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## The dynamics and impact of social media on university teaching and learning: A case study of a university in Zimbabwe

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### ABSTRACT

*Technology has taken centre stage in many contemporary institutions the world over and universities have not been spared. Most students have access to the Internet through their Smart phones and other related gadgets. This case study sought to explore the dynamics and impact of social networking on university teaching and learning. Fifty handwritten undergraduate student assignments and twenty student interviewees were purposively sampled and results were analysed. The study revealed that the social media has significantly affected the communication landscape the world over. The highly technological and fast-paced life has brought with it commendable contributions to teaching and learning, on one hand, and a litany of challenges to students in a developing country like Zimbabwe, on the other. Student interaction has been made easier, particularly group tasks for widely-dispersed students, as they can discuss tasks and exchange research notes even in the comfort of their homes. Students are able to get instant responses, from their classmates and lecturers alike, on crucial academic matters, thus enhancing the quality of their academic presentations and general communicative competences. However, some students have become so addicted to the social media, like WhatsApp, that they pay marginal attention in lectures. Texting habits like shorthand and slang have also negatively affected the quality of the work that they present and submit for assessment. The study recommends that lecturers sensitise students on both the benefits and pitfalls of social media and also against incorporating social media lingo into their academic writings.*

**Key terms:** academic, textese, social media, digital technology, lingo.

### Background to the study

Electronic communication, which encompasses social networks (also known as social media (SM)), is a very broad phenomenon whose aspects cannot be adequately explored in a study of this magnitude. It is a relatively new phenomenon in developing countries like Zimbabwe. As a result, students are bound to be very excited to get connected to their friends, relatives and classmates through WhatsApp and other social media. According to the Postal and Telecommunications Sector Performance Report (2015:21), "Active Internet subscriptions increased by 8% to reach 6,575,591 from 6,086,827 subscriptions recorded in the previous quarter [of 2015]." "With a number of mobile applications being in existence, the one that has become so popular in Zimbabwe is WhatsApp. Never mind the different versions that people have, this communication tool has made it cheaper and faster to circulate information" (<https://developmentagezim.wordpress.com/2012/>). This statistic shows that, of the roughly 14

million people in Zimbabwe, there are slightly above 46% subscribers to the Internet but this does not mean that 46% of the population has access to the Internet, given that some people can afford more than one Internet-compatible Smartphone. WhatsApp is a pun on 'What's Up', intended to build a better Short Message Services (SMS) alternative and accessed most conveniently through a Smartphone, thus making the world a more connected place (<https://www.whatsapp.com/about/>).

Research on digital technology and its effect on Standard British English (that which is recommended in our education system has recently increased, with stakeholders interrogating this important aspect further. According to Crystal (2007), Standard English was, and still is, of relevance to everyone who wanted to communicate in writing, and it existed to avoid variability, which causes problems of comprehension and acceptability. Proysen (2009) observes that educational experience seems to indicate that the language of text messaging is reflected in schoolwork, an observation which made us keen on carrying out this study.

Proysen (2009:6) further argues that "[S]ome students seem to use abbreviated forms and non-standard spelling in their schoolwork, which is very typical of the language of text messaging." Several other studies have been carried out on the effects of social media (Baron, 2000; Crystal, 2005; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Lusk 2010; Wang, Hen and Liang, 2011; Schill 2011; Haught et al., 2016) but these studies were mostly in the developed world, so we felt that it was necessary to investigate how such digital technology has affected teaching and learning in developing countries, with specific reference to Zimbabwe. The same social media phenomenon is explored here, but in a different context altogether.

Social networking has evolved from Internet Chat (m/RC- Internet Relay Chat) of the 1990s, msn (messenger) to Facebook of 2004, Twitter of 2007 and the latest, WhatsApp, which facilitate communication over vast distances and affords interlocutors the opportunity to respond instantly. Communication technology continues to develop, affecting people differently, depending on their ever changing needs, hence the need to continuously interrogate its dynamics and impact, which themselves are not static.

### **Problem statement**

The researchers are lecturers in communication, which targets all undergraduate students in their first semester at university and aims at sharpening their academic and professional communication skills. The module mainly aims at preparing students to make formal academic presentations and broaden their general everyday language use and proficiency. As such, the observations stated below spurred us to investigate the dynamics and impact of social networking on university teaching and learning, with the view to improving the quality of teaching and learning at university level.

Research on the effect of the Internet shows that there are conflicting views, for instance, Crystal (2004: viii) posits that "[T]he Internet has not yet had a major impact on English vocabulary and use." On the other hand, Baron (2000) argues that the Internet actually has had an impact on English, considering that it has been around for a few decades now. It has been suggested that an over-dependency on technology has culminated in a youth generation with deficient communication skills (Thurlow, 2006; Lusk, 2010; Gok, 2016). It appears there is a paucity of data on the dynamics and impact of social media on teaching and learning as scholars continue to argue for and against social networking and admit that it is an area that requires further scrutiny. The

study was motivated by other variables which included researchers' observation of prevalence of ungrammatical constructions in students' assignments. We also observed that there was an inclination by some to be 'heavy users' of their electronic gadgets, particularly cell phones, during lectures, perhaps communicating on their chat platforms. In addition, we found Proysen's (2009: 6) proposal quite motivating when he states that "[O]ne needs to study student writings in connection with text messaging in order to find out if there is any truth to the claim about text messaging." Given an impetus by such observations, we sought to investigate the dynamics and impact of SM on teaching and learning at university level in a developing country like Zimbabwe.

### **Literature review**

Kaplan and Haelein (2010) define social media as a group of Internet-based applications that allows the creation of user-generated content. Steinfield, Ellison, Lampe and Vitak, cited in Lee et al (2012: 2) state that "The term social network site broadly is used to refer to Web sites that enable users to articulate a network of connections with people with whom they wish to share access to profile information, news, status updates, comments, photos, or other forms of content." These are tools that promote interaction through collaboration and sharing of information and generally facilitate instant responses from interlocutors even when they are widely dispersed. Social networks facilitate easy communication between individuals who have Internet-compatible cell phones. Literature is replete with information on the merits and demerits of using electronic communication which has presented unprecedented challenges to people, especially in the developing world as people strive to remain part of the global community. There is no doubt that the world is embracing digital communication at a tremendous speed. Haught et al. (2016: 19) concur that "Social media has become ubiquitous in today's society." In support, Shankar et al. (2010: 11) state that "There is an explosion worldwide in the use of handheld electronic communication devices, such as mobile phones, digital music players, and handheld Internet access devices." Such developments have resulted in interlocutors being able to text and chat and get instant responses. The need for instant responses may have resulted in communicators developing skills such as shorthand, abbreviations and other non-standard forms of language. Crystal (2008) agrees that the most striking feature of text messages is the combination of standard and non-standard forms. Technology is relatively a new phenomenon, with a sizeable number of the population in these countries still computer illiterate.

Halliday, cited in Shafie, Osman and Darus (2011), argues that humans tend to humanize and adapt the technology they use. The adaptation of this technology influences the birth of varieties of formal properties of the language they use." Baron (2000) posits that digital media influence people to be more tolerant on language change as communicators pay less attention to language rules as they are empowered with more control on their communication. In agreement, Shafie, Osman and Darus (2011) emphasise that computer-based communication (CMC) demands easier and faster communication, so the conventional practice of CMC is not to conform to the rules of the language. Crystal (2006:26) also observes that "The internet is an electronic, global and interactive medium, and each of these properties has consequences for the kind of language found there." Farina and Lyddy (2011) contend that the popular perception is that texts and other forms of CMC contain an abundance of emoticons, obscure abbreviations and acronyms, often to the point that they are indecipherable to the uninitiated. Thurlow (2006) suggests that there may be a link between CMC language patterns and a perceived decline in literary in students, children and

young adults.

Furthermore, scholars contend that e-mail, instant messaging and chat are rapidly replacing conventional forms of correspondence, and the Web has become the first port of call for both information inquiry and leisure activity (<http://www.books.google.co.zw>). It is reported that social networking sites have become popular with the help of digital technologies (tablet, smart phone, notepad etc) and Internet recently (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Examples include Blogs, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Youtube etc.

### **Some merits of social media**

Research into SN has revealed that there are several advantages associated with access to SN by students, some of which are given below. Boyd and Ellison (2007) observe that growing evidence from analyses of online social network site use suggests that these sites have become important tools for managing relationships with a large and often heterogeneous network of people who provide social support and serve as conduits for useful information and other resources. Wang, Chen and Liang (2011: 2) argue that “As social media sites continue to grow in popularity, it is our premise that technology is a vital part in today’s student success equation.” In support, Lusk (2010) argues that despite the distances between the two interlocutors, social media can connect them easily, thus providing opportunities for students to reach their classmates/lecturers to seek clarification on academic challenges. Juncho, Helbergt and Loken (2011) also observe that SM is an important communication system to university students because it promotes good social relations among students and bridges the gap between students with different cultural backgrounds (in a global set up) when they engage in online discussions. This is particularly relevant to this university whose niche is culture and heritage, at the backdrop of recruiting foreign students.

Schill (2011) supports this by saying that social media are particularly important for adult learners who often have complex, busy schedules that may not enable them to participate face-to-face at their institutions. Schill further argues that social media participation can happen anytime, anywhere and fills the need of adult learning to feel connected to their classmates, their instructor as well as their institutions.

From the above observations, it is evident that social media has since ceased to function merely as a way of keeping up relations but now acts as a vital channel for student participation on issues that affect them in their academic work

### **Some demerits of social media**

Research has also unveiled a number of demerits attributable to social media. Drouin (2010: 68) posits that “Within the texting literature, various theories have been presented that could support the assertion that the use of textese may have a negative effect on literacy.” Lusk (2010) also observes that the speed at which information is generated [in typing] through social media has created a lax attitude towards proper spelling and grammar which usually reduce students’ ability to effectively write without relying on computer tools like spell-check. Lusk further observes that when abused, social media can distract students’ attention during learning hours e.g. when they habitually watch films/videos online or listen to music on sites like YouTube

In agreement, Brydolf (2007) says that students tend to multi-task (checking social sites while studying and even in lectures) and get distracted. They focus more on entertainment than studying

and being attentive in lectures. Leedy and Omrood (2005) posit that two thirds of students are reported to be using electronic media while in class, studying, or doing homework. This shows that social media can be addictive to the extent that students divert towards non-educational, unethical and inappropriate actions such as useless chatting, thus losing valuable learning time and material. In general, much of the international media attention surrounding textese has been quite negative, with educators claiming that students are using textese in their formal written assignments (Lee, 2002; Barker, 2007 and Rogers, 2008 cited in Drouin, 2010).

The observations made above, from various studies, indicate that the relationship between social media and teaching and learning is so significant and so controversial that it would be worthwhile to interrogate the dynamics and impact of social media to teaching and learning at university level, hence the current study.

### **Objectives of the study**

The study sought to:

1. explore the dynamics and impact of social media on university teaching and learning;
2. examine the role of social media in students' assignments and everyday interaction; and
3. suggest ways to enhance teaching and learning with social media playing a more meaningful role.

### **Research questions**

1. How do students interact on social media platforms and with what impact to teaching and learning?
2. What role do social media play in students' assignments and everyday interaction?
3. How could lecturers and students enhance teaching and learning with social media playing a more meaningful role?

### **Research methodology**

The study employed qualitative methodology, with case study as its design. According to Bryman (2012: 66), "The basic case study entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case (a single community, a single school, a single family, a single organisation, a person or a single event)." Miles and Huberman, cited in Punch (2005: 101), posit that "[A]ll research, including qualitative research, involves sampling. This is because no study, whether quantitative, qualitative or both can include everything: you cannot study everyone, everywhere doing everything" Punch (2005:187) also observes that "Qualitative research would rarely use probability sampling, but rather would use some sort of deliberate sampling. Purposive sampling is a term often used; it means sampling in a deliberate way, with some purpose or focus in mind." In support, Silverman (2010: 141) says "Purposive sampling allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested." As such, this study purposively sampled the participants who were considered to be rich sources of relevant information on the dynamics and impact of social networking on university teaching and learning. In addition, the case was also considered to be suitable because it provided "... a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered" (Bryman, 2012: 66). The research tools which facilitated effective data collection were document analysis of fifty volunteer student assignments and semi-structured interview (twenty voluntary interviewees, from two departments, who had access to the Internet using their cell

phones). The assignments were in handwritten form. Interviewee ages ranged from 20-30 years. Participants were assured that the information would be kept confidential and anonymous, strictly for the current study only.

Creswell (2013: 48) also asserts that “We conduct qualitative research when we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants address a problem or issue.” In this context, there was need to investigate the contexts in which students used SM and what effects it had on teaching and learning.

For the current study, frequency of social media use was not considered very significant (for further study, may be) Interview questions were biased towards text messaging and chats on social networking platforms, specifically WhatsApp (considered more recent) on cell phones and related gadgets.

### Findings and discussion

This study has revealed mixed results and provided interesting insights regarding digital technology, particularly the dynamics and impact of SM on teaching and learning in Zimbabwean universities. The researchers found Trudgill’s (1993) affirmation quite valid, that Standard English is the dialect of education, and that it is spoken by most teachers; it is the dialect which is normally employed in writing and rewarded in examinations. Standard English is the language of instruction in the Zimbabwean school curriculum and students are expected to have good communication skills which would enable them to express themselves well and be rewarded accordingly.

Proysen (2009:23) observes that “[T]here is a very important distinction between spoken and written language, and between formal and informal settings.” As such, students are expected to demonstrate an awareness of such distinction when they present their work for assessment. It is important to note that the students’ assignments, which were considered for this research, were handwritten and the students did not have any access to applications like spell/grammar checks. Below are the results of the investigation.

### Excerpts from student assignments:

In the excerpts given below, the parts where students were found to deviate from the standard and sometimes actually failing to distinguish between the standard and non-standard varieties are presented in bold.

*“Good **intaviu shld b** impressive of good management”*

*“Interviewers **du nt** put into consideration the intimidatory atmosphere created by the interview.”*

*“Aspects of academic writing **a thz** that concern . . .”*

*“My colleagues, **u may kum to mie** also.”*

*“Some students **hv** a tendency of copying others also.”*

*"It **wl b** unfair if the group consists of **2** (for 'too') many members."*

*"Make sure **u kp** good relations **wth ur** lecturer."*

*"**Grps ar** essential in **edn** as students **ar** able to assist each other."*

*"Sometimes one wonders **wy** some job aspirants fail interviews."*

*"**Thanx**" (The colloquial form for 'Thank you' 'smuggled' into formal writing).*

*"Aspects of academic **a** those that concern . . ."*

*"The aspects include introduction, body **n** conclusion."*

*"In the conclusion, thus **whr** u summarise . . ."*

*"Some students **hv** a tendency **o** (of) copying [from] others."*

*"It **wl b** unfair if the **grp** consists **o 2** many people."*

*"Mek sure **u kp gd** relations with **ur** lecturer."*

## Discussion

Students often tend to import into their schoolwork the language of text messaging and chatting and some non-standard forms that would not normally be used in formal settings. It can be argued that, clearly, the SM have had an impact on our usage of language and our every day behaviour. Students use shorthand ("**grps, shld b, hv, wil b, u, ur, edn**" in the above examples bear testimony to this claim) and clipped words (e.g. "**nt, kp, ar, wil, wth, 2**") in formal settings which sometimes grossly compromise the quality of their work to be assessed for academic purposes. In extreme cases, the reader may fail to adequately use the context to grasp the meaning of the communication and such work becomes incomprehensible.

These observations are similar to those made elsewhere in other studies e.g. Crystal (2007::230) says "[I]n language, variation causes problems of comprehension and acceptability . . . The differences may be slight or great." The results confirm what Thurlow (2006), Crystal (2008) and Drouin (2010) have observed, that texting is having detrimental effects on people's use of Standard English. In the excerpts above, the shorthand and clipped words are not recommended for formal presentations because the reader would sometimes labour to decipher meanings in such presentations.

Baron (2000:193) also observes that "[L]exically, the messages tend to be extremely informal, including clipped words (such as **prob** for problem), simplified spellings (for instance, **thru** for through) and use of words like **nope** for **yep**." This is true as far as the excerpts given above are concerned. Therefore, these anomalies may certainly be considered inappropriate in formal written discourse and they impact negatively on the students' grades when their written assignments are assessed.

## Discussion of results from interviews

All the twenty interviewees admitted to visiting chat platforms during lectures, when doing

homework or studying. They said that they belonged to at least one chat group at university which links them to their classmates, lecturers and other acquaintances. They also stated that SM have positive and negative impact on teaching and learning. Below are some statements taken verbatim from interviewees.

*"WhatsApp allows us to collaborate with our classmates and lecturers."*

*"Social media is important as a platform for lecturer-student literature distribution"*

Lecturers recommend to their students certain sites for research material which they would use to access important information when writing assignments or for further reading. They may send these as attachments on social media platforms. This practice offers students an additional opportunity to interact with their colleagues or lecturers in settings other than the lecture room or office.

*"We use WhatsApp because it is a cheaper and faster way of sharing information even with pictures and other such materials."*

*"We can share information that affects our everyday life at university e.g. changes to the lecture/exam timetables and other communication from admin."*

*"We can communicate anytime to seek clarification/help on academic problems."*

This is particularly true for students in a multi-campus set up where students are widely-dispersed and those on block release as adopted by the university in question in 2013. SM make it possible to converse with each other easily/any time and solve problems without having to meet physically. This is also cost effective as students do not need to travel to meet their colleagues. Since such information is transmitted and received on their mobile gadgets, social media has made it very convenient to the already financially disadvantaged student in a developing country like Zimbabwe. Thus, it saves time and other precious resources and gives students time to maximize on their study time, which may subsequently impact positively on teaching and learning. This extends students' learning hours beyond the busy and congested lecture schedules, hence creating an enabling, favourable teaching and learning environment.

*"We can communicate with others from different cultures and socialize."*

*"We make new friends since we normally meet strangers when we come to university."*

Intercultural communication has become very important in a world that has gone global. At the university, we have foreign students from a number of African countries. As such, there is need to inculcate tolerance which translates to meaningful progress in human development. SM is one such way of cultivating this culture whereby the 'foreigners' feel they are an integral part of their new communities as barriers imposed by cultural/first language differences are catered for. The above excerpts confirm observations made by Boyd and Ellison (2012) that these social sites are important in managing relationships with a large and heterogeneous network of people who

provide social support and share useful information and other resources. Also confirmed are views by Wang, Chen and Liang (2011) that social media is now a vital resource in the success of a student today.

The interviewees also articulated the cons attributable to social media, some of which are quoted below.

*“Some students send wrong information to others.”*

*“There are students who are always on their phone and even if you ask them something they may ignore you or take long before they reply.”*

Due to the busy schedules mentioned above, some students may not have time to check authenticity of sites provided by others on SM, resulting in a kind of vicious cycle of false knowledge. Sometimes, this impacts negatively on their academic work when a non-existent site is cited, especially in situations where lecturers are very strict on authenticity of sources used. University learning is a collaborative activity and those students who violate the sanctity of such personal relations risk becoming anti-social and being alienated from groups to which they once belonged. This confirms the observation made by Kamuputa (2012) that [T]he nation, in its bid to be socially connected through the Internet, is actually becoming introverted” (Newsday, Nov. 27, 2012).

*“Some may chat during lectures, thereby losing [out] on valuable information from the lecturer”*

*“There are students who watch pornographic videos and exchange silly jokes on WhatsApp in lectures or while they are studying. They will not concentrate on schoolwork and fail as a result”*

These observations confirm that multi-tasking disrupts proper flow of valuable information and diverts students towards non-educational, unethical and inappropriate actions such as useless chatting (Crystal, 2007; Lusk, 2010) [quoted earlier on]. It is important to note that students are not always using SN to add value to their academic discourse but, sometimes, they exchange information far divorced from the topic under discussion in a particular lecture. Their attention would be so marginalized that they fail to sufficiently follow the proceedings in a lecture, group discussion or individual reading. These extracts from interviews confirmed observations made elsewhere and added new insights into the contentious but important area of SM. As such, we feel that it has been worthwhile to further interrogate the dynamics and impact of social networking on university teaching and learning.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Social media can be a panacea of information dissemination but have also negatively affected teaching and learning at university level. The study has confirmed observations made in earlier

researches and added new insights into the dynamics and impact of social networking on university teaching and learning, particularly in a developing country like Zimbabwe. Students can gainfully utilize SM to exchange information that is valuable to their learning but some may also get distracted when they communicate on these platforms during lectures or when they are studying.

The study, thus, recommends that students be advised, by their lecturers and other stakeholders, on how they may gainfully make use of social media for their academic benefit. They should realise the potential that SM have on their every day communication. However, they should also be informed about the potential pitfalls so that they do not become addicted to social networking, which may become anti-social and destroy important development of personal relations. It is prudent that lecturers always carry a postmortem of an assignment after assessment so that they raise awareness whenever such discrepancies arise. We strongly feel that this research has made a fair contribution to knowledge on the role that social media may play in teaching and learning at university level, in a developing country set up.

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