Chapter 27
Students' Use of Mobile Technologies:
Motivational Factors

Hoda Baytiyeh
The American University of Beirut, Lebanon

ABSTRACT

Mobile technologies are all-pervasive in the current digital generation, and college students rely on their mobile phones to communicate on a daily basis. In the midst of the myriad of applications available to download on the mobile, some tools have become more well-known and more often adopted than others. An example of such a tool is WhatsApp, which gains an increasing, widespread number of users on a daily basis, particularly in the Middle East region. The present study investigated college students' use of WhatsApp as a communication tool, and used Lebanon as a case study. A qualitative research design was implemented to understand the perceptions of college students vis-à-vis WhatsApp, and to investigate the motivational factors behind the popularity of this communication tool. The results revealed four themes: simplicity for discussion and coordination, cost-effectiveness, immediacy and sense of belonging.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advances of new technologies, digital communication between college students has become popular, via the use of various tools, such as email, short message services (SMS), Facebook groups, Twitter and instant messaging (IM) among others, and this may influence learning. As one of these tools, the use of IM has made important contributions to the learning process, encouraging collaborative learning, active class participation and informal learning and communication. As such, students have the advantages of asking questions during the learning process and participating in discussions. Although some researchers have perceived these tools as non-academic, and have suggested that IM has a negative effect on academic writing, others have reported that the use of IM as a communication tool for faculty and students promotes positive outcomes, such as student learning; active learning; informal

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1757-4.ch027

communication between students; in-person interaction between students and faculty that is related to course content; a sense of belonging and community; the breakdown of teacher-student social barriers; and students' attentiveness towards, and serious consideration of, assignments.

Over the past decade, several studies have investigated the reasons behind the adoption of SMS as a mobile technology among teenagers in various countries in Europe (Finland, Norway and the UK), Japan and the US, and differences in text messaging habits across teenagers in these countries were noticed (Church & de-Oliveira, 2013). However, it was commonly found that SMS is primarily generally used among friends and peers for chatting, planning and coordination, as well as for carrying out rituals such as the exchanging of specific messages as gifts. The main reasons for the adoption of SMS were revealed as cost, ease of use, social connection, immediate responses and the simplicity of the language employed, such as abbreviations (Grinter & Eldridge, 2003).

Another mobile technology tool, WhatsApp IM, was launched in 2009, and is available on a variety of smartphone platforms. WhatsApp Messenger is a cross-platform, mobile messaging application that enables users to exchange messages, phone calls, images, videos and audio using the same data plan as for emails and web browsing (WhatsApp, 2016). WhatsApp handled 10 billion messages per day in August 2012, which rose to 27 billion daily messages in June 2013, and users share 700 million photos daily (Olson, 2013). As of February 1, 2016, 1 billion people, nearly 1 in 7 people on the planet, used WhatsApp (WhatsApp, 2016). Several advantages have been identified as being behind the adoption of WhatsApp as a main communication tool, rather than other platforms: its immediacy, cost-effectiveness, the desire to be a part of a trend and constant interaction with friends and family, as well as the ability to send an unlimited number of messages and to conduct conversations with many friends simultaneously (Church & de-Oliveira, 2013).

2. THE SPREAD OF SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

A recent study that involved 6,093 face-to-face and telephone interviews with participants aged 18 and older from Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) showed that mobile technologies have pervaded Arab culture (Dennis, Martin, & Wood, 2015). It was shown that almost 79% of the participants used social media at least once a day, and nearly 69% used the Internet on a daily basis, to learn of the latest news and events from friends and family. In addition, Facebook and WhatsApp have been considered as the leading social media platforms in the Middle East region, as they are used by more than 3 in 4 respondents (Dennis, Martin, & Wood, 2015). It has been shown that WhatsApp is highly popular among all age groups, as it has become ubiquitous in the UAE (used by 100% of respondents), Lebanon (97%), Saudi Arabia (94%) and Qatar (89%).

A mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) study was conducted by the Arab Social Media Influencers Summit in 2015 and revealed that WhatsApp is the most social tool used after Facebook as shown in Table 1 (Arab-Summit, 2015). The study involved a sample of 7282 active users of social media aged 15+ years who currently use at least one social media tool on regular basis as well as experts in the fields of media and communications. The study was conducted in the Arab Gulf countries (United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and Yemen), the Levant Region (Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq) and North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Sudan) with around 400 participants per country.