

# **Social Networks as Bridges to Learning: An Investigation and Exploration of Impact and Effectiveness**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

*This research aims to examine the role of social media in the context of open access to education and the promotion of open educational policies. Open access to education and open educational policies seek to ensure equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for all, transcending traditional barriers that hinder access to formal education. Social platforms, understood as online portals where users can share content, interact, and collaborate, have demonstrated significant potential in facilitating open access to education. This study seeks to analyze the specific features and tools offered by these platforms that facilitate the sharing and dissemination of educational resources. The analysis highlights the benefits of an open and collaborative approach to learning, as access to high-quality educational resources can help bridge gaps in formal education, providing opportunities for personalized and flexible learning. In particular, the examination of the role of Instagram in the context of open access to education and the promotion of open educational policies reveals its relevance as a platform for sharing educational content. The primary objective of this research is to underscore these positive aspects, while acknowledging the need to address some critical challenges. Among these challenges are ensuring the quality and reliability of shared educational resources and safeguarding user privacy and security.*

**Keywords:** *Social Network, Open Education Access, Open Educational Policies, Instagram, Sharing of Educational Content*

## **Introduction**

The evolution of social media represents a significant phenomenon in the technological landscape of the last century, with some platforms having emerged only recently. However, within the academic community, there still exists a lack of consensus on how to comprehensively assess the impacts of these technologies. In particular, the terminology used to describe the issue of social media addiction exhibits considerable heterogeneity (Varona et al., 2022). Furthermore, numerous studies have focused on investigating social media dependencies and their potential consequences on mental health and individual well-being (Elmer & Stadtfeld, 2020). Yet, to fully grasp the extent of this phenomenon, it is essential to examine data related to the use and proliferation of mobile devices and social media. Currently, there are approximately 5 billion Internet users worldwide, with over 4.5 billion active social media users (DataReportal, 2023). Globally, individuals dedicate an average of about 2.5 hours per day to social media usage (DataReportal, 2023). Concerning this growing dependence, Williams (2018) has provided alarming data that underscores the level of user engagement. On average, individuals check their mobile

devices 150 times a day and touch them as many as 2,600 times a day. Moreover, according to estimates, mobile devices represent the last object people look at before going to sleep. These data, along with research conducted on this topic, highlight the importance of gaining an in-depth understanding of the effects of social media on daily life and beyond. The ever-expanding prevalence of these technologies necessitates a critical analysis and awareness of the potential risks associated with excessive social media use, emphasizing the urgency for further studies and research to address this phenomenon comprehensively and effectively. Beyond this pivotal consideration, it is imperative to focus on additional relevant issues, given the fundamental premise that social media has become an intrinsic and irremovable component of contemporary human experience. This recognition compels us to thoroughly examine the social, cultural, psychological, and ethical impacts of social media in modern society. The widespread dissemination of these platforms has generated a plethora of complex dynamics, encompassing how people communicate, connect, and share information. These changes have brought forth new opportunities but also significant challenges, including privacy management, the spread of misinformation, the creation of filter bubbles, and the perception of the self in relation to others through the dynamics of exhibitionism and social comparison. Furthermore, it is essential to investigate how organizations, institutions, and businesses utilize social media for communication, marketing, and audience engagement. The online presence of organizations, the use of personal data, and responsibilities in digital ethics are critical issues that require thorough analysis and informed debate. Therefore, while it is undeniable that these online sharing platforms have deeply embedded themselves in contemporary human life, it is equally important to consider the broad spectrum of issues connected to this phenomenon, extending well beyond personal use. A multidimensional approach is fundamental to fully comprehend the role and impact today and to develop appropriate strategies and policies to address the challenges and maximize the benefits of this increasingly ubiquitous technology. Furthermore, the ongoing digital transition presents new challenges, making innovation a cross-cutting element and reshaping forms and models of organization in every aspect of social life. In this regard, digitization directly enters the frameworks of analysis, research, and dissemination within the humanities, which are essential components of the new knowledge society. This highlights an increasingly greater integration of technology into daily practices, extending to profound and complex experiences such as learning, knowledge exchange, human relationships, and hybrid human-machine relationships (Castells, 2000; Boccia Artieri, 2006, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Within an increasingly intricate yet rapidly evolving landscape, this current research occupies a particularly relevant field of study. Today's global society is characterized by a significant shift in educational paradigms, with a growing commitment to open access to education and the promotion of open educational policies. These initiatives are inherently aimed at eliminating

inequalities in education by breaking down the traditional barriers that hinder access to formal educational institutions. In this context, social media platforms, serving as digital ecosystems where individuals can share content, engage in interactions, and collaborate, have demonstrated substantial potential as drivers of open access to education. This study aims to conduct an analysis of the specific resources and functionalities offered by these platforms, which facilitate the dissemination and sharing of educational resources. The analysis seeks to highlight the benefits associated with an open and collaborative approach to learning, as access to high-value educational resources can act as a catalyst in bridging gaps in formal education, while offering opportunities for personalized and flexible learning. Taking into account that despite the widespread and extensive accessibility of such platforms, some studies seem to derive limited benefit in terms of learning from their interaction with them (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2023). Particular attention will be devoted to examining the role of Instagram in the context of open access to education and the promotion of open educational policies, emphasizing its relevance as a platform for the dissemination of educational content. Instagram, in addition to being a well-known visual content-oriented social media site, assumes significant relevance in the context of learning. Numerous studies have documented how users utilize this platform to share a wide range of extraordinary images, which serve as vehicles to express their lives and personal stories (Anuar et al., 2020; Febria Lina & Setiyanto, 2021). This aspect of visual sharing offers a unique opportunity for learning as it allows individuals to explore different perspectives and contexts through the observation and analysis of images shared by their fellow citizens and members of the global community. Users can learn through the viewing of images that cover a wide range of topics, from visual arts to culinary arts, from environmental education to fashion, and even in the realm of politics (Battista, 2023). Interaction with high-quality visual content can stimulate curiosity and reflection, encouraging users to delve further into the topics that interest them. In summary, Instagram represents not only a means for sharing personal experiences and life stories but also an informal learning environment where users can gain new knowledge and perspectives through the exploration of images shared by the community. This dual dimension of the platform underscores its significant impact in promoting learning through visual media and social sharing. In our analysis process, the complexity of the challenges inherent in this landscape becomes apparent. Among these challenges are the need to ensure the quality and reliability of shared educational resources, as well as the protection of user privacy and security.

The primary objective of this contribution is to provide a comprehensive overview of these aspects, thus contributing to an in-depth understanding of the crucial role of social media in the realm of open access to education and open educational policies.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The section of theoretical and contextual research forms the conceptual foundation of this study, providing a comprehensive analysis of theories, models, and contexts relevant to the research topic. This section plays a crucial role in establishing a solid conceptual framework and deepening the understanding of the underlying phenomena under investigation. The starting awareness lies in the fact that one of the primary commitments in contemporary education involves the need to redefine and reconfigure the educational space to align it appropriately with a perpetually evolving society. In this context, social networks, which represent one of the distinctive features of the Web 2.0 paradigm, must undergo an in-depth analysis that goes beyond the apparent perception of "weapons of mass distraction," especially considering their undeniable appeal among the new generations. Instead, they must be understood as a powerful educational resource, as they are characterized by their core focus on interaction and the ability to facilitate immediate and persuasive communication (Salzano & Battista, 2022). For example, Greenhow (2011) expresses appreciation for the pedagogical adaptation of open social network environments, as she considers these platforms capable of initiating a learning process in various ways. They have the potential to generate social and civic benefits, both online and offline, with significant implications for the field of education. Some emphasize how social networks can encourage sharing personal and professional interests and aspirations (Anderson, 2009), often overlooked in traditional study contexts. Similarly, these tools enable the cataloging, organization, and annotation of online resources created by external participants, extending sharing beyond the limits imposed by conventional academic courses. In line with these observations, Fini and Cigognini (2009) emphasize that the use of social media can provide the socio-relational substrate, ranging from informal relationships to connections with professional communities, and the cognitive substrate, through the exchange of knowledge and competencies, which can be effectively integrated with formal e-learning courses. These approaches confirm the significant role that social networks can play in learning, providing a dynamic and socially interactive learning context that goes beyond traditional educational approaches while promoting the development of personal and professional skills. Therefore, in the face of constant change, there is a need for a critical and thoughtful perspective on the use of social networks in the educational context. Far from being considered mere sources of distraction, they can represent a vast territory of learning opportunities. Their intrinsic ability to facilitate interaction and promote rapid and effective communication provides fertile ground for the implementation of innovative teaching strategies. Over a significant period, the urgent need to effectively address the inherent challenges represented by these tools has emerged, emphasizing integrated approaches aimed at creating more sophisticated educational contexts that facilitate interaction and learning activities, while always

considering a Digital Divide that prevents widespread penetration (Salzano et al., 2023). This imperative reflects the growing awareness that the adoption of social networks and online resources in the educational context requires a comprehensive strategy that goes beyond a fragmented approach. Such a strategy must be conceived as a coherent and synergistic system capable of harmonizing the various dimensions of technology-mediated education. It is an appeal to consider these tools not only as mere means of communication or sharing but as an integral part of a broader and well-structured educational environment. In this perspective, it is possible to identify the fundamental characteristics of any practice related to social media, such as widespread socialization and mass participation. These characteristics refer to the ability to harness the power of collective actions undertaken by groups of online users, where actions are closely intertwined with the dynamics of social relationships and active user participation (Dolata & Schrape, 2016). Along this trajectory, the explosive growth of social media has profoundly reconfigured how the majority of end-users interact with the Internet. The Internet of 2012 can no longer be reduced to a linear system of one-way functioning, where a single user passively receives data, information, and resources from a relatively limited and selected number of content providers.

Instead, today's Internet can be driven (and to some extent defined) by the activities of regular users, a concept known as "many-to-many" rather than "one-to-many" (O'Reilly, 2005). In essence, the Internet era during the 2010s, the age of social media, significantly distinguishes itself from the Internet era of the 1990s and 2000s, the age of Cyberspace (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013). Furthermore, the user in the context of social media has undergone a significant transformation: they are no longer to be considered mere passive consumers of content but rather active participants in the mutual creation of content and digital interaction. Users of social platforms connect online with the intention to share, evaluate, incorporate, remix, form friendships, and engage in emerging trends. In many respects, all of these activities can be conceptualized as genealogical archiving processes, involving the sharing of content, the establishment of interpersonal connections, the evaluation of cultural elements, and the active production of digital content (Gehl, 2011). In this new digital dynamic, users have become active agents and participants in the construction and circulation of knowledge. Their involvement extends beyond a passive reception role, embracing a wide range of creative and relational activities. This phenomenon reflects a trend towards a user-centric culture where content creation and distribution are democratized, allowing individuals to have a significant impact on the production and circulation of information.

## **Methodological Note**

This study aims to conduct an in-depth theoretical analysis of the role of social networks in the context of learning, with the objective of identifying and evaluating emerging educational dynamics and available pedagogical strategies. This research area holds significant relevance within the landscape of contemporary education, not only for its practical implications but also for the fundamental pedagogical and social considerations it entails. The theoretical approach adopted in this investigation will allow for a critical examination of the various dimensions related to the use of social networks as learning tools, laying the foundation for a deeper understanding of how such platforms can influence the educational process and learning dynamics. The social significance of this research lies in its ability to promote greater awareness among the stakeholders involved in education regarding the potential and challenges offered by social networks in learning, enabling more informed participation in educational practices. At the same time, the pedagogical importance of this work is evident in its capacity to highlight the didactic implications associated with the use of social platforms, thereby making a significant contribution to the discussion on the design and implementation of effective learning strategies in the digital age. Given the continually evolving nature of social network-mediated educational dynamics and the increasing attention to this topic in the academic sphere, this research represents an innovative contribution from both a theoretical and prospective standpoint. Its originality lies in its ability to integrate various dimensions, including technology, pedagogy, and the sociology of learning, thus providing a comprehensive overview of the interconnections among these complex aspects. Furthermore, it seeks to lay the groundwork for a better understanding of the future dynamics of social network-mediated education, offering a clear and informed perspective on how to best leverage such platforms to facilitate learning. The methodology employed in this theoretical study was designed with the aim of providing a rigorous and systematic framework for the analysis of the concepts and theories within the scope of the research. Firstly, an extensive literature review was conducted, with the objective of identifying the most authoritative and relevant primary and secondary sources related to the topics under consideration. This initial phase of documentary research allowed for the delineation of the key concepts and theories subject to investigation. Subsequently, a critical and comparative analysis approach was adopted to examine the identified theories and models in detail. This process entailed a systematic assessment of the principal characteristics, differences, and similarities among various theoretical perspectives, with the purpose of identifying their primary areas of conceptual convergence and divergence. The synthesis of information derived from this critical analysis contributed to the development of a comprehensive understanding of the themes addressed in this article.

## **Instagram: An Ally in Online Learning?**

Instagram, as an integral part of the social media landscape, plays a significant role in the realm of online learning. This platform, known for its sharing of images and short videos, has demonstrated considerable potential in facilitating open access to education and promoting open educational policies. Its visually stimulating interface and ease of sharing educational content have made Instagram an appealing channel for the dissemination of knowledge and educational information. Users can access a wide range of visual content, such as infographics, tutorials, educational videos, and more, which make learning more engaging and accessible. Furthermore, it fosters user interaction and active participation through features like comments, stories, and education-related hashtags. These features promote the creation of online learning communities where users can share experiences, ask questions, and collaborate effectively. The use of specific education-related hashtags allows users to discover content related to their educational interests and access a vast network of educational resources. However, it also presents challenges, such as the need to assess the quality and reliability of shared content and protect user privacy. It is important for educators and users themselves to develop critical skills to evaluate and select trustworthy content and engage consciously in the educational environment of Instagram. In summary, Instagram represents a powerful and versatile learning platform within the social media landscape, offering users the opportunity to access quality educational content, interact with other learners, and actively participate in the learning experience. Its role in open access to education and the promotion of open educational policies is destined to grow significantly in the future of digital education. Below, we hypothesize five dimensions in which Instagram can act to promote open access to education and open educational policies:

### ***Dissemination of Quality Educational Content***

Instagram serves as a platform where educators and academic institutions can share high-quality educational content. These materials can include short lessons, infographics, video tutorials, and multimedia resources. Such sharing contributes to making education more accessible, enabling users to access reliable and in-depth information on a wide range of topics.

### ***Creation of Online Learning Communities***

Instagram facilitates the creation of online learning communities through social interaction and active user participation. Users can follow accounts dedicated to education, engage in discussions through comments and direct messages, and collaborate with other learners with similar interests. This aspect promotes the development of a global and interactive learning network.

### ***Personalized Learning***

Instagram's Stories features allow educators to create short and interactive educational content. This promotes personalized learning, as users can select the content they want to explore and do so at their own pace. The use of interactive tools, such as polls and quizzes, enriches the learning experience, enabling learners to actively participate.

### ***Global Access***

Instagram is a global platform that transcends geographical barriers, allowing educators and learners from different regions of the world to share and access educational resources. This dimension promotes open access to education on an international level, encourages cultural diversity in learning, and facilitates the exchange of knowledge globally.

### ***Awareness and Advocacy for Open Educational Policies***

Instagram can serve as a tool for raising awareness and advocacy to promote open educational policies. Educators and education advocates can use the platform to share information, statistics, and stories related to the importance of open education and equitable access to learning. This contributes to a broader public discourse on the need for accountability-oriented regulations and educational policies in the digital era.

The platform under analysis, as an integral part of the social media ecosystem, offers ample opportunities to support open access to education and open educational policies. Through the dissemination of high-quality content, the creation of learning communities, the promotion of personalized learning, global access, and advocacy for educational policies, Instagram can play a significant role in the evolution of education in the digital age. Additionally, a prominent aspect of the discussed topic should be emphasized. The human need for validation, as stated by Vygotsky (1990), has deep roots in the social dimension of cognition. This concept can be widely applied to the use of social media platforms like Instagram in the context of learning. Instagram, like many other social media platforms, offers users the opportunity to engage with others' thinking through the sharing of visual and textual content. This active participation can be seen as a mechanism for social validation in which individuals seek to communicate their knowledge, experiences, and opinions to convince or influence other members of the virtual community. In the educational context, Instagram can be used as a tool to promote collaborative learning and knowledge sharing among different users. Through the sharing of photos, videos, or informative posts, they can engage in meaningful and constructive discussions, leveraging the social dimension of validation to reinforce their skills and learn from others. Among all the features offered by Instagram, short video clips known as "Reels"



are certainly of great importance in the context of online learning. These brief video clips, ranging from 15 to 90 seconds, not only entertain users but also play a significant role in virtual education. Their intrinsic ability to capture attention, generate positive emotional responses such as enjoyment, and engage the audience with plot twists or surprising elements make them a powerful tool for knowledge dissemination.

Furthermore, Reels videos are stimulating as they can initiate viral trends and discussions that other users can easily participate in. This aspect is particularly advantageous in the context of online learning, where the sharing of engaging content can promote interaction among students, creating a dynamic learning community. The ability to use creative tools such as text, filters, and camera effects allows educators to personalize educational content, making learning more engaging and effective. Thanks to their capacity for entertainment, stimulation, and personalization, Reels videos can be a fundamental element in online learning, helping educators reach and effectively engage students in a virtual environment. A thorough analysis of the use of Reels on Instagram reveals surprising versatility, contrary to the initial perception that relegates them to superficial and immediate content. These short videos, constrained to 90 seconds, offer an ideal platform for presenting a wide range of topics, ranging from simpler concepts to more complex ones. The time limitation, although seemingly restrictive, turns into an advantage as it forces content creators to focus on the key concepts of the subject, contributing to effectively synthesize and communicate the desired information. The integration of music also emerges as a significant element in enhancing communicative effectiveness. The soundtrack can underscore the atmosphere of the topic, adding an emotional and engaging dimension that helps maintain the viewers' attention. In particular, the most appreciated videos often feature experts or teachers using a whiteboard and markers or writing on paper or digital devices. This visual approach not only facilitates understanding of the topics but also allows for clear and concise communication. To this, the hashtag research strategy should be added, which emerges as an important navigation and discovery tool within Instagram. The use of hashtags has now assumed considerable relevance in contemporary communication dynamics, becoming an informal and engaging mechanism for drawing attention to themes or elements that represent our identity and that we want to highlight within our social networks. This phenomenon can be understood as a targeted personalization process, with the aim of creating a messaging effect that accurately reflects our self and interests (Rivoltella & Rossi, 2019). The use of hashtags, which has become a kind of symbolic language of digital communication, allows people to categorize, identify, and share content quickly and effectively. From an academic perspective, this phenomenon can be interpreted as an expression of the construction of digital identity within social networks. The strategic use of hashtags allows individuals to assert their identity by emphasizing significant elements of their personality, opinions, or interests.

This process of personalization can significantly influence how others perceive us within social networks, contributing to the construction of a coherent and distinctive digital narrative. Furthermore, the use of hashtags is not only an act of self-expression but also a form of participation in digital culture. Through the use of common hashtags, individuals can connect with others who share the same interests or viewpoints, thereby helping to create virtual communities based on affinity.

This process of aggregation and community-building is a phenomenon of significant sociological and cultural relevance in the digital age. What has been said goes beyond a simple cultural trend and is a complex manifestation of digital communication, reflecting both the search for individual personalization and participation in the construction of online communities. This phenomenon is becoming an increasingly interesting topic for scholars in the social sciences, as it provides significant insights into the nature of contemporary communication and the construction of digital identity. Moreover, the choice of specific hashtags is crucial for identifying the topic of interest and accessing relevant content.

Ultimately, the educational aspect, as emphasized by Calvani (1998), deals with the complex series of interventions aimed at the design, implementation, management, and evaluation of "learning environments." These environments represent specific contexts designed to facilitate specific learning processes in individuals who may lack initial experience in a particular subject. Such learning processes emerge from the appropriate combination of cultural, normative, and technological elements, as well as specific human actions. Therefore, if didactics and learning are disciplines that focus on creating conditions and contexts in which individuals can learn effectively, leveraging both existing cultural knowledge and available technological resources, integrated with human interaction. Social networks, and Instagram in particular, with this approach aim to provide an optimal environment for the acquisition and construction of knowledge, carefully considering the needs and characteristics of learners. Didactics is a multidisciplinary field that concerns the development of educational strategies and methodologies aimed at promoting learning efficiently and effectively.

## **Conclusion**

In recent years, a broad and nuanced debate has emerged regarding the pedagogical and didactic potential of social networks. Numerous scholars, especially those who adopt the social learning and connectivism approach, including Siemens (2005), have highlighted the benefits that such platforms can bring to teaching and learning. In particular, the value derived from the synergy between environments originally created for recreational and

social purposes and learning environments designed with specific educational objectives is emphasized. However, despite the growing relevance of studies on this topic, there is also a certain degree of skepticism in the broader context of research. The current debate is characterized by a deep reflection on the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and risks associated with the incorporation of social tools into educational design.

In particular, it highlights the complex dynamics that can emerge when effectively integrating social networks into education, considering both the advantages and potential obstacles in order to develop informed and balanced educational strategies. Fundamental is the observation by Boccia Artieri (2012) regarding the redefinition of the dynamics of production, distribution, and consumption of symbolic forms in society through blogs, social networks, and cooperative wiki-style production. This lays a significant foundation for the analysis of the educational potential of digital applications. In particular, the possibility of harnessing informal e-learning based on the use of social media to create a rich socio-relational and cognitive context characterized by the sharing of knowledge and skills emerges, to be integrated in synergy with formal e-learning. Social platforms, as participatory environments spontaneously chosen by users, present the opportunity to become the backbone of new inclusive educational projects. These contexts allow for the sharing of interests and aspirations that often remain outside traditional environments. Of course, in this developed mechanism, in the process of knowledge construction and sedimentation, the so-called "digital immigrants," those who acquired digital skills at a later stage of their lives, can guide and lead the "digital natives," the new generations who grew up in the digital age, contributing with their creative spirit and confident determination. However, it is crucial that this culture of speed, of immediate interaction with digital technology, typical of the so-called "net generation," is grounded in a terrain that promotes an attitude of reflection.

Moreover, it must be channeled towards meaningful learning that is capable of combining the ease and speed of digital skills with methodological reflectivity, critical awareness, and the critical thinking typical of mature knowledge. This balance between the technological and pedagogical dimensions is crucial to ensure that the use of social media in education can have a lasting and profound impact on student learning, contributing to the formation of competent and aware individuals in the digital age. However, an additional consideration must still be addressed, even if this amalgamation primarily aims at democratizing education by overcoming traditional barriers that often limit access to formal learning. From a positive perspective, it is evident that an open and collaborative approach to learning, facilitated through the use of social media, offers numerous advantages. Access to high-quality educational resources available on these platforms can bridge existing gaps in formal

education, providing opportunities for personalized and flexible learning that adapts to the needs and individual paces of students. In particular, the analysis of Instagram's role in the context of open access to education and open educational policies underscores its relevance as a means of sharing educational content, thereby contributing to the promotion of accessibility and inclusion in learning. However, it is important to emphasize that this research also grapples with some critical challenges. Among these, one of the foremost concerns the need to ensure the quality and reliability of educational resources shared on social media. The diversity of sources and the absence of standardized evaluation systems can compromise the coherence and validity of accessible information.

Furthermore, the issue of safeguarding user privacy and security arises, as intensive use of social media can entail risks related to the sharing of personal data and potential exposure to inappropriate or harmful content. In summary, despite the considerable potential for open access to education and the promotion of open educational policies, this research lays the groundwork for addressing future challenges related to resource quality and user safety, in order to maximize the benefits derived from using social media as a tool for open education.

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