


Ubiquitous Technologies and Learning: Exploring Perceived Academic Benefits of Social Media Among Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This study makes an original contribution to the literature on social media usage for learning purposes through the phenomenological approach of enquiry. It examined the general motivations for social media usage, how social media is used to meet academic needs, perceived academic benefits, and how social media usage disrupts studies. A total of 24 undergraduate students were engaged in rigorous focus group discussions. Results showed that social media has been adapted to suit the academic needs of users through the process of appropriation. It was found that although social media could be a viable platform for inter-university collaborative learning, respondents hardly engaged in that. It was suggested that students create inter-university social media groups for collaborative learning. There were accounts of negative implications of using social media, like addiction and distractions. Students must adopt tactics to handle distractions which could prove helpful in out-of-school settings like the workplace.

KEYWORDS

Learning, Perceived Benefits, Social Media, Technology Appropriation, Ubiquitous Learning, Ubiquitous Technologies, Undergraduates, University Students

INTRODUCTION

Internet-enabled digital communications technologies, such as mobile phones, are considered disruptive technologies because they are creative and at the same time have displaced or chipped away how humans originally communicated or interacted, while at the same time shifting how organisations operate, [nearly] sweeping away the communications systems or habits they replace because of their noticeably superior features (Smith, 2020). Digital communications technologies can also be considered ubiquitous because they have become pervasive, permeating every facet of our lives. Their ubiquity is propelled by their ability to enable individuals, groups, or communities to communicate and participate for various purposes, including learning. The devices that house the various digitally enabled communications platforms are typically small and [sometimes] inexpensive and utilise telecommunication [internet] networks to connect people and devices locally and globally

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(Brown, Keller & de Lima, 2018). These platforms are also easily accessible and delivered in a manner appropriate to the location and context (Greenfield, 2010).

Social media are interactive digital tools that allow for the creation and sharing of information, interests, ideas and other forms of expressions or communications with the public (Kietzmann et al., 2011). As a disruptive technology, it has transformed the interaction and communication of individuals throughout the globe and is fast changing society's public exchange of ideas or interaction. Being a medium for social communication, the sense of being in a community and interacting with people who share similar interests is deemed the major reason for the success of social media (Kumar, 2014). Due to its reach, speed and ease of operation, social media enhance engagement of a multitude of topics, including entertainment, politics and environmental concerns. Widespread network access eliminates time and location barriers, meaning users can access social media globally and around the clock (Asur & Huberman, 2010, p.1), no matter the location of participants and time. This has resulted in the acceleration of a set of media practices that are very much rooted in other media modalities, such as television viewing, making social media a common feature of young people's everyday lives (Swist, 2015). Mobile communications technologies are also ubiquitous in settings where learning occurs (Lepp, Barkley & Karpinski, 2015). However, there is a likelihood for interruptions to occur when learning takes place in spaces where mobile phones are being used at the same time. In the case of using social media for learning purposes, the disruptions could be even greater as messages or alerts that are non-academic related could disrupt learning. Thus, although social media can be used to enhance learning, it can also interrupt it.

The Context

According to the Technology Appropriation Model, technology can be transformed as users appropriate it. This is because users find new modes of using the technologies than what they were originally intended for. Therefore, in the process of appropriating technologies, "technology-as-designed" can be altered or transformed during the process of usage ["technology-in-use"] (Alberts, 2013). The alterations or transformations that occur during technology-in-use are the result of users finding other uses for them. Traxler (2010) states that although mobile communications technologies are used for learning, they were originally developed and designed for various retail niches and corporate markets rather than for learning. Adjin-Tettey and Akrobotu (2018) also argue that digital devices have features which demonstrate that they were not originally made for education but corporate businesses and individual lifestyle customers. Yet, these devices are used by students for academic purposes, lending credence to postulations in the Technology Appropriation Model.

With a large body of evidence indicative of young people being active social media participants and their lives intrinsically woven around same (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Boczkowski, et al. 2018; Dzisah, 2018), this present study avers that students spend a significant amount of time on social media. It is no doubt that social media was created to facilitate communication and socialisation. However, as it becomes entrenched into the daily lifestyles of users, student users, for example, are adopting it as a medium for academic discussions and sending and retrieving of educational materials. To this end, it may be said that users have altered the original intent for use of social media, which was to facilitate social communication, to using it for educational or academic purposes.

Previous studies have reported both positive and negative effects of general social media usage as well as its effects on academic performance of higher education students (Kauser & Awan, 2019; Alamri, 2019; Giunchiglia, et al. 2018). Apart from the fact that most of such studies were conducted in different contexts, the literature shows a dearth of studies that use qualitative means for data collection to explore this phenomenon. This qualitative approach provides the opportunity to explore the depth and uniqueness of each participant's experiences using social media for academic purposes and the perceived benefits obtained from using them for such purposes.

This study explored the experiences of using social media among a group of university students to achieve academic needs; the perceived benefits of using social media for learning purposes; as

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