Influence of Social Network Usage on Undergraduate Students’ Academic Performance in Benue State University, Makurdi

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Abstract

This study investigated social network usage and its influence on undergraduate students’ academic performance in Benue State University, Makurdi. The use of social networking among tertiary institution students has exploded in recent years. One of the main reasons for this popularity is to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships online. Social networking is one major tool the new media literacy has provided in the 21st century for people of all works of life. An increasing number of educators, researchers and students are making positive use of these social sites to improve literacy skills and academic performance. WhatsApp and Facebook are the two major leading social networks that most Nigerian students engage themselves. There is therefore a relationship between usage of these social networks and students’ academic performance. This study adopted ex-post facto survey design. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. The sample size comprised 98 undergraduate students. Instrument for data collection were a structured Questionnaire on Students Usage on Social Networks and Academic Performance (QSUSNAP) and students current session academic results. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions while Independent t-test was used in analyzing the hypotheses. Findings indicated that there was significant positive relationship between usage of both WhatsApp and Facebook and students’ academic performance. The researchers recommended that researchers should come up with best ways of integrating social networks into educational and pedagogical practices to promote literacy.

Key Words: New Media, Literacy, WhatsApp, Face book, Academic Performance

Introduction

The desire for change and lifelong learning that will positively develop any society has necessitated the quest for more creative and innovative means of sharing information. This is because, learning often times is the outcome of social interactions among learners and educators. Researchers and educators in the 21st century have continued to advocate for innovations in learning that will have a positive lifelong impact and literacy development of students. The new media is one of the current social learning technological resources that are being used to create new literacy practices in the 21st century. These innovations for
promoting lifelong learning could be achieved through mass sharing of information and content area among educators, researchers and students. One cannot deny the fact that we live in a global information society where majority of information received comes less often from print sources.

Young people are usually exposed to information that comes from highly constructed multiple media formats. According to Gainer (2010), the importance of media texts such as social networking websites in the lives of young people begs the question of how they interpret the message and the role schools should play in assisting students to navigate and evaluate these new literacy practices. The ability to balance the use of these social networks will go a long way to improving literacy. New media has made it possible for a great number of people to create, modify and share content knowledge with others, using relatively simple tools that are usually free and inexpensive through the internet.

The new media often requires computers or mobile devices such as smart phones, Ipad, laptops with internet access to share information online. People of all ages and backgrounds are online using new media tools for a variety of reasons such as searching for information and connecting with others for social interaction. Bere (2013) explains that new media is a means of mass communication using digital technologies such as the internet. Chan (2014) informs that there are three basic tools or features in the new media technology, connecting people with basic and vital information in almost all topical issues, collaborating with other people within an organization, creating new content, services and channels of communication that people deliver information and services.

Wikipedia (2014) gives a broader definition of new media as availability of content on demand through the internet which can be accessed on any digital device which is usually achieved through interactive and creative participation of many persons. Some of the common examples of new media include: blogs, wikis, video games and social media. The social media as one of the most popular feature of the new media has become a growing phenomenon with many varied definitions in academic use. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as a means of interactions among people who create share and exchange ideas in virtual communications and networks. According to Cohavi (2013), social media accounts for nearly one quarter of all internet activities. With the advent of social media, there has been explosion of social networking sites for people to interact and exchange ideas on the internet.

Social networks are some of the activities under social media. The global influence of social networks on levels of education is very apparent. Yeboah and Ewur (2014) explain that all activities where people share information can be considered to be social networking. Social networks can therefore be defined as forms of electronic communication through which users interact by creating, sharing and exchanging information, ideas and personal messages by utilizing online platforms through the internet. Some of the technological innovations that most people use to access the internet are smart phones, laptops and desktop computers which come in handy to many students. Williams, Scot and Sumone (2015) refer to social networks as websites or applications that allow users to communicate with one another by posting items such as comments, images and messages.
Castek and Coiro (2015) inform that the use of internet by students is increasingly becoming central to many students. This has greatly affected many aspects of people’s social lives especially tertiary institution students. The use of these applications on the social media amongst students of higher institutions is very popular and inevitable. Many students in both advanced and developing countries are using these social networking sites to conduct online researches by locating and evaluating vital information that could improve literacy. Some of these popular social networks that most students use are: WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, 2go and Wechat. The use of these social networks has continued to grow at an incredible rate. As of 2014 32.7% of the world population had access to these social networks (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014). These social networks create opportunities for members in a group who share similar or common interest to interact on the internet. The explosion of social networking has therefore become platforms for educators, researchers and students to create and share information. In citing Ochefu (2012), Egbe and Muodumogu (2014) inform that an estimate of 2.191 billion people log into social network sites every day. This is supposed to be great news and opportunities for students to increase and improve their knowledge, learning skills and general academic performance. Many students in the tertiary institutions like universities, colleges of education and the polytechnics have access to these social networks. Egbe and Muodumogu (2014) again inform that the basic activities of sending and sharing information on these social networks by students are texting (sending digital words and images) and texting (sending semi-nude and sometimes nude images) to friends. Kapuswany and Narayan (2010) note that social networks grab the concentration of students and divert their attention towards non-educational, unethical, inappropriate activities such as unprofitable chatting.

In spite of the enormous educational benefits that are available to students through the use of these social networks, many students are not taking advantage of them to increase their knowledge and improve their academic performance. These social networks can actually be used to promote collaboration of information in academic settings and students learning, especially in higher institutions where research-based learning and individual student development is the order of the day.

Egbe and Muodumogu (2014) found in a study that membership of social network groups promote reading among university students. The study further informed that students between the ages of 16-20 who belong to social networks agreed that they read more. The development of critical literacy to empower students to be active in a democratic society cannot be overemphasized. There is need therefore to train students on how to locate and evaluate information from these networks that will enhance literacy in the new media era.

The researchers of this study have, however, observed that majority of higher institution students especially those at the university often divert their attention on non-educational, unethical and inappropriate activities like posing nude pictures and unprofitable chatting. All these may not be unconnected to students’ low performance in general academics. The researchers have also noticed that even though use of social networks enhance informal communication, it does not make students appear intelligent, responsible and motivated because having easy access to these social networks do not give students opportunity to think critically talk less of being creative.
Oyewo and Oladipupo (2013) established in a study that students’ academic performance kept declining because of their excessive engagement in non-educational network sites as they often used coined forms of language to send messages and exchange information. This new form of communication affects their proficiency in English language use which results in their poor performance when they are eventually evaluated. There are other negative side effects like poor reading culture, psychological and health factors associated with the constant use of social networks which have negative influence on undergraduate students overall academic performance. Thus, social networks which are part of the new literacies may be doing more harm than good on literacy development, depending on the perception and attitudes students have towards the use of these platforms.

The two most popular social networks that students often engage on-line are WhatsApp and Facebook. This study therefore examines the influence of social networks (WhatsApp and Facebook) usage on students of Curriculum and Teaching Department of Benue State University and their academic performance.

**Educational Implications of WhatsApp and Facebook on Students’ Academic Performance**

An increasing number of undergraduate students are getting addicted to social networks. Many students in Nigeria are bombarded with diverse information on daily basis through WhatsApp and Facebook. There is, therefore, a connection between activities of these social networks and students’ proficiency in English language as well as general academic performance. It has also been observed that an increasing number of educators, researchers and students especially in developed countries are creating chat groups for exchanging information and research purposes on WhatsApp and Facebook (Amry, 2014). Members of group chats usually upload educational resources which are very informative and useful for students in almost every topic of study.

Boulink and Dashan (2014) list some educational benefits of using WhatsApp social network. These include: quick and easy transference of links of study materials which ensure that every member of the group gets the information even after school hours. WhatsApp enables students learn beyond classroom borders as students can discuss their homework on this platform, students can invite their lecturers to be in the group in order to ask questions concerning their courses of study whenever the need arises; students’ language skills are also enhanced.

WhatsApp network is a popular cross platform that employs users’ existing internet data plan to help them interact (networks) socially. It provides online users with the ability to send and receive a variety of media such as images, videos and audio messages. Amry (2014) informs that over 450 million active users of WhatsApp are recorded monthly with over 10 million messages shared daily by users. WhatsApp, as a social network could be utilized as a social learning platform which will usually require a deep collaborative effort among students. Amry (2014) further informs that the WhatsApp platform has the following collaborative features:
provides online users with the ability to exchange text messages, images, videos and voice notes to their social network groups.

- gives students the ability to create a group that supports social interactions among 200-250 members where they can engage in discussion forums.
- provides students the ability to send messages without limits.

Yeboah and Ewur (2014) also point out some basic educational advantage of WhatsApp network for higher institutions students. The platform is used for the enhancement of academic discussions and sharing of ideas among students. WhatsApp also makes collaborative learning efficient and effective. It also builds relationship that stimulates learner to learner consistent and progressive learning. Since university education is basically research-based, students could take advantage of WhatsApp network to upload and download research findings which could go a long way to enhance academic performance.

Amry (2014) conducted a study to explore the impact of using WhatsApp social network learning activities on the achievements and attitudes of online students as well as compared this with face-to-face classroom learning. The study focused on female undergraduate students of Taibah University in the 2014 session. Result showed that the experimental group who were exposed to WhatsApp mobile learning had a mean gain of 4.80 while those exposed to the face-face learning had a mean gain of 3.80. The study further showed that students had a very high positive attitude towards WhatsApp social learning. The conclusion of Amry’s (2014) study shows that student’s responses on WhatsApp messaging made learning easy and resolved learning difficulties of members of the group. WhatsApp therefore helps students to create a learning community that easily constructs and shares knowledge with other members.

In a related study, Mahlan, Shamsuddin, Japeri and Umar (2014) assessed students’ readiness in using WhatsApp for calculus subject. Data were collected from 485 mechanical engineering students in Pulav Pina-g University. Findings of the study showed that more than half of the students preferred to use WhatsApp as one of the most effective learning group. Students’ marks increased in calculus subject through the use of WhatsApp mobile learning. The implication is that WhatsApp could help students to create a learning community that would easily construct knowledge and share with other members. Boulink and Dashan (2014) established in a study that students who use WhatsApp indicated that the use of WhatsApp positively influenced their manner of conversation and had easy accessibility to learning materials.

Nigeria students could form such learning communities by creating platforms or groups on WhatsApp where members belonging to special areas of needs or course specialization can upload and download basic information like research findings and questions on the wall group for others to benefit. This is because learning is becoming more personal and increasingly online-based for social interactions that enable collaborative and portable processes even in informal education.

Church and de Oliveira (2013) examined the use of WhatsApp among university students in South Africa. Students indicated a positive and easier way of communicating with
their teachers and classmates. Students also indicated that use of WhatsApp was fruitful in their academic studies as they found it easy to discuss relevant issues in an informal environment that made learning cooperative and fun.

In spite of the numerous educational benefits of WhatsApp social network on students’ academic performances, many undergraduate students in Nigeria are yet to take advantage to effectively collaborate among one another on this learning platform to increase their knowledge and skills. Yeboah and Ewur (2014) observe that many students spend more time using this social network on things other than educational purposes, thus causing decline in their academic performance.

Yeboah and Ewur (2014) investigated the impact of WhatsApp messenger usage on students’ performance in tertiary institutions in Ghana. The sample size was 550 respondents from universities and polytechnics students. Findings of the study indicated that 76% of students used WhatsApp for negative purposes while only 24% responded that it impacted positively on their studies. Students spent more time chatting with friends on irrelevant issues. The results of the study also revealed that many students type most sentences, phrases and words in short form which mar their spellings and grammatical constructions. Words and sentences like ‘forward’ ‘love’ ‘tomorrow, ‘we thank God’ are abbreviated as ‘4wrd’, ‘luv’, ‘2mrow’ and ‘WTG’. According to the researchers, this form of writing on WhatsApp has negatively affected the way students write English language even in formal situations like examinations. This often distorts grammar and meaning which of course consequently causes decline in academic performance. Halloway (2011) refers to this forms of writing and instant messaging as linguistic ‘method in madness’ and argues that the use of constant abbreviations in chatting forums is assaulting written English.

Facebook is another leading social network available to Nigerian students. It was developed by Mark Zuckerberg and launched as Facebook.com on February 4th 2004. Facebook started as a social network originally made for the students of Harvard which was later released in other campuses to attract the idea of having online communities. This subsequently opened the website to the younger population. In 2006, Facebook.com ultimately offered the opportunity to the rest of the world. In citing Facebook statistics (2012), Orafu (2015) informs that over 500 million active users were already signed up on the Facebook social network.

In a compilation of the latest social media consumer and usage, Chaffey (2016) informs that of the five top social networks which are most popular, Facebook reigns supreme with over 1,590 million active users. The author goes on to reveal that Facebook holds an 18% market share, 71% more than its closest competitors, WhatsApp. It is therefore, the most engaging social network. Many users have created different groups to express their thoughts and ideas through this network.

Different researches have shown that Facebook impacts all levels of academic settings. It has opened new worlds of learning for both educators and students who have found the potential for academic use. Allen (2016) explains that Facebook messengers, a subsidiary of
facebook.com has an impressive 47 million penetration followed by Instagram. Facebook has a considerable lead over and above WhatsApp and Twitter. Facebook therefore has diverse functions as a result of its potentials. Students at different levels of education use Facebook for messaging, contact, research and assignments. Facebook is supposed to enhance students' communication skills as well as lead to positive language and general learning. Egbe and Muodumogu (2014) found out in a study that membership of students of 900 million who used Facebook as a social platform promoted reading and literacy learning among academic staff and students in selected Nigerian universities.

Thurairaj, Hoon, Sinha, Roy and Wei-Fong (2015) showed that the most preferred social network site is the Facebook with 99.2% responding positively to the use of Facebook in social interactions. The authors found that students welcomed the idea of making Facebook a fun seeking learning tool in their academic activities. These learning processes occur as they check their messages, search for information as well as respond to messages. The study indicated that students claimed to learn new sets of English vocabulary whenever they check friends' activities and updates on their group chats. Facebook can therefore be utilized as a social learning resource and space for new literacy practices. This can be achieved by creating well-crafted social learning platforms that will likely require effective collaborative efforts among educators, researchers and students. Adaja and Ayodele (2013) advocate that Facebook as a social platform could be activated and actively used for the promotion, acquisition and distribution of knowledge based information. The potentials of Facebook in enhancing academic performance of students cannot therefore be undermined in the development of literacy.

In spite of the huge educational benefits that accrued to the use of Facebook by undergraduate students, many undergraduate students in Nigeria neither make use of this platform nor use it positively to enhance their academic performance. In a study by Adaja and Ayodele (2013) on the potentials of harnessing social media for academic excellence, they revealed that 67% of the respondents who used Facebook as their favourite network platform for social interaction, only 33% used Facebook for academic information exchange. It is against this background that this study was designed to investigate the impact of social network usage on students' academic performance.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between WhatsApp usage and students’ academic performance?
2. How will the use of Facebook influence students’ academic performance?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between WhatsApp usage and students’ academic performance.
2. There is no significant relationship between Facebook usage and students’ academic performance.

Research Method

The study adopted the survey design, specifically the ex-post facto. A total of 311 drawn from 400 level undergraduate students from the Curriculum and Teaching Department of Benue State University, Makurdi were used for the study. The sample consisted of 98 students from the following six programmes: English, Maths, Chemistry, Biology, Physics and Integrated Science. Simple random sampling technique was used to ensure equal opportunities for students from all the six groups to be represented in the sample.

For the purpose of data collection, a structured questionnaire was developed and used by the researchers. The Questionnaires on Students’ Usage of Social Networks and Academic Performance (QSUSNAP) consisting of 20 items. The QSUSNAP items were on a four point Likert Scale. The second instrument was students’ session examination Cumulative Grade Point Aggregate (CGPA) results for the 2014/2015 session. The questionnaire was validated by an expert in measurement and evaluation. Students’ CGPA results were collated with students’ responses from the QSUSNAP. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research question while Independent t-test was used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between WhatsApp usage and students’ academic performance?

Table 1: Mean CGPA scores of students who use WhatsApp and those who do not use WhatsApp

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WhatsApp Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students that use WhatsApp</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students who do not use WhatsApp</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean Difference 0.88

Table 1 shows that mean CGPA score of students that use WhatsApp as 3.07 with standard deviation as 0.82, while those who do not use WhatsApp CPA was shown as 2.19 with standard deviation of 0.09. The difference in their CGPA was shown as 0.88.

Research Question 2: How will the use of Facebook influence students’ academic performance?

Table 2: Mean CGPA scores of students who use Facebook and those who do not use Facebook
Table 2 shows that mean CGPA score of students that use Facebook as 2.96 with standard deviation of 0.93 while those who do not use Facebook was shown as 2.48 with standard deviation of 0.91. The difference in their CGPA was shown as 0.48.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between WhatsApp usage and students’ academic performance.

Table 3 shows that there is significant relationship between WhatsApp usage and students’ academic performance.

Table 3: Independent sampled t-test on influence of WhatsApp on students’ academic performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students Performance</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that there is significant relationship between Facebook usage and students’ academic performance.

Table 4: Independent sampled t-test on influence of Facebook on students’ academic performance

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students Performance</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion of Findings

This study investigated social network usage and its influence on undergraduate students’ academic performance in Benue State University. Specifically, the study examined students’ use of WhatsApp and Facebook social networks. The findings showed that there was significant relationship between WhatsApp usages on students’ academic performance. This is in consonance with the findings of Amry (2014), Boulink and Dashan (2014) and Church and de Olivera (2013) who found in their various studies that students who used WhatsApp
social network improve in their academic performance. Amry (2014) found in a study that students who were exposed to WhatsApp social network learning activities gained higher mean scores than those exposed to the traditional face-to-face classroom learning findings also indicated that students had a high positive attitude towards the use of WhatsApp social network. Boulink and Dashan (2014), Church and de Oliveira (2013) also concluded in their studies that students responded positively to the improvement of their academic exercises as they had easy accessibility to learning materials which made learning cooperative and effective in an informal environment.

The finding of this study has also established the positive relationship between students’ usage of WhatsApp social network and academic performance. The benefits of WhatsApp usage by students are numerous. As observed by Church and de Oliveira (2013) WhatsApp has become a shared platform that enhances accessibility encourages cooperation and motivate students to take active part in academic activities. The finding however, contrasts with Yeboah and Ewur (2014) and Oyewo and Oladipupo (2008) who established in their studies that students who were exposed to various social networks activities declined in their academic performance. Yeboah and Ewur (2014) found in a study that majority of students who used WhatsApp social network did so only for non-educational purposes.

Oyewo and Oladipupo (2008) also established that students’ academic performance kept declining because of their excessive engagement in non-educational network sites. This is not unconnected with students coined forms of language used as they send messages and exchange information. This form of communication affects their proficiency in English language as L2 which result in their performance when they are eventually evaluated. The implication here is that social networks which are part of the new literacies may be doing more harm than good on literacy development, depending on the perception and attitudes students have towards the use of these social platforms.

The result of this study also showed that there is a significant relationship between Facebook usage and students’ academic performance. This finding is in consonance with Thurairaj, Hoon, Sinha, Roy and Wei-Fong (2015) and Egbe and Muodumogu (2014) who found a positive relationship between Facebook usage and students’ academic activities. Thurairaj, Hoon, Sinha-Roy and Wei-Fong (2015) proved in a study that 99.2% students who used Facebook responded positively to their use of this social network as they claimed to have found Facebook as a positive learning tool that helped them to learn new sets of English vocabulary. Egbe and Muodumogu (2014) found in a study that 900 million membership of students who used Facebook as a social platform promoted reading and literacy learning among academic staff and undergraduate students.

Facebook being the most popular social network used by students can actually be utilized as a social learning resource and space for new literacy practices. As students actively use and distribute knowledge-based information through Facebook, they could stand to gain a lot in their academics. The potentials of Facebook in enhancing academic performance cannot therefore be over-emphasized in the development of literacy. The finding of this study however
debunked the findings of Adaja and Ayodele (2013) who established that 67% of students who used Facebook social network did so only for non-educational purposes.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The increasing rate of students’ use of social networks in Nigeria is inevitable. The world has become a global village and the new media literacy has made it possible for new styles of communication among undergraduate students. This form of communication is cheap, fast and convenient for conveying lots of information. These social networks have contributed positively to students’ knowledge and academic performance. Despite some negative influences and pervasive use of students’ academic activities, this study has proved that the use of WhatsApp and Facebook networks has positive relationships with students’ academic performance. Based on the conclusion, the study recommended that management of tertiary institutions should set up counselling sections for students periodically on the positive and negative implications of using social networks sites on their academics. Facebook and WhatsApp which seem to be the most popular social networks should be integrated into educational and pedagogical practices to promote literacy. Lecturers and students should collaborate in using these social networks as a platform for learning. English language educators should discourage students from using coined and wrong abbreviations in their writings in order to promote effective communication.

**References**


