

Understanding the impacts of social media platforms on students' academic learning progress

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Abstract

Can social media platforms positively impact students' academic learning progress? This question and many more are issues confronting students and scholars in developing countries, and this study aims to address it. Social media platforms provide students with continuous opportunities in their learning progress. Students in developing countries are beginning to use social media platforms to positively impact their learning process because of its ability to positively change their learning process and performance. Students use it to improve their academic learning progress and performance effectively. However, the impact of social media platforms on students' academic learning progress is sometimes misinterpreted because of the distractive nature of the platforms to students. Many scholars believe that social media platforms have no positive impacts on student's academic progress. This study aims to investigate the impact of social media platforms on students' academic learning process. A quantitative research methodology was adopted in using online questionnaires among first-year university students at the North-West University, South Africa. The study found that social media platforms improve students' academic learning performance, communication, interaction, engagement, and self-directed learning (SDL). These findings provide positive impacts of social media platforms on students learning progress.

Keywords

Academic learning, Academic, Interaction, Learning process, Social media platforms, Students.

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Introduction and background

Social media platforms provide students with the opportunity to engage with others in the academic and non-academic environment. The increase of social media platforms is seen mainly among the youths (Gudelliwar, Kishor & Yadav, n.d). Students use social media platforms to communicate and collaborate with others in and outside the academic environment (Aghaee, 2010). Social media platforms are a virtual community that connects friends, including students, in sharing information and communication (Balakrishnan, Teoh, Pourshafie & Liew, 2017). To this study, social media platforms provide students with a better environment to interact for academic purposes. It allows students to be connected in sharing resources and information. However, the impacts of social media platforms on students in developing countries are still in doubt because of its distractive nature. Students spend hours on their social media platforms chatting and doing other activities, which many see as distractive. This study looks into the impact of social media platforms on students' academic learning progress in applying a quantitative research approach using online questionnaires. The study's outcome will facilitate the understanding of students, lecturers, and other stakeholders on the impact of social media on students' learning process and performance. Students' effective application of social media platforms provides a better opportunity to stay connected, share resources, and learn at all times (learn-as-you-go).

The impacts of social media on students' academic learning progress

According to Gudelliwar et al. (2019), social media platforms enable teachers and students to collaborate, interact or communicate with others and access online resources. It improves students' grades and reduces absenteeism in class, which affects academic grades and performance. Kolhar, Kazi and Alameen (2021) and Alnjadat, Hmaidid, Samha, Kilani and Hasswan (2021) suggest that students are recorded as one of the largest users on social media platforms daily for everyday tasks (activities). Gudelliwar et al.'s (n.d.) research found that 51% of students used social media for academic assignments, while 60% used it for academic topic discussions. Aghaee (2010) also mentioned that 64% of the students used social media to engage with fellow students in-class activities, while 41% used it when doing academic work. The use of social media has increased, which impacts positively and negatively on students' academic-related activities and discussions. According to Alnjadat, Hmaidid, Samha, Kilani and Hasswan (2021), social media usage increases students' academic performance. Apart from the increase in usage, users' (students') culture affects the adoption of SMPs at higher education institutions (Balakrishnan et al., 2017). The fact that culture influences students' social media usage and adoption shows their intentions are primarily affected.

The use of social media in higher education institutions is increasing by the day. Scholars believe that students at higher education institutions use social media for personal and academic activities, which drive the increase (Mbatha, 2014; Karvounidis, Chimos, Bersimis & Douligeris, 2014; Rogers-Estable, 2014; Aydin, 2012). A study demonstrated that 81.9% of the students in Australia engage in learning using Facebook, which means that Facebook can help in a collaborative and cooperative learning process (Balakrishnan et al., 2017). This finding indicates what social media can offer students in a formal and informal academic environment compared to other online platforms. Santoveña-Casal (2019) believes that lecturers and learners adopt social media platforms, which positively impacts their academic performance. Students continuously check their social media statuses, which indirectly allows them to engage in discussions, learning, exchanging ideas, knowledge, and information. Social media has opened new opportunities for students to learn new knowledge and skills on the go. According to Sobaih, Moustafa, Ghandforoush and Khan's (2016) research findings, social media benefits higher education institutions' teaching and learning processes. Lecturers and students can learn through social media, which assists them in sharing learning content and connectivity (Alhababi et al., 2015). According to Nthala (2019), social media platforms as a learning technology is beneficial, but it can also be destructive when wrongly used. However, the use of social media for teaching and learning is underused because of the high cost of

access to smartphones and data. Lecturers are beginning to apply the use of social media to communicate and share content with students across higher education institutions.

Problem statement and research motivation

Social media usage is increasing among students and youths, especially during and after crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. At the same time, they are not considering the effects of social media on their academic lives. Students and youths spend hours on social media platforms interacting with friends rather than face-to-face (Gudelliwar et al., n.d.). Social media allows students to perform different academic and non-academic activities such as communication, research, assignments, and many more (Balakrishnan et al., 2017). According to Kitchakarn (2016), social media platforms such as Facebook have supported teaching and learning for so long, promoting academic participation. The usage and application of social media promote self-directed learning (SDL) and the submission of scholarly works. Social media also creates an opportunity for students to build their ideas and knowledge, exchange lecture notes, submit assignments and other academic-related documents.

Saaondo and Igbaakaa (2018) study suggest that undergraduate students' social media usage should be regarded as a good thing but not for social vices and crime. Social media provides an opportunity for students to play and learn beyond the border (Alhababi et al., 2015). However, the opportunities presented by social media platforms are not yet identified (Lubua, Semlambo & Pretorius, 2017). The opportunities behind social media as a learning tool are limitless. This study aimed to determine the impacts of social media platforms on first-year students' academic learning progress. The literature indicates that social media provides access to educational learning, but little is known of its impacts on first-year students' academic learning process. The research objective is to determine the impacts of social media platforms on first-year students' learning process.

Research method

This study deployed quantitative research methods, which allowed the researcher to use a questionnaire as the data collection instrument. The data collection was done using different social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter). For example, first-year students of information system (INFS) and Economics department WhatsApp group, NWU Mafikeng campus, NWU Mafikeng Confessions (Facebook page), and many others were used. These social media platforms are open for anyone to post and comment on, with students actively using them daily. The data analysis was done using SPSS statistical software to understand first-year students' perception of the impacts of social media platforms on their learning process and performance. This study consists of first-year students registered in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (FEMS). According to the record, an estimate of 3 886 students registered in the Faculty for the 2020 academic year (NWU, 2020).

Interestingly, the outbreak of COVID-19 has led to many higher institutions adopting social media platforms as their medium of teaching and learning, which the NWU Mafikeng Campus is not an exception. Thus, the first-year students are actively involved in using social media platforms both for their learning and communication. Krejcie and Morgan (1970) provided a table for the determination of a research sample size. According to the table, in the estimated population of 3 886 potential participants, 351 respondents' data should be collected (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). As noted earlier, social media platforms were used to recruit and distribute the data among the first-year students registered in FEMS, based on random sampling. The questionnaire was designed to determine those eligible respondents in advance before the commencement of the study. A total of 325 online questionnaires were collected, which amounted to 93% of the collected data.

Findings

This section of the study presents the data discussion and interpretation of the study using Table 1 below. The data discussion consists of 20 questions that seek to determine the impact of social media platforms on students' academic learning. The data discussion shows the study findings in Table 1.

Table 1.

The question constructs

Constructs	Strongly disagree	Undecided	Strongly agree
Social media as a learning tool improves academic performance	68 (20.6%)	59 (18.2%)	199 (61.2%)
Social media as a learning tool makes learning fun and easy to understand	92 (28.3%)	61 (18.8%)	172 (52.9%)
I have enough knowledge on how to use social media platforms for efficient and effective learning processes.	65 (20%)	45 (13.8%)	215 (66.1%)
Using social media for learning purposes improves students' academic work quality	79 (24.3%)	67 (20.6%)	179 (55.1%)
Using social media platforms for academic purposes improves students' participation	86 (26.4%)	50 (15.4%)	189 (58.2%)
Using social media platforms improves collaboration and engagement among students	50 (15.4%)	48 (14.8%)	227 (69.8%)
Using social media platforms improves communication between students and lecturers	65 (20%)	55 (16.9%)	205 (63.1%)
Using social media platforms increases students' interest in lesson topics	88 (27.1%)	71 (21.8%)	166 (51%)
Learning using social media increases efficiency and effectiveness	74 (22.8%)	72 (22.2%)	179 (55.1%)
Students interact more because of social media in their learning process	58 (17.8%)	54 (16.6%)	213 (65.5%)
I believe that social media platforms are essential for students' learning	54 (16.6%)	62 (19.1%)	209 (64.3%)
I believe that social media is not distractive to students in their learning process	129 (39.7%)	59 (18.2%)	137 (42.2%)
I believe social media platforms are reliable and can be used for learning purposes	74 (22.7%)	67 (20.6%)	184 (56.7%)
I believe that social media makes learning effective throughout the university journey	77 (23.7%)	55 (16.9%)	193 (59.4%)
I believe that social media platforms will increase academic competition among students	78 (24%)	69 (21.2%)	178 (54.8%)

Social media platforms will motivate students to become productive and hardworking	71 (21.8%)	68 (20.9%)	186 (57.2%)
Social media platforms improve convenient learning and students can learn without time and location boundaries	53 (16.3%)	47 (14.5%)	225 (69.2%)
Social media platforms improve self-directed learning	40 (12.3%)	38 (11.7%)	247 (76%)
Social media platforms improve student-centred learning	40 (12.3%)	61 (18.8%)	224 (68.9%)
Social media platforms improve cooperative learning	52 (16%)	76 (23.4%)	197 (60.6%)

Question 1 aimed to determine whether social media use improves the academic performance of the students. The finding proves that 199 (61.2%) of the students believe that social media platforms improve students' academic performance. The study also found, from question 2, that 172 (52.9%) of the students suggest that social media usage as a learning platform makes learning fun and easy. The study also suggests that 215 (66.1%) of the participants know how social media platforms can be used for efficient and effective learning processes. Question 4 shows that 179 (55.1%) of the students believe that social media usage for academic purposes improves students' quality of work and 189 (58.2%) of the students suggest that social media platforms improve students' learning and participation, as well as 227 (69.8%) collaboration and engagement among themselves. Kitchakarn (2016), who believes that social media platforms improve students' participation and engagement in the learning process, supports this finding.

The finding from question 7 is that 205 (63.1%) of the students suggest that social media platforms improve communication between students and lecturers. According to Balakrishnan et al. (2017) and Gudelliwar et al. (n.d.), social media platforms enable students to communicate, collaborate and interact with classmates and lecturers, while 166 (51%) believed that social media platforms improve students interest in any given topic. Question 9 aimed to determine whether the use of social media increases efficiency and effectiveness in learning, and it shows that 179 (55.1%) suggest that social media increases efficiency and effectiveness, while 213 (65.5%) of the students believed that students interact more because of social media in their learning process. Question 11 shows that 209 (64.3%) of the students believed that social media platforms are essential for student learning, while question 12 shows that 137 (42.2%) of the participants prove that social media platforms are not distractive to students' learning process. Question 13 suggests that social media platforms are reliable and can be used for learning purposes. Question 14 proves that 193 (59.4%) participants suggest that social media platforms make students' learning effective throughout the university journey. Question 15 shows that 178 (54.8%) of the participants suggest that social media platforms increase academic competition among students. The study also found, from question 16, that social media platforms motivate students to become productive and hardworking. Furthermore, question 17 proves that social media platforms improve convenient learning, and students can learn without time and location boundaries. Question 18 proves that social media improves self-directed learning. At this point, question 19 shows that social media improves student-centered learning, while question 20 shows that social media platforms improve cooperative learning among students.

Contributions to the body of knowledge

Social media platforms provide students with many benefits and opportunities for their learning process. Social media improves academic performance, and it makes learning fun and easy to understand. Students have developed enough knowledge on how to use social media platforms for efficient and effective learning processes. Social media improves academic work quality and improves students' participation, collaboration, and engagement in the academic

process. It also improves communication between students and lecturers, increasing students' interest in the lesson topics. Social media increases efficiency, effectiveness, and interaction among students in their learning process and is essential for students' learning. However, social media is not distractive to students in their learning process because it is reliable and can be used for learning purposes. It makes students' learning more effective throughout their university journey, increasing academic competition among students. Social media platforms motivate students to become productive and hardworking and improve convenient learning because students can learn without time and location boundaries. Social media platforms improve self-directed learning, student-centered learning, and cooperative learning.

Conclusion

Social media keeps changing the academic and social interaction activities of students in this digital age. Lecturers and students have accepted the platform as a learning tool towards enriching academic progress, social interaction, and communication during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study provided an understanding of the impacts of social media platforms on first-year students' academic learning progress. Social media platforms facilitate social interaction, communication, and engagement tools; it positively impacts academic learning and improve their continuous engagement in the learning process. The findings from this study foster the acceptance and usage of the social media platform, whether for academic or non-academic purposes. In the future, researchers should determine the barriers to social media adoption in the students' learning process. Furthermore, studies should look into the challenges facing students in adopting social media platforms as learning tools.

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