Full Length Research Paper

Using Social Media in Higher Education as Tools for Learning: What do faculty think?

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This paper examines the attitudes of instructors at an emerging university in southern Saudi Arabia regarding the use of social media tools to support learning and to investigate their current usage of these tools. It also examines the barriers that instructors perceive when they use social media tools in the classroom. The study surveyed a sample of 23 faculty members (educators) using a questionnaire. The results indicate that educators, both male and female, across academic ranks, are using social media tools and their opinions largely coincide regarding the benefits of and barriers to social media usage. Moreover, the study found that there was a significant difference among educators regarding social media usage in teaching. Although instructors use social media applications every day, they tend not to use them as a tool for learning. The study recommends that future research on the usage of social media tools for learning and teaching be extended to include a wider demographic base at the same or at a different university to further explore the extent to which the findings are generalisable. The study provides insights that may help professors, administrators, and decision-makers to recognise the extent to which instructors use and integrate social media tools to facilitate the educational process.

Keywords: Social media, benefits of social media use, barriers to social media use, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of social media technologies is unprecedented, with these tools becoming an essential part of everyday life in a wide range of settings. Social media tools are beginning to get more attention from educational institutions because they have become an effective (to an extent) means of communicating ideas and feelings among users. Weigel, James & Gardner (2009) observed that institutions are taking steps to educate instructors and students on the advantages of using social media tools for learning as well as about concerns in the areas of privacy, legal issues, and potential psychological dangers. Gross (2004) noted that students use social media tools to develop their identities, beliefs, and stances on various issues including politics, religion, economy, work, intimate relationships, sharing links, online learning, and finding jobs. Many students also use social media tools to get and share information

with their peers. It could be argued that using these tools to support learning encourages self-motivated and autonomous learning, as well as becoming an integral part of learners' experiences (McGloughlin & Lee, 2010). Moreover, social media tools can act as a resource to support educational communications between student and faculty, facilitate educational processes and support knowledge acquisition. This study investigates the current usage of social media tools to support learning in an emerging university in southern Saudi Arabia. The main purpose of the study was to understand how these tools could be used for teaching and learning at a new Saudi Arabian university, and the barriers perceived by the university's instructors in using these tools.

The use of these tools has many implications for wider economic and social life (Maduku, Mpinganjira, & Duh, 2016 and Burbules, 2016). Social media tools have

received a great deal of recent attention for their potential to facilitate and enhance learning (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013; Basu, B. 2017; and Mollett, Brumley, Gilson, & Williams 2017). It has been argued that they are transforming the ways instructors communicate, collaborate and teach.

"Social connections affect so many aspects of our lives that our argument that they can also be applied to education and learning should be no surprise" (King and Sen, 2013, p.622).

Handheld devices have contributed to these developments. Students and faculty can have access to electronic resources through cell phones, iPads, and other mobile devices. According to a recent survey on the use of social media in U.S. higher education sector, over 80% of faculty members use social media at least once a month or more, and approximately 41% of faculty members use them in teaching (Seaman and Tinti-Kane, 2013). Studies conducted by Junco, Heiberger, and Loken (2011), and by Blaschke, Porto and Kurtz (2010) suggest that the active use of social media can increase learner engagement levels and promote the development of cognitive learning skills, including reflection, critical thinking, construction of knowledge and understanding of individual learning processes. Social media on mobile devices can enable learners to connect and collaborate with other learners out of the classroom, as well as to gain practical experience to prepare for the workforce (Coleman, 2013; Minocha, 2009). Others have argued that students can use these media on mobile devices to manage their own learning more effectively, and thus become more independent, lifelong learners (Rahimi, van den Berg and Veen, 2013; Kimber and Wyatt-Smith, 2006).

The Study

This study was conducted at an emerging university in southern Saudi Arabia. An electronic survey was distributed in the Arabic Language to examine the current usage of social media tools to support learning, its benefits in teaching and learning, and the purposes for which these tools were used. 23 lecturers participated in this study (11of the participants were male and 12 were female). The survey was carried out during the 2016 fall semester. The questionnaire was distributed via an online platform to university faculty members. The total sample size was 23 participants. There were 11 males and 12 females in the sample group. The questionnaire was collected from the sample through direct contact and online, using Google Forms, with the links sent by email. The data were anlysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science 21 version) to help clarify the descriptive data of the study.

RESULTS

The findings of the study revealed that a slight majority of the sample is female (12 out of the 23 instructors - 52.2%). The result illustrated that the greatest proportion of the sample was in the 28- to 32-year-old age group (52.2%). Also, lecturers accounted for the highest proportion of the sample in terms of their academic rank (47.8%). The vast majority of instructors used social media (82.6%), while only 4 of the instructors (17.4%) did not use it at all. The result illustrated that 11 out of the 23 faculty members in the sample had given a class where social media were used (47.8%), while just over half of the faculty members had not given a class where social media were used (52.2%).

Over half the sample stated that they did not understand social media websites in the English Language (56.5%). The result indicated that almost 70% of the sample accepted that social media was a tool that should be utilised by teachers (16 out of 23 instructors). However, 7 out of the 23 instructors refused to use social media tools for teaching (30.4%). Over half of the sample used social media tools to communicate with their students (52.2%), while 11 of the 23 faculty members sample did not use social media tools to communicate with their students (47.8%).

The finding highlighted the vast majority of the sample had a social media account, such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat (87%), while 3 out of the 23 did not have an account with those tools (13%). Almost three-quarters of the sample believed that social media was the best way for teachers to reach students (73.9%). Also, the result demonstrated the largest percentages of the sample had used social media for between four and seven years (34.8%). Of the sample of 23 participants, 6 had used social media for one year or less (26.1%), 5 of them had used social media for more than eight years (21.7%), while 4 had used social media for between two and four years (17.4%).

The finding showed that almost 90% of the sample believed that social media was important (87%). Almost 80% of the sample used social media for learning in colleges (78.3%). Moreover, almost 80% of the sample believed that social media had changed Saudi students' learning culture (78.3%). Almost three-quarters of the sample felt that using social media in teaching was effective for supporting students' learning process (73.9%). The result indicated that slightly over one-third of the sample held that using social media in teaching decreases the dependency of students on their instructors (34.8%), with just below two-thirds of the sample believing that using social media in teaching increases the dependency of students on their instructors (65.2%).

DISCUSSION

Social media are still far from being regularly used in academic contexts for teaching. Therefore, the frequency of use is generally low, with less than 40% of the academics in the study using at least one tool for teaching on a monthly basis, and less than 40% declaring that social media is useful for teaching purposes. The results of this study showed a generally low level of faculty adoption that seems to confirm the resistance emphasised in previous studies in relation to teaching practices (Brown, 2012), or by previous research in the US context (Moran et al., 2012).

The results of this study show that gender has a limited impact on the decision to use social media for teaching. Slight differences were found between males and females in the use of social media tools for learning. On the other hand, age appears to be the most influential element, particularly with reference to young instructors. This result is in line with other studies on faculty use of social media (Dahlstrom, 2012; Greenhow & Gleason, 2014; Moran et al., 2012) which found that faculty members adopt and use social media differently depending on their age: the younger they are, the more likely they are to regularly use social media tools. This is consistent with more general studies on social media usage that show that females and young people spend more time with these tools (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012). In terms of academic rank, social media tools are used more by lecturers than by professors and administrators. The results of this study are consistent with the results showing age to be a discriminating factor reported in other studies (Dahlstrom, 2012; Greenhow & Gleason, 2014; Moran et al., 2012).

The result of this study indicated that all faculty members were familiar with social media and have used at least one type of social media for learning. Moreover, almost all instructors have shown positive attitudes toward using social media as a tool for learning in education. Several studies conducted in other countries also report similar findings of teachers' attitudes toward social media tools in education (Rezaei & Meshkatian, 2017; Draskovic, Korper & Kilian-Yasin, 2017; Inayati, 2015; Veletsianos, 2013, and Cao, Ajjan, and Hong 2013). Additionally, the results of this study indicate that almost 70% of the instructors believed that social media should be utilised by teachers (16 of the 23 instructors). The respondents indicated a positive attitude towards the use of social media for continuous professional development and a considerably high interest in obtaining further training in using social media to attract students' attention, create a community among their students, collaborate to share tips and resources, ask questions to their instructors, send lectures, and receive students' answers. This result is consistent with those of studies conducted in other Saudi universities by (Al- Kathlan, 2011, and Rambe & Nel, 2015) which indicated that

social media tools have positive impacts on students' academic achievements.

This study found that social media tools are used by most of the participants in general and that a smaller portion of them used these tools for educational purposes. As this study indicates, 12 out 23 participants are not very excited about the voluntary usage of social media within a course because they still prefer to keep communication via traditional methods as well as using these tools as secondary platforms for communication and engagement. Moreover, just under half of the instructors sampled do not agree with using social media to communicate with their students. They believed that they should not be communicating with students outside of the class environment – the classroom is the only place for communication between instructors and students in the learning process. They believed that social media have no benefits and distract students. This finding confirms the results of the study by Seaman and Tinti-Kane (2013) conducted in the US, which found that more than half of instructors used social media for professional purposes other than teaching, but less than half of instructors did so for teaching purposes.

On the other hand, our findings clarify that there is a considerable number of participants (18 out 23 participants) who are currently not using social media tools in academia and are willing to do so in the future. They felt that using social media in teaching could be effective for supporting students' learning processes when there is the necessary infrastructure and clear educational policies to use these tools for educational purposes. This result is consistent with these studies that conducted by Jones et al., (2011) and Kreijn et al (2012) which indicated that social media tools could help instructors be more confident in their teaching and help to better convince them about the positive contribution of social media tools to teaching and learning, and eventually to student learning outcomes.

The findings showed that 20 out 23 of the participants have a social media account, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Snapchat. WhatsApp and YouTube were the most frequently used types of social media tools by faculty members. Other niche social media technologies like Snapchat, Instagram, and Telegram may be growing in popularity with instructors for personal use, but the results illustrate that they are not yet being incorporated into the classroom with as much frequency as WhatsApp and YouTube. Facebook was mentioned frequently in faculty responses, and occasional references to Twitter and Wikipedia also emerged. In addition, the analysis showed that, although most the faculty members were aware of the benefits of social media tools in teaching and used a range of social media tools for various personal and professional purposes, they were reluctant to use it in the classroom. This result is in line with the study of Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane (2011) which stated that "the top two sites for

personal use (YouTube and Facebook) remain the top two for professional use" (p. 14).

Educators' negative perceptions of using social media tools for learning have also been reported. The concerns expressed by Saudi instructors relate to privacy issues and a general issue of reputation management, classroom fit with objectives and content, student-teacher relationships issues, grading issues, and time, and allegations of plagiarism by students. Other challenges that face most of the participants in this study include the low awareness among students of the importance of social media as a tool in e-learning to support their learning, lack of information about using social media, and perceived lack of control of educators on social media platforms. Some other reservations and obstacles found in this study include differing opinions about social media's role in the higher education environment, and the rather informal nature of social media, preventing the full adoption of social media as tools for learning. Moreover, instructors stated that some of these problems related to the technology of the web and the barriers related to the habits and the culture of the region, for example, language and religious reservations. Most social media do not support Arabic as a language that can be used and teachers, therefore, require a high level of proficiency in the English language. Similarly, other barriers expressed by most of the respondents include the lack of available high-speed Internet, lack of smartphones for rapid access to the Internet, lack of teacher confidence in using technology, small screen spaces, technical problems, fears for the online safety of students using these sites, and the concern that students will misuse them during instructional time, as well as the lack of teacher training in using social media tools for learning. These results are in line with other studies (Manca & Ranieri, 2013; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013; Draskovic, Caic and Kustrak, 2013, and Ng'ambi, 2013), which 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, are limiting the use of social media in teaching.

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