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Researching Students' Experience of Social Media Use as an Informal Learning Platform

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The purpose of this article is to explore students' experience of social media use as an informal learning platform in the international perspective. In accordance, the main focus of this exploratory study is to reveal the use of social media for informal learning of Masters level students of an international Institute of Education in the United Kingdom. Initially, for setting the context of the study, this article begins with some background information about social media and informal learning. Then, consequently, it describes the whole research design process along with students' experience. Data is collected through focus group discussion and questionnaire from the students of different countries, where diversified contexts of students created multidimensional data which enriches the article. Data reveals that, in this age of advanced technology, students use social media as a modern interactive communication channel to communicate, share ideas, experiences, message, pictures, videos and information of interest. Moreover, students find the use of social media helpful in terms of supporting one another in their learning, arranging study groups, managing group works, coordinating meetings, and communicating each other. On the contrary, the most significant demerit of social media students mentioned is the distracting nature of social media; and students become easily addicted to these media which distracts their focuses of learning. Nevertheless, critical analysis of their experience and opinion are made, and some important issues are revealed, which are considered as recommendations for future prospects of social media use in informal learning.

Keywords: *Social media, informal learning, ICT in education, international students.*

Introduction

Over the years, social media have become a very popular platform of both interpersonal and public communication all over the world. In this age of advanced technology, people are using social media as a modern interactive communication channel to communicate, share ideas, experiences, messages, pictures, videos and information of interest (Eke et al., 2014). The use of social media that provide new ways of communication and collaboration affects the way of learning as well (Parker and Chao, 2008; Prensky, 2011). This media has become popular among students between 2004 and 2006 very rapidly, after creation of Facebook and MySpace, through which students can communicate with one another on campus as well as outside (Abdelraheem, 2013).

Nevertheless, before embarking on the main discussion, it is significant to clarify the researchers' understanding of the comprehensive terms 'social media' and 'informal learning', used in this research. In

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this article the term 'social media' means "technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders. These technologies include blogs, wikis, media (audio, photo, video, text) sharing tools, networking platforms (for example, Facebook, youtube), and virtual worlds" (Bryer and Zavatarro, 2011, p. 327). In addition, the second term 'informal learning' refers to the self-directed intentional or/and unintentional learning that takes place in people's leisure time using social media outside the curriculum of formal and non-formal learning activities (Hague and Logan, 2009, p. 2).

Context and Objectives of the Study

Educational researchers and practitioners become interested to investigate how social media can be used in teaching and learning practices due to its increased popularity among students. In many cases, students find the use of social media helpful in terms of supporting one another in their learning, arranging study groups, managing group works, coordinating meetings, and communicating (Veletsianos and Navarrete, 2012; Arnold and Paulus, 2010; Ellison, 2010; Lipsett, 2008). On the contrary, a number of researchers argue that students use social media for non-academic purposes, which negatively affects their academic performances; for example, excessive use of short-hand versions of words in some communication platforms leads to weaker writing skills (Ahmed and Qazi, 2011).

However, McCarthy (2010) argues that students prefer rapid communication and multitasking, that is why they use social media for interactions and accessing information; nevertheless, further support is needed to ensure the best possible use of this platform for their learning (Cigognini et al., 2011). Evidently, most of the researchers have studied the use of social media in formal education context, but little research has been focused on the informal learning context. Considering the significance of above discussed issues, this study attempts to investigate Masters students' experiences of using social media for informal learning and its prospects. Following the main aim of the study, two major research questions are as follows:

a. How do Masters Students of an international Institute of Education experience the use of social media for informal learning?
b. What are the prospects of social media use in informal learning for students?

Research Methodology

Researchers prepared Participants Information Sheet (PIS) that clarified the purpose and nature of the study, participant's selection process, and the responsibilities and rights of the participants along with an informed consent form (Robson, 19993; Cohen et al., 2011; Wellington, 2015). Moreover, issues related to anonymity and confidentiality, data collection and analysis were included in the PIS. Furthermore, we contacted the participants via email where we explained the purpose of this small scale study and asked to read and sign the attached PIS and consent form ahead of time.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

The non-probability sampling strategy was used to recruit fulltime international students from the institute of education of theuniversity, as the research is a small-scale study, targeting a particular group with no accurate representation of the population (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 113; Best and Kahn, 2006, p. 18). The *convenience* and *purposive sampling* are followed in this study as the research aim was not to generalize the findings. These two strategies were followed for the easy access of the participants and less expensive and time saving for a small scale study like this. In total, 12 students were selected as respondents for the questionnaire through convenience sampling, and 7 of them were selected purposively for the FGD based on their responses on the questionnaire and, the criteria for selecting

participants for FGD were the vast experience of social media use and content sharing for learning which were considered as helpful to explore the prospects of social media use. Questionnaire and FGD were used in this research for their appropriateness with time frame and relevancy with the research questions (Robson, 1993) that permit methodological triangulation which was significant for a complete understanding of a phenomenon and to minimize personal bias (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 141).

Importantly, as researchers of the study one of us steered the FGD as a moderator with minimal intervention (Bell, 2010), andtook important notes. Moderator encouraged them to respond to the questions (Gay et al., 2014) interacting with each other and to listen to other's views. Sometimes, two participants were dominating the discussion and moderator handled these participants carefully and created space for others. The FGD lasted for 90 minutes. Data with detailed notes was recorded with a good quality recorder with group's permission (Wellington, 2015).

Impact of Social Media Use: Advantages and Drawbacks

Before boarding to the main analysis, it is better to show our participants' (who are postgraduate students studying education as a subject) use of various social media platform by a word cloud that will help us to understand their practice. Figure 1 shows various social media, the larger the size of the name the mostly used that is.

Figure- 1

List of Social Media Used by the Participants



According to the participants, students, nowadays, share much more informative materials such as videos, images, news links and articles through social media. It also makes easier to reach out to their classmates, seniors, teachers and academic experts easily and collaborate with their peers. One of the prominent respondents mentioned, "*We created a group in Facebook to discuss about sessions and share our experience. Moreover, this group allowed us to post any kind of issue related to the students, tutors and university. We can share our voice here*." Another respondent added, "*We organize activities, create events, share contents and reading materials as well.*"

Data reveals that, social media undoubtedly is the strongest medium to communicate with the world for not only students, but for everyone also. With a single click, one's thought reaches the potential recipient. In case of urgent news, social media can help studentscatch the response of the individual they need to contact instantly. For example, one respondent confirmed, "*I share my assignment outline in the group, other friends positively criticize it and their comments help me to improve my idea*."Evidently, online interactions may influence developmental outcomes through peer feedback (Pempek et al., 2009). Along with this, students organize group discussion on various subject matter issues using Facebook group. They find video lectures of other international university from YouTube helpful to make their understanding clear.

Recent years, students found social media as the best way to keep themselves on track with the transformation of the world. Students can get closer to cultures from different nations and societies easily. They know what is trending on the web and that brings students across the globe under a single umbrella.One of the strongest benefits of social media is making people more social, collaborative and critical thinker. As they said, students in modern days get linked with more people by the grace of the internet. And there is the sky is the limit in terms for social media friends. They are connected with classmates, elders, juniors, teachers, family members and can follow up the relation with few clicks. "*We get news links and helpful video links from our national and international friend that not only helps us academically, but also helps us to develop our values and moral ethics.*" one participant replied.

All of the respondents agreed that, through social media, students are able to get in touch with new friends from across the world. Collaborating with entities from diverse cultures can help students become more thoughtful to cultural differences and increase their inclusiveness in this global village. As one respondent argued, *"Still we are far from the concept of global village in terms of our nationality and geographical boundary, but social media is a real example of global village."*Another participant added, *"Though there is digital division, in terms of access to social media, between developed and underdeveloped country, but we are moving faster demolishing that division towards a real global village."*As per the study, communicating online is simpler than communicating personally for most of the students because of the geographical distance among people, as we mentioned earlier. Virtually discussing with an associate allows students to learn more about each other, thus firming the faith between the two parties. It also bridges distance. One of the respondents mentioned, interestingly, *"In the real world we maintain various relationship (for example, father, mother, sister, brother, boss, colleague, teachers and so on), but in this world of social media we all are just friends."*

Through forums, students are able to give their ideas and thoughts on certain areas and themes that interest them. By partaking in discussions, they involve in positive self-expression that develops their communication skill. However, participants were asked to share their opinion on their friends' responses. As the participants replied, likes and good comments in social media posts tend to be tremendously positive. Students can check their profiles and spontaneously gain affirmation, support, confidence and self-respect that motivate their works. Data revealsthat as a positive impact of social media many students have not chosen the path of suicide. Blogging can be healing for students who are disordered, depressed, or frustrated, and do not have voice in the family, classroom and society. When they sign in to a social community, they find persons to chat to and those who will listen to them. In the same vein, in their academic and personal life students have some idols. They follow them through the internet and the social-networking sites that always keep them posted on their icon's work. They take inspirations from their hero's page or profile.

Social media is a great tool for spreading awareness. Student can know about important and sensitive topics very fast and also can make others awaken. Sometimes this it is become a life-saving issue according to the study. On the other hand, students often use social media to raise funds for any noble or interesting cause. They open groups or events and reach out to the maximum population rapidly through internet. Many students use crowdsourcing to save one's life or give someone aid for better treatment that develop solidarity among them, and thus they enjoy the power of togetherness.
One prominent respondent mentioned, "Students maintained diary in previous time, but we maintain several digital diaries now." Consequently, as students personalize their social media profile, they go through a sense of individuality. Apart from being able to share their thoughts and interests, they also use to join peers and groups that help them adoptand approve their personality.

We asked the participants to mention 5 adjectives that closely matched their personal reactions to advantages of social media use. A word cloud, showing the frequency of the selected adjectives, is presented in figure 2. Among a variety of words, the most frequently mentionedones were communication, collaboration, content sharing, interesting, feasible, and virtual hangout.

Figure- 2
Participants' Responses towards Advantages of Social Media Use



Nevertheless, besides this optimistic usability of social media, respondents of this study mentioned some demerits also. This popular social media is amazing and source of fun in their compartmentalized life that causes negative impacts of using this media, which is discussed afterwards.

Some Drawbacks to Consider
Most frequent demerit of using social media mentioned by students was its distractive nature. Students often get lost within the enormous virtual world unintentionally and they enjoy it. They log in for some specific purposes, but subsequently they get out of the desired topic and found themselves somewhere else. As one respondent stated,

I open YouTube to watch some additional video tutorial of my subject. I watch two or three tutorials, then I get autosuggestion from YouTube and unknowingly I follow those distractions, and I lose my focus. The dangerous thing is I enjoy these distractions though they are harmful for my academic life.

Social media always costs our valuable time. Many students can utilize those time into productive work but most of them can't make the good of it.Still it harms mostly during the exam and deadline days according to the participants. *"It is very attractive, interactive and engaging. I have fun while using social media. Though I plan to use them for few minutes, my few minutes end up with few hours. Time actually flies when I use social media, but I cannot notice that until I stop."*
Respondents also claimed that students get distracted because of smartphone and social media applications. Along with new features of Facebook, YouTube and other social media, those two factors are very prominent to make the use of social media easier and distracted. It is worth mentioning that, over the times, social media is being more and more user friendly and time wasting. "*Applications in our smartphones continuously give us notifications that insist us to use social media most often when we do not really have that time*", as one of them mentioned. However, Columbia University Professor Keith Wilcox (Today, 2012)argues, itis not about stop using Facebook [social media], but just be aware of what it might be doing to you. The implication for successful use has been investigated subsequently.

Implications for Successful Use of Social Media

The popularity of social media could make them a powerful cognitive tool if adapted for academic pursuits and career goals (Pempek, 2009). Educational institutions could consider the new ways students are communicating each other to take the advantages of social media use in learning. In most of the developed countries across the world, especially international universities, use interactive educational options like Blackboard though social media for academic purposes is rarely used. However, in this fast growing technological era, educational institutions could consider social media use to make learning inclusive, interactive and collaborative. To ensure successful use of social media for students, educational institutions, teachers and policy makers should consider some important issues: *privacy and security measures, quality of information, suspicious information, personal and professional time management, professional and ethical behaviour, and positive attitude*(Schlenkrich and Sewry, 2012). After all, considering the fast growing popularity of social media, educational institutions should develop their students as social media literate which will ensure the positive use of social media for their personal and academic development. There are various types of information available on social media, but students have to be aware about the quality and authenticity before accepting. There, critical thinking and skills to research is required to get the positive results of using social media. Otherwise, young and unaware students could be lost in the crowed by following the usual tendency to run with the race.

To get the positive outcomes, universities could develop websites that is linked to popular social media, where students could interact on academically-focused issues with other students and professors. Students could include their thinking about favourite courses and their career goals. 'Alumnae could visit these sites to help current students find appropriate internships, job placements, and information about postgraduate academic and job experiences' (Pempek, 2009, p. 237). This can be helpful to engage students' social media use with their informal learning experience.

Nevertheless, the full potential of social media has yet to be achieved as our students continue to struggle for optimal ways of using these media though they are matured enough and independent learners. However, if we can find the way of using social media successfully, it can offer teachers and students a suitable tool to improve their learning experiences (Schlenkrich and Sewry, 2012).The findings of this study clearly indicate that students' informal learning experience through social media use is really

interactive and joyful despite there are some impediments. Therefore, academics and educational researchers should look into the possibilities of using social media for students' learning experiences (Balakrishnan, 2016).

Concluding Remarks

This study aimed to explore students' experience of using social media as an informal learning platform. Data revealed that students found social media use, to some extent, very helpful for their informal learning. They also mentioned some challenges of using though they could not stop using social media. However, it should be noted that the research focused on the use of social media in a higher education setting where students are matured and ICT literate. This study focused on the international students' practices that found more or less similar responses from across the world. Students go through the same experiences despite their diverse cultural and academic background. It is worth mentioning here that there are several limitations of this study. This is a small scale study in terms of sample that assesses a specific group, mainly students attending an international university. Therefore, researchers do not claim the generalizability of their finding though they found the findings applicable to any educational settings in modern times as useful research pointers. Further research should explore the use of social media as an informal learning platform in different contexts. More importantly, as the number of users of social media is growing fast, this study recommends that much scholarly research need to be conducted considering the various age groups of students as well as teachers who are responsible for students' achievement.

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