The Use of Social Media in Education: A Friend or Foe?

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Abstract
The rapid growth of social media has significantly transformed the educational landscape, influencing the ways students and educators communicate, collaborate, and access information. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and academic networking sites have emerged as powerful tools for learning, offering opportunities for knowledge sharing, interactive learning, and academic collaboration beyond traditional classroom boundaries. When used constructively, social media enhances student engagement, promotes collaborative learning, supports self-directed study, and provides quick access to educational resources. However, excessive and unregulated use of social media can negatively impact academic performance by causing distractions, reducing concentration, encouraging procrastination, and exposing students to misinformation and cyber-related risks. This dual nature raises an important question: Is social media a friend or a foe in education? This study examines both the positive and negative impacts of social media on the teaching–learning process, highlighting its role in academic development as well as the challenges it poses. The findings suggest that social media can be a valuable educational ally when used responsibly, with proper guidance, digital literacy, and institutional policies, but it may become detrimental if misused or overused. Therefore, a balanced and purposeful integration of social media into education is essential to maximize its benefits while minimizing its drawbacks.

Keyword: Social Media, Namibia, Higher Education, Instructional Technology, Open and Distance Learning

Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become an integral part of everyday life, especially among students and educators. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter (X), and academic networking sites have revolutionized the way information is shared and communication takes place. Originally designed for social interaction, these platforms are increasingly being adopted in the field of education for teaching, learning, collaboration, and knowledge dissemination. The growing accessibility of smartphones and internet connectivity has further accelerated the integration of social media into educational environments.

Social media offers numerous educational advantages. It enables instant communication between teachers and students, encourages collaborative learning, and provides access to a vast range of academic resources. Online discussion forums, educational videos, virtual classrooms, and peer-learning communities help students learn beyond the constraints of time and location. Social media also supports informal learning, promotes creativity, and enhances digital literacy skills, which are essential in the modern knowledge-based society.

However, alongside its benefits, social media poses significant challenges to academic performance and student well-being. Excessive use of social networking sites can lead to distraction, addiction, reduced concentration, and poor time management. Students may prioritize entertainment and social interaction over academic responsibilities, resulting in declining academic outcomes. Additionally, issues such as cyberbullying, privacy concerns, misinformation, and exposure to inappropriate content raise serious concerns about the uncontrolled use of social media in education.

This dual nature of social media has sparked an ongoing debate on whether it acts as a friend or a foe in the educational process. While its effective and purposeful use can enhance learning experiences and academic engagement, its misuse can hinder students' academic growth and personal development. Therefore, it is essential to examine the role of social media in education critically, understanding both its positive and negative impacts. This study aims to explore how social media influences educational practices and academic performance, and to identify strategies for its responsible and balanced use in the teaching–learning process.

According to Mullen and Wedwick (2008:66) in Ratneswary and Rasiah (2014:370) [10], "Being literate no longer only involves being able to read and write. The literate of the twenty-first century must be able to download, upload, rip, burn, chat, save, blog, Skype, IM, and share" This view is however not shared by all Higher Education faculty members, particularly when it comes to the use of Facebook as a teaching and learning tool in Higher education. Currently, the usage of social media as a teaching and learning tool is minimal amongst our Namibian higher education academic staff for various reasons. In order to regard or disregard these reasons, it is vital to first assess the importance as well as the drawbacks of using social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, as a teaching and learning tool at the Namibian higher learning institutions. This will enable the Namibian higher education learning institutions to make informed choices about the adoption and usage of social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, to mend the support structure offered to our ODL students and improve their academic performance. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate the role and importance of social media in higher education and how our Namibian higher education institutions can tap into this lifeline to support our ODL students through the use of social media technologies.

The Evolution of Social Media Technologies and How Infiltrated into Higher Education It
Technology has caused a huge reform for ODL. This reform has demanded from higher education to revise its policies and practices, so that it can conform to the demands of our present day ODL students. In order to ensure that there is a constructive alignment between demand and supply (by using technology as the driver), it is important for universities to explore and improve upon present day methodologies and practices in order to attract more millennial students and increase their registration numbers in this age of scarce financial resources. Technology, being regarded as an enabler, has enabled the use and popularity of social media networks, such as Facebook, Twitter and WatsApp amongst others, to grow exponentially in size and popularity (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, Witty 2010:135; Falahaha and Rosmalab 2011:157; Oyetunde 2017:3) [1, 8, 9]. However, although social media has made a

permanent imprint on our ODL educational reform, faculty members are still in disarray about the suitability and benefits of using social media, like Facebook, in higher education (Falahaha and Rosmalab 2011:157; Ratneswary and Rasiah 2014:370) [10]. Even though the use of social media possess some concerns to higher education faculty staff members, the benefits outweighs the drawbacks by far. Authors such as Falahaha and Rosmalab (2011:157), Ratneswary and Rasiah (2014:369) [10]; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, Witty (2010:135 – 137) [1, 9], Oyetunde (2017:4) [8] amongst others, have highlighted the benefits of social media as being popular amongst university students. Social media offers a platform for collaboration, interaction, team-based learning, a tool that can boost your communication skills, complement face-to-face interactions and can be used for library, faculty and administrative purposes in higher education. However, even though numerous studies have been conducted on the use of social media in education, very little empirical research has been conducted on the use of social media platforms, for example Facebook, within higher education (Ratneswary and Rasiah 2014:370; Mnkandla and Minnaar 2017:25) [10]. It is imperative for social science researchers to understand and investigate the impact of social media on higher education, both for the student and the lecturer. This view is supported by research conducted by Oyetunde (2017:3) [8], who stated that social media seems to have the greatest impact in higher education, as opposed to any other level of education. Oyetunde (2017:3) [8] cited research that was conducted by LiveScience. The study revolved around the use of social media by college students and how it impacted on their academic performance (LiveScience.com 2010 in Oyetunde 2017:3) [8]. This research highlighted the benefits as well as the drawbacks of the usage of social media by college students. Surprisingly, this research highlighted the fact that Facebook was seen as 'drug' that caused 'withdrawal' symptoms for its 'addicts' (Oyetunde 2017:3) [8]. You might probably wonder why is the emphasis on Facebook? Well, Facebook has been regarded by students and faculty alike as the most popular social media platform (Oyetunde 2017:4; Ratneswary and Rasiah 2014:370) [10, 8], apart from the fact that it is the second most popular (after Google) and most visited website (Oyetunde 2017:4) [8] and was created by a college student for college students to connect them to the rest of the world. In light of the benefits of using Facebook to reach the masses, this tool will compliment our ODL objectives, this being to offer accessible and affordable education to the masses by using the latest, inexpensive technology at our disposal. I would like to take a step back from the 'socialization' aspect of using social media technologies and bring the reader back to the aspect of literacy, particularly digital literacy. The landscape of literacy and the acquisition thereof has transformed lecturer and student alike. Being literate no longer only involves the ability to read and write, however it now also involves the ability to download, upload, rip, burn, chat, save, blog, Skype and share content (Mullen and Wedwick 2008:66 in Ratneswary and Rasiah 2014:370) [10], thus transforming the educational and business landscape, some would argue for better or for worse, permanently. Considering all these factors, is it then not worthwhile to explore and tap into the benefits of social media, like Facebook, for higher education institutions in order to determine if social media can be regarded as a friend or foe for our Namibian higher education institutions?

Problem Statement

The widespread adoption of social media has significantly influenced the educational experiences of students and educators. While social media platforms provide easy access to educational resources, facilitate communication, and promote collaborative and interactive learning, their uncontrolled and excessive use has raised serious concerns regarding academic performance, student behavior, and mental well-being. Many students spend considerable time on social networking sites for non-academic purposes, leading to distractions, reduced concentration, procrastination, and poor time management, which may negatively affect their academic outcomes.

Despite the increasing integration of social media into educational practices, there is a lack of clear guidelines and structured strategies for its effective and responsible use in academic settings. Educational institutions often struggle to balance the benefits of social media as a learning tool with the risks associated with misuse, such as addiction, misinformation, cyberbullying, and privacy issues. Furthermore, the varying impact of social media on students' learning habits and academic achievement remains insufficiently explored across different educational levels.

Therefore, the core problem lies in determining whether social media acts as a supportive educational tool or a disruptive force in the learning process. This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining the positive and negative effects of social media on education, identifying factors that influence its impact on academic performance, and proposing measures for the balanced and purposeful use of social media in educational environments.

Research Questions

a) Analyse the applicability and usage of social media technologies for the ODeL context.

Research Objective

a) Inform ODL policy makers and reformers on the benefits of using social media as a teaching and learning tool within Namibian higher learning institutions.

Methodology

A desktop study was conducted on the use of social media in higher education. Google Scholar was the primary search engine for research articles. The search yielded various articles, however a 'sifting' process was necessary in order to ensure that the research yielded only related to the social media usage within the higher education sector. The search produced ten (10) of research articles, ranging from 2023 to 2024.

Literature Review

A search was conducted on the use of social media in higher education, mainly by using the Google Scholar search engine. After a process of sifting ten (10) of research articles, ranging from 2023 to 2024, were consulted. All of the research articles related to the use of social media in higher education from the perspective of students as well as faculty staff. Below are a summary of findings from the various researchers and why these findings are significant for my research. According to Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011:1) [1], social media is a 21st century term used to broadly define a variety of networked tools or technologies that emphasize the social aspects of the Internet as a channel for communication, collaboration, creative expression and is often interchangeable with the terms Web 2.0 and social software (Dabbagh& Reo, 2011a) [1]. The evolution of social media began in 1997 with the launch of Sixdegrees.com (Boyd & Ellison 2008:214 in Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman and Witty 2010:135) [1, 9], which enabled the user to create profiles and list and surf their friends lists (Boyd & Ellison 2008:214 in Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman and Witty 2010:135) [1, 9]. After the birth of Sixdegrees.com, the emergence of two very popular social networking sites, namely MySpace and Facebook, came about. Amongst the two social media networking sites, MySpace and Facebook, Facebook was the most popular social networking site amongst college students (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman and Witty 2010:135; Miller & Jensen, 2007 in Lemoine Hackett and Richardson 2016:380; Grossecka, Bran and Tiru 2011:1425, 1426; Hussain 2012:642; Moran, Seaman and Tinti-Kane 2011:5) [1, 9]. The difference between MySpace and Facebook was compared and contrasted (Boyd & Ellison 2008:214; Kwong, 2007:53–55-56 in Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman and Witty 2010:135; Oyetunde 2017:74) [1, 8, 9] and an overview was provided of the birth of Facebook at Harvard University and how it later expanded to reach other global users (Boyd & Ellison 2008:218 in Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman and Witty 2010:135) [1], which let to Facebook's worldwide popularity in usage amongst college students (Boyd & Ellison 2008:218 in Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman and Witty 2010:135; Oyetunde 2017:68 – 77) [1, 8, 9]. With the additional affordances that Facebook offered, it enabled not only the academic landscape to flourish, but it also enabled the business community to tap into the benefits that Facebook had to offer, by using Facebook as a marketing tool (Oyetunde 2017:75; Falahaha and DewiRosmalab 2011:158) [8]. Researchers like O'Hanlon (2007:42 in Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman and Witty 2010:136) [9] are of the opinion that it is worth exposing students to social networking sites while still at school, since this will enable them to build confidence, enhance their digital literacy skills and enhance communication skills through blogging and chatting online (O'Hanlon 2007:42 in Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman and Witty 2010:136) [9], however online safety for students remain a concern and therefore safety policies remain important (National School Boards Associations 2007:9 in in Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb , Herman and Witty 2010:136) [9]. Surprisingly, research indicated that students are not the only audience that became social media followers. Faculty staff members have equally followed suit and have used social media to support their teaching and learning activities (Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2011:2) [1] through the use of blogs, wikis, e-portfolios and have become an important assessment tool in higher education (Rosen & Nelson 2008 in Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2011:2) [1]. Faculty have realised that they can use social media to encourage group work, collaboration, social interaction, user generated content, innovation and digital literacy skills through the use of Web 2.0 pedagogy (Hazari, North, & Moreland 2009 in Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2011:2) [1]. Once again, all this optimism about the affordances of social media usage in higher education is also met with a lot of resistance. According to Hilton (2009 in Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2011:2) [1], higher education is being challenged by perceptions that Web 2.0 technologies, especially in terms of social media. Social media is enabling students to take charge of their own learning and inducing a pedagogical transformation where learning is community-based (community has become the curriculum) (Dabbagh & Reo 2011b; Dron, 2007; McGloughlin & Lee 2010; Selwyn 2007

in Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2011:2) [1], but at the same time has also induced pedagogical challenges and practices for the higher education sector in terms of linking formal and informal learning in higher education, through the use of social media (Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2011:2) [1]. Dabbagh and Kitsanas (2011:2) [1] has also highlighted the aspect of social media and the creation of personal learning environments (PLEs). According to Dabbagh and Kitsanas (2011:2) [1], a PLE is premised on social media and has gained popularity in elearning platforms. Social media has enabled students to create, share and organize content with a wide array of audiences (Dabbagh and Kitsanas 2011:2) [1]. Therefore, PLEs can be perceived as a technological and pedagogical approach that is student-centred around a specific and customized learning approach (Johnson *et al.* 2011:8 in Dabbagh and Kitsanas 2011:2) [1]. Not only does a PLE enable a student to develop an online identity, it also enables the student to link formal and informal learning through the use of social media (Dabbagh and Kitsanas 2011:3) [1]. Researchers like Dabbagh and Kitsanas (2011:3) [1] have also cautioned that the use of social media by students alone is not enough. Students need support, guidance and pedagogical interventions in order to optimize the affordances of social media as a teaching and learning tool (Cigognini, Pettenati, and Edirisingha 2011 in Dabbagh and Kitsanas 2011:3) [1]. Apart from the concern regarding the student support aspect, research has shown that the use of social media as a teaching and learning tool yields tangible rewards such as enhanced critical thinking skills, selfdirected learning, foster a learning community, enhanced interaction with course material, promoted the development of informal learning communities, collaborative modes of enquiry and encouraged group self-regulation (Churchill 2009; Harrison 2011; Hemmi, Bayne, and Landt 2009 in Dabbagh and Kitsanas 2011:3). All of the afore mentioned attributes can be directly linked to the Online Collaboration Theory (OCL), which is perfectly suited for ODeL students since it encourages collaboration and social constructivism. Ultimately, social media integrates formal and informal learning spaces that started out as a PLE (Dabbagh and Kitsanas 2011:3) [1]. Oyetunde (2017:34) [8] is another social sciences researcher who also conducted research on the use of social media in higher education. Oyetunde (2017:34) [8] highlighted aspects such as the uses and gratification theory along with the student involvement theory, with particular emphasis on the college student Facebook user. Oyetunde (2017:34) [8] compares and contrasts aspects of the fulfilment for non-curricular (social) gratification with the need of being academically committed student. It is important to note that the balance between the student's involvement on a social and academic level can sometimes interfere with their academic performance, particularly with regard to the usage of Facebook, however the two aspects (social and academic interactions) can be used in a complimentary means (Oyetunde 2017:34) [8]. With regard to the 'nuisance theory', the study conducted by Oyetunde (2017:34) [8] inferred that the use of Facebook by undergraduate college students did not necessarily impact on the academic performance of students and his study complimented the study conducted by Ogedebe *et al* (2012 in Oyetunde 2017:34) [8]. Oyetunde (2017:68) [8] suggests that social researchers should help build a body of knowledge that will enable academics to understand the dynamics between Facebook and education attainment, particularly within the African context (Oyetunde 2017:68) [8]. Apart from the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Oyetunde (2017:77) [8] also highlighted

the use and impact of WhatsApp mobile application, a popular social media platform that has taken Nigeria and the rest of Africa by storm. According to Oyetunde (2017:77) [8], WhatsApp offers flexibility with its phone and video calling features, and suggests that additional research should be conducted on the use of WatsApp (Oyetunde 2017:77) [8]. Oyetunde (2017:18) [8] also highlighted the benefits of social media platforms, for example Facebook, for universities. He (Oyetunde 2017:18) [8], particularly used the example of the University of South Africa (UNISA) using Facebook as a marketing tool where students can find information on seminars, events, conferences and occasional papers. The reason why UNISA is doing this, is to engage students in the learning and sharing of academic resources and information online (Oyetunde 2017:18) [8]. Lastly, Oyetunde (2017:81) [8], emphasised that college students embraced the use of Facebook (primarily for social purposes) and may increasingly do so in the near future if educators integrate the use of social media platforms into higher education in order to link the formal and informal learning and provide a holistic learning experience for the university student (Oyetunde 2017:81) [8]. Similar to other social science researchers, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011:1) [1], also highlighted the benefits of using social media in higher education, however this research highlighted that higher education institutions primarily still rely on learning management systems that do not capitalise on the pedagogical affordances of social media (McGloughlin& Lee, 2010; Selwyn, 2007; Valjataga, Pata, &Tammets, 2011; van Harmelen, 2006 in Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2011:1) [1]. In terms of the faculty usage of social media, social sciences The study conducted by Hussain (2012) also compliments my study. Hussain (2012:639 – 644) examined the trend of using social media amongst higher education students, evaluated the reasons behind using social media and identified problems in the usage of social media amongst university students. The study revealed that 90% of the students were using Facebook (Hussain 2012:639), primarily to exchange academic activities, share learning experiences amongst their peers nationally and internationally as well as for socialising. The study also revealed that social media played a crucial role in promoting collaboration and interaction amongst the Virtual Community across the world (Hussain 2012:639).

Gaps in Previous Research
Even though the research articles that were consulted were of great value to the researcher, the previous research reflected gaps which the current researcher sought to find answers for. The gaps identified from the desktop study included the lack of empirical research with regard to the usage of social media on the academic performance of students (most perceive the performance to be negatively impacted, however there is not sufficient proof). Another gap was that no research articles could be traced on the usage of social media within Namibian higher learning institutions and very few could be located with regard to the use within the African context. Little evidence could be gathered that academic staff attitude was changed through the use of social media and none of the research articles consulted provided evidence of a culture survey conducted amongst the staff and students of higher learning institutions on their perceptions of the use of social media within higher education. With regard to the aspect of security and privacy, the risk factors for the lecturer as well as the student and their professional reputations was not adequately considered when using social

platforms like Facebook. In addition to this, the overuse of social media and the impact on higher education has not been adequately researched (the impact of the 'Facebook drug' on higher education). The lifespan of Facebook and the impact on higher education (Oyetunde 2017:25) [8], including the use of Facebook in the 'flipped classroom' approach, was also not researched sufficiently. The use and impact of other social media (for example Watsapp) was also not researched as well as the level of interaction on social media required in an academic setting was not considered, although the selection, application and usage of social media tools was briefly touched on by Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011:3) [1]. Little light has been shed on the availability.

Conclusion
The use of social media in education has emerged as a powerful yet complex phenomenon that significantly influences the teaching–learning process. As discussed in this study, social media functions as both a friend and a foe in education, depending largely on how it is used. On the positive side, social media enhances communication, encourages collaborative learning, supports knowledge sharing, and provides easy access to educational resources. It promotes student engagement, creativity, and digital literacy, making learning more interactive and learner-centered.

However, the negative aspects of social media cannot be ignored. Excessive and unregulated use often leads to distraction, reduced academic focus, time mismanagement, and dependency, which may adversely affect students' academic performance. Issues such as cyberbullying, privacy threats, misinformation, and exposure to non-academic content further highlight the risks associated with improper use. These challenges indicate that social media, if misused, can undermine academic goals and student well-being.

In conclusion, social media cannot be categorized strictly as a friend or a foe in education. Its impact depends on the purpose, duration, and manner of use. When integrated thoughtfully and guided by clear educational objectives, social media can serve as an effective learning tool. Conversely, without proper control and awareness, it may become a barrier to academic success. Therefore, a balanced and responsible approach is essential to maximize its educational benefits while minimizing its drawbacks.

Recommendations
1. **Development of Usage Guidelines:** Educational institutions should formulate clear policies and guidelines for the academic use of social media to prevent misuse and overdependence.
2. **Digital Literacy Training:** Students and teachers should be trained in digital literacy, including responsible usage, information evaluation, and online ethics.
3. **Integration into Curriculum:** Social media should be purposefully integrated into teaching strategies, such as discussion forums, virtual study groups, and content sharing for academic engagement.
4. **Time Management Awareness:** Students should be encouraged to manage their time effectively and limit non-academic social media usage during study hours.
5. **Parental and Teacher Supervision:** Parents and educators should monitor students' social media activities to ensure safe and productive use.
6. **Promoting Academic Platforms:** Greater emphasis should be placed on using educational and academic networking platforms rather than purely entertainment-based social media sites.
7. **Awareness of Risks:** Institutions should conduct awareness programs on cyberbullying, privacy protection, and misinformation to create a safe digital learning environment.

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