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Awareness, accessibility and challenges of social media as experienced by postgraduate information studies students, University of KwaZulu-Natal during the COVID-19 pandemics lockdown

By

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Abstract

Students who receive literacy training tied to real-life assignments show greater improvement in literacy scores. The significance of this study revolves around the prominent role accorded social media in academic community for research, teaching and learning. Despite the benefits associated with the use of social media for academic purposes, it is observed that many students, teachers/lecturers have not been fully exploring these advantages to improve the academic performance. The study investigated the awareness, access and social media challenges encountered by postgraduate students of Information Studies, UKZN during the lockdown caused by COVID-19 pandemics. The study employed a quantitative research design in 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%. The findings revealed (Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, Twitter and WhatsApp) as major (100%) types of social media available for post graduate students for their academic purpose. The findings further revealed smartphone as a major tool for accessing social media by the respondents (96%), and the major challenges restraining students from effectively utilising social media for academic activities. The study underscores the importance of social media in academic environment and offers some recommendations that could lead to more informed and effective use of social media for academic purposes.

Keywords: Awareness, Access, Social media, COVID-19 Pandemics, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

1. Introduction

The emergence of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), that originated from Wuhan, China and widely spread all over the world, and killing hundreds on daily basis shook the humankind as never experienced. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new normal to all facets of life. Higher institution where research, teaching and learning take place is not an exception. There is clarion call to adopt technologies (social media) to carry out academic activities, so as to give room for physical and social distancing. This study is about awareness, access and challenges of social media encountered by postgraduate students of Information Studies, UKZN during the COVID-19 pandemics. Social media has brought a new paradigm of collaboration and communication. With social media, 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.

The emergence of social media has generated a great deal of interest from researchers, and this study can also be viewed as part of this development. Gikas and Grant (2013) pointed out that social media are both Internet and mobile-based tools that enable people to discuss and share information. Therefore, the importance of the numerous social media platforms in improving the socio-cultural, economic, political, educational and technological development of nations and their citizenry cannot be overemphasised. In academia, as alluded to above, social media are being used to advance scholarship by institutions of higher learning globally. By their nature, social media have the capability of educating, informing and entertaining their audience (Gleason and Von Gillern, 2018).

The difficulty of determining what constitutes social media has been pointed out by Obar and Wildman (2015). For example, Obar and Wildman 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). 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.” Furthermore, 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).

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, the 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 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 or access the library services and resources.

Apparently, from the researchers’ observation and participation, academic activities (which include; assignments, classwork and the sharing of educational materials) carried out by the students of UKZN, Department of Information Studies, Pietermaritzburg campus are increasingly being conducted with information in digital format, and students are formulating

coursework, making study notes and analysing data for their research projects, using the information in such a format. One could rightly conclude that students' digital literacy improvement may have been a drive to social media utilisation. With argument that use of social media cause a lot of distractions, that could lead to decrease in academic success (Hettiarachchi, 2014), it was observed that while students are using social media to carry out various functions (such as; socialise, play games, share news, share pictures and videos, etc.), they were also increasingly using social media for more academic purposes. It was this latter use of social media that prompted the researchers' interest and provided the context in which the study needs to be comprehended.

Statement of problem

Ever since late 2019 that the COVID-19 has been ravaging humankind, social and physical distancing has been encouraged in all facets of human endeavours. The adoption of social media to carry out various responsibilities has been widely encouraged. Despite the benefits that can be derived from the use of social media for academic purposes, as alluded to in the literature, the challenges of social media include issues (among others) such as access, delivery, originality and copyright, which have led to information access constraints (Park, 2010; Al-Rahmi and Othman, 2013), as academic materials are not freely accessible. In addition, students and teachers/lecturers are sometimes not up to date in terms of using social media for teaching and learning and are not familiar with integrating and taking advantage of social media application (APP) software in their teaching and learning (Abdul Wahid and Sajiharan, 2019). This will negatively affect their ability to take full advantage of using and accessing social media for academic purposes. There are also financial implications such as the cost of data and cost of buying social media enabled phones (smartphones), tablets and laptops (Chawinga, 2017; Pindayi, 2017). If not resolved, all these problems are capable of contributing to poor academic performance among the students and reducing their success rate. The gap this study seeks to address.

Significance and importance of the study

The significance of this study comes from the topic, which is centred on the importance of social media in academic activities, especially at this period that social and physical distancing is being emphasised as a result of COVID—19 pandemics that is ravaging the human existence. This virus, according to World Health Organization (WHO), spreads mainly between people

who are in close contact with each other, for example at a conversational distance. In this research, its topic is investigated in term of awareness, accessibility and challenges of social media as experienced by postgraduate information studies students of University of KwaZulu-Natal during the lockdown. The study inquired various types of social media available, how they are being accessed for academic purposes and the challenges experienced when using social media for academic purposes during the lockdown.

Objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to find out, in term of awareness, accessibility and challenges of social media, the experience of postgraduate information studies students of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa during the lockdown occasioned by COVID-19 pandemics.

Research questions

Based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions were asked:

- What are various types of social media available to postgraduate students of Information Studies, UKZN?
- Where do students access social media for academic purposes?
- What are the challenges experienced by students when using social media for academic purposes?

Literature review

In the context of this study, a review of related literature to social media and their significance; how and where students access social media for academic purposes and challenges experienced by students when using social media for academic purposes is conducted.

Social media and their significance

While social media have their disadvantages such as the decrease in face-to-face communication, the conveying of inauthentic expression of feelings and being a cause of distractions (Drahošová and Balco, 2017), their advantages are significant and it is these advantages that are focused on below. For example, Bryer and Zavatarro (2011) stated that social media are important technologies that facilitate collaboration and social interaction and enable discussion among stakeholders worldwide. Skoric, Zhu, Goh and Pang (2016) postulated that social media's capacity to boost participation because of their connectedness,

conversational nature, openness, and the appeal of their audio-visual characteristics underscore the significance and benefits associated with their use.

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. As alluded to by various scholars (Al-Bahrani, Patel and Sheridan, 2015; Collins & Halverson, 2018; Gikas & Grant, 2013; Gleason & Von Gillern, 2018; Goldstuck, 2012; Hyde-Clarke, 2014; Kircaburun, Alhabash, Tosuntaş & Griffiths, 2020; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2016; Omaggio, Baker & Conway, 2018; Rutherford, 2010) across the globe, the use of the Internet, and social media networks in particular, are becoming progressively more relevant for 21st-century politics and education. 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. These have further expanded discussion online where people create content, share, bookmark, use social networking sites to post a resume and search for potential employers in order to find a job.

Finally, Murire and Cilliers (2017) summarised the important benefits of using social media, which include: “increasing social interaction; providing access to information sources; encouraging creativity among individuals and groups; creating a sense of belonging among users; providing more choices to promote engagement among individuals and groups; reducing barriers to group interaction and communications; and increasing the technological competency levels of users.”

How and where students access social media for academic purposes

In ascertaining how and where students in higher learning access social media for academic purposes, Karlson, Iqbal, Meyers, Ramos, Lee and Tang (2010) in their study revealed that mobile devices such as smartphones, iPads, tablets and Kindles have enabled social networking to take place across numerous platforms. The social networking sites are normally accessed from homes and institutional libraries by the students in higher learning.

In Nigeria, Shehu and Shehu (2014) conducted a study among Ahmadu Bello University students, and found out that 52% of respondents accessed social networking sites via their cell phones, while 33% of the respondents accessed them through their laptop computers. Those

students that could not afford personal cell phones or laptops used cyber cafés and they constituted 10% of the respondents.

Similarly, Heinrichs, Lim and Lim (2011) carried out a study on “the influence of social networking sites and user access methods on social media evaluation”. Findings revealed that individuals used desktop computers and mobile devices (such as notebooks) as methods to access the social networking sites. This was done from the comfort of their homes, university library or university LAN mainly using mobile devices and desktop computers. These findings are similar to that of Sobaih *et al.* (2016) and Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018) who in their studies found that laptops and smartphones were the most used methods for accessing social media for academic purposes by students and this was largely done from their homes.

In South Africa, a study was conducted by De Kock and Fitcher (2016) to investigate students’ motives for utilising social media network sites within higher education institutions. The study revealed that the highest number of respondents (46%) used social media through their mobile phones, 23% of the respondents used laptops only, while 30% of the respondents used both mobile phones and laptops. Other studies in South Africa such as those of Ng’ambi, Brown, Bozalek, Gachago and Wood (2016), Murire and Cilliers (2017) and Harerimana and Mtshali (2018) also found that students mainly accessed social media for academic purposes through their mobile phones and laptops.

Finally, Lembani, Gunter, Breines and Dalu (2020) compared the digital divide and access points between rural and urban distance education students in South Africa. It was revealed that “UNISA students seemed to create a general hierarchical location of access to a computer (social media) as Home access (31%), followed by Work access (21%), UNISA LAN centres (15%) and Public access such as Internet cafés (4%) for students living in urban areas while non-urban dwellers were: Work access (19%), UNISA LAN centres (11%), Home access (11%) and Public access (19%)”. It is evident that where UNISA students live influences where they access social media,

Challenges experienced when using social media for academic purposes

Despite the enormous benefits derived from using social media, critics maintain that there are many challenges to using social media for academic purposes, particularly in developing

countries. For example, some educators and instructional designers maintain that social media technologies are not always a successful means for teaching and learning activities (Guy, 2012), as they accompanied with challenges such as; lack of trust in peer feedback, ownership issues regarding public and collaborative spaces, difficulty in adapting publicly available tools, difficulty in integration of social media technologies into the curriculum, problem of third-party Web-based innovations, lack of awareness, lack of access to computers, lack of a conducive environment, poor internet connectivity, bandwidth problems, technophobia, lack of maintenance culture, unreliable power supply and copyright issues (Hwang, Lai & Wang, 2015; Harper & Chicharo, 2014; Lester & Perini, 2010; Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Sanusi, Omowale & Kayode, 2014; Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018; Yin Lim, Agostinho, Harper, & Chicharo, 2014).

Jain (2014) identified the challenges that students at the University of Botswana faced in using social media. These were a lack of awareness, bandwidth problems, technophobia, a lack of maintenance culture, an unreliable power supply and copyright issues. Sanusi, Omowale and Kayode (2014) revealed that the constraints that students in Nigeria face in the use of the social media for education included a lack of basic amenities, lack of a conducive environment, lack of access to computers, the cost of Internet connectivity and a lack of enthusiasm on the part of instructors.

The study by Yin Lim, Agostinho, Harper and Chicharo (2014) on the engagement with social media technologies by students in Malaysia revealed that most of the respondents (81.48%) indicated that the main challenge they encountered in the use of social media for academic purposes was the blocking of some applications by their university. Other students (62.96%) expressed that they experienced slow Internet connection/low bandwidth, 44.44% identified privacy issues as constraints, 38.27% stated that all their activities were being monitored and 22.22% said their social media accounts were hacked.

Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018) investigated the factors affecting the use of social media among higher education students and academic librarians in South Africa. They found that lack of time, lack of access to the Internet, lack of interest in online groups, and the lack of the necessary skills required to use social media were the factors or constraints mentioned by students that limited their access to, and use of, social media for academic purposes. Students also mentioned the cost of social media enabled phones and other devices. It was noted that

some of the academic librarians did not have the necessary skills to engage students on social media – a finding which might well apply to some academic staff (lecturers) as well. Also noted by the librarians were the cost implications of using social media for academic purposes.

In Nigeria, Mohammed and Suleimon (2013) examined students' knowledge and utilisation of social media. Their study used a questionnaire as a method of data collection. When asked about the factors limiting their use of social media, the results showed that 14.89% of the respondents indicated that the cost of data was a constraint, 43.97% acknowledged that lack of time constituted a challenge, 14.18% stated that the poor Internet service provided was a constraint and 26.95% mentioned all three challenges/constraints.

Conclusion

Based on the gap in the research, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic which has posed serious threat to physical teaching and learning, the researchers explored the importance of social media in education (specifically, in research, teaching and learning) as being globally encouraged to adopt. According to Leonardi (2014), 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. As pointed out, social media also contribute to digital literacy as well as an information learning environment (Meyers, Erickson and Small, 2013). This view is supported by Lam (2015) who argued that the problem of isolation in learning could be remedied through social media and online learning, and especially with effective communication among students. Lam (2015) further revealed that social media allows students to develop higher-level thinking skills and increases their confidence and self-esteem in their various learning courses. As revealed in literature, 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 quantitative approach. A structured questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data. This type of research method is not simply amassing and tabulating facts but

includes proper analyses, interpretation, comparisons, identification of trends and relationships.

In terms of pretesting, the instrument (questionnaire) used in the study was distributed to 10 postgraduate students from disciplines other than information studies but within the social sciences. Based on the feedback received from the students participating in the pre-test, the instrument was adjusted. Some questions were reframed, and Pinterest and MS Teams were added to the lists of social media as suggested by the respondents. In addition, “No specific place/ ‘On the go’” was also suggested and added as one of the response options concerning where students access social media. The questionnaire that was finally administered for the study sample thus included the suggestions which emerged from the pre-test.

The questionnaire was made available via Google Forms – a Web-based application that allows one to generate and edit surveys online. Using this approach, the postgraduate information studies students who were targeted received a message (either via email or WhatsApp) with a link to the Web-based questionnaire, which was compatible with mobile devices. Included in the message was a request to complete the questionnaire and other information related to the study. The completed questionnaires were submitted online and subsequently downloaded by the researcher. This approach helped the study comply with UKZN’s online teaching and learning strategy arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data obtained through the research instrument were, in the main, arranged and analysed using quantitative analysis. Before analysing the raw data, each completed questionnaire via the web was downloaded and checked for missing data, ambiguity, omissions and errors. For instance, it was discovered that some respondents skipped answering some of the questions. It was for this reason that the charts which were automatically generated by Google Forms were not used. Rather, to reflect the no responses, the data from each of the questionnaires were input into an Excel spreadsheet, and new charts and tables reflecting the no responses were generated. Thus, the analysed data (the findings) were presented in the form of tables and charts and were expressed as frequency counts and percentages.

Findings

In a bid to investigate awareness, access and challenges of social media by postgraduate students of Information Studies, UKZN, various types of social media available to postgraduate students of Information Studies, UKZN, how and where do students access social media for academic purposes as well as the challenges experienced by students when using social media for academic purposes are presented and discussed.

Demographic characteristics of respondents

This section provides the demographic characteristics of respondents in the study which are gender and age. Table 1 presents the results. There were more male (65%) than female (35) postgraduate students of Information Studies, UKZN.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variables		Responses	
		Frequency	Percentage (%)
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

Note: n=51

Research question 1: *Awareness of social media available*

Table 2 and Figure 1 show that majority of students were aware of most of the listed social media. Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, Twitter and WhatsApp were the social media that all 51 (100%) respondents were aware of. The social media that students were least aware of were

MS Teams 24 (47%) followed by Pinterest 22 (43%) and ResearchGate with 11 (22%) respondents. Other social media not listed but mentioned by 18 (35%) respondents are; TikTok, Telegram, WeChat and Quora. As can be seen in Table 2, Telegram and Quora were the most-mentioned social media not listed. Also mentioned were Sci-Hub, SciFinder, Gmail and Outlook, none of which are social media *per se*.

Table 2: Awareness of social media available

Social media	Aware	Percentage (%)	Not aware	Percentage (%)
Facebook	51	100	0	0
Instagram	51	100	0	0
LinkedIn	49	96	2	4
Zoom	51	100	0	0
Twitter	51	100	0	0
Skype	48	94	3	6
YouTube	50	98	1	2
WhatsApp	51	100	0	0
Google+	48	94	3	6
Blogs	42	82	9	18
ResearchGate	40	78	11	22
Pinterest	29	57	22	43
MS Teams	27	53	24	47
Others	TikTok 2 (3%), Telegram 4 (8%), WeChat 3 (6%), Quora 4 (8%), Sci-Hub 1 (2%), SciFinder 2 (4%), Gmail 1 (2%) and Outlook 1(2%)			

Note: n=51

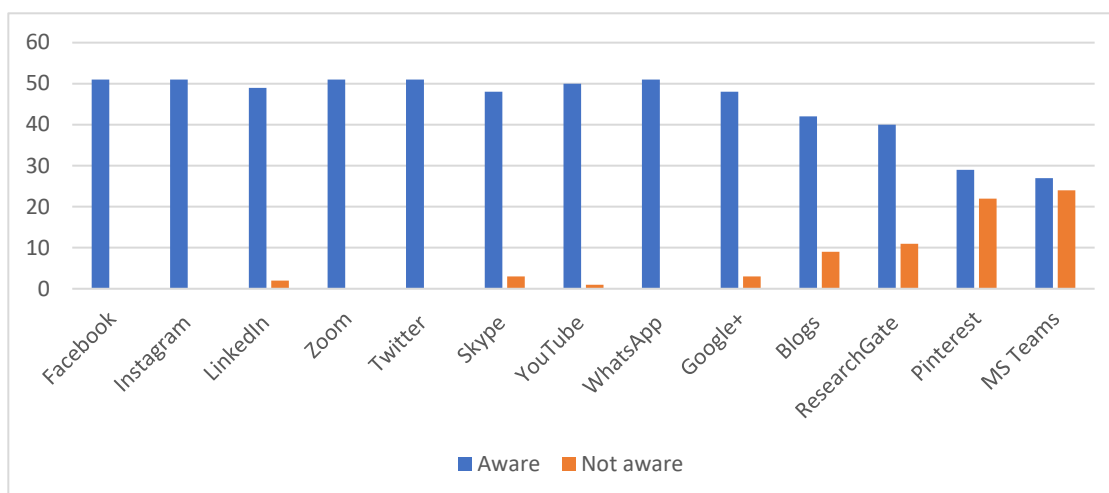


Figure1: Awareness of social media available n=41

Question 2: *How social media are accessed by students*

Table 3 and Figure 2 present the results on how social media are accessed by the students. The most used “tool” or method to access social media was the smartphone as mentioned by the vast majority, 46 (96%) of the respondents. Closely following the smartphone were the 42 (88%) respondents who used laptops to access social media. At the other extreme, the significantly less used tools or methods to access social media were tablets, as mentioned by a quarter (25%) of the respondents and personal computers mentioned by 19 (40%) respondents.

Table 3: How social media are accessed

Access method	Yes	%	No	%	No response	%
Smart phone	46	96	0	0	2	4
Laptop	42	88	2	4	4	8
Personal Computer (PC)	19	40	8	17	21	44
Tablet	12	25	14	29	22	46

Note: n=48

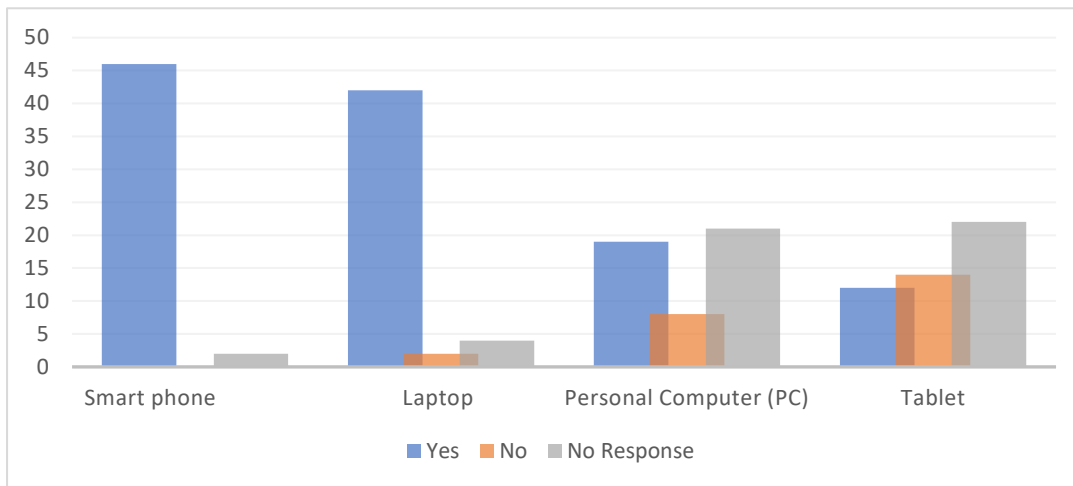


Figure 2: How social media are accessed n=48

Question 3: *Where social media are accessed*

Table 4 and Figure 3 reveal the findings relating to where the students access social media for academic purposes. Most respondents, 41 (85%), accessed social media for academic purposes from their homes. Access from home was followed by some distance by the university library and the university LAN mentioned by 21 (44%) and 19 (40%) respondents, respectively. Also interesting is that 23% of the students mentioned “No specific place/“On the go”” pointing to the fact that learning can take place anywhere and anytime – students do not need a “fixed” location to access the Internet for learning and studying purposes. The least used access point was an Internet café, with 4 (8%) respondents indicating this. A place not listed but mentioned under “Other” was the public library – mentioned by 5 (10%) respondents.

Table 4: Where social media accessed n=48

Access point	Yes	%	No	%	No Response	%
Home	41	85%	1	2%	6	13
University Library	21	44%	5	10%	22	46
University LAN	19	40%	3	6%	26	54
No specific place/"On the go"	11	23%	11	23%	26	54
Internet café	4	8%	15	31%	29	60

Other	Public library 5 (10%)
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Note: n=48

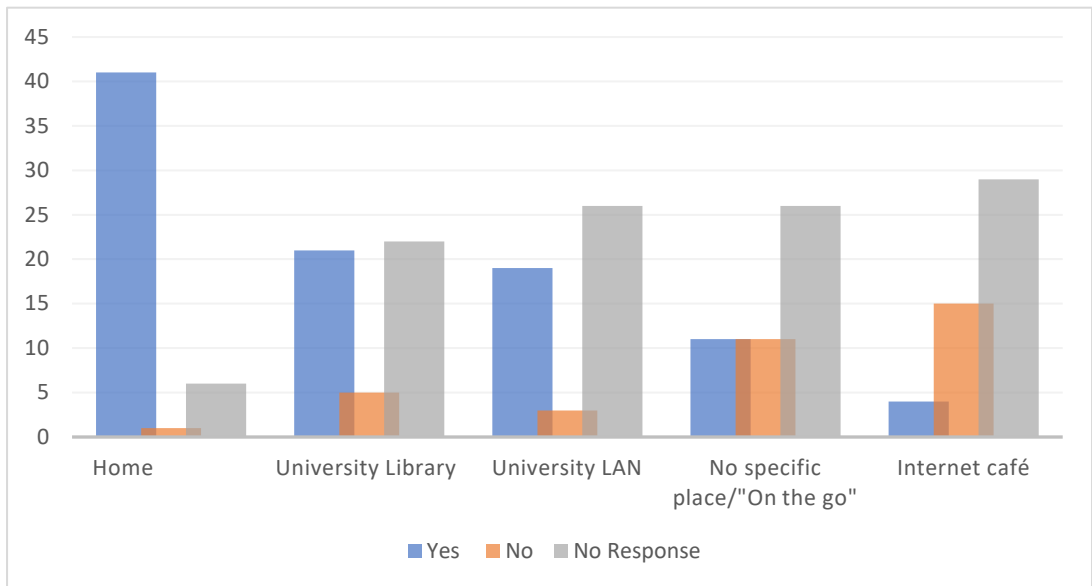


Figure 3: Where social media accessed n=48

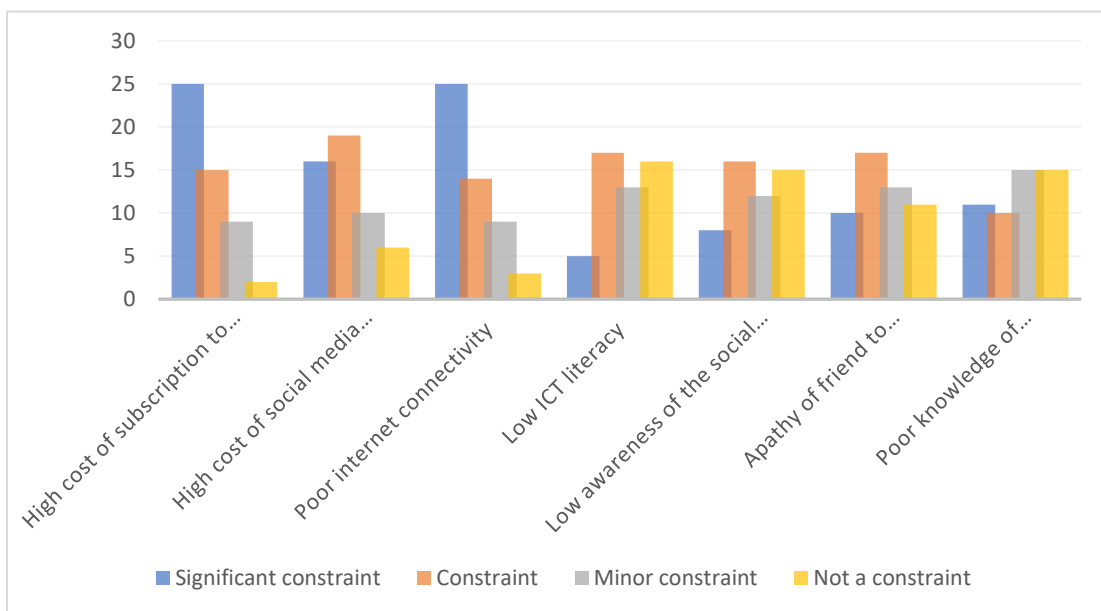
Question 4: *Extent to which challenges are constraints to access and use of social media for academic purposes*

Table 5 and Figure 4 present the results on the extent to which the challenges were identified as constraints to access and use of social media for academic purposes. The two challenges identified by just under half 25 (49%) of the respondents as a significant constraint were the “High cost of subscription to internet data bundles” on the one hand and “Poor internet connectivity” on the other. The third challenge identified as a significant constraint was also a financial one, namely, the “High cost of social media enabled phones (smartphones)” mentioned by 16 (31%) respondents. When adding the number of respondents who identified the three challenges as constraints (either a significant constraint or a constraint) the total percentage of respondents total well over 50% that is, 78%, 77% and 69% for the three challenges respectively. While not a significant constraint “Low ICT literacy” was nonetheless mentioned as an overall constraint by 35 (69%) of the respondents. A similar number 36 (71%) mentioned “Poor knowledge of social media application software and sites” as an overall constraint as well. The finding regarding apathy on the part of friends when it comes to using social media mentioned by 40 (78%) of respondents as an overall constraint.

Table 5: Extent to which challenges are constraints to the use of social media for academic purposes

Challenges	Significant constraint	Constraint	Minor constraint	Not a constraint
High cost of subscription to internet data bundles	25 (49.0%)	15 (29%)	9 (18%)	2 (4%)
High cost of social media enabled phones (smartphones)	16 (31%)	19 (37%)	10 (20%)	6 (12%)
Poor internet connectivity	25 (49%)	14 (28%)	9 (18%)	3 (5%)
Low ICT literacy	5 (10%)	17 (33%)	13 (26%)	16 (31%)
Low awareness of the social media for academic purposes	8 (16%)	16 (31%)	12 (24%)	15 (29%)
Apathy of friend to communicate academic issues	10 (20%)	17 (33%)	13 (26%)	11 (21%)
Poor knowledge of social media application software and sites	11 (22%)	10 (20%)	15 (29%)	15 (29%)
Other	N/A			

Note: n=51



Note: n=51

Figure 4: Extent to which challenges are constraints to the use and access of social media for academic purposes n=51

Discussion

Findings revealed that majority of students were aware of most of the listed social media. Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, Twitter and WhatsApp were the social media that all 51 (100%) respondents were aware of. The social media that students were least aware of were; MS Teams 24 (47%), followed by Pinterest 22 (43%) and ResearchGate with 11 (22%) respondents. Several factors might be responsible for the awareness (or not) of the various types of social media ranging from the type of communication tool or method used by the students to their level of exposure to information and communication technologies (ICTs). The latter, in particular, could play an important role and would include the extent to which their peers and family members are embracing social media (and which types). In terms of the former, not all phones and tablets, for example, are compatible with all social media. Still, the extent to which this influences students' awareness of them is debatable. Nonetheless, the findings agree with those of Gambo and Özad (2021), who reported that Facebook, Instagram, Zoom, Twitter and WhatsApp have a dominant presence among the majority of the students who participated in their study. As of 2020, Facebook had 1.69 billion users, WhatsApp had 2 billion, Instagram had 855 million, Zoom had 200 million daily participants, and Twitter had 330 million users – numbers pointing to their popularity worldwide. These numbers, no doubt, will also include postgraduate Information Studies students, UKZN.

Other social media not listed but mentioned by 18 (35%) respondents are; TikTok, Telegram, WeChat and Quora. As can be seen in Table 2, Telegram and Quora were the most-mentioned social media not listed. Also mentioned were Sci-Hub, SciFinder, Gmail and Outlook, none of which are social media *per se*. The first two provide access to research literature while the latter two are email programs, and they being mentioned does illustrate some confusion on the part of respondents concerning what social media comprise as well as the difficulty of defining social media as pointed in literature review (Chung, Han and Koo, 2015; Zanamwe, Rupere and Kufandirimbwa, 2013).

As revealed in the findings, the most used “tool” or method to access social media was the smartphone as mentioned by the vast majority, 46 (96%) of the respondents. One can assume that this was largely due to the prevalence of mobile phones with Internet capabilities (smartphones) as made available by different companies at what could be considered an “affordable” cost. This has allowed cash-strapped students to acquire, in the main, Android-based phones that can access various social media. This finding is consistent with that of Mbodila *et al.* (2014), who, in their study on the effect of social media on students’ engagement and collaboration at a South African university, found that most of the students accessed the social media through their mobile/cell phones. A similar finding was made by Shava and Chinyamurindi (2018) in their study of the determinants of social media usage by students in South Africa. Closely following the smartphone were the 42 (88%) respondents who used laptops to access social media. This finding is in line with Sobaih *et al.* (2016), who, in their study on the use of social media in higher education in developing countries, found that laptops and smartphones were the leading tools or methods for accessing social media for academic purposes. At the other extreme, the significantly less used tools or methods to access social media were tablets, as mentioned by a quarter (25%) of the respondents and personal computers mentioned by 19 (40%) respondents.

As regard where the students access social media for academic purposes, findings revealed that most respondents, 41 (85%), accessed social media for academic purposes from their homes. This is in line with Manca and Ranieri (2016), who stated that students prefer to sit in the comfort of their home to connect to online teaching and learning. It is also in line with communication theory, which states that “barriers to physical proximity can be diminished through virtual proximity”. Importantly, due to COVID-19, the UKZN campuses were closed for much of 2020, meaning that students had little option but to operate from home, given that the LANs and the library on the PMB campus were not accessible. This would almost certainly have influenced respondents answering this question. Access from home was followed by some distance by the university library and the university LAN mentioned by 21 (44%) and 19 (40%) respondents, respectively. This usage does probably reflect, to some extent, the behaviour of students prior to the closure of the university. What is evident, however, is that, in general, students are making less use of the physical library as library holdings become increasingly digitised (Chawinga, 2017). Also interesting is that 23% of the students mentioned “No specific place/On the go” pointing to the fact that learning can take place anywhere and anytime – students do not need a “fixed” location to access the Internet for learning and studying

purposes. The least used access point was an Internet café, with 4 (8%) respondents indicating this. This lack of usage might well be connected to the cost implications associated with the use of Internet cafés or not having such facilities nearby or available. A place not listed but mentioned under “Other” was the public library – mentioned by 5 (10%) respondents. Most public libraries in South Africa provide free access to the Internet as a basic service.

On the extent to which the challenges were identified as constraints to access and use of social media for academic purposes, findings revealed the two challenges (“High cost of subscription to internet data bundles” and “Poor internet connectivity”) as identified by just under half 25 (49%) of the respondents as a significant constraint. The third challenge identified as a significant constraint was also a financial one, namely, the “High cost of social media enabled phones (smartphones)” mentioned by 16 (31%) respondents. When adding the number of respondents who identified the three challenges as constraints (either a significant constraint or a constraint) the total percentage of respondents total well over 50% that is, 78%, 77% and 69% for the three challenges respectively.

The high cost of data is probably the major reason why universities in South Africa took it upon themselves to provide data to students during this era of COVID-19. The need to conduct teaching and learning online and the data usage that this entailed (and the associated cost) on the part of the students was recognised by the institutions and the provision of free data would “cushion” the financial demands being made on the students. As noted above, at the UKZN, the university libraries and LANs were closed for most of the year. There was thus no “free” Internet access as such available to students. While students were given 10 gigabytes of data per month, this was not adequate and despite the Students Representative Council’s intervention to have the allocation increased, this amount remained. Students who had used up their allocation before month-end were then required to pay for their Internet access through an Internet Service Provider (ISP) or through data bundles provided by the cellular companies.

The UKZN also provided students subsidised laptops to enable distance learning and that also enabled their use of social media for academic purposes. In line with the findings of this study, Letseka, Letseka and Pitsoe (2018) in their study which investigated the challenges of e-learning in South Africa, identified the cost of Internet connectivity and social media enabled phones as significant factors hindering the use of social media by students. While not a significant constraint, “Low ICT literacy” was nonetheless mentioned as an overall constraint

by 35 (69%) of the respondents. A similar number 36 (71%) mentioned “Poor knowledge of social media application software and sites” as an overall constraint as well. Both findings are of concern and suggest that there is room for training and awareness-raising regarding ICT literacy and the use of social media on the part of the university and specifically on the part of academic staff and the university library. The finding regarding apathy on the part of friends when it comes to using social media mentioned by 40 (78%) of respondents as an overall constraint also suggests the need for intervention in terms of raising awareness of the benefits of using social media for academic purposes.

Implications of this research

This study is worthwhile in providing a platform for education stakeholders, particularly university management to resolve the challenges preventing students from using social media for academic purposes, and equally have reasons why social media must be fully adopted in teaching, learning and research activities. This is imperative given that the lockdown imposed globally has not been completely lifted, particularly in South Africa, and teaching, learning and research activities must not be jeopardised because of the restriction in physical contact. In addition, this study would empower students, lecturers and researchers to reconsider their orientation and traditional approaches to teaching and learning as well as research, and instead lay more emphasis on holistic adoption of social media in carrying out their academic activities.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study addressed the issue of awareness, access and social media challenges encountered by postgraduate students of Information Studies, UKZN during the COVID-19 pandemics. Social media have created a platform of communication that has changed the mode of social interaction significantly during this pandemic. 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. Given this and in light of the main findings as revealed in this study, the following specific conclusions are made:

1. 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).

2. 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 the fact that students were not being allowed on campus as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.
3. Finally, two of the most mentioned challenges to the use of social media for academic purposes by postgraduate students of Information Studies, UKZN during the COVID-19 pandemics, were finance-related, namely, the “high cost of subscriptions to internet data bundles” and “high cost of social media enabled phones (smartphones)”. Poor Internet connectivity was also a factor in social media use as equally mentioned by the respondents.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that the government, in collaboration with the institutions of higher learning, should provide an enabling environment (which includes; provision of laptops with internet data bundles for the students) that will encourage adoption of social media for academic activities. The enabling environment will create room for a seamless adoption of distance learning and teaching approach. This approach will greatly facilitate better quality teaching and learning, and equally help in adherence with COVID-19 protocols. Also, there should be regular training and awareness-raising regarding ICT literacy and use of social media for academic purposes for not only the students but also for members of the academic staff. The training could be spearheaded by the UKZN library staff in particular as part of their user education services. When both students and staff are armed with the knowledge and skills relating to ICT literacy (including social media literacy) and the benefits associated with awareness and access to social media for academic purpose, this will lead to more informed and effective use of social media for academic purposes.

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