, depending on the user, but for me it has helped me to match clothes, colours, and shoes, how to communicate via WhatsApp video calls, and access YouTube video clips relating to my programme of study".* (Interview response from a male student of Institute D, July 2025).

The interview results are congruent with the quantitative results on the effects of social media on students' behaviour change in relation to study style, eating, communication, dressing, relationships, and purchasing habits. However, the effects are double-edged, positive and negative; therefore, social media are neither good nor bad but depend on the user and use.

#### 4.3.2 Observational results

The physical observation in two tertiary training institutions out of 10 under study indicated that 8 out of every 10 students had a smartphone from which they accessed social media platforms. They had a different dressing style; most of them stylishly matched clothes, handbags, and shoes in colours. Also, during midday, when most of them take lunch, they mostly queue for chips rather than ugali and rice. In their study groups, they use social media shared clips to learn and discuss different academic matters. Others communicate using emojis rather than words, writing in short forms rather than full words or sentences. The observation results are similar to what was found in the descriptive and interview results. The observation results indicate that social media use has become a part and parcel of students' behaviour and social life.

### 4.4 Discussion

The regression, interview, and observation results suggest a positive and significant impact of social media use on students' behaviour change in tertiary education institutions. If social media has influenced the students' change in study style, and if such a study style has improved academic performance, that is a positive change, hence the positive effect of social media; if the new study style has deprived their academic performance, such effects are negative. The effects of social media on study style concur with the previous study in Indonesia, which indicated that students who comply with the social media use regulation improved their academic performance (Mujiwat & Laili,



2023). This implies that the positive results of social media rely mainly on the students' compliance with the use regulations. In relation to the effects on dressing style, if students imitate the decent dressing style through social media, that is a positive effect on behaviour change, which improves their personalities. The results deviate from the previous study in Nigeria, which found that social media use among students negatively impacts their change in dressing patterns by imitating celebrities, western dress styles, peer influence, and fashion in vogue (Ibrahim, 2020). About the eating habit, if the use of social media impacts students' choice of food to meet their nutritional needs, but abandoning their traditional food types is a negative effect of social media. The results deviate from the previous study in Turkey, which associated social media use and eating disorders among students (Gunes & Dremirers, 2023). That means social media influenced students' choices of what to eat, which has both mixed effects positive and negative effects. About the relationship habits, if social media can lead to friendship formation and relationship breakups, that means it plays a double-edged sword function of positive and negative, hence a need to be regulated. The results concur with a previous study in Tanzania, which showed mixed social effects of social media use at the family and societal level, strengthening family communication but reducing family ties (Kshaija, 2021). Moreover, if social media use has enhanced the students' purchasing behaviour, changing from physical to online, that is a positive effect if the online systems enable them to get a variety of items, cheap, durable, and genuine products, rather than physical shopping. The results concur with a previous study in India, which found that social media has enabled consumers to search product variety brands, compare price and durability, and receive views of previous consumers, which enable them to decide what, when, and where to buy (Biswas & Dhimal, 2021). The effects of social media use on positive behaviour change among students differ from earlier studies, which focused only on the negative effects of social media without considering its positive aspects in the United States, where it was shown that social media use increases levels of cyberbullying and psychological distress among students (Nesi et al., 2021). Similarly, Alvi (2021) identified procrastination, declining academic achievement, and mental health issues as negative effects of social media among students in tertiary institutions in Dar es Salaam. It deviates from the study in Kenya, which found that the use of social media among students influences their exam cheating, pornography, stress, depression, and lowers their memory (Nyangesa et al., 2019). The results align with the media equation theory because when the media is treated as real people, it can lead to both positive and negative effects. Just as we take precautions when interacting with people, we should do the same when engaging with social media. No one is entirely good or bad; it depends on how you interact with them.

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

The results showed a positive and significant effect of social media on students' behaviour change in tertiary institutions. Social media has influenced changes in their study habits, dressing styles, eating habits, communication behaviour, relationships, and purchasing behaviour. Some of the changes improved their academic performance and well-being, while others alienated them from their developmental social-cultural values. Therefore, this study concludes that social media are neither good nor bad, but how they are used, students in tertiary institutions should be guided on the responsible use of social media to capitalize on the advantages and minimize negative effects to achieve their academic and social goals.

### 5.2 Recommendations

To enhance the responsive use of social media in tertiary institutions, the tertiary institutions should incorporate in the curriculum social media as a teaching, learning, and assessment tool for students, instructors, and management. Through these initiatives, students will develop awareness of the educative role of social media. Also, tertiary institutions should develop guidelines on the responsive social media use and conduct capacity building for their students about the dos and don'ts in social media. While policy interventions aim to regulate social media use purposely to sustain and uphold the benefits of social media and, at the same time, regulate its use to mitigate the detrimental effects through a legal framework, building students' capacity is proposed as a strong, effective institutional approach to encourage responsible social media use. Future research could explore the effects of social media among adult employees and graduates to see if online behaviour during higher education carries over into the workforce.

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