

Challenges and perceptions towards use of social media in higher education in Zimbabwe: a learners' perspective

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Abstract— Many instructors and students in higher education are using social media and research has shown that social media is useful in education. However, little is known about the challenges posed to students who use social media in education. Furthermore, very few studies have explored the learners' perceptions towards use of social media in higher education in the context of a developing nation like Zimbabwe. This research therefore explored the challenges and perceptions towards use of social media in Zimbabwe. The study followed a descriptive research design wherein a questionnaire was used as the main research tool. Data was gathered from 124 university students from 5 universities in Zimbabwe. The collected data was analyzed using SPSS. An analysis of the results seems to suggest that the main challenges being faced by students in higher education as regards use of social media are security, unproductive behaviour/wastes time, misuse of tools during instructional time and antisocial behaviour in that order. These challenges are ranked according to effect each has on the learner and security has topped this list of challenges. It was also found out that the students in higher education have a favorable perception towards use of social media in higher education.

Index Terms— Challenges of Social Media, Higher Education in Zimbabwe, Perceptions towards Social Media, Social Media, Social Media in Education Social Networking Sites, Uses of Social Networking Sites.

1 INTRODUCTION

MOST students and instructors are using social media as a teaching and learning tool. Several studies [11], [6], [21], [28], [40], [29], [15] point to the fact that instructors are using social networking technologies as a teaching and learning tool to blend informal learning into formal learning environments. In addition to that, currently most students are using social media in higher education even though it is believed that the media pose some challenges to students. Research on the challenges and perceptions towards use of social media in education has been carried out in developed countries; however, little or no research has been carried out in developing countries notably in Zimbabwe. This study therefore endeavors to fill this apparent research gap by exploring the challenges and perceptions on use of social media by students in higher education. Some researchers who carried out research on use of social networking technologies in education include [31] and [6]. However both studies did not address the issues raised in this section. Zanamwe, Rupere and Kufandimbwa [42] carried out research on use of social networking technologies in Zimbabwe but did not look at the challenges and perceptions students have on use of social networks.

Boyd and Ellison's [5] posit that there is lack of research that explores the link between Social Networking Sites use and education. Even though at the moment there is large body of knowledge on use of social networking sites, few students have been conducted in developing nations and none of these

studies ranked the challenges associated with use of social media according to importance. The National School Board Association [30] presents further supporting evidence to this effect by noting that up till now, a research-based discussion of social networking sites and education has been virtually nonexistent. Additionally, [16] posit that critics of social networking sites characterize them as portals for antisocial and unproductive behavior. All these researches and many others not mentioned here do not address the research gap that has been stated in above. This is so because, to date it remains unknown which social networking technology challenges affect the users most and what are the perceptions held by students on use of social media in higher education.

The article is organized as follows, the next sections presents the problem statement, research objectives, literature review and methodology. After that, research results are presented and discussed. Lastly, the conclusions are drawn and recommendations are presented.

1.1 Problem statement

Most students in Zimbabwe are spending quality time on social networking sites even though social media is regarded by critics as posing challenges to the learners such as safety and security concerns, antisocial behavior, unproductive behavior, misuse of tools during instructional and so on. In addition, previous researches have explored on the use social networking technologies in higher education, however, none of these researches focused on the perceptions learners have on use of social networking technologies in education. This study therefore endeavors to fill this apparent research gap by investigating challenges and perceptions on use of social networking

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sites in higher education in the context of a developing African country Zimbabwe.

1.2 Research objectives

This study was aimed at determining the challenges associated with using Social Networking Technologies in the classroom. The study also ranked these challenges in order of negative effect they have on the learner. Lastly, the study established learner's perceptions towards use of Social Networking Technologies for education.

1.3 Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that students have positive a negative attitude towards use of social networking sites. The hypothesis can be formally stated as:

H₀: Students have a negative attitude towards use of Social Networking Technologies in Higher education

H₁: Students have a positive attitude towards use of Social Networking Technologies in Higher education

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions

It is necessary to give some formal working definitions of terms which shall be used throughout this paper. One of the terms worth defining is learning which [23] define in two ways, firstly, as students collaborating and discussing ideas, possible solutions and secondly as connecting with other students around the world, on topics of study. Learning is also viewed as social activity, where learners construct their understanding not just through interaction with the material, but also through collaboratively constructing new knowledge with their peers.

The other term worth defining is social networking which [35] views as one aspect of social media in which individuals are in communities that share ideas, interests, or are looking to meet people with similar ideas and interests. On the other hand, [5] view social networking sites as web-based tools that allow users to develop a public or quasi-public profile, electronically communicate with other users with whom they share a connection, and view and comment on their list of communications with other members of the group. Similarly, the Computing Dictionary (2011) defines a social networking site as any website designed to allow multiple users to publish content of them. The information may be on any subject and may be for consumption by friends, mates, employers, employees just to mention a few. A similar definition is given by [34] who defines social networking as a community in which individuals are somehow connected through friendship, values, working relationships, idea and so on. While Palfrey and Gasser [33] define the services in the foregoing section as social digital technologies, [8] define them as participatory media and [3] define them as social media.

The last term that needs to be defined is educational networking which [6] define as "the use of social networking technologies for educational purposes." In this paper, the terms social media, social networking technologies and social networking sites are used interchangeably.

2.2 Social networking sites in education

There are many social networking sites being used in higher education in Zimbabwe and elsewhere. According to a survey on use of social networking in Zimbabwe which was conducted by [42], it was established that some of the most popular social networking sites being used in higher education include, Facebook, Myspace, Twitter and LinkedIn. Previous researchers like [6] also point out that Facebook, Friendster, LinkedIn, LiveJournal and MySpace are some of the examples of social networking sites. The same social networking sites are also mentioned in [41] who notes that "The most famous in the world of social networks are Facebook (Facebook.com) and Twitter (Twitter.com) and MySpace (myspace.com) and others." Similar sentiments are echoed by [35] that the two most popular social networking sites are Facebook and MySpace. Researchers like [18] and [32] claim that Facebook and YouTube are the two most commonly used social media technologies among all students. In addition to the social networking sites mentioned so far, [23] adds Bebo as an example of a Social Networking Site. On the contrary, [1] cites NING as a social networking site which is mainly used in academia.

2.3 Challenges of social networking sites in higher education

Farkus, George, et al. [13] claim that some of the challenges associated with use of Social Networking Sites stem from the risks inherent in student internet usage. They went on to argue that internet exposes students to inappropriate material, unwanted adult interactions, and bullying from peers. Similar remarks were made by [12] that, Web 2.0 is also a source of concern regarding issues such as, privacy, authorship and ownership rights, digital divide in the classroom or time management issues. Additionally, [4] cites information overload as another challenge whereas, [22], laments quality of content as a major concern. Since social networking sites are part of Web 2 technologies the challenges raised here are also true of social networking sites.

Further supporting evidence is presented by [23] who argue that, popular social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, and Bebo have received intense criticism from schools which are fearful for the online safety of students using these sites, and also the concern that students will misuse them during instructional time. On the other hand [35] indicates that the major challenges or concerns relating to social networking technologies are loss of control wherein one can receive unsolicited negative comments, time commitment, information overload and anyone can create an "official" account for your university since social networking sites do not perform any kind of background checks on individuals wanting to create an account with a college name.

Brady, Holcomb and Smith [1] conclude that Social Networking Sites challenges include privacy and safety issues which were also raised by several authors [14], [2] and [19]. Similar results were found by [39] that the educational community has been noticeably reluctant in allowing teachers to adopt social networking sites in their classrooms mainly due privacy and safety concerns involving students. This is further affirmed by [38] who claims that many school districts, colleges, and universities have actively taken steps to ban the use of Social Networking Sites in school facilities. Even though these institutions went to extremes by completely banning use of social networking sites, it can be read from these bans that the social networking sites were posing some challenges to students.

There is overwhelming evidence that social networking sites are posing some challenges to learners in higher education as evidenced by findings in [10] and [17] who claim that the most commonly cited reasons for not allowing students to use social networking sites in educational environments include preconceptions associated with exposing students to inappropriate online content, fears of online sexual predators, and student-based cyber bullying, or online student harassment. Three more challenges were cited by [25]. The first challenge is that social media can be a distraction in that they divert learner's attention from classroom participation and finally are disruptive to the learning process. The second challenge is that cyberbullying can be used as a weapon for malicious behaviour. Lastly, social media discourages face-to-face communication. In another empirical investigation on use of social media in four universities in the UK involving 76 questionnaire participants and 14 interviews with students, [20] found out that five challenges of social software for learning are; separation of life and studying; originality and copyright issues; sense of information flooded; time constraint, and lecturers are not up-to-date and may not know how to integrate and make use of social software.

A closer analysis of foregoing challenges reveals that different researchers in different parts of the world came up different challenges even though there appears to be some common ground. This research does not only seek to establish the challenges prevalent in Zimbabwean intuitions of higher but it goes a step further in ranking up these challenges with respect to the effect they have on the learner. To the best of our knowledge, there is not even a single study that ranked these challenges. Previous studies like [42] demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that social networking sites are very much useful in educational settings and should be incorporated in the learning process. Given this background, it is necessary to rank these challenges so that measures are taken to minimize the most important challenges while using social networking sites in higher education rather than to completely abandon them because of the inherent challenges associated with their use in higher education.

2.4 Learners' perception towards use of social networking sites in higher education

To date, several studies have explored on the commonly held perceptions about use of social networking sites in higher education. However, a review of literature shows that there is no consensus on the perceptions students from different parts of the world have on use of social networking sites in education. This is an apparent research gap which this study seeks to fill. However, we need to acknowledge the work which previous researchers have done on this area. In a survey on undergraduate perceptions of the usefulness of Web 2.0 in higher education in the United States of America by [24], it was established that learners' prior use of new technologies in on-campus courses greatly influenced their perceptions of their usefulness in higher education and the respondents did not perceive social networking tools to be useful to teaching or learning. Another survey on perceptions and beliefs undergraduate students had about social media was conducted by [7]. Their study revealed strong favorable perceptions of social media in general and a high degree of readiness to embrace social media portals as a way to deliver course content.

Further supporting evidence on perceptions on use of social networking sites in higher education is presented by [32]. In their study which was aimed at describing the use of and interest in social media, it emerged out that, in terms of interest in using social media for academic practice, the study respondents showed a higher interest in using those social media tools for which they were most familiar. In addition, [6] examined 52 graduate students' attitudes and perceptions toward use of social media at North Carolina State University. Their findings reveal that 70% of study participants in the fully online asynchronous course "agreed" that NING allowed for more frequent collaboration compared to a face-to-face course and 82% "agreed" that the use of NING was beneficial when communicating outside of the classroom. When comparing the NING-enhanced, hybrid courses to traditional face-to-face courses, 42% believed that NING allowed them to communicate more effectively; 74% felt that NING allowed for more time to effectively reflect and comment on other student posts; and 50% "agreed" that NING in Education was more convenient than face-to-face classes for sharing and discussing ideas.

In a related study in Malaysia by [28] it was found out that the majority of learners enthusiastically accepted the use of Facebook as a tool for online learning and found it to be both interesting and enjoyable. Several other studies ([27], [25], [7], [32]) confirm the fact that students are very much willing to incorporate social media into their learning experiences. Another study was conducted by [37] wherein they examined the learners' feelings about using Facebook for class. They concluded that students are significantly more likely to agree that it would be convenient to use Facebook for class; however students seemed not to feel privacy is an issue in this context.

3 METHODOLOGY

Since the major thrust of this research is to provide an accurate and valid representation of the challenges and perceptions towards use of social networking sites in Zimbabwe, a descriptive research design was considered the most suitable approach. This research design used a survey research methodology wherein a questionnaire was used as the main research tool. Questions included demographics, challenges and perceptions. The respondents were asked to rank and comment on different questions. This was used to determine the weight or the importance of each challenge and perception.

The questionnaires included a combination of both structured and semi-structured questions. The questionnaire was validated by pretesting it with a sample of five participants who included two postgraduate and three undergraduate students. Some of the questions were adopted from [9], [42] and [37].

The questionnaires were distributed to students as either hard copies or electronically. Limesurvey was used to create an online version of the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed at random to students from five tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe.

4 PRESENTATION OF AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1 Demographics

A total of 124 learners participated in the study and the distribution of the participants is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Frequency distribution of participants

Institution	Number of participants
Harare Institute of Technology	21
Harare Polytechnic	30
Midlands State University/TRUST Academy	22
University of Zimbabwe	36

Table 4: Frequency distribution for year of study

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		2	1.6	1.6	1.6
	Fifth year	3	2.4	2.4	4.0
	First year	20	16.0	16.0	20.0
	Fourth year	25	20.0	20.0	40.0
	Second year	48	38.4	38.4	78.4
	Third year	27	21.6	21.6	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

Women's University in Africa	15
Total	124

Of the 124 participants 27.2 percent were female and 72.8 were male as is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Frequency distribution for gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		1	.8	.8	.8
	Female	33	26.4	26.4	27.2
	Male	91	72.8	72.8	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

Further to the forgoing demographic information, the age frequency distribution is shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Frequency Distribution for Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		2	1.6	1.6	1.6
	15–20	4	3.2	3.2	4.8
	21–25	83	66.4	66.4	71.2
	26–30	19	15.2	15.2	86.4
	31–35	11	8.8	8.8	95.2
	36–40	4	3.2	3.2	98.4
	41–45	2	1.6	1.6	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 below shows the frequency distribution for the year of study. This table shows that approximately 38 percent of the respondents were second years.

4.2 Challenges associated with use of social networking technologies

As regards challenges associated with use of social networking sites, our results seem to suggest that the major challenge is security which means that there is no privacy and personal details are prone to abuse. This challenge actually topped the list of challenges. A considerable proportion (20 %) of students indicated that social networking sites result in unproductive behavior or wastes student's time. Our results also seem to suggest that use of social networking sites extent expose students to antisocial behavior. This is shown in table below.

Table 5: Challenges associated with use of social networking sites

Challenges	Percent
Security (there is no privacy and personal details are prone to abuse)	38
Unproductive behaviour/wastes time	20
Misuse of tools during instructional time	8
Antisocial behaviour	8
Unsolicited negative comments	6
Exposes students to inappropriate material	5
Harmful stomping ground for cyber bullies and sexual predators	5
Information overload	5
Exposes students to inappropriate material	5
Total	100

4.3 Perceptions about use of social networking sites in higher education

A five point Likert scale was used to gauge the student's perception towards use of social media. The scale ranged from 1 to 5 wherein 1 represented 'Strongly Agree' and 5 represented 'Strongly Disagree'. Here each learner was asked to indicate their perception on each of the items in Table 6. The results are shown in Table 6 seem to suggest that for most cases learners appear to have a positive perception towards use of social networking technologies in higher education as shown by averages below three. However there are two cases where the average score is more than three but less than four implying that the learners somehow had an indifferent perception about use of social networking sites. The overall average score of 2.61 again seem to suggest that the learners have a fairly positive perception towards use of social networking technology in higher education. Further evidence to this result is provided in the hypothesis section. As regards security when using social networking sites, results in Table 6 confirm results in Table 5 in the sense that in Table 5 security challenges topped the list of challenges and in this section, when learners were asked to indicate their perception with regards to security, the average score is above three implying that the learners did not have a positive attitudes towards use of social networking sites due to security concerns.

Table 6: Students' perception about use of social networking sites

Perception	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Result
I feel safe or secure using Social Networking Sites	18	30	30	25	21	124	3.01
I have a strong background in Social Networking Sites for education	21	28	26	33	16	124	2.96
I feel comfortable using Social Networking Sites for Education	36	43	22	12	11	124	2.35
It is very important for me to be proficient in use of Social Networking Sites for education	37	41	22	15	9	124	2.34
It is very important for everyone to be proficient in use of Social Networking Sites for education	28	51	18	14	12	123	2.42
Using Social Networking Sites for classroom discussions is very convenient	34	39	22	17	12	124	2.47
Using Social Networking Sites for group projects is very convenient	31	54	16	10	13	124	2.35
I try to think of ways to do my school work effectively using Social Networking Sites	22	35	32	23	12	124	2.74
Social Networking Sites are more effective than e-learning systems	18	20	30	31	25	124	3.20
I am satisfied using social media as an alternative to e-learning systems	20	27	32	28	16	123	2.92
I feel more connected with fellow students by using Social Networking Sites	49	49	11	9	6	124	1.98
I can now contact my instructors more often by using Social Networking Sites	27	35	31	21	10	124	2.61
I feel Social Networking Sites should be used in all courses	27	44	25	11	17	124	2.57
My view of courses positively changed after using Social	29	29	42	11	13	124	2.60

Networking Sites							
Average							2.61

5-Strongly Disagree, 4-Disagree, 3-Neither Agree nor Disagree, 2 – Agree, 1-Strongly Agree

have a favourable perception towards use of social networking sites in education.

4.4 Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesis was stated in the foregoing section as:

H₀: Students have a negative attitude towards use of Social Networking Technologies in Higher education

H₁: Students have a positive attitude towards use of Social Networking Technologies in Higher education

A one sample t-test was (one-tailed t-test at 95% confidence interval and a test value of 3) used to test the hypothesis. The result for each item is shown in Table 7. The results in Table 7 shows that a t-test was carried out for each item the decision is shown in the last column. For all but one case, the decision was accept. For the case where the decision was reject, it was probably because learners perceive e-learning systems to be more effective than social networking sites even though they

In arriving at decisions in Table 7, the following decision rule was: if the one-tailed critical t value is less than the observed t and the means are in the right order, then we can reject H₀. In this case, the critical t is 1.679 (from the table of critical t values) and the observed t values are shown in the Table 7 below. So considering each case individually, it can be seen that for all but one t value (marked with a *), we fail to reject H₀. That is, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that the students have a negative perception towards use of Social Networking Sites in Higher education. So it can be concluded that learners have a positive perception towards use of social networking sites in higher education.

Table7: One-sample test

	Test Value = 3				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper	Decision
I feel safe or secure using Social Networking Sites	0.069	123	0.9450	0.008	-0.22	0.24	Accept
I have a strong background in Social Networking Sites for education	-0.345	123	0.7310	-0.04	-0.27	0.19	Accept
I feel comfortable using Social Networking Sites for Education	-5.851	123	0.0000	-0.653	-0.87	-0.43	Accept
It is very important for me to be proficient in use of Social Networking Sites for education	-5.992	123	0.0000	-0.661	-0.88	-0.44	Accept
It is very important for everyone to be proficient in use of Social Networking Sites for education	-5.035	122	0.0000	-0.561	-0.78	-0.34	Accept
Using Social Networking Sites for classroom discussions is very convenient	-4.592	123	0.0000	-0.532	-0.76	-0.3	Accept
Using Social Networking Sites for group projects is very convenient	-5.805	123	0.0000	-0.645	-0.87	-0.43	Accept
I try to think of ways to do my school work effectively using Social Networking Sites	-2.338	123	0.0210	-0.258	-0.48	-0.04	Accept
Social Networking Sites are more effective than e-learning systems	1.687*	123	0.0940	0.202	-0.04	0.44	Reject
I am satisfied using social media as an alternative to e-learning systems	-0.495	122	0.6220	-0.057	-0.28	0.17	Accept
I feel more connected with fellow students by using Social Networking Sites	-10.25	123	0.0000	-1.016	-1.21	-0.82	Accept
I can now contact my instructors more often by using Social Networking Sites	-3.511	123	0.0010	-0.387	-0.61	-0.17	Accept
I feel Social Networking Sites should be used in all courses	-3.657	123	0.0000	-0.427	-0.66	-0.2	Accept

My view of courses positively changed after using Social Networking Sites	-3.633	123	0.0000	-0.403	-0.62	-0.18	Accept
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5 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

5.1 Discussion of challenges associated with use of social networking sites

Our results seem to suggest that the major challenges faced by students in higher education with regards to use of social networking sites are that of security and promotion of antisocial behavior. Our findings confirm what was found elsewhere by several researchers like [23] who argue that popular social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, and Bebo have received intense criticism from schools which are fearful for the online safety of students using these sites, and also the concern that students will misuse them during instructional time. However, this study and several other studies which explored on the challenges did not rank these challenges with respect to the effect they have on the student.

Other studies that produced similar results include [13] who claim that some of the challenges associated with use of social networking sites are that they expose students to inappropriate material, unwanted adult interactions, and bullying from peers. Along with that, [12] noted that Web 2.0 is a source of concern regarding issues such as, privacy, authorship and ownership rights, digital divide in the classroom or time management issues. It must be noted that each study came up with a set of challenges in which common challenges exist. Most of these challenges raised by various researchers are also raised in this study. Most of these [6], [2], [14] and [19] mention privacy and security challenges which have topped the list of challenges in this study.

Lederer [25] raised one challenge which was not raised in this study and the challenge is that use of social networking sites discourages face-to-face communication among students. Other challenges which were mentioned in other studies which did not emerge in this study include those raised by [20] including separation of life and studying and originality and copyright issues.

5.2 Discussion of perceptions towards use of social networking sites

Our study also appears to suggest that students have a favorable perception towards use of social networking sites in higher education. This result is in agreement with what previous researchers in developed countries established. Some of the studies that report results similar to ours include [7] whose study revealed strong favourable perceptions of social media in general and a high degree of readiness to embrace social media portals as a way to deliver course content. Contrary to this, [24] in a survey on undergraduate perceptions of the usefulness of Web 2.0 in higher education in the United States of America revealed that the respondents did not perceive social networking tools to be useful to teaching or learning.

Several studies [7], [28], [27], [25], [32] have shown that learners have positive attitudes towards use of social networking sites. This is confirmed by our findings even though the respondents did not feel secure or safe about using social networking sites in higher education. This is a fundamental point which previous studies did not raise under students' perceptions.

6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our study sought to establish the challenges students in higher education are facing with regards to use of social networking sites in the context of a developing African nation Zimbabwe. The study also ranked the challenges according to their perceived impact on the learner. Lastly, the study, established the perceptions learners have on use of social networking sites in higher education. The study employed a descriptive research design wherein a survey research methodology was used. Data was collected from 124 students from five institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. The collected data was analysed using SPSS. The major findings from our study were that, the most disturbingly provocative challenges with regards to use of social networking sites are that of security and promotion of unproductive behavior. These two topped the list of challenges being faced by learners in higher education when it comes to use of social networking sites. Further to that, our study also concluded that learners in Zimbabwe hold a favourable perception towards use of social networking sites in higher education even though they raised security and privacy concerns.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

Since previous studies have confirmed that social networking sites are useful in education and this study has concluded that students have a favourable perception towards use of social networking sites in higher education, it is recommended that educators must exploit social media to the fullest. Now that the most intriguing challenges with regards to use of social networking sites have been identified. Educators should therefore continue incorporating social media in the learning and teaching process but they should keep an eye on the challenges which topped the list of challenges and come up with strategies of minimizing them.

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