



PERCEPTIONS OF SAUDI STUDENTS TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS FOR LEARNING

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of Saudi students regarding the advantages of using social media tools at an emerging university in the south of Saudi Arabia to support their learning and the important role that these tools can play to facilitate the educational process. Another purpose of this study is to examine the barriers that students could face during the use of social media tools in the educational process were examined. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 male and 5 female students from the college of education at the emerging university to collect data for this study. The current study found that all the interviewees had very positive perceptions towards using social media as tools for e-learning and felt that these tools are extremely effective instructional tools and should be integrated into the university curricula. Another important finding was that students do not see any clear reasons that prevent lecturers to use and integrate social media tools in learning. Participants stated that lecturers should start using them as tools to aid the other learning environments. Also, it was apparent from the results of this study that the participants stated that there were some major barriers behind using these tools in learning including distraction, language and culture barriers, privacy issues and cyberbullying. More information is needed on the current use of social media tools for learning at other Saudi universities to investigate factors and barriers that might affect Saudi students' attitudes toward using social media to support learning. This would help to establish a greater degree of accuracy on these issues.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, social media tools, higher education, advantages of social media use, disadvantages to social media

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1. Introduction

Social media tools are one of the most prominent inventions of the twenty-first century. These tools have become tools in the hands of the present generation of students. *“Students often referred to as digital natives (Prensky, 2001), have spent most of their time on computers, game consoles, digital music players, video cameras, cell phones, as well as the Web itself”* (Jovanovic, Chiong, and Weise, 2012, p39). Hickerson and Kothari (2017) mentioned that *“They use digital technology transparently, without even thinking about it”* (p. 15). There are many social media tools that have become a part of daily life including YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Wikipedia. The growing importance of social media tools and its influence on teaching and learning has brought about significant changes in the academic environment in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Education in Saudi Arabia is undergoing a profound change to be compatible with the current revolution in educational technology. Therefore, the Ministry of Education has worked to encourage students and teachers to use appropriate modern tools in the educational process in order to develop self-education, cooperative, knowledge-building and knowledge-exchange. However, there is a shortage of studies that have been conducted in Saudi universities regarding Saudi students’ perceptions of using social media as tools for learning. Thus, this study aims to understand the existing reality of using social media as tools for learning at the emerging university from the viewpoints of students. It also aims to examine students’ perceptions expectations, practices, and barriers that they might encounter when utilizing these modern tools.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Students' perceptions regarding the advantages of using social media tools for learning

Ajzen (1991) defined perceptions as, *“the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question”* (p. 188). Students revealed positive perceptions towards using social media as tools for learning as these tools increases students’ attention and curiosity towards knowing (Evans, 2014). Almost of the students argued that utilising new technology may improve lessons because web-based materials contain a lot of images, videos and sound recordings that can be saved and be reused to anytime. They also believed that the integration of social media in e-learning will enhance communication and collaboration among students and academicians (Alsurehi and Youbi, 2014). In a qualitative study, Awodele et al. (2009) found that using social media tools for learning have increased the level of participation, interaction and collaboration between the students and lecturers. Likewise, Bista (2015) found that 60% of their 137-participant sample felt that social media would improve student-to-teacher interactions. In the same vein, Toyin & Harerimana (2017) conducted a quantitative study to investigate student’s use of different social media tools, their perceptions, and the purposes behind using these tools. The results of the study indicated that pre-service teachers in both countries have

adequate knowledge about social media tools and are willing to use these tools to support learning. The findings also revealed that the level of preference of social media site is very high in both countries among the preservice teachers.

Lee, Lee, and Kim (2015) emphasised that using social media tools, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube build strong relationships among tutors and students and helps develop self-confidence. It also enhances direct communication, thereby increasing the speed of feedback, while supporting students and facilitating learning among peers. Similarly, Hickerson and Kothari (2017) found that Facebook, Wikipedia, and YouTube are the top three social media tools most used as a learning resource because they bring social engagement, communication, the speed of feedback and relationship building.

Also, Foroughi (2011) revealed that students use social media as tools for learning for collaborative learning; the increase of independent skills for learning, early and quick feedback from lecturers, and teamwork. Haworth (2016) proposed that different social media tools can serve as a tool for self-learning. For example, YouTube enables learners to learn from a wide range of videos, experts, and professionals through watch any video related to any field or topic under study. In short, the main advantage of social media tools is that the goal of the student shifts from a recipient of information and participator in a learning experience that is designed and facilitated by the instructor to a collector, organizer, and designer of one's own learning experience.

2.2 Disadvantages of Using Social Media as Tools for Learning

The privacy issue is one of the major arguments against utilizing the internet and social media in learning. The internet can be a scary place for students if not used appropriately. Students online today are at risk from each other, due to improper use of technology, lack of privacy protection, and identity theft (Donelan, 2016 & Mao, 2014). Devine and Parker (2015) observed that social media tools use could cause security concerns. Protection and integrity were the biggest concern expressed by students about the use of social media as tools for learning. In another investigation carried out in the context of Saudi society, Alsurehi and Al Youbi (2014) conducted a study to examine the use of social media sites in Saudi Arabia. The results of the study indicated that privacy and security concerns continue to be the biggest challenges inhibiting the usage of social media applications, particularly by female students. Cyberbullying is another challenge when using social media in higher education. In a study about cyberbullying at Indiana State University, Dickie & Meyer (2015) found that about 22% of college students experienced online harassment and 25% of this group reported that the harassment was through social media sites. These challenges raise issues about the appropriate use of social media in educational settings, whether formal or informal.

Furthermore, Lederer (2012) argued that using social media in the classroom can become a distraction as these tools are attractive to use, and they catch students' attention during class time. He stated, *"YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter divert students' attention away from what's happening in class and are ultimately disruptive to the learning process"* (p. 1). Another disadvantage of using social media as tools for learning is stated

by Richard (2012), which is the lack of technological devices in schools, the teachers' unawareness of available technologies as well as the lack of theoretical and practical training to use these tools that prevented both students and teachers to successfully integrate technology into teaching and learning environments. Language and culture are other obstacles facing students when utilizing social media for learning. Liu, Lee, and Magjuka (2010) indicated that language barriers and social inhibitions are common among commencing international students when they use online communication tools. Likewise, Yee (2015) indicated that Malaysian students in an Australian university perceived online discussion as "*difficult and boring*" (p. 591) because of a lack of experience with this type of learning environment.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the interviews was to study the current reality of using social media as tools for e-learning by lecturers as well as discover their objections or hesitations to implementing them.

3.2. Sample

The sample of this study was 10 instructors, 5 males and 5 females from the College of Education in the emerging university. The sample involves a wide range of instructors from different levels of study.

3.3. Evaluation Tool

The interview consisted of ten main questions; some questions had several sub-questions. The interviews sought more in-depth data about social media tools that are not available in the emerging university, what the tutors know about these tools and whether they wish to use them with their students, and the advantages and the disadvantages social media tools. The interview also focused on the possibility of using social media tools in Saudi Arabia higher education. They were asked whether or not they were willing to improve or increase this use, with a justification for each answer.

3.4. Data Analysis

The qualitative data in this research was obtained from semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was applied to this qualitative data. The interviews data was coded and analysed through adapting the framework of Ary et al. (2006), which stated that "*In different texts, the approaches to analysis of qualitative data vary slightly, but we believe they can be described in three stages (1) organizing and familiarizing, (2) coding, and (3) interpretation of the data*" (p.481). Moreover, the interviews were conducted by using the Arabic Language because it is the official language of the participants of the current research. As a result, the researcher added the translation to the previous steps so that the analysis process is clear and consistent. A total of four broad themes emerged during the process of analysis of interviewee's responses and data collected from the

interviews. Interviewees gave responses regarding the existing reality of using social media as e-learning tools at the emerging university from the viewpoint of tutors. The themes that emerged included: (a) the perceptions, (b) types of social media tools and its extent of use for learning, (c) training, and (d) the problems associated with the use of social media as e-learning tools.

4. Results

4.1. Students' perceptions regarding the advantages of using social media tools for learning

Analysing the interviews data has shown that the vast majority of students participating in this study (eight out of ten) have positive perceptions towards using social media as tools for learning. Students' views revealed a relationship between the usefulness of social media as tools for learning and their positive feelings. Most students reported their desire to use social media tools in all the courses they take. As a matter of fact, when one of the participants was asked if he prefers using social media in learning, he said: *"yes, I use social media tools inside the classrooms because they help me to get the information that I need during the courses. They are great tools which make learning easy and enjoyable"* (Respondent: 7). Another participant declared in the interview that *"these tools help me and of course other students to be more creative and give us more space in education systems to get the information related to the topic under explanation"* (Respondent: 4).

Additionally, the interviews data analysis revealed that social media tools are effective for building interaction, and collaboration between students and students or with their lecturers. Eight out of the ten of the interview's participants stated that these tools assist learners to interact whether inside or outside formal sessions. A participant at the interviews explained that *"they are great channels to interact with other students as well as lecturers by asking questions or discussing topics related to lessons to increase the engagements and extend conversations"* (Respondent: 1). Moreover, most of the participants declared that social media tools empower learners to take charge of their own learning effectively and efficiently. *This was confirmed by one student during the interview when he mentioned that "social media tools have encouraged me as a learner to become effective self-learner to acquire personal knowledge and research skills."* (Respondent: 3).

Further analysis showed that students benefit from using social media tools for learning. They considered the use of these tools should be an integral part of the process of teaching. Eight out ten of the participants reported that one of the advantages that social media provide is an easy method to search for information and resources, which helps learners to save time. They believed that using social media as e-learning tools motivate students, keeps their attention and encourages them to learn. Also, they stated that social media tools made communication between the students and the tutors easier and therefore helped them to ask questions more freely than in class. Two of the participants indicated that social media tools facilitated learning because they added excitement to the teaching process. For example, P 3 posited that *"using a clip from*

YouTube make the lesson more interesting for students and encourage them to think deeply about the main idea of the lesson and share opinions and thoughts with other students and their lecturers" (Respondent: P 3). Another participant mentioned that *"it is boring to attend lessons that do not use modern technology like social media tools. They are our favorite tools."* (Respondent: P 9)

Furthermore, 80% of those who were interviewed believe that integrating tools such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp in the learning environment can improve students learning and their understanding of course content. In the same vein, the participants underlined that students now have the possibility of incorporating YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook into their lessons to make them more interesting. They explained how videos can add excitement to the learning process and encourage dialogue among learners, respect for one another's views while acquiring and sharing knowledge. As one participant revealed, *"I have developed my skills during sharing a video from YouTube by sharing my opinion and listen to other opinions"* (Respondent: P 10). Therefore, social media technology has helped tutors to convey intangible concepts in a more tangible way, which helps students, grasp them more easily.

4.2 Disadvantages of using social media as tools for learning

Responses from interviewees pointed out that potential impediments to the anticipated future growth of social media are the barriers which are currently preventing students to use these tools for learning. These concerns include distraction, language and culture barriers, privacy issues and cyberbullying. Four out of the ten of the interview's participants mentioned that learners can be easily distracted from lessons when they use those tools during classes to watch videos on YouTube or browse messages on Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. They also stated that even when tutors use these tools in class to enhance learning, the students may use them for unintended purposes such as to play games and chat with friends.

Cyberbullying is another challenge when using social media in higher education. The participants mentioned that social media tools are the place where online harassment can happen. As one participant stated, *"students should know that social media tools are sometimes dangerous and therefore they should pay attention to what they participate and with whom"* (Respondent: P 2).

Moreover, privacy issues were found to be an important barrier that limits the use of social media as tools for learning by students. The result revealed that most of the students (40%) declared that learners should pay more attention to their image, identity, and reputation when using these social tools. The participants referred that it has become easier to modify photos or information displayed on social media applications and to reproduce them in other contexts. Therefore, students should use these tools properly and effectively.

The vast majority of participating students in this study (four out of the ten) expressed concerns about language and culture barriers. Most of the participants reported that using social media as tools for learning may lose our language and

culture. They expressed that most of these tools use the English language as an official language instead of the Arabic language. Most participants mentioned that it is great to learn other languages but not preferring to use these languages on the Arabic language which is the language of the holy book (Quran). As one participant reported, "*losing language means that losing the culture, identity, and civilisation*" (Respondent: P 5).

5. Discussion

All students involved in this study showed positive perceptions toward using social media as tools for learning to support students and give them an opportunity to acquire diverse knowledge. The study also found that all of the students were familiar with social media and had used at least one type of social media for learning. They felt that using social media could be effective for supporting their learning processes when the necessary infrastructure and clear educational policies are in place. In accordance with the present results, several studies conducted in other countries also report similar findings of students' perceptions to use social media as tools for learning (Alsurehi and Youbi, 2014; Evans, 2014, and Bista, 2015).

The results of this study showed a generally high level of student adoption of social media tools and indicated that they are attached to the technology although social media tools are still far from being regularly used for teaching in academic contexts. However, they find these tools easy to deal with, especially WhatsApp, YouTube, Wikipedia, Twitter, and Facebook. The finding of the current study is consistent with those of Seaman & Tinti-Kane (2013) who found that students adopt, use social media, and spend more time with these tools.

Furthermore, the result revealed that social media tools are effective for building participation, interaction, collaboration, and communication among students and instructors. The result also revealed that most of the students believed that social media should be utilised by lecturers to support their learning and to connect students with each other making learning more authentic and part of daily student activities. The present finding seems to be consistent with the result' study of Lee, Lee, and Kim (2015) that emphasised the potential of social media sites to increase interaction and networking between teachers and students as well as to co-create content in and out of the classroom.

Moreover, the result of this study demonstrated that students use social media tools to search for information and resources, make communication with other students as well as lecturers, motivates students, keeps their attention and facilitated learning, and added the excitement to the teaching process. This result agrees with the findings of other studies, which indicated that social media tools contribute to facilitated learning, motivate learners, encourage cooperating work, and make the process of getting the knowledge easier (Foroughi, 2011; Haworth, 2016, Hickerson and Kothari, 2017).

The result of this study referred that students mentioned certain negative perceptions they held of using social media tools for learning. Their concerns related to

distraction, privacy issues, cyberbullying, and language and culture barriers. The participants referred the essential make a clear policy of using social media as tools for learning to avoid the misuse of these tools and decrease the distractions when using these tools inside the classrooms. Providing students with training about privacy issues and cyberbullying is good solutions to warning students about the misuse of social media tools, decrease the concerns of using these tools for learning, and make users more confident about themselves. The findings observed in this study mirror those of the previous studies that indicated that cultural and social factors, such as the erosion of teachers' traditional roles, the management of relationships with students, or the issue of privacy threats or cyberbullying, are limiting the use of social media as tools for learning (Lederer, 2012; Mao, 2014; Yee, 2015; Devine and Parker, 2015, Donelan, 2016).

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of students to use social media as tools for learning at an emerging university in Saudi Arabia and how they integrate those tools for learning to make use of all the possible learning benefits that social media tools could offer to enhance teaching practice. This study concluded that students have positive perceptions to use social media as tools for learning in their interactions with other students or lecturers, although they indicated some concerns that may prevent them to use these tools in education. Students believed that social media tools are effective for building participation, interaction, collaboration, and communication among students and lecturers. Accordingly, all students agreed that using social media in teaching facilitate learning, getting information from different resources, support teamwork, share content related to the subject of study or relevant to their areas of interest, and increases student-lecturer's interactions. To conclude, this study confirmed that using social media as tools for learning would enhance students' and tutors' communication skills and self-learning, encourage critical and reflective thinking, support collaborative learning methods, and generate and improve the content of students and tutors. Indeed, an awareness of such benefits would encourage students and tutors to use social media as a tool for learning.

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