

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF POLITICAL, ADMINISTRATIVE
AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCES

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral candidate:
Denisa Lăcătuș

Doctoral supervisor:
Associate Professor Veronica Dana Irina Câmpian, PhD

Cluj-Napoca
2026

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF POLITICAL, ADMINISTRATIVE
AND COMMUNICATION SCIENCES

Social Media as Informal Learning Environments for Generation Z

-SUMMARY-

Doctoral candidate:
Denisa Lăcătuș

Doctoral supervisor:
Associate Professor Veronica Dana Irina Câmpian, PhD

Cluj-Napoca
2026

Table of Contents

1. Research Context, Relevance, and Problem Statement	5
2. Theoretical Framework	7
3. Methodological Framework.....	10
3.1. Focus-Group Interviews with Young People	11
3.2. Interviews with Experts	13
3.3. Quantitative Survey with Young People	15
4. Conclusions.....	17
5. Contributions, Implications, and Limitations.....	19
6. Bibliography.....	20

1. Research Context, Relevance, and Problem Statement

The transformations brought about by the digitalization of everyday life have made social media a central element of young people's experiences. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok now exceed their initial functions of entertainment and communication, becoming spaces in which information circulates, knowledge is acquired informally, and identities are constructed and negotiated. Young people are no longer merely passive consumers of media content, but active participants who produce, distribute, and evaluate information within a continuously changing digital environment (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; O'Reilly, 2007). Digital platforms thus become significant spaces of socialization, stimulating both learning and development processes and new requirements regarding media competence and the critical processing of information (Ansari & Khan, 2020; Rotaru, 2010). At the same time, platform algorithms actively shape what information reaches young people and in what order, thereby influencing not only media consumption but also processes of orientation and informal learning (van Dijck, 2013).

The specialized literature on social media, Generation Z, and the use of digital technology is extensive, but it often remains focused on partial aspects of the phenomenon. At the international level, some studies address social media platforms in the context of marketing and consumer behavior (Bentley et al., 2021), while others foreground the relationship between intensive social media use and mental health (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). In the field of digital education, numerous studies also exist, but these are frequently limited to individual platforms, specific educational contexts, or particular segments of the learning process (Barrot, 2020). At the national level, Romanian research has examined young people's use of social media from several thematic perspectives: psychological well-being, coping mechanisms, and social media addiction (Maftei et al., 2023; Maftei & Diaconu-Gherasim, 2023), self-presentation, visual practices, and commercial communication (Balaban et al., 2022; Mucundorfeanu & Balaban, 2025; Szambolics et al., 2023; Vițelar, 2019), media competence, disinformation, and news credibility (Corbu & Stancea, 2025; Rotaru et al., 2022), as well as formal digital learning environments and educational technology (Câmpian et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the ways in which social media function as spaces of informal learning, the motivations that lead young people to use them for education, and the manner in which learning potential, algorithmic logics of platforms, and associated risks interact with one another remain insufficiently researched, particularly in the Romanian and Eastern European context.

The present study addresses this research gap and seeks to analyze the extent to which Instagram and TikTok can function as informal learning environments for adolescents in Romania aged 14 to 19, as well as the factors that shape this use. The general objective of the study was operationalized into three specific objectives. The first objective concerns the identification of motivations and the description of Romanian adolescents' habits regarding the use of Instagram and TikTok for educational purposes and is specified through three research questions: (1) what are their habits of using the two platforms for educational purposes; (2) what motivations support this use; and (3) what types of content with educational value they access. The second objective aims to identify possible effects of the consumption of educational content and is addressed through questions concerning (4) the contribution of this content to adolescents' personal and professional development and (5) the concerns and risks associated with its consumption. The third objective consists of investigating Instagram and TikTok as informal learning environments for Generation Z and includes questions regarding (6) learning mechanisms and knowledge-acquisition processes and (7) the content-related and formal factors that contribute to the success of educational content. Complementing the research questions, ten hypotheses were developed on the basis of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), extended through the inclusion of additional variables identified during the qualitative stages of the research.

The relevance of the study is both scientific and practical. Whereas a significant share of previous research has focused on risks, forms of problematic use, or effects on well-being (Parent, 2023; Twenge & Campbell, 2018), questions concerning the potential of social media for learning, knowledge acquisition, and orientation occupy an increasingly important place on the research agenda (Greenhow & Lewin, 2015; Taddeo, 2023). The results of this study can be used by media educators, educational initiatives, educational content creators, and education influencers to better understand young people's media practices and to adapt content to the realities of their use. The originality of the study lies in the fact that, unlike studies that analyze social media primarily in relation to mental health, advertising, or self-presentation, the present research directs attention to their potential as spaces of informal learning (Taddeo, 2023). In terms of its approach, the study is interdisciplinary, situated at the intersection of communication and media studies, media sociology, youth research, educational sciences, psychology, and media pedagogy, supplemented by models of technology acceptance and social-psychological behavioral research.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social media constitute a diverse set of digital environments in which users create, distribute, and evaluate content, communicate with others, and maintain social relationships. Their participatory architecture has transformed media use from a predominantly receptive activity into one characterized by interaction, collaboration, and user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Within this broader platform ecology, Instagram and TikTok are particularly relevant to the present study because of their extensive use among young people in Romania. According to the Center for Independent Journalism, 93.2% of young respondents use Instagram and 84.5% use TikTok (CJI, 2025). Instagram combines photographs, short videos, Stories, and Reels within an algorithmically curated environment that supports creativity, self-presentation, social interaction, information seeking, and orientation (Lee et al., 2015; Taddeo, 2023). TikTok is similarly structured around visual and audiovisual content but is distinguished by its short-video format and highly personalized recommendation system, which facilitates the rapid discovery and circulation of both entertaining and educational content (Dias & Duarte, 2022; Gyimah, 2024).

The relevance of these platforms as potential learning environments is closely connected to the media practices of Generation Z. This is the first generation whose socialization has taken place entirely under conditions of permanent digital connectivity, with information and communication technologies functioning not merely as auxiliary tools, but as integral components of communication, identity construction, social interaction, and access to information (Puiu, 2017; Szymkowiak et al., 2021; Turner, 2015). Prensky's (2001) concept of "digital natives" emphasizes this early familiarity with digital technologies, although subsequent research has shown that media competence cannot be inferred from age alone and is also shaped by educational, socioeconomic, and individual factors (Eynon, 2020). For Generation Z, social media are therefore not external technological instruments, but everyday social environments in which belonging is negotiated, identities are performed, and social recognition becomes visible (Boyd, 2014; Parent, 2023). These conditions also shape learning practices: young people frequently access information through mobile devices and show a preference for visual, interactive, and multimedia formats, while their capacity to assess sources critically and sustain attention within continuous streams of algorithmically curated content remains uneven (Akçayır et al., 2016; Szymkowiak et al., 2021).

These media practices create the conditions for informal learning. Informal learning refers to processes of knowledge and skill acquisition that occur outside regulated educational structures and emerge from learners' interests, needs, interactions, and everyday experiences (Barrot, 2020; Greenhow & Lewin, 2015). In social media environments, informal learning is embedded in routine platform use and may occur without a prior intention to learn. Users may actively seek information or encounter relevant content incidentally while communicating, seeking entertainment, or browsing personalized feeds. Social media can therefore be understood as socio-technical learning environments in which knowledge acquisition is shaped by individual interests, social interaction, platform affordances, and algorithmic selection (Dron & Anderson, 2014; Selwyn, 2012). Their accessibility and mobile availability support short, context-dependent forms of microlearning integrated into everyday life (Samala et al., 2025; Zou et al., 2025).

To explain why young people engage with these environments and under which conditions they intend to use them for educational purposes, the present study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives. The Uses and Gratifications Approach (UGA) addresses the motivational dimension of platform use. It assumes that individuals actively select media to satisfy particular psychological and social needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). In the context of social media, these needs include social interaction, information seeking, inspiration, entertainment, boredom reduction, and the regulation of emotional states. UGA is therefore used to explain why adolescents enter and engage with Instagram and TikTok (Brailovskaia et al., 2020; Falgoust et al., 2022).

The Technology Acceptance Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior complement the motivational perspective by explaining how individual evaluations and social conditions shape intentions to use social media for educational purposes. TAM links perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use to attitudes and behavioral intention (Davis, 1989). In the present study, the model was extended to include perceived enjoyment, trust in content, and concerns associated with social media use, based on both the qualitative findings and previous research (Al-Adwan et al., 2023; Eveleth et al., 2024). TPB adds subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, thereby situating educational use within a broader social and behavioral context (Ajzen, 1991). Integrating the two models allows educational use to be examined as the result of both personal evaluations of the platforms and the influence of significant others and perceived control over use (Nguyen et al., 2022; Taylor & Todd, 1995).

Although UGA, TAM, and TPB explain motivations, acceptance, and behavioral intention, they do not fully account for the learning processes that may occur during platform use. For this reason, the framework is supplemented by Self-Determination Theory and Social Cognitive Theory. SDT emphasizes the importance of autonomy and intrinsic motivation in voluntary engagement with digital content (Deci & Ryan, 1985), while SCT explains how knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral patterns may be acquired through observation, social modeling, interaction, and self-regulation (Bandura, 1986). These theories were not operationalized through separate quantitative scales; rather, they provide a conceptual basis for interpreting learning mechanisms identified in the qualitative data, including observational learning, interest-driven exploration, self-directed learning, and the influence of creators and other social models.

Taken together, these perspectives conceptualize learning on social media as a continuum between deliberate information seeking and incidental exposure to relevant content. The latter resembles the “news-finds-me” phenomenon, in which users expect important information to reach them through their digital networks and personalized feeds without continuous active searching (Ohme et al., 2022; Swart, 2021). However, exposure alone does not necessarily result in learning. The educational value of social media depends on whether users recognize, evaluate, retain, and further explore the information encountered. Media competence and social media literacy therefore represent essential conditions for transforming exposure into meaningful knowledge acquisition, particularly because platforms are not neutral channels but environments that structure visibility and relevance algorithmically (De Groot et al., 2023; van Dijck, 2013).

The educational potential of Instagram and TikTok is shaped by both content and format. These platforms provide access to scientific, professional, social, cultural, and everyday knowledge, while the boundaries between education, information, entertainment, and interaction remain fluid (Gil-Quintana & De León, 2021; Greenhow & Lewin, 2015). Educational content is therefore often hybrid, combining informational aims with platform-specific and entertainment-oriented presentation. Short videos, storytelling, interactivity, clear narrative structures, and audience adaptation can enhance accessibility and perceived relevance (Alalid et al., 2024; Taddeo, 2023). However, the same structures also create risks, including disinformation, uneven source quality, echo chambers, information overload, fragmented attention, and social comparison (Livingstone, 2014; van Dijck et al., 2018).

3. Methodological Framework

The general objective of the present study is to analyze the extent to which Instagram and TikTok can function as informal learning environments for young people in Romania aged 14 to 19. This objective was operationalized into three specific objectives and seven research questions addressing usage habits and motivations, the types of educational content accessed, the effects of consuming this content, associated concerns, learning mechanisms, and the factors that contribute to the success of educational content on the analyzed platforms. The complexity of the phenomenon under investigation justified the selection of a multiphase mixed-methods design, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods in a sequential arrangement, enabling the triangulation of perspectives and compensating for the limitations of each individual method (Fetters et al., 2013; Williams, 2011).

The first method consists of four focus-group interviews conducted with 41 young people aged between 15 and 19 in July 2023, each lasting 40-60 minutes. The purpose of this exploratory stage was to obtain qualitative data on social media usage habits, young people's motivations, and the types of content they consider relevant, covering research questions 1, 2, and 3. The recordings were transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed in ATLAS.ti through a six-phase thematic approach combining deductive and inductive coding; two coders worked independently to reduce subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The number of groups was justified by thematic saturation. The results confirmed the relevance of the research topic and provided the basis for the subsequent stages.

The second method consists of 13 semi-structured interviews with experts from Romania, Germany, and the United States, organized into two categories: external experts, namely academics who research digital media, and internal experts, namely specialists actively involved in the production of educational content on Instagram and TikTok, in accordance with the distinction proposed by Von Soest (2022). The distinction between external and internal experts enabled the comparison of an analytical perspective oriented toward risks and limitations with a practical perspective oriented toward formats, audiences, and solutions. The data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis, thematically structured into ten categories according to the stages proposed by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022). This stage deepened professional perspectives on the educational potential of the platforms, the associated risks, and the success factors of content, covering research questions 4, 5, 6, and 7.

The third stage of the research consists of an online quantitative survey conducted with a sample of 410 adolescents aged 14 to 19. The questionnaire tests ten hypotheses derived from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), corresponding to research questions 1-5. The instrument includes validated scales for measuring perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, trust, enjoyment, concerns, attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and intention to use. The data are analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and hierarchical linear regressions, and all research stages comply with the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and participant anonymization.

The sequence of the three studies enables the cumulative interpretation of the results: the focus groups capture adolescents' experiences and language, the expert interviews extend and problematize these findings, and the quantitative survey verifies the distribution of motivations and the relationships among acceptance factors, attitude, and intention. Thus, each stage complements the conclusions of the preceding one and contributes to an integrated understanding of the phenomenon.

3.1. Focus-Group Interviews with Young People

The first empirical study of the dissertation consists of four focus-group interviews conducted with 41 young people aged between 15 and 19, between 24 and 28 July 2023, each lasting 40-60 minutes. Participants were selected based on the criterion of using Instagram and/or TikTok, with the aim of including adolescents from the target age range. Participants' identities were coded using the letter F for female and B for male, followed by an ordinal number, to protect anonymity. The discussions were moderated, audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with ATLAS.ti by applying the six-phase thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and report writing. Coding was carried out independently by two coders to reduce subjectivity, using a combined inductive-deductive approach: the starting point was the motivational framework proposed by Brailovskaia et al. (2020), which was subsequently extended with new categories identified inductively from the data. The interview guide covered three central themes: social media usage habits, motivations for use, and types of educational content accessed, corresponding to research questions 1, 2, and 3.

With regard to usage habits, all participants stated that they use Instagram, while 65.85% use TikTok. The average daily time spent on social media was approximately 2 hours and 12 minutes, with significant variation among participants, ranging from 18 minutes to 3 hours and 40 minutes, reflecting the diversity of digital usage patterns within the sample. These data confirm the deep integration of the platforms into young people's everyday routines and are consistent with CJI (2025) data, which indicate an extensive presence of Instagram and TikTok in the lives of young people in Romania.

The dominant motivations identified through thematic analysis were social interaction and belonging, the search for positive emotions through entertainment and overcoming boredom, followed by the search for information and inspiration. The analysis led to an extension of the motivational categories proposed by Brailovskaia et al. (2020): social interaction was specified in the subcategories of belonging and self-presentation, positive emotions included entertainment and curiosity, and information was differentiated into general information and following current news. Inspiration appeared both as a general motivation and in relation to specific topics of personal interest. Moreover, a new category emerged in relation to the initial model, namely professional and personal development, which includes the acquisition of knowledge and skills relevant especially in the context of young people's orientation toward their professional future. Escape from negative emotions did not emerge as a relevant motivation among focus-group participants.

Regarding the types of educational content accessed, the analysis revealed three main categories. The first and most frequently mentioned category is following news and current events, particularly through accounts adapted to young audiences, such as GenȘtiri, but also through national and international news sources. The second category concerns career-orientation and skills-development content: young people actively search for profiles and pages that provide them with perspectives on possible career paths and convey practical skills relevant to their professional future. The third category brings together personal interests and individual development, including topics such as literature, travel, health, nutrition, or leisure activities. Young people also pointed to negative aspects of use: disinformation and the difficulty of filtering relevant content, wasted time, the negative impact of algorithms on exposure to irrelevant content, and diminished concentration capacity as a result of excessive consumption of fragmented content.

3.2. Interviews with Experts

The second empirical study of the dissertation consists of 13 semi-structured interviews with experts from Romania, Germany, and the United States, conducted synchronously by videoconference or in person, each lasting 60-90 minutes. The experts were contacted by e-mail after more than 30 potential participants had been identified and evaluated, with the final selection ensuring a balance between Romania and Germany, with six experts from each country, plus one expert from the United States, selected because of her direct specialization in the research topic. Participants were included in two distinct categories: external experts, namely academics and researchers specialized in digital media and communication, and internal experts, namely educational influencers and content creators active on Instagram and TikTok. This structure enabled a multi-perspective approach to the phenomenon, combining theoretical and analytical perspectives with practical and applied ones. The data were transcribed and analyzed through structured content analysis following the approach of Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022), organized into ten main categories addressing both the current state of the educational use of social media and the success factors of content and future perspectives.

The first analytical area concerned the potential contribution of consuming educational content to young people's professional and personal development. The experts confirmed and deepened the perspectives identified in the focus groups, emphasizing that social media provide young people with access to a wide variety of knowledge and skills that can complement formal education. The most frequently mentioned forms of learning were self-directed learning, microlearning, and learning through observation by following relevant role models in fields of interest. The experts also highlighted the acquisition of practical skills in areas such as photography, video production, digital content creation, and visual communication. A notable difference in perspective emerged between the two categories of experts: practitioners predominantly emphasized the opportunities and educational potential of the platforms, whereas academics adopted a more critical perspective, focusing on risks and structural limitations.

The second major theme concerned experts' concerns regarding young people's consumption of educational content. The experts identified three main categories of risks. The first category refers to cognitive effects: reduced concentration capacity, information overload, and the superficial processing of complex content as a result of exposure to short and fragmented formats. The second

category concerns socio-psychological effects, including platform dependency and excessive use, as well as social comparison with idealized representations of influencers, with negative effects on self-esteem. The third category refers to informational and security threats: disinformation and fake news, the formation of echo chambers through algorithmic personalization mechanisms, and online abuse, cyberbullying, and privacy risks. The experts emphasized that these risks should not be ignored in the discussion of the platforms' educational potential, but should be addressed through media education programs and the development of critical thinking.

With regard to the effective design of educational content, practitioner experts systematized success factors into five categories: strategy, format, topic, ethical principles, and expected impact. From a strategic perspective, successful content requires a clearly defined niche, a precise target audience, and communication that is comprehensible to young people. From a format perspective, short videos and Instagram carousels remain the most effective, with particular emphasis on the first seconds of the content, which must capture attention immediately. Storytelling was identified as a central mechanism for transmitting information, transforming abstract content into concrete situations relevant to young people's lives. Successful topics are those anchored in young people's everyday reality or that address subjects of lasting relevance. Ethical principles such as informational accuracy, transparency, and credibility toward the audience were highlighted as indispensable foundations of educational content. Finally, from the perspective of expected impact, the experts emphasized that the objective of educational content is not limited to maximizing audience size, but aims at forming informed young people, broadening their horizons of interest, and stimulating civic and practical participation.

A distinct theme of the interviews concerned the future development of educational content on social media. The experts anticipated an increase in AI-assisted content production, a stronger emphasis on gamification and the integration of learning into everyday routines, the continued dominance of video formats, and a possible expansion of learning through augmented and virtual reality. The perspectives were, however, divided: some experts viewed new learning modalities with optimism, while others expressed concern about a reduction in users' active participation and a possible return to one-way communication. Regarding research priorities, the experts emphasized the need to investigate more deeply young people's perspectives, effects on identity and career, swipe behavior, intercultural comparisons, and marginalized and neurodivergent groups, recommending mixed and longitudinal designs in this respect.

3.3. Quantitative Survey with Young People

The third empirical study consists of a quantitative survey conducted online between 22 July and 31 August 2024, via the Qualtrics XM platform, in Romanian. The target population consisted of young people aged between 14 and 19, residing in Romania, who were active users of Instagram and/or TikTok. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling via social media, school platforms, and networks associated with events, camps, and educational activities dedicated to young people. Of the 543 responses collected, 410 were included in the analysis after incomplete responses were removed (completion rate: 75.5%). The final sample comprises 69.5% girls and 27.3% boys, with a mean age of 16.84 years, originating from at least 35 of Romania's 41 counties, 80.6% from urban areas and 19.4% from rural areas. The non-probabilistic character of the sample and the uneven distribution by gender and place of residence represent limitations. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics.

The descriptive analysis confirmed the extensive integration of the two platforms into young people's lives: 99.5% of respondents use Instagram and 84.9% use TikTok. Daily usage duration is most frequently concentrated in the 1-2 hour interval for Instagram (33.4%), while for TikTok usage time is distributed relatively evenly between 1-2 hours (22.7%) and 2-3 hours (22.0%), with girls generally reporting longer periods of use than boys. With regard to motivations, the hierarchy obtained in the survey confirms the pattern identified in the qualitative stage: social interaction ($M = 6.06$) and overcoming boredom ($M = 6.07$) constitute the dominant motivations, followed by inspiration ($M = 5.44$) and information seeking ($M = 5.19$), while positive emotions ($M = 4.75$) and the management of negative emotions ($M = 4.37$) occupy secondary positions.

The questionnaire included validated scales for measuring nine constructs: perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEU), attitude toward use (ATT), perceived trust (PT), perceived concerns (PC), perceived enjoyment (PE), subjective norms (SN), perceived behavioral control (PBC), and behavioral intention to use (BI). Six constructs were derived from the TAM–TPB framework, while PT, PC, and PE were included as additional variables informed by the preceding qualitative stages and the relevant literature. The constructs were measured using five- and seven-point Likert-type response scales, in accordance with the formats of the original validated instruments. Accordingly, mean scores were interpreted relative to the response range of each scale and were not compared directly across constructs measured on different scales.

Before hypothesis testing, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted, which confirmed the existence of significant associations among the central constructs of the model. The strongest correlations were identified between PU and ATT ($r = .46, p < .001$), between ATT and BI ($r = .43, p < .001$), and between PU and BI ($r = .38, p < .001$), confirming the relevance of the central TAM constructs. Perceived enjoyment correlated significantly both with attitude ($r = .38, p < .001$) and with intention to use ($r = .32, p < .001$), highlighting the importance of hedonic factors in the acceptance of platforms in an educational context. Notably, perceived concerns correlated negatively with attitude ($r = -.13, p < .01$) and with intention to use ($r = -.21, p < .001$), but the correlation is relatively weak, suggesting that young people either underestimate risks or perceive them as secondary in relation to the benefits of use.

Hypothesis testing followed the sequential logic of the integrated model. Overall, eight of the ten hypotheses formulated were confirmed, while hypotheses H2 and H6 were not empirically supported. A first step confirmed hypothesis H1: perceived ease of use (PEU) significantly predicts perceived usefulness (PU) ($\beta = .35, p < .001$), explaining 11.7% of its variance. The actual testing was then conducted through two hierarchical multiple regression models. The first model addressed the predictors of attitude toward use (ATT). Perceived usefulness (PU) proved to be a significant predictor of attitude ($\beta = .47, p < .001$), confirming hypothesis H3. Perceived ease of use (PEU) did not significantly influence attitude (H2 not confirmed), a theoretically relevant result: for young people in Generation Z, who grew up with these platforms, ease of use represents an assumed baseline condition rather than a differentiating factor of attitude.

Extending the model with the variables PT, PC, and PE increased the explained variance from 20.8% to 31.5%: both perceived trust ($\beta = .25, p < .001$) and perceived enjoyment ($\beta = .21, p < .001$) confirmed hypotheses H5 and H7, whereas perceived concerns did not have a significant effect on attitude (H6 not confirmed). In the extended model, perceived usefulness remained a significant predictor of attitude ($\beta = .31, p < .001$), confirming the central role of perceived usefulness in the acceptance of the educational use of the platforms. This result suggests that, in the context studied, concerns related to the use of social media do not significantly reduce positive attitudes toward their use for educational purposes, possibly because young people accept risks as an integral part of everyday digital experience.

The second regression model addressed the predictors of behavioral intention to use (BI). PU ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$), ATT ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$), PBC ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$), and SN ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$) all proved to be significant predictors of intention, confirming hypotheses H4, H8, H9, and H10, with the final model explaining 33.8% of the variance in intention to use. The confirmation of subjective norms as a predictor of intention underscores the importance of peer-group influence in young people's decision to use social media for educational purposes, in line with the literature that describes Generation Z as strongly influenced by the social validation of digital behaviors.

4. Conclusions

The general objective of the present study was to analyze the extent to which Instagram and TikTok can function as informal learning environments for young people in Romania aged 14 to 19. The synthetic answer to this question, derived from the triangulation of the three methods, is that Instagram and TikTok can function as informal learning environments not because they are designed as educational tools, but because educational content is integrated into the everyday practices of platform use, structured socially, motivationally, and algorithmically. The platforms are neither digital alternatives to formal education nor exclusively entertainment media, but hybrid and ambivalent spaces of information, orientation, and knowledge acquisition, whose educational potential depends on content quality, media competence, and users' capacity for self-regulation.

In answering the seven research questions, the dissertation revealed the following main conclusions. Instagram and TikTok are deeply integrated into the everyday routines of Romanian young people, with 99.5% of participants using Instagram and 84.9% using TikTok. Young people do not use these platforms with an explicit primary educational intention; the dominant motivations are social interaction, entertainment, and overcoming boredom. However, processes of information seeking, inspiration, and career orientation are organically integrated into these everyday practices, confirming that informal learning does not require a declared intention to learn. The types of educational content accessed cover three main areas: news and current events, career orientation and skills development, and personal interests and individual development. The consumption of educational content contributes to young people's personal and professional development through observational and self-directed learning, but is simultaneously accompanied by cognitive, socio-psychological, and informational risks.

The learning mechanisms identified through the triangulation of the three studies are multiple and combine in ways specific to social media. Social interaction and the co-construction of knowledge operate alongside learning through the observation of social models represented by influencers and experts, repeated exposure to similar content in varied formats, and the selective self-regulation of accessed content. A defining characteristic of these processes is the coexistence of active and deliberate information seeking with incidental encounters with relevant content, analogous to the "news-finds-me" phenomenon described in the specialized literature (Ohme et al., 2022; Swart, 2021). Informal appropriation thus unfolds along a continuum between the unintended encounter with content and its subsequent deliberate deepening. Success factors of educational content include a clear strategy, a platform-adapted format, topics relevant to young people's lives, communication at the audience's level, effective storytelling, interactivity, and solid ethical principles, namely accuracy, transparency, and credibility toward the audience. The form of presentation is not a mere packaging of knowledge, but substantially influences whether content is perceived as relevant, comprehensible, and trustworthy.

From the perspective of the quantitative survey, the partially confirmed integrated TAM-TPB model shows that the acceptance of social media for educational purposes is determined by perceived usefulness, trust in content, enjoyment of use, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, with the model explaining 33.8% of the variance in intention to use. Perceived ease of use does not directly influence attitudes toward educational use; for Generation Z, it represents an assumed baseline condition rather than a differentiating factor. Perceived concerns do not significantly reduce positive attitudes, suggesting that young people accept risks as an integral part of everyday digital experience, a finding that highlights the need for media education programs that go beyond the mere transmission of information about risks and develop capacities for critical thinking and self-regulation of digital behavior. The confirmation of subjective norms as a significant predictor of intention emphasizes that the decision to use social media for educational purposes is strongly influenced by the peer group and the social context, with direct implications for the design of educational interventions.

The general conclusion of the dissertation is that the educational potential of Instagram and TikTok is real, but contextual, conditional, and ambivalent. The same platform structures that facilitate access to information, inspiration, and orientation can simultaneously generate disinformation, distraction, dysfunctional social comparisons, and superficial processing of content. Understanding

social media as informal learning spaces for Generation Z does not imply idealizing them, but recognizing that many young people learn in the same digital environments in which they communicate, seek entertainment, and orient themselves, requiring nuanced responses from researchers, educators, content creators, and policymakers.

5. Contributions, Implications, and Limitations

The theoretical contribution of the dissertation lies in the integration and combined operationalization of three complementary theoretical frameworks: UGA for the analysis of usage motivations, TAM for explaining acceptance factors, and TPB for understanding behavioral intentions in the context of the educational use of social media. This integration, applied to an insufficiently studied context and target group, provides a new perspective compared with studies that apply these theories separately or in formal learning contexts. At the same time, the dissertation extends the motivational taxonomy proposed by Brailovskaia et al. (2020) by inductively identifying subcategories and a new category, professional and personal development, which is specifically relevant for young people in Romania. Methodologically, the contribution consists of the sequential, multi-perspective mixed design, which articulates the perspectives of young people, practitioners, and academics and which made it possible to refine the quantitative conceptual model on the basis of qualitative results. The empirical and contextual contribution of the dissertation lies in providing data on young people in Romania in relation to the educational use of Instagram and TikTok, a field insufficiently researched in the Romanian and Eastern European context.

The practical implications of the dissertation concern several categories of actors. For young people, the results underline the importance of developing media competence and the capacity to self-regulate digital behavior as essential conditions for leveraging the educational potential of the platforms. For educators and educational initiatives, the dissertation offers an empirical framework for understanding young people's media practices and for adapting educational interventions to the digital realities of Generation Z. For creators of educational content, the results provide a set of empirically validated design principles that combine thematic relevance, platform-adapted format, storytelling, interactivity, and credibility. For public decision-makers, the dissertation underlines the need for systematic media education policies that go beyond merely raising awareness of risks and aim at the formation of critical thinking and responsible digital behavior.

The main limitations of the dissertation are methodological and conceptual in nature. From a methodological perspective, the non-probabilistic sample, with an overrepresentation of girls and young people from urban areas, limits the generalizability of the results to the entire population of young people in Romania. In addition, the qualitative sample of the focus groups, drawn from a German-language summer camp, constitutes an educationally advantaged group whose results are exploratory in nature and cannot be extrapolated to all young people. The cross-sectional design of the quantitative survey allows the identification of statistical associations, not causal relationships. The measurement of constructs through self-report scales entails the risk of social desirability, and some scales presented reliability values at the lower threshold of acceptability. From a conceptual perspective, the dissertation primarily measures conditions favorable to learning, namely motivations, attitudes, and intentions, rather than actual learning effects, leaving open the question of the extent to which exposure to educational content on social media produces the durable acquisition of knowledge and skills. Future research directions include longitudinal and experimental studies that measure concrete learning effects, the extension of research to more diverse and more representative populations, international and cross-platform comparisons, and the investigation of the specific role of algorithms in structuring young people's access to educational content.

6. Bibliography

Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179–211. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90020-t](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-t)

Akçayır, M., Dündar, H., & Akçayır, G. (2016). What makes you a digital native? Is it enough to be born after 1980? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 60, 435–440. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.02.089>

Al-Adwan, A. S., Li, N., Al-Adwan, A., Abbasi, G. A., Albelbisi, N. A., & Habibi, A. (2023). Extending the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to Predict University Students' Intentions to Use Metaverse-Based Learning Platforms. *Education and Information Technologies*, 28(11), 15381–15413. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-11816-3>

Alalid, R. P., Calipayan, J. A., Yutrago, J. J. S., Sabado, R. E., Nierves, J. C. T., Palogan, A. R. P., Banoson, S. O., & Sumalinog, G. G. (2024). Integration of Educational Content in Social Media Platforms: Content Creators' Experiences. *Salud Ciencia Y Tecnología - Serie De Conferencias*, 4, 1319. <https://doi.org/10.56294/sctconf20251319>

- Ansari, J. A. N., & Khan, N. A. (2020). Exploring the role of social media in collaborative learning the new domain of learning. *Smart Learning Environments*, 7(1), 2–16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-020-00118-7>
- Balaban, D. C., & Gross, E. C. (2022). Perceived Social-Media Literacy (PSML) and its efficiency in identifying counterfeit digital disinformation. A pilot study on the Romanian social-media users. ECREA 2022, 9th European Communication Conference, 19–22 October 2022, AARHUS, Denmark.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Prentice-Hall. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/10010087207/>
- Barrot, J. S. (2020). Scientific Mapping of Social Media in Education: A Decade of Exponential Growth. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 59(4), 645–668. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735633120972010>
- Bentley, K., Chu, C., Nistor, C., Pehlivan, E., & Yalcin, T. (2021). Social media engagement for global influencers. *Journal Of Global Marketing*, 34(3), 205–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08911762.2021.1895403>
- Boyd, D. (2014). It's complicated: the social lives of networked teens. *Choice Reviews Online*, 51(12), 51–7042. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.51-7042>
- Brailovskaia, J., Schillack, H., & Margraf, J. (2020). Tell me why are you using social media (SM)! Relationship between reasons for use of SM, SM flow, daily stress, depression, anxiety, and addictive SM use – An exploratory investigation of young adults in Germany. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 113, 106511. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106511>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Câmpian, V., Dabija, D., Vătămănescu, E., & Dominici, G. (2025). Teaching staff's role in enhancing students' future intended use of e-learning management systems. *Információs Társadalom*, 25(2), 9. <https://doi.org/10.22503/inftars.xxv.2025.2.1>
- Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent [CJI]. (2025). Der Zusammenhang mit den Informations- und Medienkonsumgewohnheiten junger Menschen in Rumänien. In *Centrul pentru Jurnalism Independent*. <https://cji.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Raport-relatia-elevilor-cu-informatia.pdf>
- Corbu, N. & Stancea, A. (2025). (Un)Real: The role of cognitive biases in young people's assessment of news accuracy. *Romanian Journal Of Applied Psychology*, 27(1), 84–103. <https://doi.org/10.2478/rjap-2025-0009>
- Davis, F. D. (1989). Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, and User Acceptance of Information Technology. *MIS Quarterly*, 13(3), 319–340. <https://doi.org/10.2307/249008>

- De Groot, T., De Haan, M., & Van Dijken, M. (2023). Learning in and about a filtered universe: young people's awareness and control of algorithms in social media. *Learning Media and Technology*, 48(4), 701–713. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2023.2253730>
- Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-2271-7>
- Dias, P., & Duarte, A. (2022). TikTok Practices among Teenagers in Portugal: A Uses & Gratifications Approach. *Journalism and Media*, 3(4), 615–632. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia3040041>
- Dron, J., & Anderson, T. (2014). *Teaching Crowds: Learning and Social Media*. Athabasca University Press. <https://doi.org/10.15215/aupress/9781927356807.01>
- Eveleth, D. M., Stone, R. W., & Baker-Eveleth, L. J. (2024). Social media users trust in their most frequently used social media site. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 14(4), e202445. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcm/14796>
- Eynon, R. (2020). The Myth of the Digital Native: Why it Persists and the Harm it Inflicts. In *Educational research and innovation*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/2dac420b-en>
- Falgoust, G., Winterlind, E., Moon, P., Parker, A., Zinzow, H., & Madathil, K. C. (2022). Applying the uses and gratifications theory to identify motivational factors behind young adult's participation in viral social media challenges on TikTok. *Human Factors in Healthcare*, 2, 100014. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hfh.2022.100014>
- Fetters, M. D., Curry, L., & Creswell, J. W. (2013). Achieving integration in mixed methods Designs-Principles and Practices. *Health Services Research*, 48(6pt2), 2134–2156. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.12117>
- Gil-Quintana, J., & De León, E. V. (2021). Educational Influencers on Instagram: Analysis of Educational Channels, Audiences, and Economic Performance. *Publications*, 9(4), 43. <https://doi.org/10.3390/publications9040043>
- Greenhow, C., & Lewin, C. (2015). Social media and education: reconceptualizing the boundaries of formal and informal learning. *Learning Media and Technology*, 41(1), 6–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2015.1064954>
- Gyimah, G. (2024). Uses and Gratification Theory: A Study of Social Media Usage, Tiktok among the Youth. *International Journal of Latest Technology in Engineering Management & Applied Science*, XIII(III), 53–57. <https://doi.org/10.51583/ijltemas.2024.130307>
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>
- Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and Gratifications Research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37(4), 509. <https://doi.org/10.1086/268109>

- Kuckartz, U., & Rädiker, S. (2022). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*. Beltz Juventa.
- Lee, E., Lee, J., Moon, J. H., & Sung, Y. (2015). Pictures Speak Louder than Words: Motivations for Using Instagram. *Cyberpsychology Behavior and Social Networking*, 18(9), 552–556. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015.0157>
- Livingstone, S. (2014). Developing social media literacy: How children learn to interpret risky opportunities on social network sites. *Communications. The European Journal of Communication Research*, 39(3), 283–303. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2014-0113>
- Maftai, A., & Diaconu-Gherasim, L. R. (2023). The road to addiction (might be) paved with good intentions: Motives for social media use and psychological distress among early adolescents. *Journal of Children and Media*, 17(4), 538–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2023.2255304>
- Maftai, A., Merlici, I., & Dănilă, O. (2023). Social media use as a coping mechanism during the COVID-19 pandemic: A multidimensional perspective on adolescents' well-being. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10, 1062688. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.1062688>
- Mucundorfeanu, M., & Balaban, D. C. (2025). Suspicious minds: Adolescents' inferences of manipulative intent in retouched influencer ads. *Acta Psychologica*, 261, 105780. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.105780>
- Nguyen, V. K. L., Le, T. M. H., Duong, T. N. M., Nguyen, T. S., Le, T. T. H., & Nguyen, T. T. H. (2022). Assessing Student's Adoption of E-Learning: An Integration of TAM and TPB Framework. *Journal of Information Technology Education Research*, 21, 297–335. <https://doi.org/10.28945/5000>
- O'Reilly, T. (2007). What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software. *Communications & Strategies*, 65(1), 17–37. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1008839
- Ohme, J., Andersen, K., Albæk, E., & De Vreese, C. H. (2022). Anything Goes? Youth, News, and Democratic Engagement in the Roaring 2020s. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(3), 557–568. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221093008>
- Parent, N. (2023). Basic Needs Satisfaction through Social Media Engagement: A Developmental Framework for Understanding Adolescent Social Media Use. *Human Development*, 67(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000529449>
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1. On The Horizon: The International Journal of Learning Futures, 9(5), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816>
- Puiu, S. (2017). Generation Z – An Educational and Managerial Perspective. *Revista Tinerilor Economisti*, 29, 62–72. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=1014286>
- Rotaru, I. (2010). Comunicarea virtuală. Impactul noilor tehnologii informaționale și comunicaționale în spațiul educațional contemporan. Tritonic.

Rotaru, I., Dragomir, I., Drinc, L., Scutaru, G. & Selim, I. (2022). An approach to fighting Disinformation using a peer to peer educational model of media Education: Investment in a Safer Future. *EDULEARN Proceedings*, 1, 5058–5067. <https://doi.org/10.21125/edulearn.2022.1208>

Samala, A. D., Papadakis, S., & Rawas, S. (2025). Global Insights into Mobile Learning in Higher Education: A PRISMA-Guided Bibliometric Analysis from 2007 to 2023. *International Journal of Educational Reform*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10567879251341869>

Selwyn, N. (2012). Making sense of young people, education and digital technology: the role of sociological theory. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(1), 81–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2011.577949>

Swart, J. (2021). Tactics of news literacy: How young people access, evaluate, and engage with news on social media. *New Media & Society*, 25(3), 505–521. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211011447>

Szambolics, J., Malos, S., & Balaban, D. C. (2023). Adolescents' Augmented Reality Filter Usage on Social Media, Developmental Process, and Well-Being. *Media and Communication*, 11(4). <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i4.7016>

Szymkowiak, A., Melović, B., Dabić, M., Jeganathan, K., & Kundi, G. S. (2021). Information technology and Gen Z: The role of teachers, the internet, and technology in the education of young people. *Technology in Society*, 65, 101565. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2021.101565>

Taddeo, G. (2023). Life Long/Insta-Learning: the Use of Influencers as Informal Educators. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 15(2), 147–167. <https://doi.org/10.14658/PUPJ-IJSE-2023-2-8>

Taylor, S. & Todd, P. A. (1995). Understanding Information Technology Usage: A Test of Competing Models. *Information Systems Research*, 6(2), 144–176. <https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.6.2.144>

Turner, A. (2015). Generation Z: Technology and Social Interest. *The Journal of Individual Psychology*, 71(2), 103–113. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jip.2015.0021>

Twenge, J. M., Martin, G. N., & Campbell, W. K. (2018). Decreases in psychological well-being among American adolescents after 2012 and links to screen time during the rise of smartphone technology. *Emotion*, 18(6), 765–780. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000403>

Van Dijck, J. (2018). *The Culture of Connectivity*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199970773.001.0001>

Vițelar, A. (2019). Like Me: Generation Z and the Use of Social Media for Personal Branding. *Questa Soft*. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=943886>

Von Soest, C. (2022). Why Do We Speak to Experts? Reviving the Strength of the Expert Interview Method. *Perspectives on Politics*, 21(1), 277–287. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592722001116>

Whiting, A., & Williams, D. (2013). Why people use social media: a uses and gratifications approach. *Qualitative Market Research. An International Journal*, 16(4), 362–369. <https://doi.org/10.1108/qmr-06-2013-0041>

Williams, C. (2011). Research Methods. *Journal Of Business & Economics Research (JBER)*, 5(3). <https://doi.org/10.19030/jber.v5i3.2532>

Zou, Y., Kuek, F., Feng, W., & Cheng, X. (2025). Digital learning in the 21st century: trends, challenges, and innovations in technology integration. *Frontiers in Education*, 10, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1562391>