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The use of social media for academic purposes by postgraduate information studies students: a case of University of KwaZulu-Natal South Africa

Abstract

The study investigated the use of social media for academic purposes by postgraduate information studies students on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The study was prompted by the recognition, as reflected in the literature, of problems associated with their use and uncertainty regarding their use in the South African context. The study was underpinned by communication theory. The study also employed a quantitative research design in the form of an online questionnaire using Google Forms. Fifty-five post-graduate students were sampled of which 51 participated, giving a response rate of 93%.

Findings revealed that majority of the respondents (94%) indicated that they used social media for academic purposes, and the most used social media for such purposes was WhatsApp and Zoom, mentioned by 83% and 79% of the respondents, respectively. WhatsApp was also the most frequently used social media, followed by Google+, YouTube and Facebook. The two least used social media were Pinterest (10%) and Instagram (15%). Smartphones (96%) and laptops (88%) were the two most used methods to access social media, while 85% of respondents accessed social media for academic purposes from their homes. The main academic purposes for which respondents used social media were learning, personal research/development, personal growth and assignments.

The practical implications of these findings are that students may find it difficult to cope with the disruption to their studies brought about by the global pandemic (COVID-19) as well as take full advantage of using social media for academic purposes to enhance their academic performance. Being unable to do so could have a negative effect on students' success rate especially postgraduate students at UKZN.

Introduction

Nández and Borrego (2013) believed that social media are amongst the greatest modern advances in the establishment of digital information and communication and help to enhance

digital literacies (Misir, 2018). In the 1980s and 1990s, email was developed as the original method to exchange messages from one computer to another using the Internet. Today, social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, Skype and Zoom, among others, have been widely accepted as official means to allow users to transmit messages and access information globally (Gerlitz, 2016; Malatji, 2019; Iqbal, Alradhi, Alhumaidi, Alshaikh, AlObaid, Alhashim and AlSheikh, 2020; Ajayi and Ajayi, 2020). In addition, on-line social media enhances digital literacy which includes network literacy, media literacy, computer literacy and visual literacy, among others (Aczel, 2014).

According to Alvarez-Jimenez, Alcazar-Corcoles, Gonzalez-Blanch, Bendall, McGorry and Gleeson (2014), online social media are defined as “primarily internet- and mobile-based tools for sharing and discussing information between users.” Obar (2014) viewed social media as Internet-based applications developed using a Network 2.0 foundation that permit the formation and interchange of ideas. The technological foundations of social media include blogs, wikis, multimedia distribution tools, interacting platforms, and computer-generated worlds. These social media foundation tools foster social interactions or digital communication between users and promote digital literacies.

It is also evident that many students send emails to each other and their lecturers for study-related purposes. In addition, students are staying up-to-date in their areas of interest by accessing news posted on websites by individuals and organisations and are accessing library collections, bibliographic databases and other educational resources, including visual resources on the Web (Parmar and Desai, 2018). What is also evident (from the researcher’s observation and participation) is that while students are using social media to socialise, play games, share news, share pictures and videos, among other uses, they are also, seemingly, increasingly using social media for more academic purposes. It was this latter use of social media that prompted the researcher’s interest and provided the context in which the study needs to be seen. A positive “spin off” of the use of social media is, as pointed to above, the promotion of (and arguably improvement in) students’ digital literacy.

Among the most frequently cited advantages of the use of social media by students is their ability to aid collaborative learning and communication amongst their peers and others in academia (Ketonen-Oksi, Jussila and Kärkkäinen, 2016; Khan, 2017). Further commonly stated benefits of social media are their notable capability to aid digital literacy and information distribution. Among the examples of such media are blogging tools used by many students to

circulate information among their peers and persons worldwide (Ahmad, 2014; Aria and Izadpanah, 2017). Other than communication, academics who use Twitter refer to “information distribution” as one of the main advantages of using the medium. Its use has proven popular, particularly in academic conferences (Holmberg and Thelwall, 2014).

Social media sites benefit students by providing platforms that foster communication and life-long learning and facilitate access to distance and open education, e-learning resources and e-libraries (Saleh, 2020). Lecturers who impart knowledge to students also benefit from the use of social media by sharing educational materials, exchanging ideas, reading through colleagues’ research, getting updated on research trends and, most significantly, establishing their own professional networks (Akram and Kumar, 2017). Social media created precisely for educational audiences provide a distinct opportunity for those audiences to learn and create a robust academic discussion among themselves. They also encourage personal connections that can lead to the establishment of new information and knowledge. Furthermore, social media have the potential to aid more rapid interactions between libraries and their users (Ezeani and Igwesi, 2012) regardless of where the users are located or how they decide to learn about or access the library services and resources.

In South Africa (and elsewhere), social media are an important development for online participation where people share, contribute and communicate knowledge and content on the Internet. According to Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke (2014), the use of the Internet, and social media networks in particular, are becoming progressively more relevant for 21st-century politics and education in South Africa. They facilitate the sharing of knowledge and social cooperation on open-access platforms. People who have common interests can share information via the various social media platforms that are available.

The increase in the use of social media sites for educational purposes has expanded in popularity over the last 10 or so years. The sites have attracted millions of users worldwide Holmes and O’Loughlin (2014) and have been an engine for the growth of the South African economy (Goldstuck, 2012). Consequently, many people are changing the manner in which they access or search for information, news, entertainment and business. Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2016) noted that “These social media sites allow users to create personal profiles, upload photographs, make a post as well as connect with other users of the sites.”

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Research questions

- What are various types of social media available to postgraduate information studies students for academic purposes on the PMB campus of the UKZN?
- Which social media are used for academic purposes by students and what is the frequency of the usage?
- What are the various academic activities that necessitate the use of social media by students?

Literature Review

The difficulty of determining what constitutes social media has been pointed to. Obar and Wildman (2015), for example, noted that the “challenges to the definition of social media arise due to the broad variety of stand-alone and built-in social media services currently available”, but they also noted that they have some common features. These include:

- “All social media are interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).
- All social media have user-generated content like comments, digital photos, and data generated through online interactions (Obar and Wildman, 2015). According to Boyd (2007), “all social media have user-created service-specific profiles for the website or app that are designed and maintained by the social-media organization.”
- “All social media aid the development of online networking by connecting a user’s profile with those of other individuals or groups” (Obar and Wildman, 2015).

Parveen, Jaafar and Ainin (2016) revealed eight different types of social media networks:

- Social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Academia.
- Discussion forums such as Quora, Digg and Reddit.
- Blogging and publishing networks such as WordPress, Tumblr and Medium.
- Cybernetic worlds such as Second Life and Open Sim.
- Presentation sharing network tools such as Scribd, Slide Share and Slide Rocket.
- Video and audio sharing networks such as YouTube, Instagram, Flickr and Livestream.
- Writing and research collaboration tools such as PBworks, Wikispaces and Wikipedia.
- Meeting, project management and collaboration tools such as Big-Blue Button, Skype and Zoom.

In this study, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Zoom, Twitter, Skype, YouTube, WhatsApp, Google+, Blogs, ResearchGate, Pinterest and MS Teams were the forms of social media focused on because they were the popular ones used for academic purposes as reflected in the literature (see, for example, Owusu-Acheaw and Larson, 2015; Mungofa and Peter, 2015; Muriithi, Horner and Pemberton, 2016; Harrison Burress, Velasquez and Schreiner (2017); Nsizwana, Ige and Tshabalala, 2017; Budree, Fietkiewicz and Lins, 2019).

Social media used for academic purposes and the frequency of their usage

As already indicated above, social media have been very useful in the educational environment, especially for academic purposes as various studies have shown that students have taken the opportunity provided through this platform to facilitate their learning and research. In South Africa, Murire and Cilliers (2017) reported on the use of social media in higher education and revealed that their popularity among students has necessitated their adoption by university lecturers. Facebook was found to have significant potential for involving students since it continued to have a dominating presence among the vast majority (90%) of higher education classes (Blattner and Lomicka, 2012). In addition, Manca and Ranieri (2016) revealed that video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo also provide considerable potential for university communications and marketing offices who have the goal of increasing their messaging efforts among the student population without adding to their post-production and distribution costs. Some institutions have adopted social media like Twitter and Facebook to provide messages for students particularly in the case of emergencies.

Stutzman (2012) looked into virtual learning platforms, namely, Facebook and YouTube that students and researchers regularly worked with and on which they shared their plans. It was found that Facebook was considered a reference point for knowledge sharing among students.

The study conducted by Wiid, Cant and Nell (2014) on “South African students’ perceptions and uses of social media networking systems” revealed that social media was mostly being used by students for social rather than educational purposes and that Facebook was the most popular social media networking system being used. Mitchell and Watstein (2007), however, in an earlier study on students’ utilisation of Facebook at the University of Cape Town, found that lecturers’ engagement with students through social media networking sites (especially

Facebook) was shown to have a positive effect on students learning and teaching methods. This was because, through social media, students are able to share helpful information along with others around the world. Academics and researchers see the benefits of using social media for educational purposes in gathering information and growing their network. For instance, researchers are using social media like LinkedIn, ResearchGate and Facebook, among others, to build their professional networks.

A study conducted by Muriithi and Muriithi (2013) on students' motive for utilising social media network sites in private universities in Dar Salam, Tanzania, found that Facebook was the most used social media network for academic purposes. It had the highest number of users with 46.1% of respondents and it was followed by Twitter (15.5%), Badoo (9.7%), Sky Blog (8.7%), Google+ (8%), MySpace (6.5%), Friendster (2.8%) and LinkedIn (2.3%). The researchers also found that some of the respondents used more than one social network site.

Harrison *et al.* (2017) and AlFaris, Irfan, Ponnampereuma, Jamal, Van der Vleuten, Al Maflehi and Ahmed (2018) highlighted the top 10 social media platforms use by students for academic purposes. These were Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Zoom, Twitter, Skype, Telegram, YouTube, WhatsApp and ResearchGate. According to the researchers, these sites offer staff and students the opportunity to learn and collaborate with one another. Niu (2019) concurred and revealed that students reported positive effects of using Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, Zoom, Twitter and Skype in their studies.

Negussie and Ketema (2014) studied the “academic impacts of social networking sites” from the perspective of 1000 students in six Universities in Pakistan. Findings revealed that the vast majority of respondents (91.3%) indicated that they made use of Facebook, while only 3.4% used Twitter, and 2.2% made use of Orkut (“a social media designed to help users meet new and old friends and maintain existing relationships”). Most of the respondents (75.3%) stated that they made use of the social media sites between one and three hours daily, while 19.5% used social media between what could be considered a high four and six hours a day.

Buhari, Ahmad and HadiAshara (2014) surveyed the “use of social media for academic purposes by students” at a polytechnic in Kaduna, Nigeria. They found that the time spent on usage was extremely high with most of the respondents using social media between 6 am and 6 pm, while others indicated that they spent more than five hours per day using social media.

Results from these studies established that even though university students utilise different types of social media sites, Facebook was the most used and most students spent considerable time using it and other social media sites.

Talaue, AlSaad, AlRushaidan, AlHugail and AlFahhad (2018) carried out a study on the social media used for academic purposes and their frequency of usage. The study identified Facebook, Zoom, YouTube and Twitter as the social media platforms most frequently used by students for academic purposes. According to the authors, these platforms can be used for posting lectures, videos, graphics and other academic materials. Talaue *et al.* (2018) revealed that “the students need to connect with other students in different zones, post online lectures, create interest groups, access online libraries, post class notes, make announcements, schedule events, brainstorm, share files, tag books and also get assistance with homework” using Facebook, Zoom, YouTube and Twitter.

In the South African context, Harerimana and Mtshali (2018) shared the same view as Talaue *et al.* (2018) above, believing that Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and other social media have the potential to support learning activities in South Africa through community networking services including wall posting of research publications, students chatting, content sharing and tagging.

Muriithi, Horner and Pemberton (2016) examined students’ motives for utilising social networking in Kenya. The findings revealed that Facebook was the most used social network for academic purposes as indicated by 46.1% of respondents, followed by Twitter (15.5%), Blogs (9.7%), Skype (8.7%), Google+ (8.0%) and LinkedIn (2.3%).

The study by Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2015) of Ghanaian students had findings similar to those reported above. Findings showed that 66.4% of the respondents identified Facebook as the most used social media for academic purposes, followed by WhatsApp (19.9%), Twitter (6.2%), Skype (3.3%), YouTube (2.6%) and ResearchGate (1.3%). The amount of time spent on social media was, however, lower and varied. In this regard, a majority of the respondents (66.3%) stated that they made use of the social media sites between 30 minutes to one hour per day, 33.2% between two and three hours and a very small minority (1.5%) between four and five hours.

Academic activities that social media used for

Students regardless of their mode of education (whether part-time or full-time) need to engage in academic activities before completing the requirements for the award of either a diploma or degree. The academic activities engaged in by postgraduate library and information studies students are not entirely different from students in other disciplines. Numerous activities that students engage in have been highlighted in the literature. These include classwork that is theory-based or practically oriented, reading, seminars, examination preparation and assignments completion among others (Chawinga, 2017).

In line with what was reflected in the literature the academic activities that social media were being used for and which were considered as most applicable to the postgraduate students in this study (and used in the research instrument) were: “Learning”, Personal research/development”, “Assignments”, “Exam preparation”, “Group discussions”, “Continuous assessment preparation” and “Personal growth”. An “Other” category was also provided.

Manan, Alias and Pandian (2012) conducted a study on the “possibility of blending traditional face-to-face courses with online instruction using Facebook.” Third-year undergraduate students were used as the population of the study and Facebook used as a discussion platform for the group. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents agreed that Facebook was a good learning tool for personal growth and development.

Gachago and Ivala (2012) examined social media sites such as Zoom and Skype which were used for academic lectures and meetings by students and provided a means of discussing course materials. According to the authors, Zoom and Skype provided students with access to resources, ease of access to information when needed, creativity in learning and made learning more engaging. The sites also gave students the opportunity to use them for examination preparation and group discussions.

Murire and Cilliers (2017) highlighted the academic activities carried out on Google+ and LinkedIn by university students in the Eastern Cape Province. These included research work, journal and book searching, research publication, workshops and conferences. The activities illustrated how extracurricular activities also contributed to the academic learning and advancement of students. Murire and Cilliers (2017) found that both Google+ and LinkedIn

provided an environment where students discussed and shared different types of books, and the fun of interaction and discussion of the content of the information contained in the books built up the academic competence of students.

Sánchez, Cortijo and Javed (2014) pointed out that WhatsApp and Facebook enable students to enter new types of collaborative learning according to their shared interests and for their personal growth and educational success. In South Africa, Mbodila, Ndebele and Muhandji (2014) revealed that some academics have welcomed the ability of social media services to afford teachers a forum for learning and positive networking with students. Chipps, Pimmer, Brysiewicz, Walters, Linxen, Ndebele and Gröhbiel (2015) listed the academic activities of students influenced by YouTube and Instagram as listening to educational materials, downloading, and the sending and receiving of educational pictures and videos. The various academic activities reviewed showed that students' academic success and development could be enhanced through social media.

Häkkinen, Järvelä, Mäkitalo-Siegl, Ahonen, Näykki and Valtonen (2017) identified, among others, informal and formal assessment, assignments, examination preparation, group discussions, continuous assessment preparation, presentation and role-play as academic activities that students are supposed to participate in when using social media such as blogs, ResearchGate, LinkedIn, Twitter, Zoom, Facebook and WhatsApp. These academic activities revealed that students are not expected to be passive learners but rather actively involved. The authors argued that doing so would boost their self-esteem, inter-personal relations and public speaking abilities. Thus, through social media, students can effectively take active roles in these activities. In a similar vein, Onyancha (2015) revealed that South African universities were rapidly adopting social media for use in students' oral presentations, learning activities, class participation, group discussions and for meeting their research needs.

Sobaih, Moustafa, Ghandforoush and Khan (2016) investigated whether social media such as Zoom, Facebook, blogs, Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube should be used for academic purposes in higher education in developing countries. The study outlined academic activities that are important for students such as examination preparation and the improvement of lecture notes. Findings revealed a need for students to use social media as they would be able to develop their personality and build their competence in various ways during their academic studies and doing so would assist them to prepare for the future. Junco (2014) revealed that

students strategically plan academic activities such as assignments, professional examinations, learning, research and assessments through social media.

Finally, Boholano (2017) revealed that Zoom, Facebook, YouTube, ResearchGate, blogs, LinkedIn and Twitter are quick and easy to use for listening, downloading, reviewing, updating and editing learning material and that this could be done anywhere and at any time. Also, those sites allow for options to select learning materials from a large number of courses offered online and which the student needs for learning, examination preparation, assignments and personal growth/development (Boholano, 2017). This means that social media help to increase satisfaction and reduce stress among students. They allow each student (slow or quick) to study at his or her own pace (self-pacing). Furthermore, it is easy to join online discussions at any time or visit classmates and instructors remotely in chat rooms. Social media can provide a stronger understanding and increased retention of subjects studied due to their utilisation of various forms of e-learning, for example, multimedia, quizzes and interaction (Akram and Kumar, 2017).

Theoretical framework

Given the argument put forward by Georgescu and Popescul (2015) on the use of social media that “virtual proximity can become a substitute for physical remoteness or distance in case of normal communications or meetings”, this study, to achieve its aim and objectives, was rooted in communication theory as a new paradigm of collaboration and communication. The foundation of communication theory is linked to the development of information theory (the theory that studies the quantification, storage and communication of information) proposed by Claude Shannon in 1948. According to Dainton and Zelley (2019), Shannon focused on how best to code the information that a sender wants to transmit and to reproduce it either exactly or approximately for a receiver who may be there physically, or at a distance in case of physical remoteness, to pass the message or information across. This helps to promote digital information and digital literacy (including, as mentioned previously, network literacy, media literacy, computer literacy and visual literacy, among others).

According to the communication theory, knowledge is formed through socialisation and communication and barriers to physical proximity can be diminished through virtual proximity (Schwarz, 2012). This means that interpersonal and intrapersonal communication can be promoted through the message medium (such as social media) and the information gap in

academic learning can be eradicated. According to Craig and Muller (2007), the communication theory captures the “process of expression, interaction, and influence, in which the behaviour of humans or other complex organisms expresses psychological mechanisms, states, and traits and, through interaction with the similar expressions of other individuals, produces a range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural effects.”

In line with this theory, Leonardi (2014) revealed that social media have a specific application that provides various ways to communicate visually, and that social media are a form of knowledge sharing and innovation, particularly in the educational sector. The theory, therefore, relates to this study as it links to how social media can be employed to communicate in an academic context during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic currently being experienced. It corroborates the literature review, and that social media provide an opportunity for discussing and sharing course-related topics and for fostering collaborative connections across content areas. Social media also provide a remedy to the problem of isolation or distance in learning.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive quantitative research design, using the survey method and a semi-structured questionnaire to collect data. The population of the study consisted of all postgraduate students in the Information Studies Programme on the Pietermaritzburg Campus.

Table 1 below provides further detail concerning the population. There are five programmes, and the total number of students registered in 2020 numbered 80. (The PhD and Research Masters students have been combined as the researcher was only able to obtain a combined total for the two programmes.)

Table 1: Study population

Information Studies Programme	
Programme	Number of Students
Coursework Masters	7
Honours	15
PGDIS	33
Subtotal	55
PhD and Research Masters	25
Total	80

Source: Figures supplied by the School of Social Sciences, Pietermaritzburg campus, UKZN

Table 2: Response rate across programmes

Information Studies			
Programme	Number of students	Response	%
Coursework Masters students	7	7	100
Honours students	15	14	93
PGDIS students	33	30	91
Total	55	51	93%

Findings and discussion of results

The findings and discussions are presented in terms of each of the questions posed in the questionnaire.

Questions 2 and 3: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Table 3 presents the results of questions 2 and 3 of the questionnaire that determined the sex and age of the respondents. The results indicate that there were 33 (65%) female respondents and 18 (35%) male respondents across the three programmes. The preponderance of females indicates that more females than males tend to enter into library and information work, and the registration numbers confirm this. With respect to age, the table reveals that the highest number of respondents were between the age of 26-30 (33%) years followed by those between 31-35 (29%). Five (10%) respondents were 25 years of age or below, while the remaining respondents, 14 (28%), were 36 years and older. The respondents could thus, in general, be described as “mature” in keeping with the postgraduate nature of their studies. It is probable that the honours and masters students, in particular, were needing to improve on their existing qualifications.

Table 3: Demographic characteristics of respondents n=51

Variables	Responses	
	Freq	%

Sex	Male	33	65
	Female	18	35
Total		51	100%
Age	18-20	1	2
	21-25	4	8
	26-30	17	33
	31-35	15	29
	36-40	7	14
	>40	7	14
	Total	51	100%

The findings relating to the programmes, sex and age of the respondents are depicted graphically in Figures 1 to 3 below.

Note #3: While it is acknowledged that the use of figures (pie and bar charts) duplicates the findings presented in the table/s, their use assists in depicting the findings in an easily understood graphic manner with a simple “eyeball” inspection.

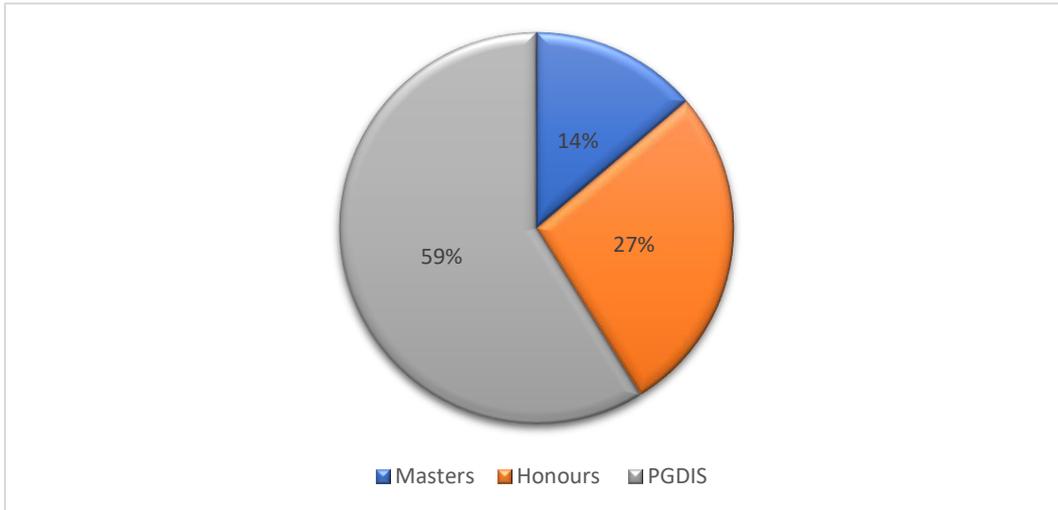


Figure 1: Programme of respondents n=51

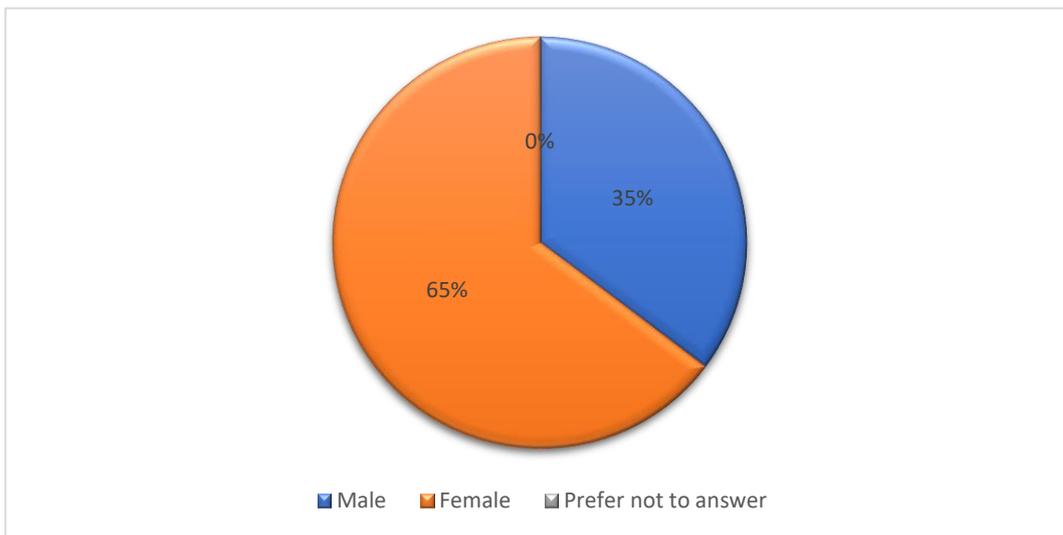


Figure 2: Gender of respondents n=51

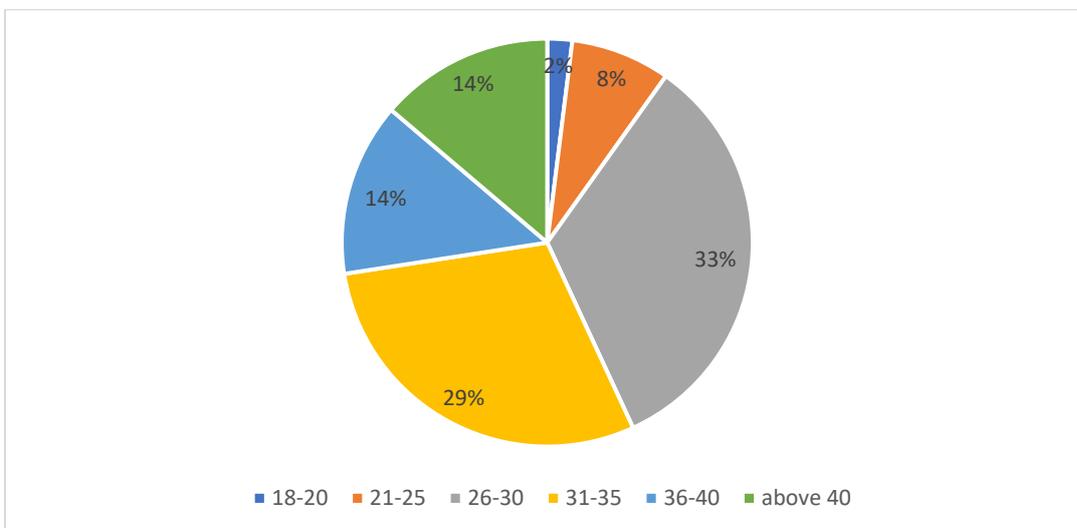


Figure 3: Age of respondents n=51

Question 4: Use of social media for academic purposes

Question 4 was a filter question to separate students who use social media for academic purposes from those who do not. Figure 4 presents the findings. The vast majority of respondents, 48 (94%), indicated that they used social media for academic purposes while three (6%) students did not. The response from the vast majority supports the new paradigm of collaboration and communication theory through which students are willing to learn visually and acquire knowledge and innovations. Findings in the literature such as Tess (2013) and Mingle and Adams (2015) revealed that social media are ever more visible, and students are increasingly making use of them in higher education settings for academic purposes.

A follow-up question asked those who do not use social media for academic purposes to give reason/s why not. The reasons for not using social media provided by the three students were a lack of authenticity mentioned by two of the respondents, while the third referred to the lack of institutional support in training the students on the use of social media. Selwyn (2012) and Gikas and Grant (2013) highlighted a similar challenge: the lack of training for students in their use of social media for their studies in higher education.

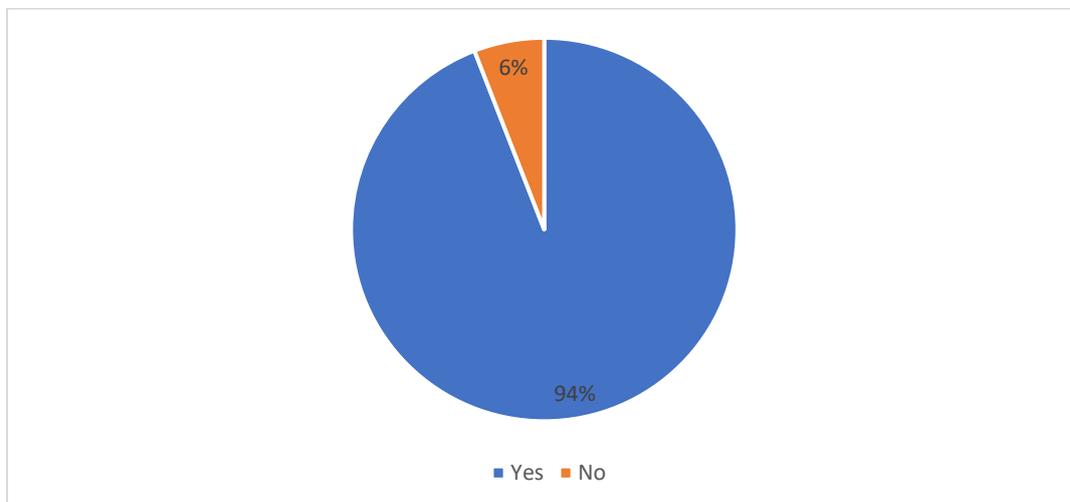


Figure 4: Use of social media for academic purposes n=51

Question 5: social media used for academic purposes

Question 5 determined what social media the respondents used for academic purposes, and the findings are presented in Table 5 and Figure 6. The three most used social media for academic purposes were WhatsApp mentioned by 40 (83%) respondents, Zoom 38 (79%) and YouTube

32 (67%) respondents. The high usage of WhatsApp by the respondents could be attributed to the fact it consumes less data and thus is among the most available and affordable social media to the students (Delam and Eidi, 2020). The findings regarding WhatsApp are corroborated by those of Habes, Alghizzawi, Khalaf, Salloum and Ghani (2018), whose study found that WhatsApp was the most used social network by students. A similar finding was presented by Chaputula, Abdullah and Mwale (2020) on the use of WhatsApp as a platform for providing library services. The study revealed that WhatsApp has successfully been used to provide several user and reference services to both students and staff. As noted above, Zoom was ranked the second most used social media after WhatsApp by the postgraduate information studies students participating in the study, and this was followed by YouTube. It took the COVID-19 pandemic for people to realise how useful Zoom is for conferences and meetings and, in the light of this study, distance education. The findings are also in agreement with Fasae (2020), who revealed that Zoom, WhatsApp and YouTube are famous among the students in terms of their use for academic purposes. The least used social media by respondents were Pinterest with 5 (10%) respondents, Instagram 7 (15%) and Twitter and Blogs with 12 (25%) respondents. This finding is similar to that of Watkins and Lee (2016) who listed Instagram and Twitter as the least popular social media that students used for learning.

Other social media used for academic purposes were Telegram mentioned by 5 (10%) respondents and Quora by 3 (6%) respondents. The findings suggest that to remedy the problem of isolation in learning as revealed by Lam (2015) while arguing in favour of communication theory), students connect to several social media platforms for effective communication among themselves. This allows them to develop higher-level thinking skills and increases their confidence and self-esteem with regard to the various courses they are studying for.

Note #4: As shown in Table 4, there was a category of students who did not indicate whether they used or did not use the various types of social media. They have been captured as a “No response”. Their non-response could be interpreted as not using a specific social media and thus could be combined with the “Do not use” responses. However, these have not been combined in the table, and the “No response” category has remained. It is the researcher’s opinion that the figures reflected in Table 4 and Figure 5 concerning social media used for academic purposes are valid as social media usage was the thrust of the question.

Table 4: Social media used for academic purposes n=48

Social media	Use	%	Do not use	%	No response	%
Facebook	15	31	13	27	20	42
Instagram	7	15	16	33	25	52
LinkedIn	23	48	7	15	18	36
Zoom	38	79	3	6	7	15
Twitter	12	25	14	29	22	46
Skype	17	35	11	23	20	42
YouTube	32	67	5	10	11	23
WhatsApp	40	83	3	6	5	10
Google+	26	54	8	17	14	29
Blogs	12	25	12	25	24	50
ResearchGate	30	63	5	10	13	27
Pinterest	5	10	22	46	21	44
MS Teams	17	35	16	33	15	31
Other	Telegram 5 (10%) and Quora 3 (6%)					

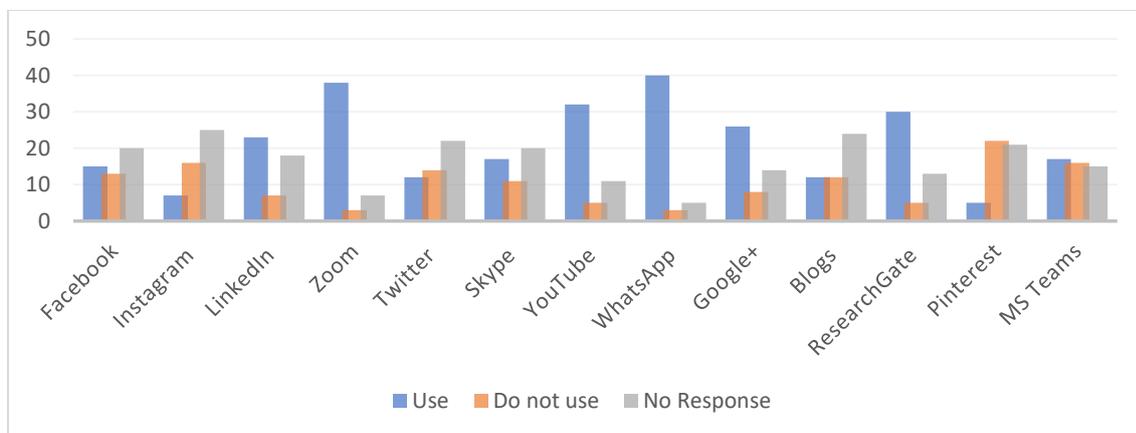


Figure 5: Social media used for academic purposes n=48

Question 6: Academic activities that social media used for

The academic activities that students indicated they use social media for are presented in Table 5 and Figure 6. Social media were used for all the academic activities but the frequency of the usage varied. As can be seen, except for two students, all 46 (96%) respondents indicated that they always used social media for “Learning”. This was followed by 42 (88%) respondents

who revealed that they always use social media for their “Personal research/development”. These findings concur with those of Onyancha (2015) who investigated social media usage for academic purposes in South Africa and Mabweazara and Zinn (2016) who focused on the use of social media tools, in this instance, by library staff at two Southern African universities. Both studies revealed that social media are used for learning and personal research/development.

Table 5 Academic activities that social media used for n=48

Academic activities	Always	%	Sometimes	%	Never	%	No Response	%
Learning	46		1		1		0	0
Personal research/development	42		5		1		0	0
Assignments	39		7		2		0	0
Exam preparation	24		16		3		5	10
Group discussions	32		5		2		9	19
Continuous assessment preparation	28		9		0		11	23
Personal growth	39		3		2		4	8
Other	N/A							

It is worth noting that no respondents skipped the top three activities that students use social media for. Hence, all the respondents indicated their choices in this regard. The academic activities for which social media were least “always used” were “Exam preparation” as mentioned by 24 (50%) respondents and “Continuous assessment preparation” mentioned by 28 (58%) respondents. It could be surmised that social media usage decreases during exam preparation given that the focus of students would be on the forthcoming examinations. This is in agreement with the study by Maikamba (2019) whose findings revealed that majority of the respondents agreed that there is low usage of social media during examination.

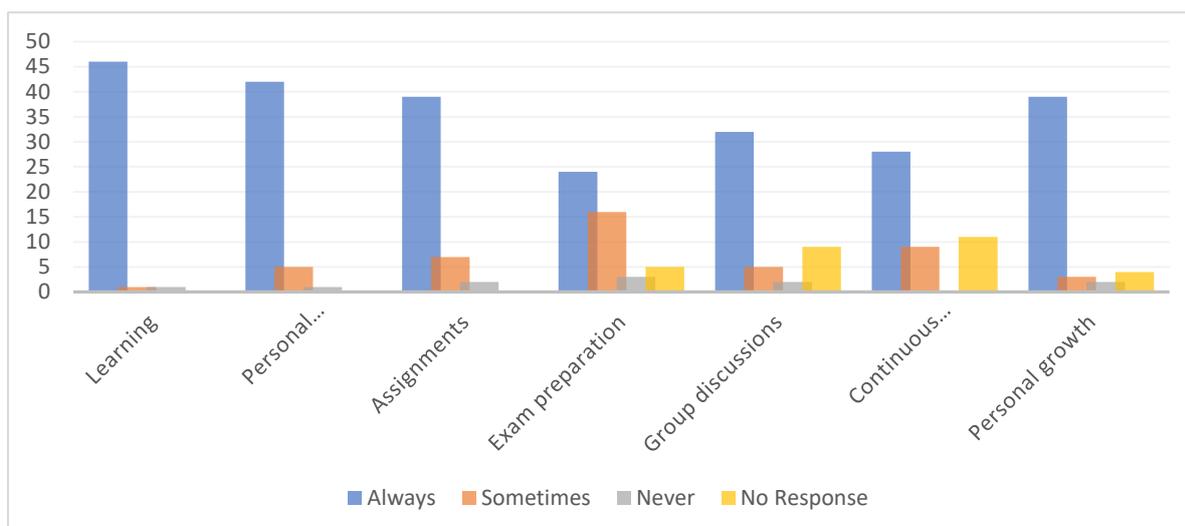


Figure 6: Academic activities that social media used for n=48

Question 7: Frequency of social media use for academic purposes

Table 6 and Figure 7 present the results pertaining to the frequency of social media use for academic purposes by postgraduate students. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the findings above, WhatsApp was the social media most used for academic purposes on a daily basis – mentioned by 34 (71%) of respondents. This may be attributed to the fact that WhatsApp is the most available social media worldwide (Anderson, 2016). The reality of this finding can be seen from the current number of WhatsApp users and the volume of Newsfeed (or group platforms) generated each day, with a current reach of more than 180 countries and two billion people (Srivastava and Singh, 2020). The finding agrees with that of Habes *et al.* (2018) who affirmed that WhatsApp and Facebook are the most available and frequently used social networks by students. Google+ mentioned by 20 (42%) respondents, YouTube 19 (40%) and Facebook 17 (35%) respondents followed WhatsApp by some distance in terms of daily usage. Therefore, WhatsApp, Facebook, Google+ and YouTube were the most used social media on a daily basis. The social media least used daily was Pinterest mentioned by 1 (2%) respondent and Skype by 3 (6%) respondents. As noted in Table 5 above, Pinterest was one of the least used social media (10%) by respondents, so this result is not surprising while Skype was used by just over a third (35%) of respondents.

When looking at overall usage frequency (from daily to less than once a month) in Table 6, WhatsApp was still the most frequently used social media with 43 (90%) respondents reporting

using it at some stage. Interestingly, Zoom was the next most used social media with 39 (81%) respondents using it. The popularity of Zoom during the pandemic has already been pointed to and according to Nash (2020), the “*Report on digital literacy in academic meetings during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown*” revealed that Zoom was the preferred platform for meetings, teaching and learning and was likely to be so until social distancing and other restrictions associated with COVID-19 end. This also coincides with the communication theory chosen for this study and the view of Georgescu and Popescul (2015) that the use of social media enables virtual proximity to be a substitute for physical remoteness or distance in cases of normal communication, meetings and learning. The least frequently used social media, again unsurprisingly, was Pinterest with less than half, 20 (42%) of the respondents using it on a daily, weekly, monthly or less basis. Telegram was listed under “Other” by one respondent who used it on a weekly basis.

Note #5: Once again the “No response” category with the various social media was quite high. There are also discrepancies concerning usage of the social media with the findings reflected in Table 5. The researcher is not sure of the reason for this, but it could be attributed to the respondents not applying their minds consistently while completing the questionnaires.

Table 6: Frequency of use of social media for academic purposes n=48

Social media	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than once a month	Never	No response	Overall usage
Facebook	17 (35%)	5 (10%)	5 (10%)	0	8 (17%)	13 (27%)	27 (56%)
Instagram	8 (17%)	9 (19%)	6 (13%)	1 (2%)	10 (21%)	14 (29%)	24 (50%)
LinkedIn	7 (15%)	10 (21%)	8 (17%)	4 (8%)	5 (10%)	14 (29%)	29 (60%)
Zoom	10 (21%)	12 (25%)	14 (29%)	3 (6%)	2 (4%)	7 (15%)	39 (81%)
Twitter	7 (15%)	10 (21)	4 (8%)	3 (6%)	8 (17%)	16 (33%)	24 (50%)
Skype	3 (6%)	6 (13%)	6 (13%)	7 (15%)	9 (19%)	17 (35%)	22 (46%)
YouTube	19 (40%)	12 (50%)	4 (8%)	1 (2%)	3 (6%)	9 (19%)	36 (75%)
WhatsApp	34 (71%)	6 (13%)	3 (6%)	0	1 (2%)	4 (8%)	43 (90%)
Google+	20 (42%)	7 (15%)	6 (13%)	1 (2%)	6 (13%)	8 (17%)	34 (71%)
Blogs	6 (13%)	4 (8%)	12 (25%)	1 (2%)	10 (21%)	15 (31%)	23 (48%)
ResearchGate	12 (25%)	11 (23%)	10 (21%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	11 (23%)	35 (73%)
Pinterest	1 (2%)	3 (6%)	13 (27%)	3 (6%)	11 (23%)	17 (35%)	20 (42%)

MS Teams	4 (8%)	7 (15%)	10 (21%)	4 (8%)	8 (17%)	15 (31%)	25 (52%)
Other	Telegram – weekly 1 (2%)						

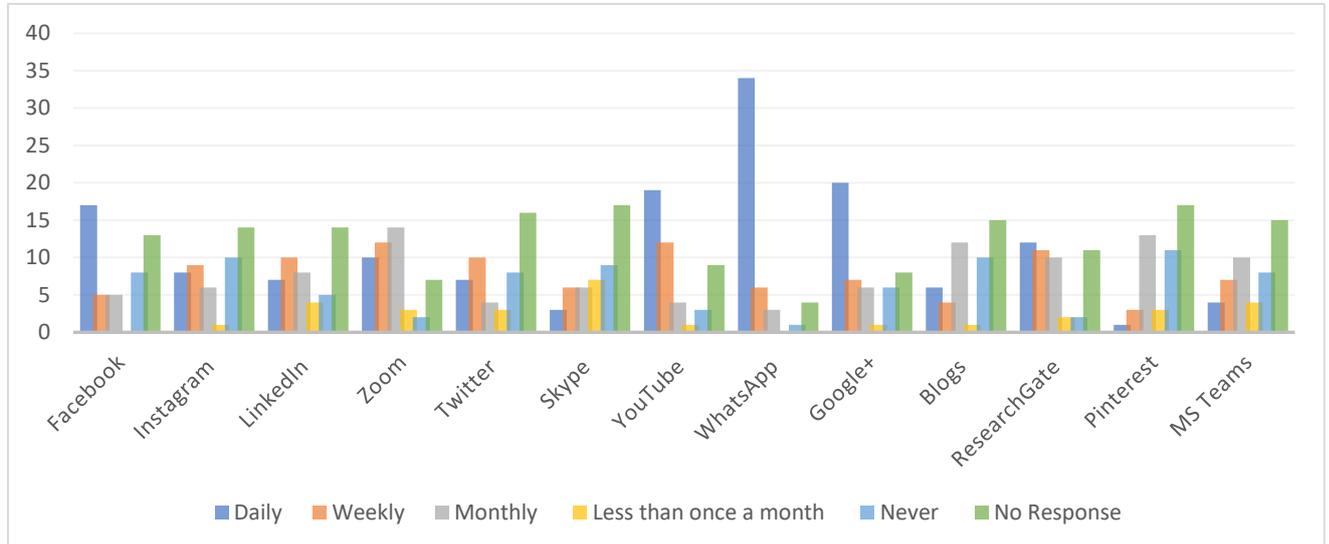


Figure 7: Frequency of use of social media for academic purposes n=48

Conclusions

Social media have created a platform of communication that has changed the mode of social interaction significantly. The opportunity to engage in instant messaging, photo sharing, video sharing and document transfer has allowed millions of users to utilise this platform for various purposes. Social media can provide platforms where students can share ideas, post documents, provide links to educative websites and interact with their lecturers to enhance their learning. Given this and in light of the main findings listed above, the following specific conclusions can be made:

- Respondents were generally aware of the various social media available to them.
- The vast majority of respondents were making use of one or more of the social media for academic purposes.
- The most popular social media used by respondents for academic purposes were WhatsApp, Zoom and YouTube while the least were Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter and Blogs. As noted, it could be argued that the popularity of WhatsApp could be attributed, amongst other reasons, to its being data “friendly”.
- The social media most frequently used by respondents, that is, on a daily basis were WhatsApp, Google+, YouTube and Facebook, findings which underscore the popularity of WhatsApp.

- The two academic activities for which social media were most used by the vast majority of the respondents were “Learning” and “Personal research/development”.
- The most used method or “tool” to access social media for academic purposes by a significant majority of the respondents was the smartphone. This was arguably due to its relative affordability (as opposed to laptop computers and PCs).
- The vast majority of respondents accessed social media for academic purposes from the comfort of their homes. It could also be argued that this was due to students not being allowed on campus in terms of COVID-19 restrictions.

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