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Tanzanian students repurpose YouTube for education: a self-directed learning study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Tanzanian students repurpose YouTube from entertainment to education through the lens of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) Theory. Using a descriptive survey design and quantitative approach, data were collected from all 96 enrolled diploma students in Records, Archives, and Information Management at the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) via a structured questionnaire, yielding 91.7% response rate. Findings reveal significant academic adoption, with over 65% of respondents using YouTube frequently for learning. Preferred content includes Records Retention and Disposal, Digital Records Management, and Research Case Studies, indicating demand for practical skills. Crucially, 78.6% found YouTube useful for understanding complex concepts, especially digital technologies and legal frameworks. Access is overwhelmingly mobile-centric, with 96.6% accessing the platform via smartphones. A Chi-Square test of independence revealed no significant association between gender and usage frequency ($\chi^2(2, n = 88) = 2.34, p = 0.67$, Cramér's $V = 0.17$), indicating gender-neutral adoption despite a male-dominated enrollment. A supplementary Spearman correlation confirmed a moderate positive association between usage frequency and perceived usefulness ($r_s = 0.41, p < 0.01$). The study demonstrates YouTube's substantial role as a supplementary academic resource, highlighting how students.

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1. Introduction and background of the study

The global educational landscape is being reshaped by the proliferation of digital platforms, with YouTube emerging as a particularly powerful, if unconventional, learning tool. Born in 2005 as an entertainment hub, YouTube has undergone a significant cultural transformation, evolving into a vital repository of knowledge where leisure and education increasingly intersect (Marone & Rodriguez, 2019; Nursilah & Jayadi, 2025). This evolution enables learners to transcend temporal, geographic, and socio-economic barriers and engage with content in a flexible, on-demand manner. For students, this often means a gradual journey from seeking entertainment to discovering scholarly resources, facilitated by algorithmic recommendations that progressively surface educational content (Ginting et al., 2023; Madhavika & Rathnayake, 2020; Maziriri et al., 2020).

This phenomenon of academic learning via YouTube represents an essential manifestation of SDL Theory (Garrison, 1997; Knowles, 1975). SDL provides a robust conceptual lens for understanding how learners take initiative in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, and evaluating outcomes. The theory posits that learners exercise autonomy and agency, particularly when formal instructional resources are limited. YouTube's features align closely with SDL principles: interactive controls such as stopping and reversing support mastery learning (Breslyn & Green, 2022), multimodal delivery enhances conceptual understanding (Lai et al., 2021), and the platform facilitates constructivist knowledge reconstruction through peer resource-sharing (Habes et al., 2022). Within SDL's three-way

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model, Garrison (1997) identifies self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation as the three pillars of self-directed engagement, and YouTube affords learners direct, personal control over each dimension. Students who select, pace, and evaluate their own video-based learning are not merely consumers of content; they are enacting the core self-regulatory processes described by SDL theory.

However, this mode of SDL operates within inherent constraints. The platform's informal design presents challenges, including variable content quality, a lack of curricular alignment, and the absence of formal pedagogical scaffolding. Issues such as discoverability problems arising from algorithmic popularity biases, the absence of reliable quality indicators (Shoufan & Mohamed, 2022), and passive consumption patterns that limit participatory learning (Lai et al., 2021) create a tension between YouTube's open architecture and the rigour required for academic success. These tensions are especially pronounced in disciplinary fields that demand technical precision, such as records management, where students must distinguish between authoritative professional guidance and generic or inaccurate content.

Analytically, despite documented global adoption, a significant gap exists in understanding this dynamic within specific disciplinary and regional contexts. Systematic reviews reveal a near-complete absence of studies examining YouTube's role in Tanzania's records management education a field that demands specialised digital curation competencies. This gap is especially significant given that contextual factors, such as inadequate training on records management practices in Global South economies, are known to significantly mediate educational technology adoption (Malekani & Mubofu, 2023; Maziriri et al., 2020). Furthermore, as Cho (2013) emphasises, the effectiveness of technology-mediated learning is not uniform but exhibits considerable disciplinary variability.

Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap in context, discipline, and theory. Guided exclusively by SDL Theory, it examines how Tanzanian records management students proactively turn a global entertainment platform into a personalised educational resource, navigating both its affordances and limitations to meet their academic needs.

1.1. Research questions

Guided by SDL Theory, this study addresses the following research questions:

- i. To what extent do Records Management students engage in SDL by utilising YouTube for academic purposes?
- ii. What specific records management topics do students seek out through YouTube, and how do these choices reflect their self-identified learning needs?
- iii. How do students perceive the effectiveness of YouTube in supporting their understanding of complex records management concepts?
- iv. What patterns of device usage and content sharing characterise students' SDL practices with YouTube?

2. Methods

2.1. Research design and approach

2.1.1. Research design

This study employed a descriptive survey design to quantify YouTube usage patterns. The design aligns with Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommendation for studies seeking to document behavioural frequencies and patterns rather than to explore lived experiences, thereby avoiding the theoretical overextension of mixed methods to this specific research question.

2.1.2. Research approach

A quantitative approach was adopted to statistically measure the extent, frequency, and trends of YouTube's academic utilisation. This prioritises generalisability across the target population regarding how an inherently entertainment-focused platform is leveraged for educational purposes, a core strength

of quantitative methods when analysing behavioural patterns and adoption rates (Bryman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019).

2.2. Area of study

The study was conducted at the MNMA in Tanzania, a purposively selected institution offering diploma-level programmes in Records, Archives, and Information Management. MNMA was chosen for its unique disciplinary relevance: Records Management, as a field undergoing rapid digital transformation, is particularly susceptible to the contextual challenges of training gaps and resource limitations in Global South economies (Malekani & Mubofu, 2023). The diploma level represents a critical connection for vocational and professional training in Tanzania, where foundational digital competencies are essential for entry into the workforce.

2.3. Sample size and sampling

A census approach, encompassing the entire target population of all 96 enrolled diploma students, was employed. Full population coverage eliminated sampling error and ensured complete representation (Etikan et al., 2016), providing a definitive baseline frequency analysis for all variables under investigation.

2.3.1. Participant screening and data inclusion criteria

Of the 88 respondents, 4 reported never using YouTube for academic purposes. These four participants were excluded from analyses of YouTube usage patterns, perceived usefulness, and content preferences, yielding an analytical sample of $n = 84$ for those sections. However, these four participants were retained in all demographic reporting and in the Chi-Square gender-vs-usage-frequency analysis, since 'Never' is a valid and theoretically meaningful response category for that test; retaining them avoids introducing selection bias into the gender association analysis ($n = 88$ for that test). This distinction is applied consistently throughout the findings.

2.4. Instrument development and validation

The study employed a structured online questionnaire, developed via Google Forms. The instrument development followed a transparent, staged process. In the first stage, the author derived a theoretical item pool from the SDL constructs of self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation (Garrison, 1997), defining the constructs and the variables to be measured independently of any AI tool. In the second stage, GPT-4 was used in two limited capacities: (1) to generate a set of candidate item phrasings from a structured prompt that specified the constructs and response formats, thereby expanding the initial item pool for expert review; and (2) to suggest alternative wordings for items flagged as ambiguous during piloting. GPT-4 played no role in defining constructs, selecting the theoretical framework, determining response scales, or making final item decisions. All AI-generated item suggestions were then reviewed by an expert panel comprising three records management professionals. The panel evaluated each item against the constructs and the specific disciplinary context; their collective professional judgment was accorded primary and final authority over any AI-suggested phrasing. Items were accepted, modified, or rejected solely on the panel's assessment, resulting in an excellent average Item-Content Validity Index (I-CVI) of 0.92. Reliability was confirmed via pilot testing with 15 non-participants, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. The data collection link was provided to participants in the first week of May 2025 and remained available for three weeks, with reminder prompts, before being closed for analysis.

2.5. Ethical approval

This study received ethical approval from the Directorate of Research and Consultancy, Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, which serves as the institution's Institutional Review Board for research ethics (Approval Reference: MNMA/DRCC-1/0012/2025; Date of Approval: 19th March 2025). The approval

Table 1. Response rate for a survey targeting 96 students.

Category	Number	Percent
Targeted respondents	96	100
Actual responses	88	91.7
Non-respondents	8	8.3

Table 2. Gender distribution of respondents ($n = 88$).

Gender	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
Male	61	69.3
Female	27	30.7
Total	88	100.0

letter itself is headed 25th March 2025, the date it was issued to the researcher, while 19th March 2025 is the date recorded within the letter as the date on which the approval decision was made; the latter is treated as the operative approval date and is used consistently throughout this manuscript. Informed consent was obtained electronically, with participants explicitly indicating their agreement by selecting an 'I agree' checkbox after reading a comprehensive information document that clarified the study's aims, confidentiality measures, and the right to withdraw at any time. No incentives were offered.

2.6. Data analysis

Data were analysed descriptively in Excel, including frequency distributions and percentages. An inferential statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 24. The primary inferential component comprised a Chi-Square test of independence examining the association between gender and YouTube usage frequency ($n = 88$). This analysis was extended to include reporting of observed and expected frequencies, verification of test assumptions (minimum expected cell frequency ≥ 5), and Cramer's V effect size. Additionally, a Spearman rank-order correlation was computed to examine the association between YouTube usage frequency and perceived usefulness ($n = 84$), addressing Reviewer 2's concern regarding analytical depth.

3. Findings

3.1. Response rate

A total of 96 students were targeted, with 88 completing the survey (91.7% response rate), exceeding the 70% benchmark for reliability (Fowler, 2014). Table 1 presents the response rate.

3.2. Demographic characteristics

3.2.1. Gender distribution

The sample included 61 males (69.3%) and 27 females (30.7%). Table 2 summarises the gender distribution.

3.3. YouTube usage patterns

3.3.1. Frequency of academic YouTube use

Respondents reported the frequency of their use of YouTube for academic purposes. Findings revealed that 40.9% ($n = 36$) used it several times a week, followed by 27.3% ($n = 24$) once a week, 18.2% ($n = 16$) rarely, 9.1% ($n = 8$) daily, and 4.5% ($n = 4$) never, as shown in Table 3.

3.3.2. Topics viewed

Table 4 presents the records-related topics students frequently access on YouTube ($n = 84$; multiple responses permitted).

Table 3. Academic YouTube usage frequency ($n = 88$).

Frequency	Number (f)	Percent (%)
Daily	8	9.1
Several times a week	36	40.9
Once a week	24	27.3
Rarely	16	18.2
Never	4	4.5
Total	88	100.0

Table 4. Top records topics watched on YouTube ($n = 84$, multiple responses permitted).

Type of records topic	Frequency	Percent (%)
Records retention and disposal	53	63.1
Digital records management	39	46.4
Research and case studies	27	32.1
Archival techniques	22	26.2
Others (e.g. metadata, digitisation)	22	26.2
Legal and compliance issues	19	22.6
Software tutorials	18	21.4
Information governance	16	19.0

Table 5. Perceived usefulness of YouTube for complex academic concepts ($n = 84$).

Response category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes, very useful	66	78.6
Somewhat helpful	17	20.2
Neutral	0	0.0
Not useful	1	1.2
Total	84	100.0

Table 6. Device preference for accessing YouTube ($n = 84$, multiple responses permitted).

Device	Frequency	Percent (%)
Smartphone	81	96.4
Laptop	19	22.6
Desktop computer	9	10.7

3.3.3. Perceived usefulness

Respondents rated YouTube's usefulness for understanding complex academic concepts. Table 5 presents the frequency distribution, which sums to 100%.

3.3.4. Device preference

Respondents' preferred devices for accessing YouTube are shown in Table 6 ($n = 84$; multiple responses permitted, as students may use more than one device), with smartphones the most common (96.4%).

3.3.5. Preferred content creators

Table 7 presents respondents' preferences for YouTube content creators.

3.3.6. Peer sharing

Most students (72.7%, $n = 61$) reported proactively sharing YouTube-sourced academic content with peers, while 27.3% ($n = 23$) use the platform only for private, individual study.

3.3.7. Examination preparation

Table 8 presents the frequency with which respondents use YouTube for examination and assignment preparation.

Table 7. Preferred YouTube content creators ($n = 84$).

Type of content creator	Frequency	Percent (%)
Professional educators	57	64.8
Content quality priority	22	25.0
Peers	3	3.4
Others	2	2.4

Table 8. YouTube Use for examination and assignment preparation ($n = 84$).

Frequency	<i>N</i>	Percent (%)
Always	10	11.5
Often	18	21.4
Sometimes	44	52.3
Never	12	14.8
Total	84	100.0

Table 9. Academic platforms beyond YouTube ($n = 84$).

Platform	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
Social media groups	47	55.7
Online courses	31	36.4
Academic journals & articles	26	30.7
Educational podcasts	24	28.4
Others	16	19.3
Webinars & live seminars	11	13.6

Table 10. Chi-square analysis – gender by YouTube usage frequency ($n = 88$).

Usage category	Male obs. (exp.)	Female obs. (exp.)	Total	Chi-square
High (Daily + Sev./week)	30 (31.1)	14 (12.9)	44	$\chi^2 = 2.34, p = 0.67, V = 0.17$
Moderate (Once/week)	18 (16.6)	6 (7.4)	24	
Low (Rarely + Never)	13 (13.2)	7 (6.8)	20	
Total	61	27	88	

3.3.8. Alternative platforms

Respondents were asked about alternative platforms used for academic purposes beyond YouTube. Social media groups were the most used (55.7%, $n = 47$), as detailed in Table 9.

3.3.9. Inferential analysis – gender and YouTube usage frequency

A Chi-Square test of independence was conducted to examine whether gender was associated with the frequency of YouTube use for academic learning. The full sample ($n = 88$) was used for this analysis, as the four non-users contribute a meaningful 'Never' frequency response category. Before interpreting the results, the assumptions of the Chi-Square test were verified. Given the five-category frequency variable, the adjacent low-frequency categories ('Daily' and 'Never') were combined with neighbouring categories to ensure that all expected cell frequencies exceeded 5.0, meeting the minimum assumption for Chi-Square validity (Bryman, 2016). The resulting collapsed 3×2 table (High use: Daily + Several times weekly; Moderate: Once a week; Low: Rarely + Never) by Gender (Male/Female) met all assumptions. Before collapsing, the minimum expected cell frequency (in the 'Never' category for females) was 1.23, well below the minimum threshold of 5.0; following the collapse into three usage categories, the minimum expected cell frequency rose to 6.8 (Low category, females), confirming that the assumption was satisfied after the adjustment.

Analysis revealed no statistically significant association between gender and the frequency of YouTube use for academic learning ($\chi^2(2, n = 88) = 2.34, p = 0.67$). The effect size, measured by Cramer's V , was 0.17, indicating a small and non-significant effect (Cohen, 1988). Table 10 presents the observed and expected frequencies for the collapsed categories.

This finding indicates uniform adoption patterns across genders, suggesting that within the disciplinary environment of Records Management at MNMA, students' repurposing of YouTube for academic learning transcends potential sociodemographic barriers. This is particularly noteworthy given the program's male-dominated enrollment (69.3%) and aligns with Maziriri et al. (2020) finding that disciplinary

context, rather than individual demographics, is often the more powerful predictor of educational technology adoption.

3.3.10. Usage frequency and perceived usefulness

To further explore the relationship between how frequently students use YouTube and how useful they perceive it to be, a Spearman rank-order correlation was computed ($n = 84$, excluding non-users). Results indicated a moderate positive and statistically significant association ($r_s = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$, two-tailed). Students who used YouTube more frequently tended to rate it as more useful for understanding complex academic concepts. This finding is consistent with an SDL interpretation: more frequent, self-initiated engagement with the platform appears to reinforce learners' confidence in its academic value, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of resource utilisation and positive utility appraisal (Garrison, 1997).

4. Discussion

This section interprets the findings through the theoretical lens of SDL Theory (Garrison, 1997; Knowles, 1975), analysing how each observed pattern confirms, extends, or complicates the specific constructs of the theory in the context of higher education.

4.1. SDL and YouTube engagement

The frequent use of YouTube (40.9% several times weekly; 9.1% daily) and the strong preference for applied topics such as records retention and disposal (63.1%) and digital records management (46.4%) are not merely consistent with SDL Theory they directly enact its core construct of *self-management*, which Garrison (1997) defines as the learner's ability to exercise control over the task and context of learning. These students are not passively receiving assigned content; they are identifying specific knowledge gaps in their training and actively pursuing targeted resources to fill them. This is a meaningful extension of SDL principles into an African context, demonstrating that the self-management construct operates strongly even where formal instructional scaffolding is limited, a finding that both supports and geographically extends Breslyn and Green (2022) work on YouTube-mediated science learning.

4.2. SDL in a mobile-first context

The near-universal reliance on smartphones (96.6%) operationalises SDL's construct of *self-monitoring*, the learner's capacity to evaluate the adequacy of available resources and adapt their approach accordingly (Garrison, 1997). In a resource-constrained setting where desktop ICT facilities are limited, students demonstrate sophisticated self-monitoring by identifying the smartphone as the most viable access pathway and systematically deploying it to maintain continuous learning engagement. This finding complicates a simplistic reading of mobile learning as merely opportunistic; rather, it reflects deliberate, strategic resource identification behaviour, a hallmark of high SDL capacity (Knowles, 1975; Malekani & Mubofu, 2023).

4.3. SDL constraints and cognitive challenges

The minority non-use (4.5%) and limited usefulness perceptions (1.2%) reveal an important complication of SDL Theory in this context: the theory presupposes a degree of self-efficacy in resource evaluation that not all learners possess (Garrison, 1997). For students who lack confidence in assessing the quality of online content, YouTube's unstructured information environment does not serve as an SDL enabler but rather as an obstacle. The low engagement with legal and compliance issues (22.6%) may reflect precisely this dynamic when content is technically complex, and the credibility of sources is difficult to assess, students with lower self-efficacy may revert to more structured resources. As one respondent noted, some videos are too generic or inaccurate for the course, underscoring the credibility evaluation challenge, which represents a critical SDL competency that the curriculum may need to explicitly develop. Crucially, this finding does not merely replicate prior literature (Shoufan & Mohamed, 2022); it

extends SDL theory by suggesting that self-directed engagement with unmediated platforms is conditional on a prerequisite level of critical evaluation skill, a moderating variable that deserves greater theoretical attention in SDL scholarship.

4.4. Social dimension of SDL

The high peer-sharing rate (72.7%) highlights a dimension of SDL that Garrison (1997) acknowledges but remains theoretically underdeveloped: the social-constructivist dimension of self-directedness, in which learners co-construct knowledge through resource sharing within informal learning communities. The present data complicate the assumption that SDL is inherently individualistic. Students at MNMA are not practising SDL in isolation; they are collectively curating and distributing resources, thereby strengthening both the reach and the vetting of YouTube content. This collective self-direction, where individual agency and social knowledge construction are intertwined, suggests a richer SDL model is needed to account for peer-mediated resource validation in digital learning environments, an insight that extends Khan and Idris (2023) finding of informal resource-sharing hesitancy by demonstrating contextual conditions under which such hesitancy is overcome.

4.5. SDL as a gender-neutral practice

The Chi-Square test ($\chi^2 = 2.34$, $p = 0.67$, Cramer's $V = 0.17$) confirms the absence of gender differences in YouTube usage frequency. From an SDL perspective, this finding has specific theoretical significance: it suggests that when learners perceive a platform as genuinely facilitating their self-management and self-monitoring goals, as evidenced by the high overall utility ratings, gender-based barriers to technology adoption are attenuated by the functional value of the tool itself. This is consistent with Garrison's (1997) proposition that strong motivational alignment with learning goals can override situational and sociodemographic access barriers. The democratic nature of smartphone-based YouTube access appears to neutralise structural inequalities that might otherwise suppress female engagement in a male-dominated technical programme, extending Maziriri et al. (2020) findings to a new disciplinary context in Sub-Saharan Africa.

4.6. Consolidated effectiveness and SDL implications

YouTube's primary value for records management students lies in supporting the SDL construct of self-managed procedural knowledge acquisition, specifically the ability to identify, access, and evaluate resources for practical vocational competencies. The moderate positive correlation between usage frequency and perceived usefulness ($r_s = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$) is consistent with a reinforcing SDL dynamic: learners who exercise greater self-direction in platform use derive greater perceived benefit, which in turn sustains and deepens engagement. While the cross-sectional design precludes establishing the direction of causality between usage and perceived usefulness, this reciprocal relationship is implicit in Garrison's (1997) model and, interpreted cautiously, has rarely been empirically examined in African vocational technology-learning contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study positions YouTube as a practically significant enabler of self-directed learning within the specific context of Tanzanian records management education. Interpreted through Garrison's (1997) SDL framework, the findings reveal a cohort that is actively exercising the three pillars of self-directedness, self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation through strategic, goal-oriented engagement with an entertainment platform originally designed for leisure. The consistent adoption across gender lines suggests that when mobile technology lowers the practical barriers to platform access, the self-directed learning drive can transcend demographic divides.

At the same time, the study identifies an important theoretical qualification: effective SDL with unmediated platforms is conditional on a learner's self-efficacy in critically evaluating content quality. Where

this competency is underdeveloped, the SDL potential of YouTube remains unrealised. These findings collectively suggest an imperative for educational institutions to formally scaffold students' critical evaluation of content and to integrate curated digital resources into the formal curriculum, thereby transforming organic, self-directed practices into pedagogically supported ones.

5.1. Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to SDL Theory in three specific ways: (1) it extends the self-management construct empirically to African vocational education contexts; (2) it identifies critical content evaluation self-efficacy as a moderating variable in SDL-platform effectiveness, a theoretically novel proposition; and (3) it demonstrates that the social-constructivist dimension of SDL is activated, not suppressed, by accessible mobile technology complicating individualistic readings of self-directedness.

5.2. Practical implications

For educators, these findings suggest the value of formally integrating curated YouTube playlists into teaching strategies and explicitly developing students' abilities to critically evaluate online resources as a foundational SDL competency. For institutions, investing in mobile-access infrastructure and digital literacy development can substantially enhance students' capacity for effective self-directed learning using accessible platforms.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study's quantitative focus on a single institution limits qualitative exploration of SDL motivations and processes. The cross-sectional design cannot establish causal direction in the usage-usefulness relationship. Future research should employ mixed methods across multiple universities to examine: the cognitive impacts of video-based versus traditional learning in self-directed contexts; scaffolding strategies to enhance SDL critical evaluation competencies; and the scalability of mobile-first SDL models in resource-constrained settings.

Acknowledgments

This research was conducted by a single researcher. The study concept, methodology, data collection and analysis, and final article drafting, revision, and approval were all the work of the author alone.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Christian Mubofu**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Generative AI statement

In accordance with Cogent Education's author guidelines on AI-assisted research, the author declares that GPT-4 was used solely to provide suggestions for instrument item phrasing during the questionnaire development phase, as described in [Section 2.3](#). GPT-4 was not used for data analysis, interpretation, literature review, or manuscript writing. All intellectual content, analysis, conclusions, and writing presented in this manuscript are the sole work of the author.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analysed during this study are not publicly available but may be accessed from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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