

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA SUCH AS WHATSAPP, YOUTUBE AND INSTAGRAM IN ENHANCING RATHER THAN IMPEDING THE LEARNING OF COLLEGE STUDENTS: AN INVESTIGATIVE CASE STUDY

Appollis, J
Sutcliffe, C M

ABSTRACT

The age of information has ushered in new and exciting possibilities for advancement in technology which can enhance our lives and experience. Education is a field that stands to gain significantly from these improvements. With the outbreak of Covid-19 toward the end of 2019, the need for emergency lockdown procedures brought with it the sudden introduction of Emergency Remote Teaching. ERT demanded that educators pivot rapidly in terms of how learning took place in educational institutions. A gap between educator and student was created by this shift, allowing the space for change - with its inevitable challenges. Digital platforms and social media proved to be the ideal solution to bridge the gap, by allowing educators and students to stay connected during enforced isolation. With the introduction of social media platforms leading into the 21st century, the way in which people communicate and share information has changed greatly (Ortiz-Ospina, 2018), possibly permanently (Khechine, 2020). The purpose of this research is to gain a greater understanding of how platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube can be incorporated into tertiary education in a way that augments higher-order learning. This study used a qualitative approach in order to explore and describe the relevance of social media in the learning lives of students at university level. This study is especially significant during the current age of profound uncertainty – caused by rapid change on all fronts. The information provided by the participants through a semi-structured survey, and supported by the literature (Gieblehausen, 2015; Nagel, 2018; Hortiguela-Alcala, 2019) helps to show how social media could make a positive change in the field of higher education. If the pandemic were to morph into an endemic era, these changes to the way learners learn could well prove to be sustainable into the future. The results of this study are significant, since they show that social media do indeed have the potential to benefit students positively, if used with discretion by educators and learners, parents and administrators of educational institutions.

Keywords: Social media; digital age; challenges of change; uncertainty; sustainability

BACKGROUND

The researcher's attention was drawn to the field of social media after watching a DVD called "Digital Cocaine". It is a presentation based on the book "Digital Cocaine" written by Brad Huddleston and published in 2016. The book speaks about the dangers of digital technology, including social media, and how they can negatively impact the lives of those who use them. In this presentation Huddleston (2016) mentions how social media can reduce attention span drastically and through frequent use, cause the mind to lose its ability to properly sort and store information. Social media have become a dominating field and despite the overpowering coverage of the negative elements in the literature, the researcher believes that these platforms hold the potential to be used for good. Hence the decision to investigate their ability to enhance rather than hinder learning at collegiate level, which is an area not largely broached in the literature.

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to find new and innovative ways in which social media can be incorporated into tertiary learning and thereby revolutionise the way in which learning takes place. Research into this topic should be greatly beneficial to do all educators, parents, teachers and administrators, since it will be made clear whether it is possible for social media to be incorporated as learning platforms, and in which ways.

THE PROBLEM (RESEARCH QUESTION)

In the world we live in today social media have become an appreciable part of the lives of the majority of the population - young and old alike. Whether it be for communication, gathering of information or purely for entertainment, social media have greatly increased the ease of accessing information. Social media have made it possible for anyone to instantly access the World Wide Web to find any information they desire, as well as making it relatively easy to share this information with anyone they choose. While this can be seen as beneficial, there is also the possibility of it becoming a distraction in terms of studies. With the rate at which technology is advancing and social media along with it, our daily lives are becoming increasingly digitally challenged. The research question which is of interest to all educators and learners is, to what extent may the rapid development of social media platforms be taken advantage of for the benefit (rather than to the detriment of) learners – particularly at collegiate level?

SUB-PROBLEMS

The research problem has been broken down into the following sub-problems, in order to address the main problem in a more manageable way:

- What is the relevance of social media, such as WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram, in the daily life of college students?
- In what ways has social media been used to assist learning?
- What are factors of social media that are known to negatively impact learning and focus?
- What is learning like for college students that are living in the digital age?
- How can social media be incorporated into studies to benefit the future of learning in colleges?

UNIT OF ANALYSIS

The unit of study was college students as individuals. The case study explored the impact that social media has on the behavioural pattern of a small group of specific students at a collegiate level, with respect to the relationship between the time they engaged on social media versus the time they engaged in formal studies.

ASSUMPTIONS

As a point of departure, the assumptions were made that excessive use of social media may lead to a decline in the performance of an individual with respect to their studies. Secondly, despite the negative press social media have received, there is still the possibility for social media to be used in a productive way to enhance the student's ability to learn.

AIM

The aim of this paper was to investigate and describe the potential that social media have to enhance rather than to hinder the studies of tertiary students.

OBJECTIVES

The main aim of the study was divided into the following objectives:

- To understand the relevance of social media in the lives of college students
- To find in what ways social media are currently being used for educational purposes
- To uncover the negative aspects associated with social media and their use
- To achieve a better understanding of the studying experience in the digital age
- To describe how social media can be incorporated into a collegiate level studying experience

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the literature review was to learn what previous researchers have discovered about the role social media play in the lives of students at collegiate level and if there is a possibility for these networks to be used in a way that could enhance these students' learning experience. The researcher explored the available literature in terms of the negative effects that social media could have on individuals who use it and weighed this up against the positive impact that they could have. It was made evident by this secondary research, that social media are a viable option to integrate into learning in order to improve the systems that are already in place. This review covered the relevance of social media, which ways they are being used in education, the negative side effects they can have, what it is like to live in the digital age and the future role social media might play in tertiary studies.

The relevance of social media in the lives of students

Indu (2018) investigated the implications of social media (specifically Facebook and WhatsApp) among post-graduate students at Maharishi Dayanand University in Rohtak. The research focuses on the percentage of individuals who own and use any form of social media accounts and how much time they are engaged in activities related to social media. The researcher also considered whether there were ways that social media could be used for educational purposes, considering the popularity of social media. Social media are pointed out as being a means to communicate with fellow students, family and friends as well as an easy way to access information. The study reveals that a very high percentage of the students had accounts on one or more of these social media networks and that a large number of students spent many hours a day on these networks – indicating the high relevance of these platforms in students' lives.

Indu (2018) highlights how popular social media and networks have become. The number of students who interact with social networks, shows that it is something that is almost universally used by most students. The potential for using these platforms for educational purposes, therefore becomes evident.

In a study into the implications of student use of social media at the collegiate, undergraduate and graduate levels, Nagel (2018) reiterates the popularity of social media and how the larger populations of students are engaged on such apps. The author noted that in many cases students are active on multiple social media accounts which they use for different types of engagement or connectivity. Some networks are used for leisure and entertainment, whilst other are used for communication or learning purposes. In some case there is an overlap of what the network is used for, based on what the app offers. The level of usage differs from person to person. However, it is clear that social media is a universally used platform among students.

Nagel (2018) confirms the relevance of social media in students' lives and explains the many uses that social media possess. This study demonstrates that social media are hugely relevant in the lives of students and impact them on a day-to-day basis. This researcher's findings add to the weight of evidence for the case of using these enormously popular platforms for teaching and learning purposes.

Ways in which social media have been used to assist learning

Gielbelhausen (2015) discusses how social media can be used as a learning aid outside of the classroom and the impact that it can have on the learning experience of students. The focus of this study is on the use of social media regarding the learning of music. However, the findings may also be applicable to other fields of study. Social media allow for the student to engage in alternative means of learning the same material that they would learn in class. In certain cases, it may allow for them to gain a better understanding of the topics in question. Students now have access to an array of instructional video and tutorials that can be found on social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter or even Facebook. Gielbelhausen (2015) provides the valuable insight that lecturers can use these platforms to enhance the learning experience for the student and perhaps even increase the rate at which the material can be learned. The author shows the benefits that were already being taken advantage of from social media to assist and enhance learning, as early as 2015.

Social networks which promote motivation and learning in higher education from the students' perspective

The research done by Hortiguera-Alcala (2019) focuses on how social media may be used by lecturers and teachers in a way that helps to motivate the students in their learning experience. With the advancement of technology and social media following suit, more educators and institutions are looking at incorporating these platforms into the learning process. The aim of the integration of social media into learning is to help motivate the students and create a culture of sharing information, which positively impacts learning. Educators have seen the benefits which social media can have with regard to engagement and sharing of information related to specific fields of study. It was noted by Hortiguera-Alcala (2019) that educators have already found ways to use social media in their teaching programmes. These findings support the aim of the current research study by showing that there is space for social networks to be used in education.

Negative factors that social media may present

Yung-Yu's (2015) study is centred on the negative impact social media use may have on the amount and quality of sleep of college students. The study highlights the importance of maintaining a healthy amount of sleep. Yung-Yu (2015) found that there is a correlation between lack of sleep and the increased use of social media. It was noted that a large portion of those involved in the study spent extended periods of time on social media at night and often lost out on many hours of sleep. This study reveals one of the many negative effects of social media and cautions that students should be made aware of the dangers that social media can have on their health. The author thereby addresses the sub-problem of the negative factors that may impact those that use social networks.

Ache (2019) addresses further negative impacts which social media may have on users. Although the good side of social networks should not be ignored, in that they help to connect family, friends and those with mutual connections, there is a downside. With the constant flow of information and high stimulation, social media can cause an increase in stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues. The content that can be viewed and shared on the platforms has been noted to affect individuals on a personal as well as cognitive level - often taking a toll on their mental health. This is especially true for college students, as they form one of the biggest groups that use social media. The increase in the use of social media has been shown to increase stress. This is important to be aware of as students at a collegiate level are already under large amounts of stress due to their studies. The overuse or engagement in social media can drastically affect the studies of these individuals and impact their lives as a whole, according to Ache (2019) and supported by Sutcliffe and Virassamy (2021).

The tendency of fake news to be passed off as fact and the difficulty young persons have in distinguishing between fact and opinion in the media, is a further danger pointed out by Sutcliffe and Adams (2022).

What it means to live in the digital age

With the progression of technology, the way in which learning takes place is quickly changing from the traditional methods that were once prevalent in the world. Considering the level of connection and amount of information that is currently available on the internet, an individual has access to an unlimited source of knowledge. This means that unlike before, an individual can pursue any direction of learning without the traditional methods such as going through schools, colleges or universities. Prestidge (2021) explains that this information is not only beneficial to those who seek their own education without the help of an institution. It also allows for institutions to build greater interconnected ways of learning. Social networks provide countless ways in which students and educators can connect and share knowledge. They are also now more accessible than ever to receive and engage in learning across the borders of countries and to span across cultures. Learning is no longer limited to the area in which one is situated.

Thus, in addressing the sub-problem of what it means to live in the digital age, Prestidge (2021) draws attention to the fact that digital media have opened up the possibility of accessing information from all over the globe.

The author (Argun, 2017) takes a slightly different approach and focusses on the characters and personalities of those who live in the age of information. The way in which the younger generation interact with technology and social networks has brought the need to adapt the way that learning is done. Educators have had to find new ways to interact with learners in order to create a method of teaching that caters to the characteristics, needs and abilities in their students. The use of more online and digital content as well as connections has played a vital role in changing how education is practised. There is a higher degree of connectivity between educator and learning outside of the classroom. This allows for more information to be shared and learned even while students are at home. Such an approach seems to be beneficial for the present generation of educators and students alike.

Argun (2017) indicates how much learning has changed in the digital age and the role that social networks and the internet have played in these changes. In fact, they have resulted in a “flipped classroom”, whereby practice outside of the classroom comes before learning the theory inside the classroom.

Whether social media can benefit the future of college studies

Learning has changed drastically with the incorporation of the internet for educational purposes, claims Khechine (2020), whose study delves deeper into a theory known as “social learning”. This theory suggests that learning takes place in areas of life other than just in the classroom and in what the educators teach students. The internet, as well as social media networks, are providing new ways that students can engage to a greater extent in their studies. By learning which ways these networks can be used in an educational setting, educators will be able to unlock new potentials for learning that were previously not available before internet and social media were created, asserts Khechine (2020).

The theory of social learning points to the possibility of a brighter future for learning with the aid of social networks. Khechine’s (2020) valuable study has helped to lay the groundwork for further research into the question of how social media can benefit the future of college students.

Finally, a qualitative study by Jang (2014 / 2015) explores how social media impacts learning on a personal level for students at a collegiate level. The study highlights how the collaborative nature of social media forms part of the basis of its popularity. Social media encourage individuals to work more collectively with their fellow students. In learning from others on these platforms, students may gain more knowledge or understanding in their respective field of study. The interconnected environment that is created, helps to produce an atmosphere of learning. This stimulating environment can be seen as a beneficial step forward in the direction of social networks becoming incorporated within learning programmes to a greater extent (Jang, 2014 / 2015).

Thus, as early as 2014, Jang indicated that social networks have already created their own environment for learning which has and will continue to aid in educational advancements.

THEORETICAL BASIS

This research paper has used the VARK learning style model as a conceptual framework for the current study. VARK stands for the following:

- Visual learners
- Aural learners
- Reading / writing learners
- Kinaesthetic learners

These groups describe four preferred learning styles that an individual may possess a stronger aptitude for (Harappa, 2021).

Visual learners

In the category of visual learners, individuals have the best results from learning when visual aids are used. These aids can consist of images, video or any other visual representation of the information that needs to be understood (Harappa, 2021). Social media platforms rely largely on images, videos and visual representations of information, thus acting as an attractive learning tool for visual learners. Instagram and Snapchat are good examples of largely visual platforms for the sharing of images and videos.

Aural learners

Aural learners are also known as auditory learners. Individuals that fall into this category learn best from information that is spoken or played via audio channels. They pick up information more effectively when it can be heard such as in lectures or group discussions on the relevant topics (Harappa, 2021). Digital platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom would appeal to aural learners. Podcasts might also comprise a primary means of learning.

Reading / writing learners

Reading / writing learners prefer to learn information from written sources. The way that they learn and understand is through reading and writing (Harappa, 2021). Digital platforms such as Google Forms, Word and Excel would appeal to these learners. WhatsApp and Facebook could be favourites of reading / writing learners too.

Kinaesthetic learners

Kinaesthetic learners could also be described as practical learners. They learn best from hands-on experience and through being present in the event or environment that they need to learn about. Hence, a virtual learning situation such as having to present a cooking demonstration or promotional video on TikTok or YouTube could appeal to such learners (Harappa, 2021).

With reference to this research paper, the VARK model helps to elucidate the fact that while online / remote learning may be ideal for certain students, it may not be the most viable option for other individuals. The model can also assist in revealing ways that social media could be incorporated to meet the academic needs of students, and for them to have a better learning experience from online / remote learning.

Application of the VARK theory to social media, indicates that social media platforms could appeal to most of the learner types. Therefore, social media appear to be an excellent method for the majority of learners to benefit from.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This research paper used a qualitative approach, as the goal for this paper was to understand the personal views that students had on social media and its potential for further integration into collegiate level studies.

SAMPLING

The demographic of individuals targeted for this research were college students that fell within the age range of 18 to 35 years and used voluntary response sampling. The target size goal for data collection was 10 people. Students approached to participate in the research were those who had not yet achieved a degree and thus form part of the group known as undergraduates. The study was not specific to race or nationality, nor was marital status taken into consideration in the selection criteria.

DATA COLLECTION METHOD

In this paper a survey using a mixture of open-ended and closed-ended questions was the means used for data collection. This online survey was given to those participants who agreed to participate in the study. Results were collected by means of email or information posted on the site. The qualitative survey was created on Survey Monkey.

The researcher followed the following steps:

1. Designed an online survey (using a platform such as "SurveyMonkey").
2. Found the appropriate individuals that were willing to take part in the survey, using the criteria for selection mentioned.
3. Distributed surveys via email to participants who had been approached in person or by means of social media such as WhatsApp with a confirmed interest to participate.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collection followed an online survey approach. The data from online surveys was collected on SurveyMonkey as well as via email and later transferred to an official written document which converted all of the information into narrative form.

Once all of the information was collated, the data were colour coded for easy processing. The results were tabulated and then analysed, using thematic analysis to reach conclusions.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In alignment with the ethical considerations spelled out by Cawthra, T., Aslam, V., King, B., Henderson, S., Anderson, W., Ellis, N. K., Donald, A. and Nortje, A. (2020), the participants were given the reassurance that they would remain anonymous and that all of their personal information as well as results collected from them would be kept confidential.

- Participants retained the right to withdraw from the survey at any given point if they did not feel comfortable in continuing. Any information that they had provided before their withdrawal would be discarded and would not appear as part of the data collected.
- No personal information regarding participants was published or released to any individual that was not part of the research that took place.
- The survey avoided any form of questioning that might come across as intrusive or offensive.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

In the data collection process, ten participants were given a qualitative survey to complete with questions pertaining to their experience with online learning as well as their interaction with social media platforms. The responses provided by the participants helped to create a rich, in-depth understanding of how social media platforms could be incorporated to improve college students'

learning experience. The table that follows is a representation of the data that was collected from participants who took part in the survey.

Table 1: Tabulation of survey data

Questionnaire data table						
	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Platforms used	All of the above	WhatsApp & YouTube	All of the above	All of the above	All of the above	WhatsApp & YouTube
Average usage	more than 6 h	3 to 5 h	1 to 3 h	more than 6 h	3 to 5 h	1 to 3 h
Reasons for use of platforms	Communication and entertainment	Communication and entertainment	Communication and entertainment	Communication and entertainment	Communication, entertainment and business	Communication and entertainment
Positive aspects of social media	Being able to stay in the loop with things I'm interested in	Easy to keep up with friends and family	Ease of connectivity	Helps to pass time when bored	Allows individuals to express themselves online	Staying in contact with family and friends
Negative impacts of social media	Spending an excessive amount of time	Feeling tied to my devices	Nothing noticeable	Often distracted by notifications	Getting to sleep too late after scrolling through Instagram	Nothing noticeable

Questionnaire data table						
	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Platforms used	All of the above	WhatsApp & YouTube	All of the above	All of the above	All of the above	WhatsApp & YouTube
Average usage	more than 6 h	3 to 5 h	1 to 3 h	more than 6 h	3 to 5 h	1 to 3 h
Reasons for use of platforms	Communication and entertainment	Communication and entertainment	Communication and entertainment	Communication and entertainment	Communication, entertainment and business	Communication and entertainment
Positive aspects of social media	Being able to stay in the loop with things I'm interested in	Easy to keep up with friends and family	Ease of connectivity	Helps to pass time when bored	Allows individuals to express themselves online	Staying in contact with family and friends
Negative impacts of social media	Spending an excessive amount of time on my devices	Feeling tied to my devices	Nothing noticeable	Often distracted by notifications	Getting to sleep too late after scrolling through Instagram	Nothing noticeable
Ways to avoid negative impact	Trying not to spend as much time on social media and apps	Manage screen time	Don't experience any as I am not on my devices often	Putting phone on silence while studying or during class	Putting phone off at night to avoid missing out on sleep	Making sure to take regular breaks
Negative side effects from increased screen time	Anxiety from needing to be in front of the screen for most of the day	Tiredness	Nothing noticeable	Eyes feeling strained	Headaches and tension.	Nothing noticeable
Online/remote learning viability	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Elaborate	Prefer contact class over online	It is more convenient	Less time and money that would be used to commute to college	Don't need to leave the house to attend class	Allows for wider reach of students that can attend	Connection to classes is always an issue

Questionnaire data table				
	Participant 7	Participant 8	Participant 9	Participant 10
Platforms used	WhatsApp & Youtube	All of the above	All of the above	WhatsApp and Youtube
Average usage	1 to 3	3 to 5 h	more than 6 h	3 to 5 h
Reasons for use of platforms	Communication and entertainment	Communication and entertainment	Communication, entertainment and Studies	Communication and entertainment
Positive aspects of social media	Connection with anyone no matter where they are in the world	different content that caters to everyone's individual tastes and preferences	Access to unlimited information	Makes it easy to connect with family and friends
Negative impacts of social media	Having too many group chats to respond too and constantly getting notifications	Tempted to check social media when I should be working	Social media distracts from getting work done for studies	Sometimes gets in the way of work or studies
Ways to avoid negative impact	Being aware of how much time I spend on social media	Taking breaks from devices	Turning off notifications to avoid being distracted	Limiting the use of social media
Negative side effects from increased screen time	Feeling overwhelmed	Eyes become tired	Struggling with sleep since starting online learning	Restlessness when needing to be in front of the screen for long periods
Online/remote learning viability	No	Yes	No	Yes
Elaborate	Can't afford the cost of data needed to attend all the classes	Can access all work from home without needing to go to campus	Struggle to stay focused in class	It is easier than having to attend contact classes
Changes you would make to online learning	Having less classes to attend	Nothing that I can think of	Shorter classes would be nice	less allocated work and assignments. Lectures seem to think we time because classes are online.
Enhancement of student/lecturer & student/student communication	No real changes	Easier to get hold of other students when needing help with work	I don't really contact lectures or other students.	Back and forth communication works better than with just email

The 11 categories of questions asked are explained below:

Platforms used

Which of the three apps participants used namely WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram

Average usage

The average time each participant spent on social media collectively. Times were split up into slots of 1-3 hours, 3-5 hours, and more than six hours.

Reasons for use of platforms

The purpose for the participants use of the various apps

Positive aspects of social media

Benefits or things participants enjoy about social media

Negative impacts of social media

Any negative experiences or aspects of social media

Ways to avoid negative impacts

The way participants manage their use of social media to avoid negative side effects

Negative side effects from increased screen time

Any negative side effects experienced by participants due to increased screen time from online learning

Online/remote learning viability

If participants think that online/remote learning is a viable option for collegiate level studies or not

Elaboration

Reasons why the participant agrees or disagrees with the viability of online / remote learning

Changes students would make to online learning

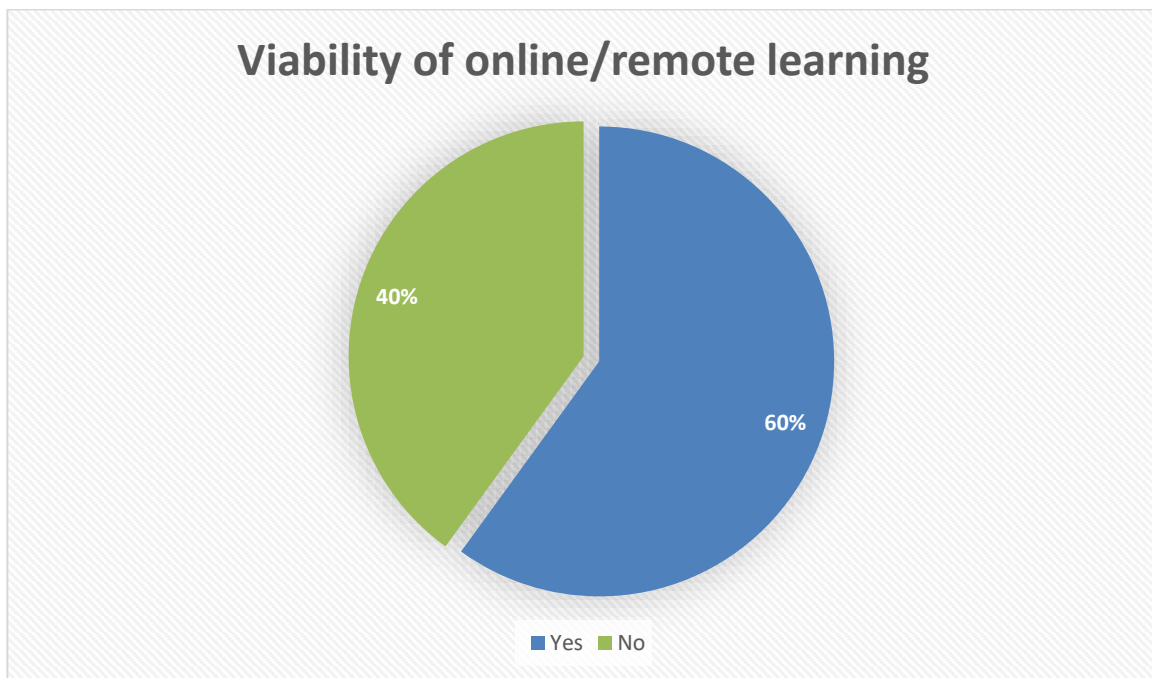
What changes participants would like to see made to online / remote learning in or to have a better learning experience

Student / lecturer and student / student communication

How social media has impacted the connectivity between students-to-student as well as student-to-lecturer

The pie chart below shows the percentage of participants that believe online / remote learning is a viable way forward for colleges and universities and the percentage of those who disagree with the notion.

Figure 1: Pie chat representations of viability of remote learning



Since a majority of 60% of the respondents voted for the incorporation of online learning, the above chart suggests that online / remote learning might be a viable option moving forward.

CODING

The questions addressed in the survey were colour coded as follows, in order to assist with analysis:

- Platforms used: Lime green
- Average usage: Light orange
- Positive aspects: Yellow
- Negative aspects: Lavender
- Ways to avoid negative aspects: Light blue
- Negative side effects: Pink
- Online / remote learning viability: Dark blue
- Elaboration: Dark orange
- Changes students would make to online learning: Purple
- Enhancement of student / lecturer and student / student communication: Green

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A narrative technique has been used to analyse the data presented in Table 1, according to the themes above. See the thematic analysis which follows.

Platforms used

In the survey it was noted that 100% of participants used both WhatsApp and YouTube while, only 60% used Instagram. It may be argued that WhatsApp and YouTube could comprise better learning platforms for students, as opposed to Instagram which is a platform predominantly for the sharing of images.

Negative versus positive aspects

The participants who had better management strategies of their use of social media platforms, as well as the amount of time spent on the apps, had decreased impact from negative side effects. In other words, the less time spent on social media apps the fewer negative side effects were experienced. This finding is in support of Yun-Yu (2015) and Ache (2019), who found that large amounts of social media usage correlate positively with sleep deprivation and mental health issues such as stress and depression, respectively. One student responded: "I experience anxiety from needing to be in front of the screen for most of the day."

Elaboration

The additional information provided by participants indicates that there are benefits that can be taken advantage of by using online / remote learning. Some of the comments made by respondents regarding the benefits of online learning platforms are as follows: "Being able to stay in the loop with things I'm interested in; it is more convenient; less time and money that would be used to come to college; don't need to leave the house to attend class; allows for wider reach of students that can attend; getting hold of lecturers has become easier."

CREDIBILITY OF THE STUDY

The researcher made sure to be precise in recording the data so as not to change the wording in any way that might alter its meaning, and ensured that the collected data matched as closely as possible with the recorded data to extract accurate results for further evaluation (see Cawthra et al, 2020).

Transferability

The findings of this study may not be transferred to other contexts, since non-probability sampling has been applied. The data collected can therefore not be generalized to other groups as the sample size was too small. The conclusions reached may not be applied accurately to a larger population (Cawthra et al, 2020), but provide useful guidance within the context of higher learning institutions.

Dependability

To achieve the dependability of this research, each step in the process was clearly outlined and the respective data pertaining to each section was documented in its corresponding step. Keeping the data and processes outlined and categorised helped to create a paper trail from the beginning of the research process until the end (Cawthra et al, 2020).

Confirmability

To attain as high a level as possible of confirmability, the data recorded directly reflects the data submitted by the participants (Cawthra et al, 2020).

Reflexivity

During the research process, the researchers made it their goal to focus on the research question as much as possible and construct the surveys using the sub-problems as a guide. The researchers intentionally stuck to the original goals set out and were careful not to allow their perceptions to sway the results or course of the research. The researchers practised reflexivity by drawing accurate conclusions based directly on the input provided and were intentional about not proving any personal biases or ideas (Cawthra et al, 2020).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In alignment with the specifications for ethical research practice outlined by Cawthra et al (2020), the survey used for data collection was constructed in a manner which was void of any maleficent intent or offensive content. The participants were assured of their anonymity regarding the information provided in the survey. They were not asked to submit their name or any personal information that could be used to identify them. Participants took part in the survey of their own free will and reserved the right to withdraw from participation and remove any input provided if, at any point, they felt uncomfortable with the questions or the proceedings of the survey.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The literature review and primary data analysis went a long way in achieving the objectives of the study.

- The relevance, popularity and immensely positive impact of social media in the lives of college students and on their learning, was attested to by Indu (2018) and Nage (2018), as well as by the students in comments such as: [Social media provide] "Different content that caters to everyone's individual tastes and preferences; [it is] easier contacting other

students in the case of group work; easier to get hold of other students when needing help with work; back and forth communication works better than with just email.”

- Ways in which social media are currently being used to create a conducive learning environment, for educational purposes and to motivate students were recommended by Yang (2014 /2015), Giebelhausen (2015) and Hortiguela-Akala (2019), respectively.

The negative aspects associated with social media and its use were highlighted by Yung-Yu (2015), Ache (2019), Sutcliffe and Adams (2022), namely mental health issues, sleep deprivation and the mixing of fact with opinion by the media, respectively. Certain respondents mentioned the following negative effects of social media: “Spending an excessive amount of time on my device; having too many group chats to respond to and constantly getting notifications; social media distract from getting work done for studies; tempted to check social media when I should be working; sometimes gets in the way of work or studies.”

- A better understanding of the studying experience in the digital age was provided by Prestidge (2021), who described the digital learning age as being one of connectedness, collaboration and the crossing of borders. In the words of two respondents: “Having WhatsApp groups for each class makes it easier to contact other students from the same module”; “connection with anyone no matter where they are in the world.”
- Insights into how social media can be incorporated into a collegiate level studying experience were shared by Argun (2017) who suggested the “flipped classroom” concept of practice before theory, and Khechine (2020), who recommended that “social learning” via the internet, could be beneficial to students, if incorporated into learning.

From the participant data that was collected and analysed, there is evidence that social media have played a role in the betterment in the collegiate level studying experience. Sixty percent of the respondents preferred online to contact classes. The media have allowed individuals to reach a better level of communication between students and fellow students, as well as communication with their lecturers.

The VARK learning style model (Harappa, 2021) may be used to help understand the learning style needs of participants. The four styles of learning in this model should be taken into consideration to determine where and how social media may be used to enhance the learning experience. The information that can be accessed as well as shared through these social media apps, comes in a variety of forms. Lecturers should carefully consider the available options and create a healthy mix of learning styles which caters to the needs of all students.

Social media are becoming a central part in the lives of most students and that it is something that will inevitably remain relevant in time to come. Despite the negative factors that have been explored, there is the potential for social media to be used in a positive way that could aid and enhance the current methods and understanding of studies in the digital age we live in. Social network platforms are ever growing and finding new ways to become involved with daily life. As such, the possibility for social media to become more integrated into studies seems more than likely in the future.

LIMITATIONS

This study used only 10 participants and focused on exploration and accurate description, rather than on drawing conclusions and generalisability to other contexts. Since this was a small case study, rich and valuable insights have been gained for educators in the specific context of higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the in-depth findings of this exploratory case study, a larger sample for further studies would result in more accurate conclusions and improved credibility. The information gathered from the participants in this study was limited, and there was not enough data to be allow generalisation of the findings to other contexts. Using a quantitative approach, or preferably a mixed-method approach with a large sample of participants, would allow the researcher to understand more about the ways in which social media could be incorporated effectively into collegiate-level learning.

Despite its limitations, this study may be of great significance to educational administrators, teachers, learners and their parents owing to the current popularity of social media platforms and their clearly untapped potential to enhance rather than hinder tertiary studies.

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Appollis, J
Helderberg College of Higher Education
Email: appollisj1@hche.ac.za

Sutcliffe, C M
Helderberg College of Higher Education
Email: sutcliffec@hche.ac.za