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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES IN THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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Abstract

The study explored the use of social media among which are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Whatsapp and communication platforms such as Gtalk. Being a survey, the study employed the use of a questionnaire referred to in this study as a social media assessment tool (SMAT) which was administered on a sample of 10 academic staff and 100 students drawn from all the four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland East Region. Results indicate that the most popular social media was Whatsapp followed by Facebook. The least popular was Twitter. Despite the benefits of social media to ODL students, the majority of the respondents did not normally use the social media platforms for educational purposes. Where the social media were used for educational purposes, these were mostly used to discuss assignments, research projects and communicating important dates. Results further indicate that while the social media platforms were available, the required smart phones to get hooked to the social media were a challenge for most respondents especially students. Connectivity was also a challenge for quite a good number of respondents especially students in remote areas. Being an important tool that can bring about results for the ODL tutor and learner, the study recommended synergies between the institution and mobile phone services providers to provide students with compatible handsets on a credit facility. The use of social media can be enhanced through training of tutors and learners and equip them with technological expertise, availing compatible gadgets to log on to the social platform through university initiatives and also coming up with a clear ICT policy and programme in the university. Tutors and students should put more focus on using social media for educational purposes rather than on other purposes.

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Background to the study

By mediating interactions among and between individuals and groups, social networks have changed several areas since ancient times, including business, industry, economy, art, culture, and education (Clark & Roberts, 2010). The use of modern digital technologies for communication has become the in thing in all spheres of life, be it economic, social or educational. In the homes, people communicate using internet based communication platforms and the same applies to the education sector. The advent of the communication media more so, social media like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Whatsapp presents potential for effective communication in ODL. Given the scattered nature of ODL students, this introduction of social media came at the most momentous time for the interaction of ODL stakeholders owing to their geographical distances apart. However, the social media have come at a cost in terms of training and the capital outlay required to purchase the gadgets and put in place an effective communication system, more so for higher education in African universities where financing is a challenge. It is behind this background that this paper sought to explore opportunities and challenges brought about by the adoption of social media as communication tools for ODL.

Statement of the problem

Social network platforms the world over have necessitated individuals and organisations to improve communication and productivity respectively. However, this important innovation has had its own share of benefits and challenges. This study, therefore, aimed at establishing the benefits and challenges of the social network platforms in open and distance learning institutions, specifically at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Research questions

The following were the research questions that guided the study:

1. In what ways have the social media benefitted the learners and their tutors in Open and Distance Education?
2. How have the learners and their tutors utilised the social media in the instructional processes in ODL?
3. What have been the impediments in the use of the social media as tools for instruction in ODL?
4. What can be done so that social media is effectively utilised in ODL as tools of instruction?

Literature review

Social networks have brought about several platforms through which people communicate for all sorts of purposes. A social network is a set of two elements which are actors: people, institutions and groups on one hand, and their connections which are interactions or links between nodes (Recuero, 2009). These platforms are also named as tools, systems or sites. Among these social media are Facebook, Twitter, Gtalk, Skype, YouTube, Zopia, Twoo and WhatsApp.

The merits of social media

Social networking platforms have benefitted various individuals and or groups and the benefits vary based on platform type and the features provided by the social media platform. While it is envisaged that in distance learning the learner utilises the platforms to bridge the gap between student and student and learner and tutor, the platform has been utilised for other purposes (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Kim and Sin, 2013). Research has established that prevalent among these uses of social media platforms are the video learning, communication, data collection and analysis and collaboration among others (Moreira and Monteiro, 2010).

Social media platforms such as YouTube, have provided users a lot of interesting videos and in a matter of seconds any topic, idea or presentation can be elaborated on. The social media have come in handy as communication platforms (Barcelos and Batista, 2013). ODL learners and other students even those in conventional institutions and their tutors can hold discussions whilst in different locations thus bringing about the concept of virtual learning. Social media users, send and receive information at rapid speeds which has not been the case in previous couple of years (Kim and Sin, 2013; Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011). The forms of social media give users more opportunities to collaborate and in different ways. Immediate responses and discussions can begin with a simple tweets or postings on the chosen platform. This therefore stands to benefit the ODL student who does not have to move to different locations for tutorial.

A research study carried out by Moreira and Monteiro (2010) showed that internet social media, used to support traditional learning, are significant inasmuch as they promote teacher/student and student/student interactions. Gulten (2013) established that most pre-service distance education teachers used the communication platform every day because they found the platform more convenient for distance education.

How social media have been utilised for instruction

Another study carried in the USA with 1920 college teachers showed that their majority participated in social networking, and that more than half of them used the media for instructional purposes (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Barcelos and Batista, 2013)

Clark and Roberts (2010) established that educational use of internet social networking has been limited to blogging and other class resources; but mostly resulting from individual interests. The authors add that, in most cases, such usage was mainly to send and receive materials sent by students their teachers. Other studies in concurrence have also seen that the use social networking in the classroom is still quite passive (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Bukaliya and Muyengwa, 2012). In a study carried out by Bukaliya and Muyengwa (2012), social networks usage was the in-thing among most academics but instead of logging onto the social platforms for purposes of research and

scholarship, most lecturers and students went into social networking exchanging the latest news in the community. Studies elsewhere also go to show that computer games, pornographic material and shopping on the internet interfered with the use of social media for educational purposes (Kim and Sin, 2013; Moran, Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 2011).

Impediments in the use of the social media

Before one intends to use social media platforms, there is need to weigh the financial demands, risks and vulnerabilities that we are exposed to through these social media platforms (Kim and Sin, 2013). The most common impediments in the use of social media platforms include the technical difficulties presented the gadgets as well as by the lack of experience by users in using digital resources to support academic tasks (Moreira and Monteiro, 2010). According to Adika (2003) challenges in the usage of these internet based network platforms arise from lack of access to the internet itself and lack of training in platform usage. Al-Ansari (2006) argues that despite the Internet based platforms being mostly used for communication slow speed, lack of time, and lack of access are the major problems confronting users.

Some have avoided the use of social networking because of the strain it bring about between students and tutors as well as between and among students. Also, academic staff can show their dissatisfaction with management on a public forum of social media which tarnishes image of the institution (Kim and Sin, 2013). The institution's image may also get compromised if users exchange negative comments about the organisation, hence this may cause some institutions not to be keen on using the type of media.

Studies by Goldfarb, Pregibon, Shrem and Zyko (2011) and Moreira and Monteiro (2010) show that excessive time spent on social networks causes some individuals to experience withdrawal symptoms. They **retreat from actual interaction** with fellow humans and assume a virtual persona. They then exhibit signs of anxiety, distress, boredom and loneliness. These results indicate that, for most students, the network functionalities contributed to decrease student teacher hierarchy. The possibility of establishing a community made up of teachers and students who shared information and resources was pointed by Goldfarb et al. (2011). According to these authors, Internet Social Networking platforms are encouraging democratic environments but some have argued that social networking also reduces face to face interaction and socialising becomes something of a burden to an addict (Clark and Roberts, 2010).

How best social media can be utilised in instruction

A study carried in the USA with 1920 college teachers showed that the majority of users who participate on social networking, used this medium in the classroom (Moran, Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 2011). Barcelos and Batista (2013) established that with regards to education, a satisfactory number of the students used social media to interact with other students and colleagues. Among these most of them used the social networking platform to exchange professional experience with fellow students and experts. However, the same study by Barcelos et al (2013) established that providing educational material for students and building and sharing digital materials for educational purposes on the social media platforms received lower ratings.

Methodology

The present study was a survey and as such data for this study were solicited through the use of a social media assessment tool (SMAT), a survey questionnaire used for the purpose of this study, which contained both open and closed ended questions. The survey encompassed the views of both faculty members and all registered students during the January to June 2013 semester from four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University. All the 110 tools dispatched to respondents were returned giving a 100% response rate. In order to ensure reliability and effectiveness of the instrument, the questionnaire was pilot tested on ten faculty members and twenty-five students from the same faculties.

Population and sample

In order to get a diversity of opinions on the issue at hand, the study focused on multiple sources of data which consisted of academic staff and students at the Zimbabwe Open University's Mashonaland East region. Out of the 14 academics, 10 were drawn into the sample obtained through the convenience sampling method. Of the 339 registered students, only 100 made it into the sample drawn proportionally through the stratified random sampling

technique based on the existing four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University. The total sample for the study was therefore, 110 respondents.

Data presentation, analysis and discussion

This study aimed at establishing the benefits and challenges of the social network platforms in open and distance learning institutions, specifically at the Zimbabwe Open University. In order to answer this research problem, the following research questions needed to be answered.

1. In what ways have the social media benefitted the learners and their tutors in Open and Distance Education?
2. How have the learners and their tutors utilised the social media in the instructional processes in ODL?
3. What have been the impediments in the use of the social media as tools for instruction in ODL?
4. What can be done so that social media is effectively utilised in ODL as tools of instruction?

Research question 1 was stated as follows: In what ways have the social media benefitted the learners and their tutors in Open and Distance Education?

To begin with, the academics and students which social media platforms they were aware of. Figure 1 below shows the responses.

(N=110)

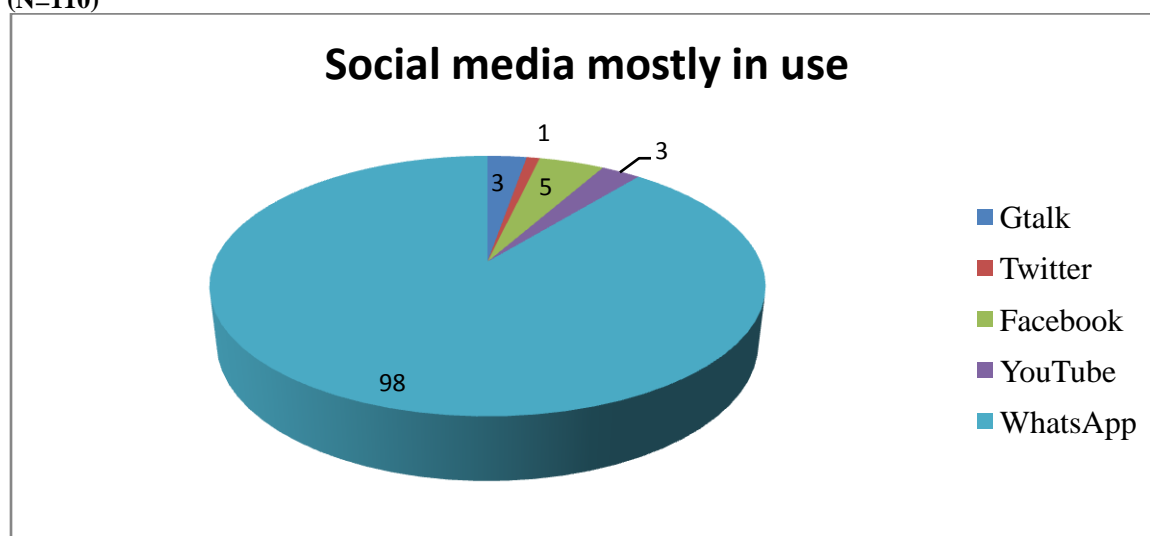


Figure 1: Social media platforms mostly used by academics and ODL students

According to Figure 1, Gtalk was used by only 3(3%) respondents while Twitter was used by a paltry 1(1%) respondent. Five (5%) used Facebook and YouTube was used by another 3(3%). WhatsApp was widely used and popular social media platform as it accounted for 98(89%) respondents. An analysis of why most of the respondents used WhatsApp shows that most of the cellular phones possessed by the respondents could more easily connect to this social media than any other.

The students and the academics were also asked how they came to know about the social media platforms. The table below shows the responses.

Table 1: Sources of knowledge of the existence of the different social media

(N=110)

Source of knowledge	Number	%
Through friends	36	32
Through the tutors	43	39
Through fellow students	20	18
Through the university	11	10
Through fellow academics	5	5

Table 1 shows that 36(32%) knew of the social media through friends while 43(39%) stated that they knew of the media through the tutors. Twenty (18%) stated that they knew of the existence of the media through fellow students

while 11(10%) knew of the media through the university. Those who knew of the social media through fellow academics were only 5(5%). The university might not be taking the initiative to put the issue of social media networking on full throttle probably for some concerns as argued by Kim and Sin (2013) who assert that some have avoided the use of social networking because of the strain it bring about between students and tutors, among students and between academic staff management resulting in tarnishing image of the institution. However, that being the case, though, social media provide everyone the opportunity to express their views.

Asked what the use they first put the media to, the majority of the respondents, indicated they had been introduced to WhatsApp and most have hitherto been stuck to this social media platform. Only a few 5(5%) were moving from one platform to another depending on the job at hand. There was mention of Skype as a social media to which one of the respondents resorted to in an attempt to communicate with colleagues where vision and sound were required.

Table 2: The benefits of social media as seen by students and academics (N=110)

Benefit	Number	%
Fast means of communication	99	90
Efficient means of disseminating information	98	89
Cost reduction means since no transport costs are incurred	83	75
Effective means of exchanging educational information	56	51
You can hold discussions at any time of day	90	82

Asked about the benefits of social media, 99(90%) indicated that social media were a fast means of communication and according to 98(89%), the media were an efficient means of disseminating information between and among students and tutors. This is in line with arguments by various authorities who have argued that social media users, send and receive information at rapid speeds which has not been the case in previous couple of years (Kim and Sin, 2013; Moran, Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 2011). Some 83(75%) indicated that social media were a cost reduction means since no transport costs were incurred more so given the vast distances apart between students and tutors. Fifty-six (51%) indicated that the media were effective means of exchanging educational information and 90(82%) indicated that they could hold discussions at any time of day. The same findings were established by Barcelos et al (2013) who found out that social media were effective in providing educational material for students and sharing digital materials. This is so when the students and their tutors share tutorial notes and other documents such as tutorial letters.

Research question 2 was stated as follows: How have the learners and their tutors utilised the social media in the instructional processes in ODL?

Figure 1 below shows the responses on the most important uses to which social media are put.

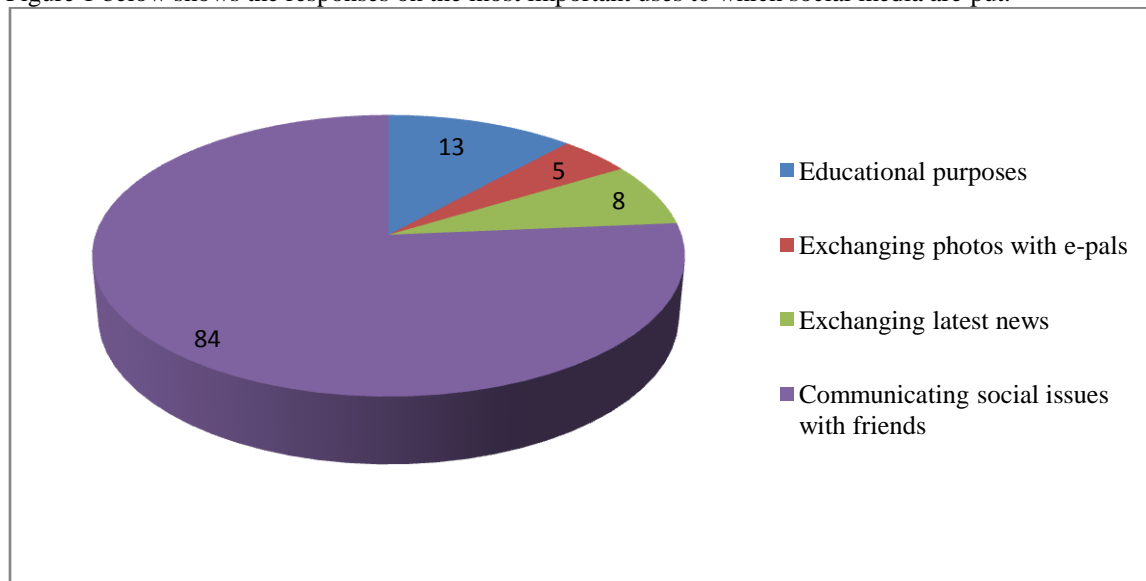


Figure 2: Responses on the most important use to which social media are put

A minority of 13(12%) respondents stated that they used social media for educational purposes while the majority 84 (76%) indicated that they used social media for communicating social issues with friends. Some 5(5%) used the media for exchanging photos with e-pals and another 8(7%) used the media for exchanging latest news. This goes to demonstrate that ODL students and tutors have not embraced social media for educational purposes. Rather where they use the media platforms is mostly for communicating issues not related to distance education. This is in concurrence with other findings that while it is envisaged that in distance learning the learner utilises the platforms to bridge the gap between student and student and learner and tutor, the platform has been utilised for other purposes (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Kim and Sin, 2013). In the same way other studies have shown that distance education has not embraced new technology among which are the social media platforms, the present study shows that technology has been embraced by both the tutors and their students but the technology has been used for other purposes rather than educational ones. However, in contrast Moreira and Monteiro (2010) established that prevalent among these uses of social media platforms are the video learning, communication, data collection and analysis and collaboration among others which are not rife among the academics and learners in ODL at ZOU.

ODL learners and their tutors were asked if they used the social media platform for educational or instructional purposes, and what the benefits were. The following table shows the educational purposes to which the social media were used.

Table 3: The purposes to which social media platforms are used
(N=110)

Educational purpose	Number	%
Holding discussion groups with peers and tutors in the programme	67	61
Exchanging tutorial notes	43	39
Discussing assignment expectations with the tutors and peers	56	51
Sharing information for example on important dates of the academic calendar	98	89
Asking for clarification on issues raised in the modules	25	23
Discussing research projects with supervisors	10	9

Table 3 shows that 67(61%) used social media for holding discussion groups with peers and tutors in the programme whereas some 43(39%) used the social media for exchanging tutorial notes. Fifty-six stated that they used social platforms for discussing assignment expectations with the tutors and peers and a vast majority of 98(89%) used the media for sharing information for example on important dates of the academic calendar. Social media were used for asking for clarification on issues raised in the modules by 25(23%) respondents. These were students seeking clarification from their tutors. A minority of 10(9%) used social media in discussing research projects with supervisors. For the few that resorted to the use of the social media platform, it can be argued that these results match those by Barcelos and Batista (2013) who established that a satisfactory number of the students used social media to interact with other students and colleagues.

How best social media can be utilised in ODL as a tool of instruction

Most respondents were of the opinion that social media was a potent tool for the enhancement of the instructional processes in distance education. ODL students thought that because of their geographical distances apart, tutors could save the students much in terms of finances by starting discussions on how to tackle assignments and past examination questions via social media. Students themselves could discuss the same without necessarily coming to a meeting point. However, to the contrary, most of the respondents were not using social media platforms for educational purposes. This is unlike in studies carried out elsewhere that showed that the majority of users who participated on social networking, used this medium for instruction (Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011). Like Barcelos et al (2013), the present study has established that providing educational material for students and sharing digital materials for educational purposes on the social media platforms has not been the in-thing among both academics and ODL learners.

Research question 3: What have been the impediments in the use of the social media as tools for instruction in ODL?

Students and the academics were in concurrence that a number of impediments worked against the full utilisation of social media. These were enumerated and are presented in the table below.

Table 4: Impediments that work against the full utilisation of social media (N=110)

Impediment	No	%
Lack of technological expertise	78	71
Unavailability of the compatible gadgets to log on to the social platform	90	82
Lack of connectivity	78	71
Financial incapacitation	65	59
Lack of a clear ICT policy and programme	15	14

Some of the impediments to full utilisation of social media in ODL are indicated in Table 4. Seventy-eight (71%) stated lack of technological expertise while 90(82%) indicated the unavailability of the compatible gadgets to log on to the social platform as setbacks to the use of social media. Some 78(71%) stated that there was lack of connectivity to the different networks that provide connectivity. The present findings replicate those by Moreira and Monteiro (2010) who posit that difficulties presented by the use of the gadgets as well as by the lack of experience by users curtailed the use of social media platforms. In concurrence, Adika (2003) states that the challenges in the usage of these internet based network platforms arise from lack of access to the internet itself and lack of training in platform usage. Al-Ansari (2006) also adds to this voice by remarking that lack of access is the major problem confronting users. Financial incapacitation was put forward by 65(59%) respondents while a minority 15(14%) indicated that there was lack of a clear ICT policy and programme in the university.

Research question 4 was stated as follows: What can be done so that social media if effectively utilised in ODL as tools of instruction?

Students and their tutors alike suggested the following strategies that can be put in place so that social media be utilised in ODL as a tool of instruction.

Table 5: Strategies that can be put in place so that social media be utilised in ODL as a tool of instruction (N=110)

Strategy	Number	%
Training students and tutors on how to use social media	95	86
Collaborating with service providers so as to procure compatible gadgets through installments	56	51
Service providers to enhance connectivity in the different areas	89	81
Purchase of solar powered gadgets in case of electricity outages	45	41
The university to incept a rigorous ICT policy and programme aimed at enhancing the use of social media	65	59

Table 5 shows some of the strategies put forward by the respondents in an attempt to fully utilise social media as an effective tool for ODL. Ninety-five (86%) respondents suggested the training of both students and tutors on how to use social media while some 56(51%) suggested collaborating with service providers so as to procure compatible gadgets through installments for those tutors and students who could not afford to purchase the compatible gadgets on cash basis. Eighty-nine (81%) respondents put forward the suggestion that service providers should enhance connectivity in the different areas while some 45(41%) suggested that there was need to purchase of solar powered gadgets in case of electricity outages when the students and the tutors were in need of the media. These results have corroborated with those by Al-Ansari (2006 and Adika (2003) who have established the need training among a host of other strategies. According to 65(59%), the university ought to incept a rigorous ICT policy and programme aimed at enhancing the use of social media. This also substantiates earlier responses in this study which indicated that only 11(10%) of the respondents had been introduced to the social media through university initiatives.

Conclusions

Based upon the above findings, the present study made the following conclusions:

- Gtalk, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube were the social media that the academics and students were exposed to despite there being others such as Twoo and Zopia among others.
- WhatsApp was most widely used and popular social media platform among the tutors and their students.

- The use of social media for educational purposes was very minimal as most focus on the use was on communication for other purposes not related to the instruction of ODL students.
- The minimal use of social media for educational purposes entailed tutors and students holding discussions, exchanging notes and assisting each other on assignments and research projects.
- Despite minimal use social media was acknowledged as being beneficial in that the media were a fast means of communication and were an efficient means of disseminating information between and among students and tutors. They were also a cost reduction means since no transport costs were incurred more so given the vast distances apart between students and tutors.
- The use of social media for educational purposes was hindered by, among other impediments, lack of technological expertise, the unavailability of the compatible gadgets to log on to the social platform lack of connectivity, financial incapacitation lack of a clear ICT policy and programme in the university.

Recommendations

Drawing from the above conclusions, the present study made the following recommendations:

- Other social platforms such as Twoo and Zopia should also be popularised as they have their merits over the use of Gtalk, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube
- Social media for educational purposes should be effectively used for the instruction of ODL students as it has more benefits for the ODL students which include the media being a fast means of communication, an efficient means of disseminating information between and among students and tutors and also the manner in which it can reduce costs for the ODL learner.
- The use of social media can be enhanced through training of tutors and learners and equip them with technological expertise, availing compatible gadgets to log on to the social platform through university initiatives and also coming up with a clear ICT policy and programme in the university.
- Tutors and students should put more focus on using social media for educational purposes rather than on other purposes.

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