

Beyond the Feed: Instagram Usage Patterns and Academic Engagement among Students in Kozhikode, Kerala

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Abstract: Instagram is now part of daily students' lives. This study examines how students in Kozhikode use the Instagram platform and how that use relates to their academic engagement. It draws on an online survey of 318 respondents aged 16 to 26. Most were undergraduate and postgraduate students. Instagram penetration was very high 95.3% of respondents used it. Two-thirds of users (66.3%) spent two or more hours a day on it, and nearly half spent more than half that time watching Reels. Entertainment was the main reason for use, followed by communication. Study habits showed heavy overlap with Instagram. About two-thirds used it while studying at least sometimes. About 73% checked it during study breaks. Nearly half used it often or always within 30 minutes of sleep. Self-reported academic effects were mixed. About 44% felt Instagram reduced their academic time. About 35% said it was hard to return to studying after long sessions. About 34% felt it harmed concentration. A third to a half of respondents stayed neutral on these items. The study concludes that Instagram cannot be characterised as unambiguously detrimental. It is a pervasive, entertainment-led habit that competes with study for time and attention.

Keywords: Instagram Usage, Academic Engagement, College Students, Social Media, Study Habits, Kozhikode.

Introduction

Digital media have become embedded in the everyday routines of student life. The smartphone now shares the study desk with the notebook. Notifications interrupt reading and writing. Short videos fill the pauses between academic tasks. Instagram occupies a central position in this pattern. It began as a photo-sharing application and has evolved into a multimodal platform that combines video, messaging and commerce. Its Reels feature delivers short-form video through an algorithmically curated, continuous stream. India is among the largest Instagram markets globally, and young adults constitute the core of its user base (Kemp, 2024).

Kerala offers a distinctive context for inquiry. The state is characterised by high literacy, widespread smartphone access and an active culture of public debate. Kozhikode is a major centre of higher education, and its students represent diverse disciplines, including the arts, science, law, engineering and the health professions. These students are also intensive users of Instagram. However, empirical evidence on the nature of this use, and on its relationship with academic life, remains limited at the local level. This article addresses that gap. It does not take a normative position on whether Instagram is beneficial or harmful. It adopts an empirical approach instead. It examines the extent, purpose and timing of students' Instagram use, and it explores how students perceive its influence on their academic engagement.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education assumes sustained attention. Reading, writing, revision and reflection all need unbroken time. Instagram is built for the opposite. It rewards glances, frequent returns and endless scrolling. Students sense this tension. Many say they lose time or focus. Yet many also defend the platform as a source of entertainment, friendship, news and even learning. Public debate swings between moral panic and denial. Three problems were identified. First, the evidence from Indian campuses, and from Kerala in particular, is thin. Most studies cover Facebook or "social media" in general. Second, usage is rarely broken down by pattern: duration, frequency, content type and timing. Third, "academic engagement" is often reduced to grades. It also includes concentration, time management, task completion and the ability to resume study after a distraction. This study addresses these gaps. It describes how Kozhikode's college students use Instagram. It then examines how they perceive its effect on their academic engagement.

Objective of the Study

➤ To examine how college students in Kozhikode use Instagram and how they perceive its effect on their academic engagement, including study time, concentration and the timely completion of academic work.

Research Question

➤ How do college students in Kozhikode use Instagram, and how does this use relate to their perceived academic engagement?

Review of Literature

Social media and academic performance

Early research on social networking and study focused on Facebook. Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) found that Facebook users reported lower grade point averages and fewer weekly study hours than non-users. Junco

(2012) took a finer approach. He found that time spent on Facebook predicted lower grades, while certain activities, such as checking friends' updates, mattered differently from others, such as sharing links.

Later studies widened the lens. Giunchiglia et al. (2018) linked heavier mobile social media use to lower academic performance among university students. Lau (2017) found that non-academic social media use and multitasking while studying were associated with poorer outcomes. Not all use is harmful in these accounts. What matters is the purpose and the timing.

Attention, multitasking and interruption

A second line of research explains the mechanism. Ophir, Nass and Wagner (2009) showed that heavy media multitaskers were worse at filtering irrelevant information. Rosen, Carrier and Cheever (2013) observed students during a short study period. Those who switched to media and messaging often performed worse on the task. Mark, Gudith and Klocke (2008) found that interrupted workers sped up to compensate but reported more stress and effort.

Even the phone itself can distract. Ward et al. (2017) reported that the mere presence of a smartphone reduced available cognitive capacity. Instagram's design deepens this effect. Notifications call the student back. Infinite scroll keeps the student there.

Sleep and night-time use

Academic engagement depends on rest. Hale and Guan (2015) reviewed evidence on screen time and sleep among young people. They found that screen use was associated with later bedtimes and shorter or poorer sleep. A student who scrolls before sleep may study less effectively the next day.

Motivations and gratifications

Not every use is a distraction. Uses and gratifications theory holds that people choose media to meet needs such as entertainment, information, social connection and identity (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). Instagram serves all of these. Students follow friends, creators, news pages and educational accounts. Excessive use can, for some, drift into problematic or addictive patterns (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Intent and intensity therefore need to be studied together.

Research Gap

The existing literature reveals four notable gaps. First, much of the available evidence is drawn from Western or East Asian samples, while studies from India, and Kerala in particular, remain limited. Second, most studies examine Facebook or "social media" as a single category, and Instagram, with its Reels-driven design, has received comparatively little specific attention. Third, many studies rely on grades as the sole outcome measure. This overlooks everyday indicators of academic engagement, such as study habits, concentration,

timely completion of assignments and the ability to resume work after interruption. Finally, few studies examine the timing of use across study sessions, study breaks and bedtime within a single analysis. This article addresses these gaps by providing a district-level, Instagram-specific and engagement-focused account of student use in Kozhikode, Kerala.

Research Methodology

The study used a descriptive, cross-sectional survey design. It aimed to capture patterns at a single point in time, not to test causation. Data came from a structured online questionnaire built in Google Forms. It had 18 items in four blocks:

- **Profile (items 1 to 4):** age, gender, education and current Instagram use.
- **Usage patterns (items 5 to 8):** daily hours, checking frequency, primary reason and share of time on Reels.
- **Study-related behaviour (items 9 to 12):** use while studying, use during study breaks, use before sleep and weekly study hours outside class.
- **Perceived academic impact (items 13 to 18):** six five-point Likert statements from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

The survey received 318 responses at its widest. Item-level responses ranged from 277 to 318 because some questions were optional or skipped. Respondents were college students in Kozhikode, aged 16 to 26. Participation was voluntary and online, so the sample is best treated as a non-probability, convenience sample. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Responses were summarised as frequencies and percentages. Combined categories, such as "agree" and "strongly agree", were computed by adding the reported percentages. Where a response category was not labelled in the survey output, its percentage was derived from the remainder or reported as an approximate value. The study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall error and social desirability bias. Academic grades and objective screen-time records were not collected. The analysis is limited to descriptive distributions and does not include cross-tabulations or tests of statistical significance. Moreover, the sample was non-probabilistic. The findings therefore describe the present sample and cannot be generalised to all students in Kerala.

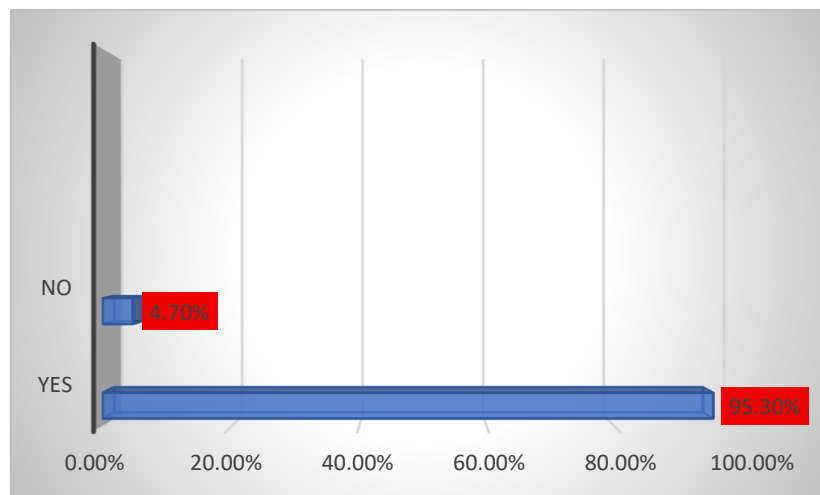
Findings and Discussion

Who the respondents are?

The respondents were predominantly young adults. Half of the sample (50%) were aged 21 to 23. About 31.4% were aged 18 to 20, and 11.9% were aged 16 to 18. The remaining 6.7% were aged 24 to 26. Of the 289 respondents who answered the gender question, 58.8% were women and 40.1% were men. About 1.1% chose

"others" or "prefer not to say". In terms of educational level, undergraduates formed the largest group (41.5%). They were followed by students in professional courses (23.9%), postgraduates (12.3%) and higher secondary students (10.4%). The remaining respondents identified themselves by year of study. The sample therefore skews towards young, female and undergraduate students. The findings thus speak most directly to early-adult learners in higher education.

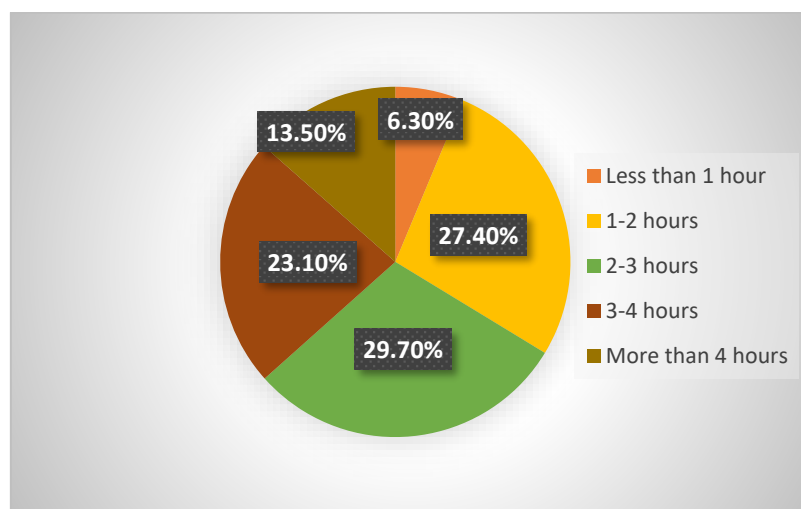
Do you currently use Instagram?



Source: Field Survey

Instagram use is near-universal among the respondents. Of the 318 students surveyed, 95.3% reported that they currently use the platform. Only 4.7% did not. Among this population, Instagram is not a marginal platform. It is the dominant medium of social media use.

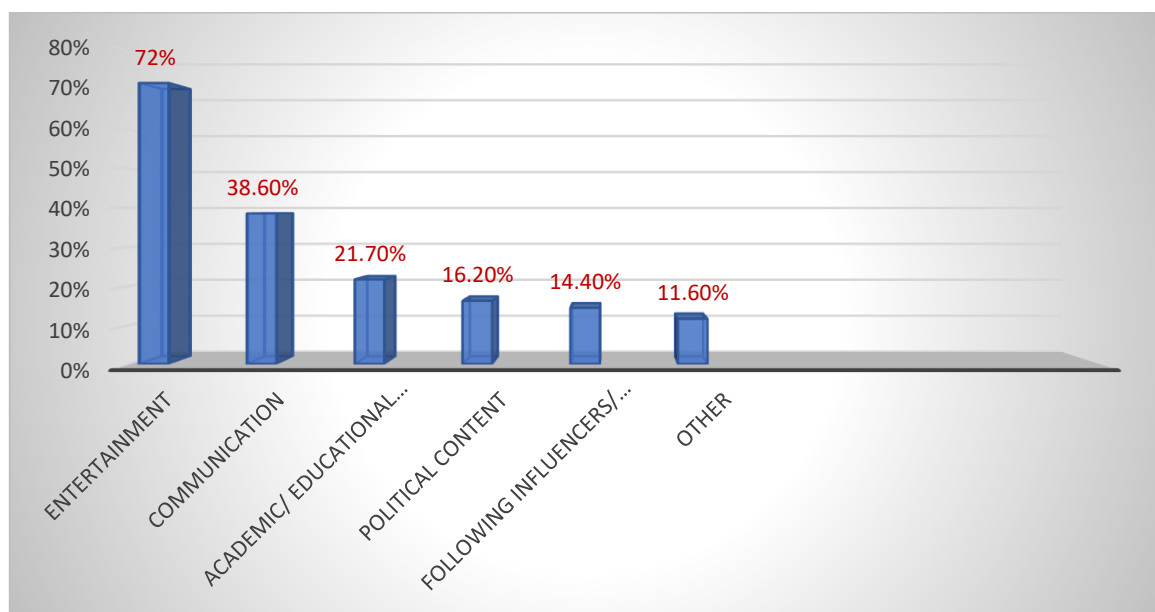
Approximately how many hours do you spend on Instagram on an average day?



Source: Field Survey

Daily time spent on Instagram was substantial among the 303 respondents. Only 6.3% used the platform for less than one hour. About 27.4% spent one to two hours, and 29.7% spent two to three hours. Another 23.1% spent three to four hours, while 13.5% spent more than four hours. Thus, two-thirds of respondents (66.3%) used Instagram for two hours or more daily, and over a third (36.6%) used it for three hours or more. Few other activities occupy this much unstructured time in a student's day. Checking frequency was also high. About 31% opened the app six to ten times a day, and 18.2% did so 11 to 20 times. A further 13.5% checked it more than 20 times. In total, 31.7% checked the app more than ten times daily. Notably, 18.2% of respondents did not keep track of how often they checked it. This suggests automatic, habitual use that is not consciously monitored.

What is your primary reason for using Instagram?

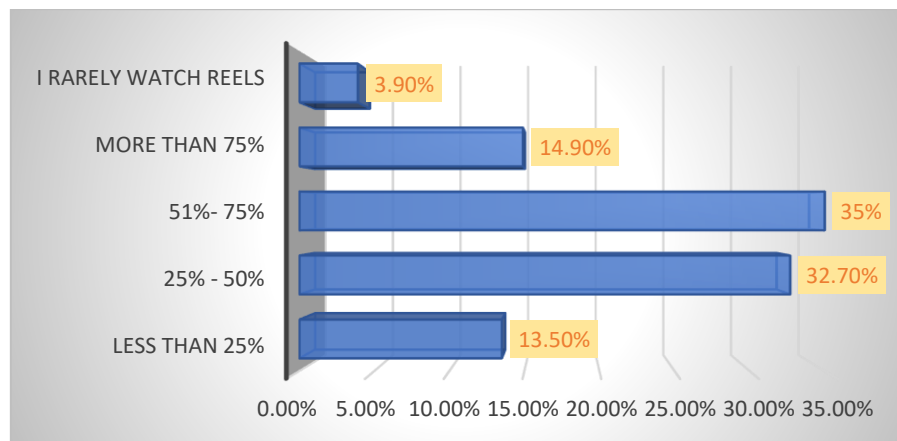


Note: This is a multiple-response question; hence, percentages do not total 100.

Source: Field Survey

More than 200 of the 277 respondents cited entertainment as the most frequent reason for using Instagram (over 72%). Communication followed with 107 responses (38.6%). Respondents cited academic or educational content (21.7%), political content (16.2%), and following influencers or public figures (14.4%). Other reasons accounted for 32 responses (11.6%). As the percentages exceed 100, respondents appear to have selected more than one reason. Two patterns emerge. Entertainment clearly dominates, yet about one in five students also use Instagram for academic content and about one in six for political content. This supports the uses-and-gratifications perspective, which views users as active agents rather than passive consumers. Students use the platform to learn and to engage with public life as well as to be entertained. However, this academic use occurs within a platform designed to capture attention, where learning and leisure share the same feed

Approximately how much of your Instagram usage is spent watching Reels?



Source: Field Survey

Reels account for a large share of Instagram use among the 303 respondents. About 13.5% spent less than 25% of their Instagram time on Reels, while 32.7% spent 25% to 50%. A further 35% spent 51% to 75%, and 14.9% spent more than 75%. Only about 3.9% rarely watched Reels. Thus, nearly half of the respondents (49.9%) spent more than half of their Instagram time on Reels, and for roughly 15%, Reels constituted almost the entire experience. This is consistent with entertainment being the primary motive for use. Reels are short, auto-playing and personalised, and they remove the natural stopping points that a static feed offers. This design may reasonably explain why many students cannot say how often they check the app.

Instagram and the study routine

Table 1. Instagram use during study, study breaks and before sleep (%)

Context	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always / Very often	At least sometimes
While studying	11.9	23.1	47.9	15.2	~1.9	~65.0
During study breaks	8.6	18.2	42.6	21.1	9.6	73.3
Within 30 minutes before sleep	7.9	13.2	30.0	22.8	26.1	~78.9

Source: Field Survey

Note: $N = 303$. "Very often" applies to the item on use while studying; "Always" applies to the other two items. The last column is the sum of "sometimes", "often" and "always/very often".

Table 2. Time spent studying outside class compared with daily time on Instagram (%)

Time category	Study time outside class (%)	Daily time on Instagram (%)
Less than 1 hour	29.0	6.3
1 to 2 hours	37.0	27.4
2 to 3 hours	18.8	29.7
More than 3 hours	~15.2	36.6
2 hours or less (study) / 2 hours or more (Instagram)	66.0	66.3

Source: Field Survey

Note: N = 303. The "more than 3 hours" value for study time is derived from the remainder because the survey export does not label the smallest slices.

The overlap between Instagram use and study was considerable. While studying, 47.9% of respondents used Instagram "sometimes", 15.2% "often" and about 1.9% "very often". Only 11.9% never did so, and 23.1% did so rarely. Roughly 65% therefore used the platform at least sometimes during study. Use was even more common during study breaks. About 42.6% checked Instagram sometimes, 21.1% often and 9.6% always, so 73.3% did so at least sometimes. Only 8.6% never did. Study breaks thus appear to be the point at which Instagram has the strongest hold, as a short break can easily extend into a long one. Use before sleep showed the most intense pattern. Within 30 minutes of bedtime, 30% used Instagram sometimes, 22.8% often and 26.1% always, so 48.9% used it often or always. Only 7.9% never did. This echoes sleep research linking late screen use to poorer rest (Hale & Guan, 2015). Sleep quality was not measured in this study, but the pattern is a potential risk factor. Self-reported study time outside class was modest. About 29% studied for less than an hour a day, 37% for one to two hours, and 18.8% for two to three hours. Roughly 15% studied for more than three hours. Thus, 66% studied for two hours or less, while 66.3% spent two hours or more on Instagram. For many students, Instagram time therefore matches or exceeds study time. This is consistent with Kirschner and Karpinski (2010), who linked social networking to fewer study hours. However, the present data cannot establish causation. They show only that the two activities compete for the same hours.

Perceived academic effects

Students own judgments were cautious and divided. The most common answer on every item was "neutral".

Statement	Agree + Strongly agree	Neutral	Disagree + Strongly disagree
Able to concentrate for a sustained period	~34%	47.2%	~18%
Frequently interrupt study to check Instagram	~28%	40.9%	~30%
More Instagram time affects timely assignments	29.7%	38.6%	31.7%
Hard to return to study after long Instagram use	35.3%	36.6%	28.1%
Instagram reduces time for academic activities	~44%	32.7%	~23%
Instagram negatively affects concentration	34.3%	33.7%	32.0%

Source: Field Survey

Several patterns emerge from the students' perceptions. First, time displacement drew the strongest agreement, as about 44% felt that Instagram reduces the time they devote to academic activities. Students appear more willing to acknowledge that the platform takes their time than that it harms their cognition. Second, re-entry to study was a notable difficulty. About 35% found it hard to resume studying after long Instagram sessions, which fits the interruption literature showing that resuming a task after a distraction carries a cost (Mark et al., 2008). Third, views on concentration were divided. About 34% said that Instagram negatively affects their concentration, while 32% disagreed. Only about 34% felt able to concentrate for sustained periods, and almost half were neutral about their own focus. This may reflect uncertainty, as students who check an app dozens of times a day may not notice changes in their attention. Fourth, the large neutral share warrants attention. It may reflect genuine ambivalence, but it may also indicate limited self-awareness or reluctance to admit harm. Either way, it cautions against alarmist interpretations. Most students do not report a crisis, yet many also do not report being unaffected.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings present a consistent picture. Instagram use is near-universal and time-intensive. It is largely entertainment-oriented. Reels account for much of this time. The platform extends into study sessions, study breaks and bedtime. Self-reported study time remains modest. Many students feel that Instagram costs them time and focus. These findings do not show that Instagram lowers academic performance. Grades were not measured. However, the overlap between platform use and study time is considerable. A student may spend three hours on Reels, check the app dozens of times and scroll before sleep. The same student may study for only an hour. Such a pattern puts pressure on academic engagement on several fronts. This reflects the displacement and multitasking arguments in earlier research (Junco, 2012; Rosen et al., 2013; Lau, 2017). The data also caution against a one-sided reading. About one in five students use

Instagram for academic content. Between a third and nearly half hold neutral or positive views of its effect. Instagram can support learning when used purposefully. The concern lies less in the platform than in the pattern of use. That pattern is unplanned, habitual and unmonitored.

Recommendations

- Promote self-monitoring of usage. Students should be encouraged to track their Instagram use through built-in activity dashboards or screen-time applications. Awareness of actual usage is a necessary precondition for behavioural change, particularly given that a considerable proportion of respondents did not monitor how often they accessed the platform.
- Separate study time from platform use. Students should keep their phones out of reach during study sessions and schedule short, time-bound breaks that do not involve the feed. Evidence suggests that the mere presence of a smartphone can reduce available cognitive capacity (Ward et al., 2017).
- Protect pre-sleep hours. Students should avoid Instagram for at least 30 minutes before bedtime. Nearly half of the respondents reported using the platform often or always during this period, which may compromise rest and, in turn, next-day academic engagement.
- Integrate attention and time-management skills into teaching. Teachers should incorporate short sessions on focus and time management into instruction, and design assignments with staged deadlines. Such checkpoints can reduce last-minute pressure and limit the displacement of academic work by leisure use.
- Institutionalise digital well-being support. Institutions should provide digital literacy modules during orientation, offer counselling and workshops on healthy media use, and establish phone-free study zones in libraries and hostels.
- Strengthen the evidence base through further research. Future studies should link usage data with academic performance, sleep and well-being, and employ longitudinal or experimental designs to test causal relationships. Qualitative inquiry is also needed to explain the large proportion of students who remained neutral about Instagram's academic effects.

Conclusion

This study examined Instagram use and academic engagement among college students in Kozhikode. It found a platform deeply embedded in students' daily lives. Nearly all respondents used Instagram, and most spent several hours on it each day. Entertainment and Reels were the dominant uses. Students also used the platform for study sessions, study breaks, and the period immediately before sleep. Students own assessments were ambivalent. Many reported that Instagram reduces the time available for academic work, but fewer believed that it harms their concentration, and a substantial share remained neutral. This ambivalence is the central finding. Instagram appears to be neither an unambiguous threat nor a harmless

pastime. It is better understood as a habit that is easy to initiate and difficult to monitor. Addressing it requires awareness, supportive design and institutional support. Students can regulate when and why they use the platform. Teachers and institutions can create routines and environments that protect attention. Future research can test the relationships that this descriptive study could only suggest. The aim is not to remove Instagram from student life but to prevent it from displacing the time that learning requires.

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