

Students' Social Media Use and its Perceived Impact on their Social Life: A Case Study of the University of Zambia

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Akakandelwa Akakandelwa¹ and Gabriel Walubita²

¹Senior lecturer, Department of Library and Information Science, University of Zambia;
email: akakandelwa@unza.zm

²Lecturer, Department of Educational Psychology, Sociology and Education, University of Zambia; email: easygabby@gmail.com

Abstract

Social media has become ubiquitous and almost inescapable, revolutionizing the way students communicate, interact and socialize; and has become an integral part of their social and cultural fabric. Consequently, students are spending a substantial part of their time on social media. University students and youth are considered the largest users of these technologies. Despite a growing corpus of literature on the usage of social media around the world, there is a dearth of research in Zambia on how social media affects the students' social life. This descriptive, exploratory study examined the types of social media platforms students commonly use, the amount of time students spend on social media, the purposes for which students use the social media and the impact of social media use on students' social life. Two hundred and forty full time students in the School of Education, at the University of Zambia, completed self-administered questionnaires and their responses were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. Results indicated that the most commonly used social media platform was Whatsapp, most of the sampled students reported actively engaging in this social media application between 31 to 60 minutes on a daily basis. The study also found that more than half of the students found themselves saying "just a few more minutes" when using social media, checked their social media sites before doing something else, felt their academic productivity suffered because of social media, failed to cut down on time spent on social media, received negative comments from others about their use of social media and felt stressed out due to social media use. Furthermore, 22.4% of the students felt addicted to social media. Students used social media more for social information than for academic purposes. Social interaction is enhanced by social media use among students. Thus, productive use of social media is recommended while minimizing its negative impact. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will attract further research in this area with more divergent and larger samples of varying student demographic characteristics.

Keywords: Social Networks; Academic performance; University students; Internet use; University of Zambia

INTRODUCTION

Globally, online social media defined as web-based tools that allow users to interact with each other in some way by sharing information, opinions, knowledge and interests online (Ford & Ravansari, 2017), is shaping human interactions in varied ways. It has been estimated that 94% of adults worldwide own a social media site account and have visited or used one within the last month (Chaffey, 2016). Approximately 73% of adolescents use social media (Lenhart et al., 2010). There is general consensus that one of the most popular Internet activities among college students is social media use as confirmed by Smith & Caruso (2010) who found that 90% of 36,950 university students drawn from 126 U.S.A and Canadian universities use social networking websites. Young people are active social media users (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

The use of social media by university students in Zambia is also increasing rapidly. The 2015 survey conducted by the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA) found that 63% of Internet users in Zambia spend their time online on social networking sites while about 71% of those that own smart phones use their devices to access WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, Skype and Twitter for communication using instant messaging or voice calling (ZICTA, 2015). The growth of Internet use in Zambia currently estimated at 63% from 13.47% in 2012, more than double the estimate for 2009 (ITU, 2013 cited in Serpell, 2014) has been attributed to widespread use of personal mobile devices and adequate internet service provision which has covered almost all areas of the country (Serpell, 2014).

Types of Social Media

Major development of Web applications during the last decade, termed as Web 2.0, is the emergence and intensive use of social networking sites (SNS). Examples of SNS are Myspace, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Tango, Line, Yahoo, Hike, We Chat, Skype, Imo, BBM, Viber etc (Eid & Al-Jabri, 2016). Social media users create, share and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and they are able to network with other members who share similar or common interest, dreams and goals (Sharma & Shukla, 2016). Social media helps users to remain in touch with others. Social media facilitates communication among college students when they express themselves by posting status updates, links, videos and photos. It also allows them to follow others' online presence by keeping track of regular updates about their family, friends, classmates, and acquaintances (Smock et al., 2011).

Studies on the preferred social media platform have established that WhatsApp remains the most popular social media application. A Ghanaian study found that the majority of students used WhatsApp as the most widely used social media platform followed by Facebook and Twitter (Mingle & Adams, 2015). This finding was confirmed by Ogaji et al. (2017) who sampled Kenyan students. More than half of the sampled undergraduate students at the University of Brunei Darussalam reported that they would still continue to use WhatsApp even if it was no longer freely available (Ahad & Lim, 2014). However, other studies have found

that use of facebook is more common among university students (Eke & Odoh, 2014; Lenhart et al., 2010).

Frequency of Social Media Use

Worldwide, digital consumers are now spending an average of 1 hour and 58 minutes per day on social networks and messaging. This number has increased by over 20 minutes since 2012 (Chaffey, 2016). Studies examining use of media among college students suggest that students spend between 30 to 60 minutes of social networking (Jacobsen & Forste, 2010; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). The estimated daily median time spent on social media by older adolescents was 28 minutes (Jelenchick, Eickhoff & Moreno, 2013).

Why students use Social Media

As could be expected, researchers have begun to examine what motivates young people to join social media sites. The following are some of the motivations for using social media. First, students use social media to share information, discuss study material or topics, and network to complete homework assignments or term projects. Social media also provides convenient ways of peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge and collaboration (Eid & Al-Jabri, 2016). Second, it could be expected that students would actively participate in social media to experience connectedness and happiness (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). Therefore, college students with lower levels of life satisfaction could seek to participate in online networks to increase their personal well-being (Ellison et al., 2007). Third, students spend time on social media to keep in touch with old friends and to strengthen bonds with colleagues. By using social media, individuals seek to maintain and increase their social networks (Ellison et al., 2007). Finally, students use social media for sexual exploration purposes. For example, one study found that though students did not go out of their way to seek sexual materials such as sex clips and nude pictures from porn sites, they encountered these contents mostly through social media platforms (Adu-Kumi, 2016).

Sharma & Shukla (2016) have argued that young people engage in social media because this dynamic and busy world does not allow people to physically stay in touch. Ajayi (1995) further argues that, for many people, social media use is a way of dealing with a society where spending time with humans is less valued than time with technology. Others have supported the view that for students, university life can be a stressful owing to the demanding school work and exams (Tandoc, Ferrucci & Duffy, 2015) so social media use serves to reduce tension. It is expected that college students would be heavy social media users because students are far away from home, are free from parental home supervision (Arnett, 2007). Additionally, adolescents frequently use social media because they have reached a stage in life when they spend most of their leisure time alone (Larson, 1990) and they are also at a stage in life when they are trying to develop their identity (Arnett, 2007). All the reasons reviewed above are consistent with the Uses and gratifications paradigm which explains the reasons for people's preference for a specific communication media over the other as proposed by Katz (1959).

Effects of Social Media

Although a growing body of recent literature has examined the use of social media among college students (Ogaji et al., 2017; Eid & Al-Jabri, 2016; Sharma & Shukla, 2016; Devi & Tevera, 2014; Mingle & Adams, 2015), there still remains a dearth of research on the impact of social media on social outcomes among university students (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014; Walsh et al., 2013). The following are studies conducted to evaluate the effects of social media.

Whereas most studies on social media have shown that participation in social media activities improves one's social development, others have shown to the contrary. Yeboah & Ewur (2014) found that social media like whatsapp distracted students from completing their assignments, damaged their language skills such as spellings and grammar and disturbed their concentration when in class. In addition, Sharma & Shukla (2016) also found that students' academic performance was adversely affected by social media. Students faced challenges arising from their frequent use of social media, which included the need to attend to messages immediately, the exposure to false or unregulated information or media contents, mobile connectivity and addictive-like behaviors which disturbed their studies (Ahad & Lim, 2014). Literature that support the use of Social media report that social media encourages effective communication offering real-time messaging, empowerment, sense of belongingness and sociability, enjoyment, quick information-sharing and cost benefits (Bere, 2012; Plana et al., 2013; Devi & Tevera, 2014; O'Hara et al., 2014).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the absence of any previous research on the perceived impact of social media on social development among university students in public universities in Zambia, this study serves as the basis from which to examine the type of social media used, frequency, the motivation for social media use and the effect of social media on students' social development.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the study was to investigate the impact of social media on students' social life. The specific objectives of the study were:

1. To examine the types of social media platforms commonly used by students
2. To find out the amount of time students spent on social media
3. To investigate the purposes for which students used social media
4. To examine the perceived impact of social media use on students' social life

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Despite the increased use of social media use among university students in Zambia, researchers have pay little or no attention to understanding the effect of social media on the students' social development. Social media use has become a popular and fundamental aspect of the social lives of many Zambian students today and hence investigation of its outcomes deserves attention. The increase in the use of smart phones in Zambian society is expected to correspond to increased use of more affordable and convenient computer mediated communication (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2012). Although, students engage in

various Internet activities participation in social media sites seems to be the most popular activity, thus it is appropriate to study the impact of online social networks (Cheung & Lee, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The survey method was used to solicit data and information from a sample of students studying a Bachelor of Arts in Library and Information Science (BALIS) and a Bachelor of Special Education (BASE), School of Education, University of Zambia. A sample of 240 participants was conveniently selected during lecture hours of the second semester of 2016/17 academic year. A questionnaire was designed by the researchers to collect data. The data obtained was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science, Version 23.

RESULTS

Respondents demographic characteristics

240 questionnaires were distributed among students pursuing a Bachelor of Library and Information Science and a Bachelor of Special Education at the University of Zambia. 227 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 94.6%. Table 1 shows that 53.3% of the respondents were males while 46.7% were females. Furthermore, 33.9% were aged 17-21 years, 59.5% were aged 22-25 years, and 6.6% were aged 26-30 years. The composition of respondents with regard to years of study was: 33.5% were first years, 18.9% were second years, 23.3% were third years, and 24.2% were fourth years.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Values	N	Percent
Gender	Males	121	53.3
	Females	106	46.7
Age	17-21	77	33.9
	22-25	135	59.5
	26-30	15	6.6
Year of study	1st year	76	33.5
	2nd year	43	18.9
	3rd year	53	23.3
	4th year	55	24.2
Study programme	BALIS	153	67.4
	BASE	74	32.6

Types of social media commonly used by students

The first objective of the study was to find out the types of social media platforms commonly used by students. Table 2 shows that the most popular social media platform was WhatsApp (83.3%), followed by Facebook (78.0%), Twitter (12.8%), LinkedIn (7.9%), Instagram (7.5%), Imo (2.6%), Snapchat (1.8%), Myspace (1.3%), and Skype (0.9%). Other social media platforms used include Badoo (0.4%), GOAT (0.4%), YouTube (0.4%) and WeChat (0.4%).

Table 2: Type of social media regularly used

Social media	N	Percent
WhatsApp	189	83.3
Facebook	177	78.0
Twitter	29	12.8
LinkedIn	18	7.9
Instagram	17	7.5
Imo	6	2.6
Snapchat	4	1.8
MySpace	3	1.3
Skype	2	0.9
GOAT	1	0.4
Badoo	1	0.4
YouTube	1	0.4
WeChat	1	0.4
Total	227	100.0

Amount of time students spent on social media

The second objective of the study was to investigate the amount of time students spent on social media. Table 3 shows that 22.0% of the respondents spent 30 minutes or less per day on social media; 37.9% of the respondents spent 31-60 minutes per day on social media; 21.1% of the respondents spent 61-90 minutes per day on social media; 6.6% spent 91-120 minutes per day on social media; and 12.3% spent more than 120 minutes per day on social media.

Fishers' Exact Test results indicated that there was no association between a) gender and time spent on social media ($\chi^2 = 2.583$; $df = 4$; $p = 0.630$); b) age and time spent on social media ($\chi^2 = 13.795$; $df = 8$; $p = 0.66$); c) year of study and time spent on social media ($\chi^2 = 19.856$; $df = 12$; $p = 0.070$); and d) program of study and time spent on social media ($\chi^2 = 5.975$; $df = 4$; $p = 0.199$).

Table 3: How many minutes per day do you spend on social media?

	N	Percent
≤30 min	50	22.0
31-60 min	86	37.9
61-90 min	48	21.1
91-120 min	15	6.6
>120 min	28	12.3
Total	227	100.0

Further analysis revealed that 12.8% of the respondents very often wrote their status updates; 19.8% frequently wrote their status updates; 41.9% rarely wrote their status updates; and 2.1% never wrote their status updates; 23.3% of respondents were neutral on this question.

Table 4: How often do you write a status update?

	N	Percent
very often	29	12.8
frequently	45	19.8
neutral	53	23.3
rarely	95	41.9
never	5	2.1
Total	227	100.0

Purposes for which students used social media

The third objective of this study was to investigate the purposes for which students used social media. Table 5 reveals that 79.7% of the respondents used social media to obtain new information; 74.0% used social media to keep in touch with friends; 55.1% used social media to facilitate school work; 47.1% used social media to keep in touch with their families; 43.6% used social media to chat with others; 37.0% used social media to share “good things”, 15.0% used social media to find new friends; and 10.1% used social media to share “bad things”.

Table 5: Reasons for using social media

Reasons for using social media	N	Percent
To obtain new information	181	79.7
To keep in touch with friends	168	74.0
Facilitating schoolwork	125	55.1
Keeping in touch with family	107	47.1
Chatting with others	99	43.6
To share good things with friends	84	37.0
To find new friends	34	15.0
To share bad things with friends	23	10.1
Total	227	100.0

Perceived impact of social media use on students' social life

The fourth objective of this study was to examine the perceived impact of social media on students' social life. Respondents were asked whether they felt addicted to social media. Table 6 below reveals that 4.8% of the respondents strongly agreed that they felt addicted to social media; 17.6% agreed that they felt addicted to social media; 34.4% were neutral; 29.5% disagreed that they were addicted to social media and 13.7% strongly disagreed.

Table 6: Do you feel that you are addicted to Social Media?

	N	Percent
strongly agree	11	4.8
agree	40	17.6
neutral	78	34.4
disagree	67	29.5
strongly disagree	31	13.7
Total	227	100.0

Respondents were further asked to rate how the use of social media had affected their social lives by responding to 7 statements on a four point Likert Scale (0-5 = never; 6-10 = rarely; 11-15 = sometimes; 16-21 = often) as shown on Table 7 below. These findings indicate that 70.9% found themselves either often or sometimes spending more time on social media; 75.8% found themselves often or sometimes checking social media sites before doing something else; 59.3% sometimes or often felt their academic productivity suffered because of their use of social media; 62.3% had sometimes or often tried to cut down on time spent on social media but have failed; 76.2% had often or times found themselves saying “just a few more minutes” when using social media; 60.8% had often or sometimes heard other people negatively comment on their usage of social media; and 55.9% had often or sometimes felt stressed out due to their use of social media.

Table 7: Perceived impact of social media on students' social life

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Aggregate
Spending more time on social media	2.2%	26.9%	33.2%	37.7%	70.9%
Checking social media sites before doing something else	1.8%	22.5%	27.3%	48.5%	75.8%
Feeling academic productivity suffers because of social media	7.5%	33.2%	31.4%	27.9%	59.3%
Tried to cut down on time spent on social media but still failed	11.1%	26.5%	26.5%	35.8%	62.3%
Found myself saying "just a few more minutes" when using social media	6.2%	17.6%	29.5%	46.7%	76.2%
Other people negatively comment on my social media usage	8.8%	30.4%	20.3%	40.5%	60.8%
I feel stressed out due to use of social media	17.2%	26.9%	27.3%	28.6%	55.9%

Figure 1 below summarises the perceived impact of social media on respondents' social life. The results show that 42.0% of the respondents rated themselves as often being negatively affected by social media; 32.0% rated themselves as sometimes being negatively affected by social media; 21.0% rated themselves that they were rarely negatively affected by social media; and only 5.0% of the respondents rated themselves as never being negatively affected by use of social media.

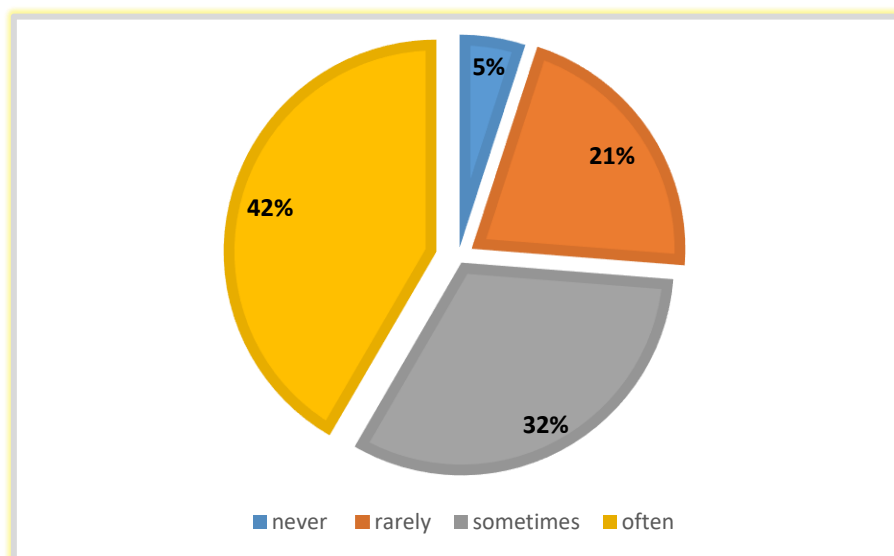


Figure 1: Perceived impact of social media on students' social life

DISCUSSION

Social media has changed the way college students interact. Yet the perceived impact on the social life of students has not been explored among Zambian University students. The present study addressed this issue by examining the types of commonly used social media platforms, the frequency of social media use using survey data collected at the University of Zambia, School of Education. The study also addressed the reasons why students use social media and the perceived effects of social media use on student's social life.

Type of social media used

Consistent with research conducted by Mingle & Adams (2015) and confirmed by Ogaji et al. (2017) and Ahad & Lim (2014), the current study found that most of the students used WhatsApp as the most widely used social media platform followed by Facebook and tweeter. Ahad & Lim (2014) are among those who provide the reason why students use whatsapp. They argue that built as an alternative to short messaging service (SMS), Whatsapp offers real-time texting or communication, including the ease of sharing information (e.g. contact list) or media content (e.g. audio, video files, images, location data). Although Whatsapp seems to be popular, Young and Rogers (1998) argue that interactive features of the internet such as chat rooms are the most addictive.

Time spent on social media

Similar to other studies (Budden et al., 2007; Jacobsen & Forste, 2010; Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009), the current study also found that the majority of sampled students spent between 31 to 60 minutes per day on social media. The current study shows that the majority of students were average users of social media. According to O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson (2011) The American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) classify time spent on social networking sites (SNS) into three categories as high use (more than 2 hours), average use (30 minutes to 2 hours) and low use (less than 30 minutes). There are several reasons why it is expected to find that the student estimated daily average time spent on social media is more than 30 minutes. College students have reached a stage in their lives when they spend most of their leisure time alone, free from parental control and independently explore the world which gives them a chance to make media choices that are not constrained by others (Larson, 1990).

Why students use social media

The current study found that most of the sampled students used social media to obtain new information, keep in touch with friends and for school work. This finding is consistent with what Sharma & Shukla (2016) found in among Indian college students that social media was used as a cheaper online medium for chatting with friends, keeping in touch with family and for sharing pictures, documents and videos. In supporting the current finding, social media also provides convenient ways of peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge and collaboration (Eid & Al-Jabri, 2016). Therefore, college students with lower levels of life satisfaction could seek to participate in online networks to increase their personal well-being, to keep in touch with old friends and to strengthen bonds with colleagues, to maintain and increase their social networks (Ellison et al., 2007).

Effect of social media

The current study established that more than half of the students found themselves saying “just a few more minutes” when using social media, checked their social media sites before doing something else, felt their productivity suffered because of social media, failed to cut down on time spent on social media, received negative comments from others about their use of social media and felt stressed out due to social media use. Although only 22.4% of sampled students felt addicted to social media, these observations among students were suggestive of internet addiction-related behaviours (Sultan, 2014). In other words the students in the current study were addicted to social media. The findings of the current study corroborated the findings of Ahad & Lim (2014). Other researchers have found evidence suggesting that addiction to social media has adverse effects (Griffiths, 1998; Shotton, 1989). Unregulated (pathological) Internet usage among college students undermined self-regulation (LaRose, Lin & Eastin, 2003) and was associated with depression (Young and Rogers, 1998; Lee et al., 2009).

Engaging in various types of social media has also been associated with positive outcomes such as increased ‘communication, social connection and even technical skills’ (Ito et al., 2009: 800). Social media users stay connected longer at affordable rates (Sultan, 2014). Consequently social media users are aware of what is going on in the lives of friends and family members. In addition to being in touch with friends and family, students are able to make new friends and exchange ideas via social media (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Social media fosters technical skills such as the ability to create online groups, exchange videos, documents, images, podcasts and blogs, developing artistic and musical endeavours (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Sultan (2014) argues that social media interactions create a context that generates less anxiety than face-to-face meetings do and are thus helpful for socially anxious individuals who tend to be stressed in face-to-face relationships.

CONCLUSION

Our results have demonstrated that the sampled University of Zambia students mostly preferred to use Whatsapp more for social activities such as obtaining new information, keeping in touch with old friends, family and to strengthen relationships than for academic purposes (using social media for school work). The majority of students engaged in social media for more than 30 minutes per day. The results also showed that most of the sampled students found social media “irresistible” to the extent that they checked their social media sites before doing something else, felt their academic productivity suffered because of social media, failed to cut down on time spent on social media, received negative comments from others about their use of social media and felt stressed out due to social media use.

This study makes an important contribution to understanding university students’ use of social media and its effects on their social lives. The findings of the current study present important implications. First, these results unlock the potential to identify students who may have social media addiction problems which cause detrimental effects such as poor grade performance among students. Second, understanding the effects of social media on students’ social development allows the teaching staff at the University of Zambia to design learning content that fit the social and personal needs of students. The present study has demonstrated that students tend to use WhatsApp for not less than 30 minutes per day. Thus, course lecturers

can consider using social media to disseminate vital course information to their students. Third, since students use social media for non-academic purposes, lecturers can develop teaching strategies that utilise social media for teaching and learning, which in turn increase lecturer-student interaction for better academic achievement. Finally, by learning the about the adverse effects of social media such as depression and addiction, students can be encouraged to regulate their heavy use of social media.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study focused on students in two disciplines in the School of Education. It is recommended that future studies should involve more divergent and larger samples of varying student demographic characteristics. Other areas of research worth pursuing include the impact of social media sites on students' academic performance and self-concept. Second, another area of research can be to investigate the extent to which social media is used by students in collaborative learning, with special reference to students studying under the distance mode. Finally future research should also investigate university lecturers perception of social media as a teaching strategy in higher education context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommendd that the University management should develop policies that encourage innovative usage of social media for educational purposes such as group discussions, group research projects, etc. whilst minimizing its negative impact on students by controlling social media use among students during learning sessions.

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