INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' LEARNING EXPERIENCE: FACEBOOK AS A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Due to the increasing use of social networking sites in the last couple of years, these virtual communities have often been blamed for distracting students and taking more of their concentration and time. However, many studies have revealed that students use this social media platform not only for communication and entertainment reasons but for educational purposes as well. Our objective in this work is, therefore, to investigate the potential role that Facebook plays in enhancing students' learning experience. In this respect, based on the survey we conducted amongst Moroccan higher education students, it was demonstrated that 87.4% of the respondents have recourse to this social network for educational purposes. In fact, most of the surveyed students reported that they use Facebook to gain access to valuable learning materials, check for homework assignments and class-related information and activities, discuss various topics with peers as well as get help on academic-related materials. Nonetheless, despite the major role that Facebook plays in improving the students' learning experience, it was found out that communication between students and instructors on this social network was minimal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the recent advances in information and communication technologies, the use of social media has exploded in the past couple of years and will certainly continue to increase in the coming years. Social media platforms are of different types, but they can be divided into three main classes. The first class includes online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Viadeo, Google+ and LinkedIn. The second class is composed of content sharing applications such as YouTube, Dailymotion, Dropbox and Slideshare. The third class consists of content production and editing services like blogs, discussion boards and wikis.

Nowadays, these social media platforms are widely used by millions of people around the globe for various purposes. Given the ubiquitous use of these digital networks, they seem not only to impact how people interact with each other, but also to influence the way many activities and processes are conducted in different domains. Nonetheless, one of the major fields in which the use and impact of these Web-based platforms is very promising is education. Indeed, a growing number of youth, most of whom are students, are greatly immersed in these online communities, and resort to them for many reasons (Bicen & Cavus, 2011; Madge et al., 2009). They use them to get connected with family members and friends, meet new people, share thoughts of common interests, and most importantly to deepen their understanding and knowledge on various subjects and, thus, to improve their learning experience (Faizi et al. 2014; Faizi & El Fkihi, 2016).

To test the validity and the efficiency of the role that social media may play in education, our objective in this paper is to investigate the potential impact of social networks in enhancing students' learning. Nevertheless, our analysis in the present study will be confined to Facebook.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section Two examines the potential benefits of using social networks in education. Section Three presents and discusses the students' attitudes and perceptions towards using Facebook as an educational platform. Finally, Section Four concludes this paper.

2. USING SOCIAL NETWORKS AS EDUCATIONAL PLATFORMS: POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES

Though initially designed for communication and interaction purposes, social networking websites have made their ways into a variety of fields. However, one of the domains that has witnessed an intensive implementation of such Web-based platforms is the education sector. Many studies have actually shown that this set of social media platforms can be made use of as e-learning online communities thanks to the educational benefits that they offer to both students and educators (Faizi et al., 2015; Mallia, 2016).

The first benefit of using social networks in education is that they have strong potential to enhance communication and interaction among students, and between faculty members and students (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014; Camus et al., 2016; Kabilan et al., 2010; Ractham & Firpo, 2011). Given the fact that effective communication between teachers and students inside and outside the classroom is essential for the successful running of the learning process, social networks can be used by every student or teacher to interact with others in the larger community. Using networking sites such as Facebook, Google+, Viadeo or WhatsApp, teachers can post assignments, answer students' queries, extend in-class discussion and announce forthcoming events. Moreover, these online networks can enable teachers to provide their students with the instant feedback that they need. On the other hand, students can use these virtual communities to seek help from peers or instructors beyond classroom walls. Via these networks, students can also assist classmates or other learners who cannot understand a particular topic or who have trouble with learning materials. These continual teacher-student or student-student interactions will not only help in fostering the students' learning experience but will also contribute in enhancing teaching methodologies.

Social networking websites can also serve as collaborative platforms (Suwannatthachote & Tantrarungroj, 2012; Lampe et al., 2011). In fact, thanks to the assortment of features that they incorporate, these online communities can enhance collaboration amongst students and teachers and facilitate the exchange of ideas much better than any other social media tool. On such platforms, users are not only allowed to send messages or post comments but they can also upload audios, videos, images as well as text documents. In this way, social networks foster collaborative learning as they enable students and learners to work together jointly towards a common objective. Henceforth, rather than striving individually to work on independent parts of a given project or assignment, students, teachers, and other learning community members are given one single virtual space where they can discuss, collaborate, share knowledge, and help each other gain better understanding of the learning materials. This collaboration, which can occur from both inside and outside the classroom, can contribute to enhancing the students' learning experience (Ractham & Firpo, 2011).

An additional advantage of using social networks in education is that they are capable of increasing students' engagement in the learning process (Chen et al., 2010). Since the popularity of social networks around the world is primarily due to the various social features that these online communities are bristling with, the same features are capable of attracting students and learners to the learning opportunities that can be made available on these platforms (Rutherford, 2012). As opposed to classroom-based learning and teaching in which students often cannot voice their opinions or take part in different class activities, social networks enable every student to express his views and share their ideas with others. Therefore, students who seldom participate in class simply because they are timid, intimated or even bored can actively get engaged in the learning experience and can enthusiastically collaborate with classmates or other learners (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007).

Besides enhancing communication, collaboration and students' engagement in different educational activities, social networks can also serve as a digital library of valuable educational materials. In actual fact, since any user can currently create and share content on the Internet, the quantity of learning resources that is available on social networks on any given subject or topic is extremely huge. This includes text documents, videos, audio files, as well as ready-made educational activities that a student or teacher could wish for. Henceforth, students are no longer restricted to knowledge that they get from their teachers in the classroom or to the resources that are offered on their institutions' Learning Management Systems. By contrast, students can, on social networks, have access to pertinent learning materials that would help them successfully complete their courses.

Despite the educational opportunities that social networks offer in education, many educators are still hesitant in embracing these online communities. Thus, to test the validity and usefulness of these digital platforms, evidence is required to confirm the educational value of these tools. In this regard, the purpose of the following section is to explore how higher education students perceive the use of Facebook as a virtual education setting.

3. STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS USING FACEBOOK AS AN EDUCATIONAL PLATFORM

Though it was launched only a few years ago, Facebook is currently the most popular social network in the world with more than 1.4 billion daily active users (Statista, 2018). Facebook is commonly used to keep in touch with friends and family, and to constantly get up-to-date with current news events. Nevertheless, even if this social network was initially designed as a communication and an entrainment outlet, its potentials in education are aspiring.

3.1 Research Methodology

To explore the impact of Facebook on education, a survey was carried out amongst Moroccan higher education students to examine their attitudes and perceptions towards using this social network as an educational platform. In this respect, an online-based survey was submitted to the participants in the study. Our choice of an Internet-based rather than a paper-based questionnaire was motivated by the fact that the former is quicker, easier to analyze and it enables us to reach the majority of students.

The survey was sent by email to about 420 students from Mohammed V University in Rabat in the fourth quarter of 2017. Yet, only 253 students completed it. The questionnaire was composed of two main parts. The first was devoted to the informants' use and usage of Facebook. The second was concerned with retrieving information about the students' attitudes towards using this social network for educational purposes.

3.2 Data Processing

Analysis of the collected data revealed that the great majority of the students who participated in the survey are greatly immersed in this online network. Indeed, 94.46% of the surveyed students were found out to be active members of Facebook. Only 14 informants claimed not to be members of this virtual community.

The students' immersion in Facebook is clearly confirmed by the amount of time that they spend on this platform. Results of the study have, actually, demonstrated that most informants (90%) spend more than 3 hours a week on this network. However, only 10% of the students are connected for less than 2 hours. This clearly shows that being connected to this social network is a priority amongst students.

Concerning the main reasons behind using Facebook, the respondents claimed they resort to this social networking website for various purposes. The findings have, actually, proven that the subjects use Facebook not only to entertain themselves, keep in touch with friends and family members, but most importantly to improve their learning in different subjects. In this context, 87.4% of the students who use Facebook noted they have recourse to this online community mainly to enhance their learning experience. Students noted that Facebook enables them to access learning resources, check for class exercises and assignments, discuss different course topics with classmates and to seek help on issues they are stuck in.

Another piece of evidence that confirms that students use Facebook for learning purposes comes from the kind of people that they get in contact with via this online community. In fact, since most of the surveyed students stated that they use Facebook mainly for educational reasons, the people they interact mostly with online are classmates (81.2%). This means that discussion on this social network is likely to be related to educational issues.

Concerning the activities of students on Facebook, results of the study revealed that a significant number of the subjects are dynamically engaged in generating educational content on this platform. The students' contributions on Facebook take various forms: posting comments (53.3%), providing links to educational resources (39.9%), announcing academic activities or events (35.3%) and answering students' questions (33.9%). However, about 30% of the students seem to be passive users as their use of Facebook is restricted to viewing what others post.

Moreover, given the intense debate as to the impact of social media in general and Facebook in particular on students' academic performance, the subjects were asked to select among five choices (i.e. *very positive, positive, I do not know, negative and very negative*) the kind of effect that this social network has on their academic outcomes. Though the subjects' answers were conflicting, most informants (46.2%) agree on the

fact that Facebook has a positive impact on their learning experience while only 16.7% argued it is negative. The rest of the surveyed students were neutral.

However, despite the students' positive attitudes towards using Facebook as an educational tool, it was noticed that teachers are still reluctant in embracing this virtual space in their teaching. In fact, when asked whether they interact with their teachers on Facebook, 72.3% of the interviewed students stated that no interaction occurs between them and their teachers online. Of all the respondents who interact with faculty members (i.e. 27.7%), 13% reported that they communicate only with one single teacher on this platform.

Taking into consideration the findings above, it is quite clear that Facebook supports education given its potential benefits for both the end user and the learning provider. Therefore, as opposed to educators who think that social networks distract students from learning, Facebook has proven to allow students to get connected with peers, have access to valuable educational content and learn in a social way. For their parts, faculty members can interact in a quick and cost effective way with their target audience and get insights on what their students are learning and how they leaning it. All these findings go in line with the results of many other previous studies that converge on the major role that social media in general and Facebook in particular play in enriching students' learning experience (Faizi, 2018a; Faizi, 2018b; Moghavvemi et al., 2017; Staines & Lauchs, 2013).

4. CONCLUSION

Our objective in this paper was to examine the potential role of Facebook in enhancing students' learning experience. In fact, based on the online survey we carried out amongst Moroccan higher education students, it was revealed that nearly all the subjects are greatly immersed in this social network and use it for different purposes. In this vein, it was found out that Facebook is not only used by the students for social connectivity, but also as an educational space. Results of the study also demonstrated that most of the surveyed students acknowledged the positive impact that this online social network has on improving their learning experience. Nevertheless, despite the educational opportunities that Facebook presents, it was noted that the number of teachers who interact with their students on this social network is still minimal. However, since social networking websites are here to stay, we recommend that faculty members take full advantage of the educational benefits that this online platform provides.

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