

Chapter 20

The Use of a WhatsApp Record for Communication With Students: A Case of the Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland West Campus

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of WhatsApp usage in disseminating information to students at the Management, Zimbabwe Open University's Mashonaland West Regional Campus. This study employed a mixed methodology wherein both the qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. Data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires were distributed to students through WhatsApp groups for all faculties. A total of 255 questionnaires were distributed to students through the existing WhatsApp groups. Of the distributed questionnaires, 128 were returned, and of these, 69 were usable for data analysis. The study revealed that the majority of students utilize WhatsApp for communication with the university. The other finding was that WhatsApp communication was characterized by data bundle costs and internet connectivity challenges. The study recommended that there be a WhatsApp policy and widening of the use for teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Across the globe institutions of higher learning have embraced the use of social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn for information dissemination to staff and students. Web 2.0 articulates that social media usage refers to technologies which allow individuals and groups to build networks by collaborating, sharing information, interacting with one another, and promoting online social communities. These technologies include tools like blogs, video sharing, presentation sharing, instant messaging, and social networking and is intended to construct a more socially connected and integrated platform (Gaál, Szabó, Obermayer-Kovács, & Csepregi, 2015). The use of WhatsApp by tertiary institutions and the gratification gleaned from it has been associated with several factors including social interaction, information seeking, passing time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others (Whiting & Williams, 2013). In a study conducted by Malecela in 2016, students' perceptions of the use of WhatsApp as a learning tool in a university in Malaysia were explored. The results showed that the students believed that WhatsApp could be helpful in their learning by facilitating communication with other students and with the instructor, collaborative learning, and access to and sharing of educational information. The Zimbabwe Open University, Centre for student management department deals with queries, information dissemination, and assisting the physically challenged students. This department was established for the purpose of promoting a smooth flow of information from the university to the students. The student management department uses WhatsApp to reach out to students who are scattered across the Mashonaland West Province. Information is also posted on the University e-learning platform and website newsfeed.

The usage of WhatsApp in the Centre for student management department has recently intensified due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the restriction of movement and physical contact. Students have an e-learning platform where they access learning materials, as well as information related to their studies. However, the University has casted its communication net wide by using WhatsApp and YouTube as other means of cascading information to its stakeholders (students). WhatsApp is easy to use, fast, convenient and a personal mode of communication. It is easy to form groups with WhatsApp or to use it for private communication (Tang & Hew, 2017). It can be used to communicate anywhere and at any time, and it is commonly used by university students worldwide (Bere, 2012; Yeboah & Ewur, 2014). Devi & Tevera (2014) found that WhatsApp was one of the most popular SNSs among university students. Most students have access to smartphones and the ubiquitous nature of internet availability across the Regional Campus despite challenges experienced in the remote areas.

According to Gasaymeh (2017) WhatsApp is a popular social networking site used in different parts of the world. Statistics have shown that there were 1, 2 billion active monthly users of WhatsApp in 2017 across the globe (Statista, 2017). WhatsApp messenger is a smartphone and web-based instant message application that allows users to exchange information using a variety of media including text, image, video, and audio messages (Church & de Oliveira, 2013; Sahu, 2014). These text, image, video, and audio messages used in a WhatsApp chat can be referred to as a record. In the sense that, a record is viewed as any "information created, received as evidence and information by an organisation or a person in pursuance of legal obligations or in transaction of business", (International Standards Organisation, 2001a). In the same vein, the National Archives Act of Australia established in 1983 & Zimbabwe National Archives Act of 1986 articulated that a record is any medium (document or object) that is or has been made or recorded, in connection with any event, person, circumstance or thing.

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