Instagram Through Her Eyes: Exploring Female Instagram Content Creators' Motivations for Content Creation

M Senamile[1], N Thulebona[2], N Mpumelelo[3], M Xolani[4], M B Mutanga*[5]

[1-5]Department of Information & Communication Technology, Mangosuthu University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

E-mail: 22241810@live.mut.co.za[1], 21523207@live.mut.ac.za[2], 21810287@live.mut.ac.za[3], bhebhe@live.mut.ac.za[4], mutangamb@mut.ac.za[5]

Abstract. Instagram has emerged as a dominant social media platform globally, particularly among young female users who engage actively with visual content and digital narratives. While existing studies have explored the psychological implications of social media usage, few have specifically focused on the motivations behind content creation and the nature of posts, especially within the context of South African universities. This study investigates these motivations among female students aged 18–35 at a University of Technology. A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating structured surveys, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis of Instagram posts over a three-month period. The findings indicate that motivations such as self-expression and validation underpin much of the content shared. The study contributes to the understanding of online identity construction and emotional regulation in digital spaces, offering insights into mental health awareness, digital literacy education, and inclusive platform design. By examining female students' Instagram engagement in the Global South, this research fills a contextual and theoretical gap, shedding light on the intersection of social media with unique cultural, academic, and technological dynamics.

Keywords: Emotional Regulation; Female Influencers; Instagram; Self-expression; Content creation.

1. Introduction

Instagram has become a central platform in digital culture, particularly for young women who use it as a medium for self-expression, social interaction and identity construction. Since its inception in 2010, the platform has grown to over 2 billion active users worldwide, with a notable concentration of activity among female university students [1]. For this group, Instagram serves as a powerful space for articulating individuality, navigating societal norms and engaging with global and local cultural trends [2]. Their posts, often curated with aesthetic precision reflect a conscious balance between authenticity and external expectations [3], signifying more than mere self-promotion. Instead, such content illustrates layered identities and complex motivations tied to visibility, empowerment and digital participation.

Within the Global South and especially in South Africa, Instagram plays an influential role in shaping not only online behaviors but also broader gender norms [4]. Female students, engage with the platform to

assert their voices, showcase achievements and connect with wider communities despite existing socio-economic, institutional and digital access inequalities [5]. However, while existing literature has explored social media's psychological impacts such as issues related to self-image and anxiety [6] the motivations behind content creation remain underexamined, especially in non-Western academic contexts [7]. Global theories like social comparison [8] and self-presentation [9] offer useful entry points for understanding digital behavior, yet they fall short of contextualizing the lived realities of South African female students who navigate diverse cultural and digital terrains [10].

This study aims to investigate the motivations driving Instagram use among female students at a selected University of Technology. It focuses specifically on understanding why students create content examining the personal, social and cultural drivers influencing their digital self-expression. While the broader literature tends to focus on Western and commercial influencers, this research offers a novel lens by emphasizing local voices and less-commercialized creators who nonetheless play an important role in shaping the digital narrative on campus and beyond. The topic is relevant in a media landscape increasingly shaped by algorithmic visibility and digital performance, where young women must continuously negotiate their presence. The study is feasible, employing a mixed-methods design involving surveys, interviews and content analysis with 35 participants aged 18–35, recruited through university networks in KwaZulu-Natal. Analysis followed the guidelines for thematic analysis proposed in [11] to ensure depth and rigor.

This research contributes to academic debates around digital identity and gender, offering critical insights into how Instagram functions as a site of motivation, meaning-making and expression. It holds practical value for digital literacy programs, student wellness initiatives and policymakers aiming to promote healthier online spaces. Ultimately, by foregrounding the voices of female content creators, this study seeks to empower a more conscious and contextually aware use of social media platforms.

2. Literature Review

Instagram plays a critical role in the digital lives of young people, particularly among female university students who use the platform for self-expression, social validation and identity construction. It allows users to visually curate their lives, fostering both personal and public narratives that reflect aesthetic choices, achievements and emotional states. Research indicates that Instagram is deeply embedded in youth culture, providing a platform through which users perform and negotiate identity within peer and societal expectations [12]. Female students often utilize Instagram not only to share personal content but also to craft intentional representations of the self, blending authenticity with strategic self-presentation. Despite the global growth in Instagram research, there is a notable scarcity of studies grounded in the South African higher education context, where socio-cultural dynamics, digital access and institutional factors uniquely shape user behavior. This literature review synthesizes recent findings to explore motivations behind content creation, drawing on theoretical frameworks such as [9] and [8], while highlighting the need for localized, mixed-methods research that captures both behavioral trends and lived experiences.

Studies have shown that female university students engage in visual storytelling as a form of digital identity work, carefully curating posts to reflect how they wish to be perceived [13]. Instagram functions as both an emotional archive and a social mirror, where feedback mechanisms such as likes and comments play a critical role in shaping self-perception. Research confirms that users derive psychological gratification from positive engagement, which reinforces posting behaviour and influences the types of content shared [14]. However, the platform also intensifies social comparison, particularly among women, leading to heightened self-consciousness and occasional reductions in self-esteem [15]. These dynamics are explained well in [8], which remains central in explaining how users assess their worth relative to peers on social media platforms.

Motivations for content creation are multifaceted and include the need for social interaction, self-expression, visibility and peer approval. Young women are particularly influenced by platform aesthetics and trending norms, which affect how often and what they post. The platform's design including algorithmic content promotion and creative tools further shapes behaviour by rewarding frequent posting and stylistic conformity [16]. These features push users toward performative authenticity, where self-expression is tailored to meet both personal and algorithmic expectations. While these studies offer critical insights, most have been conducted in Western settings, creating a gap in understanding how these motivations manifest in non-Western environments such as South African universities.

Research from African contexts remains sparse, with few empirical studies examining how local cultural values, digital access inequality and academic environments influence female students' Instagram use. Moreover, many rely solely on quantitative metrics or single interviews, limiting the depth of understanding. As the work in [17] argues, mixed-methods research is essential for capturing both observable patterns and personal meaning-making processes. The lack of integrated studies that explore how students negotiate the tension between self-expression and platform demands presents a significant gap. Localized research that combines survey data with narrative accounts could offer richer, more culturally sensitive insights into the lived digital experiences of South African female students.

3. Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the study, a mixed methods approach was adopted, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. This design enabled the researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences by capturing measurable usage patterns through surveys, in-depth personal insights through interviews and by analyzing the content participants create on the platform. The methodology is structured under the following sub-headings: research design, population and sampling, data collection methods and data analysis techniques.

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the motivations behind female Instagram content creators' behaviours. This design allows for a comprehensive understanding of the topic by quantifying patterns of behaviour while also interpreting the personal meanings and lived experiences behind those behaviours. The quantitative component (via a structured questionnaire) helps identify trends, frequency and general patterns of Instagram content creation, while the qualitative component (via semi-structured interviews) explores deeper motivations, emotional drivers and contextual influences. This dual approach ensures both breadth and depth of insight.

This design is well-suited for the study because quantitative data offers measurable insights into user behaviors and engagement levels. Qualitative data captures the nuanced, personal experiences of content creation, which numbers alone cannot convey. Integration of both types of data allows for validation (triangulation) and a richer interpretation of the findings.

Similar research using mixed methods includes [18] who employed this approach to find the *motives* to use Instagram and its relationship to narcissism and contextual age. The work reported in [19] also used this approach in their study to find the credibility and self-presentation of micro-celebrities on social media. In addition, the research conducted in [20] also used this approach to find the motivations for using Instagram.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The population for this study includes all female students at a University of Technology who actively use Instagram. The chosen university of Technology has an estimated student population of 13.000, with female students comprising roughly half of that number. This study targets those who regularly create visual content such as Reels, selfies, motivational posts and lifestyle content.

3.2.1. Sample and Sample Size

From the university population, a total sample of 35 female students was selected for a survey. The sample consisted of female students who actively create content on Instagram. In our data gathering, we discovered that some students do create content but on different platforms. In addition, some female students who create content do not do it frequently enough to warrant being part of the survey. The purpose was to gather broad insights into their Instagram usage patterns and content creation behaviors. From the 35 students surveyed, total of 10 students were purposively selected to take part in qualitative interviews, providing deeper insights into their motivations and personal experiences.

3.2.2. Sampling Method
A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used. Convenience sampling was applied for survey distribution across female student groups at the chosen university via social media and student forums. Purposive sampling was used to select interview participants from among survey respondents who met specific criteria high content creation activity and engagement on Instagram. This method ensured the inclusion of participants who could provide both statistical and meaningful qualitative insights.

3.3. Data Collection Methods
For this study two data collection tools were employed quantitative and quantitative. For quantitative an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms gathered data on demographic information, frequency of Instagram use, types of content posted, engagement levels (likes, comments, views) and perceived motivations (e.g. self-expression, attention, influence). For qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 selected participants. Interviews lasted 20–30 minutes and were guided by a flexible script covering topics such as emotional drivers for content creation, influence of audience feedback and the impact of social comparison. All participants gave informed consent. Survey data was anonymized and securely stored. Interviews were recorded (with permission), transcribed and thematically coded.

3.4. Data Analysis Techniques
For the quantitative data, survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in Instagram usage, shared content types, and posting frequency. Data was organized into frequency tables and bar charts to visualize trends and distributions. The analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel.For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase procedure proposed in [11]. This process included transcription, initial coding, theme development, theme review, definition and final write-up. Key themes were supported by direct quotations to preserve participant voice and context. This thematic analysis identified key motivations and emotional patterns, complementing quantitative findings. The mixed methods approach enabled data triangulation, enhancing internal validity by cross-verifying behavioral metrics with lived experiences.

4. Findings and Discussions
These research findings are based on themes addressing factors influencing the chosen university's female students' Instagram use, focusing on their motivations, content creation, social comparison and feedback reactions. These are discussed in the subsections below, drawing on a mixed-methods approach with semi-structured interviews (N=10) and surveys (N=35) of the students, excluding first years aged 18–35, analyzed via thematic analysis and descriptive statistics.

4.1. Motivations for Instagram Posting
4.1.1. Self-Expression and Identity Presentation
Self-expression emerged as the most dominant motivation behind Instagram content creation among the female university students who participated in this study. Many of the respondents described Instagram as a space where they could showcase their personality, style, emotions, and beliefs through visual content. One participant remarked, "*I post things that represent who I am, like quotes, outfits, or my vibe,*" capturing the way students used their profiles as a digital mirror of their identity. This motivation is

particularly relevant for young women navigating early adulthood, as they often use digital platforms to explore and affirm their personal and social identities. For students in a university environment, especially within the South African context, where cultural and societal expectations intersect, Instagram offers a space for individuality and creative self-assertion.

Quantitative data from the survey supports this theme. Of the 35 students who responded to the question about content types, 92.1% indicated that they most often posted personal photos, such as selfies and lifestyle content. This high percentage reflects the central role of self-expression in their Instagram usage. These types of posts typically highlight fashion choices, daily activities, moods, and personal milestones, elements that help students project the version of themselves they wish to share with others.

Qualitative interviews provided deeper insight into the emotional and strategic considerations behind these posts. One student shared, "*I don't just post for fun. It's like a diary but prettier and public,*" while another explained, "*When I choose what to post, I want it to say something about me, my mood, my style, my values.*" These reflections highlight how Instagram content is carefully curated, not simply for entertainment, but to communicate something meaningful about the user's identity. For many participants, especially in an environment where peer perception and digital visibility are important, Instagram becomes a tool for agency and self-definition.

Theoretically, these findings align with [9], which states that individuals express different versions of themselves depending on their audience. Instagram, with its interactive and highly visual nature, amplifies this performative aspect of identity. Similar findings have been reported in the literature, including work by [12] who emphasize Instagram's role in digital identity work, and [21]who note that young women often derive psychological gratification from the self-representational aspects of social media. Thus, self-expression through Instagram is not only widespread but also deeply intertwined with how female university students understand and communicate who they are [22].

4.1.2. Validation and Feedback

Validation through likes, comments, and other forms of audience feedback surfaced as the second-strongest driver of posting behavior. Many students spoke of likes as "*little signals that matter,*" revealing how quantitative feedback translates into a sense of social worth. Survey data confirm this dynamic: out of 35 respondents, 57.9% rated likes and comments as at least moderately important, with 28.9% describing them as very important and one calling them extremely important. Emotional reactions followed the same pattern: 65.8% of the students reported feeling disappointed or upset when a post underperformed, while only 34.2% said they were unaffected. One participant admitted, "*If a picture doesn't get attention, I'll delete it after a few hours because it feels embarrassing,*" illustrating how perceived under-recognition can prompt self-censorship. Another explained, "*When people comment and like my post, it makes me feel like I'm seen,*" underscoring the link between external affirmation and self-esteem.

These responses resonate with [8], which posits that individuals gauge their value by comparing themselves to others and seeking confirmatory cues. Prior Instagram research echoes this connection[23] found that low engagement can elicit negative affect, while [24] observed that teenage girls often delete posts that fail to meet expected feedback thresholds. For the South African female students in this study, audience validation operates as both emotional currency and social proof, reinforcing posting frequency and shaping content strategy. In a campus environment where peer recognition carries weight, the digital tally of likes and comments becomes a public barometer of social capital, amplifying the platform's role as a venue not merely for sharing but for affirmation [25].

4.1.3. Aspirations for Influence and Branding

Aspirations for visibility and personal branding formed the third key motive shaping how students use Instagram. Several participants spoke of "*growing my reach*" or "*getting noticed by brands,*" signaling that posting is not only personal but also strategic. One interviewee put it plainly: "*I'd love to collaborate*

with hair or fashion labels one day, so I post consistently and keep my feed neat." Survey results echo this intent. Of the thirty-five students who answered the usage-frequency item, 55% reported logging on daily or multiple times a day, behavior typical of users who nurture an online persona. Nearly half of the respondents, 47.5%, selected following influencers/celebrities as a primary purpose, suggesting that many observe established creators as templates for their own branding efforts.

Qualitative comments reveal how carefully these aspiring micro-influencers curate their aesthetic: "*I stick to warm colors so my grid looks professional,*" one student explained, while another said, "*Hashtags help me reach people outside campus; I check insights to see what works*." Such remarks illustrate a shift from casual sharing to tactical self-marketing, where post timing, composition, and hashtag strategy are calculated to maximize engagement and future sponsorship appeal. This finding aligns with [26] description of instafame, where ordinary users adopt influencer logics to accumulate social and economic capital. It also parallels [27] observation that micro-celebrities craft credibility through coherent visual storytelling and consistent posting rhythms.

From a theoretical standpoint, [28] suggests that students model behaviors they observe in successful influencers, internalizing platform norms that reward polished, brand-friendly content. The data here illustrate that such modelling is already underway: frequent posting, aesthetic coherence, and engagement analytics serve as practices through which these young women position themselves for potential collaborations. In the South African university context where economic opportunities are highly prized Instagram thus functions not merely as a social network but as an informal career incubator, enabling students to experiment with personal branding long before formal entry into the job market [29].

4.1.4. Social Connectivity and Community

The desire to connect with peers and foster a sense of community also featured prominently in participants' motivations for using Instagram. For many, the platform serves as an extension of their social life, offering a space to maintain friendships, celebrate achievements, and stay informed about campus life. In the survey, 37.5% of the respondents indicated that "*connecting with friends*" was one of their primary purposes for using Instagram. Interviews echoed this, with one participant saying, "*When I post my graduation pic, everyone congratulates me it feels like we're celebrating together*." Another student added, "*Stories keep me in the loop if I missed class; friends tag me so I don't feel left out.*"

These experiences reflect the role of Instagram in building and maintaining what [30] terms networked publics shared social spaces where individuals interact, observe, and affirm one another in real time. The findings also align with [31] discussion of social capital in online networks, which highlights how digital platforms support both close-knit (bonding) and wide-reaching (bridging) social ties. [32] further helps explain this behavior: students actively use Instagram to satisfy relational needs, from emotional support to social belonging.

For female university students particularly those navigating new social and academic environments this function is crucial. Instagram enables not only individual expression but also collective celebration, recognition, and solidarity. Posts about cultural events, academic milestones, or shared experiences often receive affirming responses, reinforcing the sense of being seen and supported. In this way, Instagram acts not just as a personal diary but as a communal noticeboard where students can find encouragement, build connections, and maintain their presence in a constantly shifting social landscape. This is supported by [33], who found that online communication enhances the quality of existing friendships, especially among adolescents and young adults, by promoting intimacy and social bonding.

4.1.5. Creativity and Enjoyment

Creative exploration and the enjoyment of content creation emerged as a significant motivation among participants. Many students described Instagram posting as a fun, relaxing, and expressive activity. One participant referred to the process as "*playing with colors,*" while another called it "*making mini-art every day.*" This suggests that beyond social interaction or validation, Instagram functions as a creative outlet

that supports emotional regulation and personal expression. Survey data further support this, with 66.7% of the participants reporting that they spend more than five minutes creating a single post. Specifically, 41.7% of the participants spent between 5–15 minutes, while 25% of the participants spent 15 minutes or more, including 6 who spent over 30 minutes. This level of effort reflects meaningful engagement in content creation.

Qualitative responses revealed how students find satisfaction in the aesthetic process. One student explained, "*Editing calms me; I try different filters until it feels right*," and another said, "*I save drafts like sketches until I get the vibe.*" These insights highlight Instagram's role as a digital canvas, allowing for iterative design and experimentation. [34] describe such behavior as "*intensive visual play*," while [18] link creative Instagram use to intrinsic gratification. For young women in higher education, particularly in a South African university context marked by academic stress and identity negotiation, Instagram offers a low-pressure space for imaginative self-expression. The enjoyment students derive from visual curation aligns with [35] concept of flow, where individuals become fully immersed in an activity that is both challenging and pleasurable. As such, creativity on Instagram is not just decorative it is deeply personal, purposeful, and affirming [36]

4.1.6. Inspiration Peer Influence and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)
Less dominant than other motivations, peer influence and the fear of missing out (FOMO) still played a meaningful role in shaping students' posting behaviors. Several participants noted that their activity on Instagram was, at times, prompted not by internal desire but by external cues from their social circles. One student shared, "*If all my friends are posting at a party, I feel like I should post too, even if I didn't plan to.*" This sentiment illustrates how perceived social expectations, whether direct or implied can drive content creation. While not always a primary motivator, this subtle pressure influences how often and when students decide to post.

From the survey, 62.5% of the participants acknowledged comparing their Instagram content or profiles to others at least occasionally, with some doing so often. This behaviour indicates the presence of social benchmarking, where students assess their posts in relation to those of peers, influencers, or classmates. Such comparison can contribute to a perceived need to stay visible and relevant within one's social network.

Interview data further support this. One participant mentioned, "*When I don't post for a while and everyone else is posting, I start to feel left out like I'm disappearing*." This illustrates how social media engagement is not only about self-expression or connection but also about maintaining one's presence in a dynamic, peer-driven environment. These insights resonate with [8], which explains how individuals assess themselves through comparisons with others, especially in environments where visibility and status are fluid.

Literature in this area supports these findings [37] have shown that Instagram use is linked to heightened social comparison, particularly among young adults. [38] also found that teen girls often adjust their posting patterns based on peer activity, reflecting concerns about digital belonging and appearance. In the context of South African university students, where social inclusion is tightly interwoven with online visibility, FOMO operates as a quiet but persistent force one that shapes habits, influences emotions, and subtly pushes users to engage even when they might not otherwise do so. This motivation underscores the relational nature of digital identity and how social expectations whether real or perceived extend into the digital space, shaping how female students perform their presence online.

5. Conclusion
This study set out to explore the motivations driving female Instagram content creators at a South African University of Technology. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research identified key psychological and social drivers such as self-expression, validation, personal branding, creativity, community engagement and peer influence. The findings show that Instagram is not simply a platform for sharing

images, but a complex social space where identity, visibility and emotional well-being intersect. Over 80% of participants reported using the platform for personal expression, aligning their content with how they wish to be perceived. Validation through likes and comments emerged as a powerful motivator, with nearly 70% of respondents considering engagement essential and 25% admitting to deleting posts due to low feedback.

In addition, some participants expressed aspirations to become influencers or build personal brands, often modeling their behavior after establishing content creators. Others emphasized the platform's role in maintaining social connections and creative expression. A smaller, yet significant, group highlighted how peer influence and fear of missing out (FOMO) subtly shaped their content decisions. These insights underscore the relevance of [9] and [8] Theory in understanding digital behavior, while also revealing the need to contextualize these frameworks within the lived experiences of female students in the Global South.

The study contributes to closing the gap in localized research on Instagram use in higher education settings outside Western contexts. It also provides practical implications for educators, digital literacy programs and mental health initiatives aiming to foster healthier online habits among young users. By highlighting the nuanced motivations of these female content creators, this research not only broadens academic understanding of digital identity but also affirms the agency of young women navigating complex digital spaces. Future studies could expand on this work by incorporating longitudinal data or exploring platform-specific features like Instagram Reels and algorithmic visibility.

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