

Students' Perceptions of the Use of Social Media in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

Omar Alshehri, Vic Lally

Abstract—This paper examined the attitudes of using social media tools to support learning at a university in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, it investigated the students' current usage of these tools and examined the barriers they could face during the use of social media tools in the education process. Participants in this study were 42 university students. A web-based survey was used to collect data for this study. The results indicate that all of the students were familiar with social media and had used at least one type of social media for learning. It was found out that all students had very positive attitudes towards the use of social media and welcomed using these tools as a supplementary to the curriculum. However, the results indicated that the major barriers to using these tools in learning were distraction, opposing Islamic religious teachings, privacy issues, and cyberbullying. The study recommended that this study could be replicated at other Saudi universities to investigate factors and barriers that might affect Saudi students' attitudes toward using social media to support learning.

Keywords—Saudi Arabia, social media, benefits of social media use, barriers to social media use, higher education.

I. INTRODUCTION

AS social media technology develops, it allows users ever greater access to valuable knowledge. 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 (to some extent) effective means of communicating ideas and feelings among users. Reference [9] note that students use social media tools to develop their identities, beliefs, and stances on various issues, including politics, religion, economy, work, intimate relationships, etc. Users can do this by sharing links, engaging in online learning, and seeking jobs. It could be argued that using these tools to support learning encourages self-motivated and autonomous learning, and the tools themselves are becoming an integral part of learners' experiences [3]. Moreover, social media tools can act as resources to support educational communication between students 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 Saudi Arabian university, and the barriers perceived by the

university's students to using these tools.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Advantages of Using Social Media Tools for Learning

The use of social media tools has many implications for wider economic and social life [5]. Social media tools have received a great deal of recent attention for their potential to facilitate and enhance learning [16]. The interactive nature of many social media tools allows learners to become active participants, who can co-construct learning experiences with their peers and instructors and receive resources and feedback from their instructors, while avoiding feelings of intimidation that often arise when asking questions in front of a large lecture hall of classmates [13]. The rise of social media tools has transformed internet users from passive receivers to active learners. Indeed, [12] stated that social media tools can be used to improve the quality of teaching, share educational content, increase students' motivation, and promote collaborative learning. Reference [4, p. 40] states social media is beneficial to student learning as it leads to "greater engagement, greater interest, and students taking more control and responsibility for their education". Handheld devices have contributed to these developments. 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 [6]. A community can be created locally for a particular class, beyond the boundaries of a single classroom, or even beyond the campus. According to a recent survey on the use of social media in US higher education, 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 [15]. Likewise, from a pre-semester and post-semester questionnaire at Griffith University in Australia, it emerged that 78% of the students surveyed believed that a Facebook page would increase student interaction and 51% felt that it would augment instructor interaction [9].

Reference [7, p. 1] argued for the usefulness of utilising social media in higher education and the important role that Facebook can play in classrooms. Based on results of a study, they concluded that "the evidence presented reinforces the view that such networks have untapped potential capable of making a significant contribution to the learning and teaching process.". Reference [8, p. 3] lists multiple benefits of using social media tools in higher education, including, "retention, socialisation,

O. A. Alshehri is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Glasgow (UK) studying the reality of using social media as e-learning tools in Saudi Arabian higher education (phone: 447454625470; e-mail: o.alshehri.1@research.gla.ac.uk).

L. Vic is Professor of Education and Director of the ILETS Research Group at the University of Glasgow (UK) (e-mail: vic@viclally.co.uk).

collaborative learning, student engagement, sense of control and ownership”. Furthermore, researchers indicated that students who are taught using social media tools are able to collaborate and engage in problem-solving, receive feedback, engage in teamwork, and overcome geographical boundaries [1], [14].

B. Disadvantages of Using Social Media Tools for Learning

Many of the complaints about social media technology have come from educators whose students are distracted from their studies and claim that technology adversely affects academic performance. Reference [11] argued that using social media in the classroom can become a distraction as these tools are attractive to use, and they catch students’ attention during class time. As [11, p. 1] states, “Facebook and Twitter divert students’ attention away from what’s happening in class and are ultimately disruptive to the learning process”. There are also challenges relating to cyber authoritarianism. Moreover, students and instructors face certain barriers when utilising social media for learning, particularly in situations where teachers lack sufficient knowledge to implement the new technology in their classrooms. However, it is issues related to privacy that represent perhaps the main challenge posed by this technology. Using statistical analysis of Facebook data, [10] conducted a study to examine how Facebook affects the privacy of students at the University of Oklahoma. They found that over 70% of user’s willingly post large amounts of personal information, such as age, gender, location and interests, and demonstrate a disregard for both the privacy settings and Facebook’s privacy policy and terms of service. In a Saudi Arabian context, [2] also conducted a study to examine the use of social media sites. The results of the study indicated that privacy and security concerns continue to play a critical role in preventing male and female students from using social media as educational tools. Cyberbullying is another challenge when using social media in higher education. In a study about cyberbullying at Indiana State University, [11] found that about 22% of college students experienced online harassment and 25% of this group reported that the harassment was through social media sites. These challenges raise issues about the appropriate use of social media in educational settings, whether formal or informal. As [17, p. 26] points out, “Schools need to ensure that guidelines are provided for expectations about acceptable online communication, in relation to school matters”.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at an emerging university in southern Saudi Arabia. An electronic survey was distributed in Arabic to examine the current usage of social media tools to support learning, these tools’ benefits in teaching and learning, and the purposes for which they were used. The sample consisted of 42 participants: 29 males and 13 females. The survey was carried out during the 2017 autumn semester. The questionnaire was distributed via an online platform to university faculty members. The questionnaire was collected from the sample through direct contact and online, using Google Forms, with the links sent by email. SPSS (Statistical

Package for Social Science 21 version) was applied to help clarify the study’s descriptive data.

IV. RESULTS

As can be seen in Table I, the study revealed that the rate of social media usage among students was very high (97.6%). Almost all respondents in the survey indicated a degree of usage of social media. Moreover, 56.9% of the students owned smartphones, while (30.6%) owned a laptop. The socio-demographic data indicated that 69% were male, while 31% were female. The greatest proportion of the sample was in the 18-22 year age groups (50%). Additionally, the vast majority of the sample participants had a social media account, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat (95.2%). It is also apparent from the results that the social media tools that attracted most usage among the student respondents were WhatsApp (24.8%), Instagram (19.9%), Snapchat (18.0%), Twitter (17.4%), YouTube (13.7%), and Facebook (6.2%).

TABLE I
 PARTICIPANTS’ DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

	Frequency	Percentage
Use of social media		
Yes	41	97.6
No	1	2.4
Total	42	100%
Means of access to social media tools		
Computer	5	6.9
Laptop	22	30.6
Smartphone	41	56.9
iPod/ iPad	4	5.6
Total	72	100%
Sex groups		
Male	29	69
Female	13	31
Total	42	100%
Age groups		
18 to 22	21	50
23 to 27	17	40.5
28 to 32	3	7.1
33 and above	1	2.4
Total	42	100%
Social media tools used		
WhatsApp	40	24.8
Facebook	10	6.2
Twitter	28	17.4
Instagram	32	19.9
Snapchat	29	18.0
YouTube	22	13.7
Total	161	100%

As shown in Table II, 69% of the students in the sample had attended a class in which social media were used. Moreover, 76.2% of the students in the sample mentioned that they use social media tools to communicate with their teachers. Interestingly, over half of the sample (61.9%) stated that they do understand social media websites in English. In addition, 83.3% of the sample accepted that social media was a tool that should be utilised by teachers. Moreover, almost three-quarters

of the sample believed that social media was the best way for teachers to reach students (92.9%). Most of the sample (54.7%) had used social media for between four and seven years, 31% had used social media for two to three years, while 14.3% had used social media for more than eight years.

TABLE II
QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS

Statements	Answers	Frequency	Percentage
I have taken a class where social media were used	Yes	29	69
	No	13	31
	Total	42	100%
I have used social media to communicate with my teachers	Yes	32	76.2
	No	10	23.8
	Total	42	100%
I understand social media websites that are in English language	Yes	26	61.9
	No	16	38.1
	Total	42	100%
I think that using social media is the best way for teachers to reach students	Yes	39	92.9
	No	3	7.1
	Total	42	100%
I have used social media tools for:	2 to 7 years	23	54.7%
	2 to 3 years	13	31%
	8 years or more	6	14.3%
	Total	42	100%

As shown in Table III, almost the entire sample (95.2%) believed that social media was important. Most of the sample (88.1%) used social media for learning in colleges. Moreover, 90.5% of the sample believed that social media had changed Saudi students' learning culture. Over half of the sample (61.9%) felt that using social media in teaching was effective for supporting students' learning processes. Half of the sample (50%) held that using social media in teaching decreases the dependency of students on their instructors, while the other half believed that it increases their dependency.

TABLE III
PERCEPTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Statements	Answers	Frequency	Percentage
I think that social media are important for learning	Yes	40	95.2
	No	2	4.8
	Total	42	100%
I use social media for learning at college	Yes	37	88.1
	No	5	11.9
	Total	42	100%
I think that social media have changed Saudi students' learning culture	Yes	38	90.5
	No	4	9.5
	Total	42	100%
I think that using social media in teaching is effective in supporting students' learning processes	Yes	26	61.9
	No	16	38.1
	Total	42	100%
I think that using social media in teaching decreases the dependency of students on their instructors	Yes	21	50
	No	21	50
	Total	42	100%

As can be seen in Table IV, the participants considered the major barriers to their use of social media to be distraction (89.9%), opposing Islamic religious teachings (89.9%), privacy

issues (40.1%), and cyberbullying (38.1%).

TABLE IV
DISADVANTAGES OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS FOR LEARNING

Statements	Answers	Frequency	Percentage
I am concerned about privacy issues related to the use of social media tools	Yes	18	40.1
	No	24	59.9
	Total	42	100%
I feel concerned about the dangers of cyberbullying when using social media	Yes	16	38.1
	No	26	61.9
	Total	42	100%
Social media usage could distract students' focus away from academic learning	Yes	29	89.9
	No	13	10.1
	Total	42	100%
Some contents of social media oppose Islamic religious teachings	Yes	29	89.9
	No	13	10.1
	Total	42	100%

V. DISCUSSION

Social media are still far from being regularly used for teaching in academic contexts. Therefore, the frequency of use is generally low, with less than 40% of the academics surveyed 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 high level of student adoption of social media tools. This result is in line with other studies on students' use of social media [6], [15] [1], which found that students 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 also consistent with more general studies on social media usage that show that females and young people spend more time with these tools [13], [15].

The study found that all of the students were familiar with social media and had used at least one type of social media for learning. Moreover, almost all students showed positive attitudes toward using social media as a tool for learning in education. Several studies conducted in other countries also report similar findings of students' attitudes toward social media tools in education [4], [15], and [12]. Additionally, a total of 83.3% of participating students felt that social media tools supported students and gave them an opportunity to acquire diverse knowledge. Accordingly, the majority of the student participants (83.3%) believed that social media should be utilised by teachers. They believed that social media tools are important, useful, and enjoyable tools to support their learning and to connect students with each other making learning more authentic and part of daily student activities. Through these various networks, it has become easier for users to post, tweet, record a clip, create a video, and disseminate information to a specific group or to the public in general. These were all sources of motivation for them to utilise these platforms in teaching and learning activities. The student 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 students,

collaborate to share tips and resources, allow students to ask questions to their instructors, send lectures, and receive students' submissions. This result is consistent with those of studies conducted in other Saudi universities [8], [14], which indicated that social media tools have positive impacts on students' academic achievements.

Also, the majority of the study participants (97.6%) are currently using social media tools and are willing to use these tools in the future for learning. They felt that using social media could be effective for supporting their learning processes when the necessary infrastructure and clear educational policies are in place. This result is consistent with studies conducted by [9], [5], which emphasised the potential of social media sites to increase interaction, collaboration, and networking between teachers and students as well as increase engagement in course material and promoted the development of informal learning communities.

The questionnaire results also revealed that students are familiar with social media tools and indicated that the students are attached to the technology in their hands. It is perhaps in part thanks to this familiarity that the students started to enjoy the use of social media in education given that they lived in a world of social media so much of the time. Therefore, they find these tools easy to deal with, especially Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia, and Facebook. 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. This result is in line with the study of [15, p. 14] which found that "the top two sites for personal use (YouTube and Facebook) remain the top two for professional use".

The Saudi students also mentioned certain negative perceptions they held of using social media tools for learning. Their concerns related to privacy issues, cyberbullying, and time usage. Other challenges that most of the participants in this study faced were their low awareness of the importance of social media as a tool to support their learning, a lack of information about how to use social media, and the 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 their full adoption as tools for learning. Students 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, such as, language and religious reservations. As most social media tools do not support the Arabic language, teachers 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 and student training in using social media tools for

learning. These results are in line with other studies [10], [17] [11], [2], 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.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alshehri, O. (2018). Using Social Media in Higher Education as Tools for Learning: What do faculty think? *Global Advanced Research Journals*, 7(1), 1-5.
- [2] Alsurehi, H. A., & Youbi, A. A. A. (2014). Towards applying social networking in higher education: Case study of Saudi Universities. *International Journal of Academic Research*, 6(5), 221-229.
- [3] Basu, B. (2017). Analyzing the Perception of Social Networking Sites as a Learning Tool among University Students: Case Study of a Business School in India. *World Academy of Science, Engineering, and Technology, International Journal of Social, Behavioral, Educational, Economic, Business and Industrial Engineering*, 11(7):1660-1666.
- [4] Blankenship, M. (2011). How social media can and should impact higher education. *Education Digest*, 76, 39-42.
- [5] Burbules, N. C. (2016). How we use and are used by social media in education. *Educational Theory*, 66(4): 551-565. doi:10.1111/edth.12188.
- [6] Coleman, V. (2013). 'Social media as a primary source: a coming of age', *EDUCAUSE Review*, (online) Available at <http://www.educause.edu/ero/article/social-media-primary-sourcecoming-age>.
- [7] Dickie, V. A., & Meier, H. (2015). The Facebook tutor: Networking education. *Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal*, 8(2).
- [8] Hoffman, E. (2009). Social media and learning environments: Shifting perspectives on the locus of control.
- [9] Imlawi, J., Gregg, D., & Karimi, J. (2015). Student engagement in course-based social networks: The impact of instructor credibility and use of communication. *Computers & Education*, 88, 84-96.
- [10] Jones, H. & Soltren, J. H. (2005). Facebook: Threats to privacy. *Project MAC: MIT Project on Mathematics and Computing*, 1, 1-76.
- [11] Lederer, K. (2012). Pros and cons of social media in the classroom. *Campus Technology*. Retrieved from www.campustechnology.com
- [12] Manca, S. & Ranieri, M. (2013). Is it a tool suitable for learning? A critical review of the literature on Facebook as a technology-enhanced learning environment. *Journal of Computer-Assisted Learning*, 29(6): 487-504.
- [13] McLoughlin, C., & Lee, M. J. (2010). Personalised and self-regulated learning in the Web 2.0 era: International exemplars of innovative pedagogy using social software. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 26(1).
- [14] Rambe, P. & Nel, L. (2015). Technological utopia, dystopia, and ambivalence: Teaching with social media at a South African university. *British Journal of Educational Technology: Journal of the Council for Educational Technology*, 46(3): 629-648. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12159>.
- [15] Seaman, J. & Tinti-Kane, H. (2013). *Social Media for Teaching and Learning*, Pearson Learning Solutions and the Babson Survey Research Group, (online) Available at <http://www.pearsonlearningsolutions.com/assets/downloads/reports/social-media-for-teaching-and-learning-2013-report.pdf>.
- [16] Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.
- [17] Wankel, C. (2009). Management education using social media. *Organization Management Journal*, 6(4): 251-262.