# Social Media in Tertiary Education-Vhembe Further Education Training College Case Study

Manzira Francis Mungofa and Tsvara Peter

# Abstract

Social media technologies are being widely used by students in institutions of higher education and these are transforming their way of learning, social conduct, communication and networking. The intend of this research was conducted to determine value of social media technologies to students in higher education but with a focus that was directed towards students in a vocational training college. A random sample of 105 students from Vhembe Further Education Training College (FET) participated in the study and they were the following departments, Business/Finance, Engineering, Hospitality and Tourism. Analysis of results was executed through application of SPSS statistical package. Findings show that social media technology has infused a new culture of learning among students. In addition, social media applications which are being widely used by students for learning activities that include studying, access of education content, and social communication are: Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube.

Keywords: Learning culture; social media; social networking technologies.

# Introduction

## Background of study

Trends in technology developments are altering the course of some existing models and methodologies of enhancing student learning to those who are who are engaged in both formal and informal education. Most initiatives for educational technologies are affected by a broad range of challenges that include weak bandwidth, lack of qualified personnel in the field of technology and old infrastructure, (Carr & Czerniewicz, 2011). Social media technology usage has increased in the past five years due to a combination of factors that entails affordability of the mobile devices and increased internet bandwidth amongst the consumers. (Bell, 2010; Selwyn, 2012). This paper will address the concept of social media technologies being used in the field of higher education. Social media is being widely used through desktop computers and mobile devices. Trubitt and Overholtzer (2009) indicated in their research that social networks have been embedded in people's cultures resulting in creation of personal and professional networks.

The most popular interfaces being used are Facebook, Flicker and Twitter although the list of some is endless. Users can connect in cyberspace, creating groups that enable sharing and exchanging of information and ideas. According to Zanamwe, Rupere and Kufandirimbwa (2013), social networking technologies were received with mixed reactions by academics in developing countries although the trend seems to be in their favor of adoption. The social networking technologies improve computer skills of a student who may not have had access to formal introductory computer courses. The increase of social media tools has contributed towards an increase in user generated content through use of self-help tutorials that are freely available from the internet.

## Research Objectives

This research seeks to establish whether social media technologies are being considered as disruptive or complimentary technologies in the context of Further Education Training College located in the rural environment. Another aspect will focus on how the technologies are benefiting students in the rural environment where technological changes lag behind unlike in the urban areas.

# Literature review

## Social media in learning

Social media technology is now an essential requirement in people's daily lives contributed by a combination of factors that include growth of affordability of mobile computing devices, improved internet wireless bandwidth, social media technologies and several other web 2.0 technologies (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). The present day college students are exposed to existing, new and emerging technologies in many aspects of their lives (Browning, Gerlich, & Westermann, 2011). They use the following devices on daily basis: e-readers, tablets, desktop computers, laptops, and cell phones / mobile devices to actively engage in social networking, text messaging, blogging, content sharing, online learning, and much more (Cassidy, Griffin, Manolovitz, Shen, & Turney, 2011). Paliktzoglou and Suhonen (2014) argued that concept behind social media tools were not a new phenomenon as interfaces such as chat rooms, internet forums, message boards, web communities and blogs were being used since the revolution of internet.

In social media, people use the web based and mobile applications for social interaction. In addition, individuals and organizations can generate new content, share existing content in the cyberspace. A number of interfaces used for social media have increased with Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp,

MySpace, and Flicker being among the top. (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar & Gonzalez-Canchem, 2012; Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2010).

The social media tools and networking sites enables students to engage with one another, express and share their creativity. There are drawbacks associated with social media technology especially when students develop a continuous usage of internet which encompasses reduction in higher-order reasoning processes. In addition continuous internet use is likely to exposes students to interactive, repetitive, and addictive stimuli that produce permanent changes in brain structure, WCER (2011).

Zanamwe, et al. (2013), Greenhow and Gleason (2012), Junco, Elasky and Heighberger (2012) revealed in their research, that students who improved in their communication, technology and research skills, assist in helping student connection with application concept as well as increasing student engagement in course material, through the use of social media which are critical in their development. This is an indication that social media technologies contribute positively behind the classroom but to a student's life experience, knowledge and skills this develops over a period of time. Application of social media in education would imply that learners have to take lead by participating, producing knowledge rather that consuming only which in turn contribute towards support of personal life goals and needs (Lee & McLoughlin, 2010). A point to note is that learners do not only engage in social interaction on the social media but contribute in the shaping of their career and personal life that form key components of personal development.

## Application of social media in student recruitment

International universities have embraced social media for international recruitment of students due to increased competition and reduced funding by the governments. In order to meet the recruitment targets, it is important for colleges and universities to adapt to changes as the social media technology platforms enable them to reach out a large target of potential students across the world (Choudaha, 2013). The use of websites by the institutions reduces communication costs over geographic distances and in addition, disintermediation will reduce the communication channel since students are able to connect directly. However institutions need to remain guarding against loss of information control due to the unlimited number of social applications available. It should be noted that social media conversations are informal which requires high interaction for the parties involved which enables deep engagement with prospective students intending to enroll at a given institution.

## Disruptiveness of technologies in higher education

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have significantly invested in electronic learning technologies such as Blackboard, and Moodle, but they have not been universally adopted and used by students and staff. Instead, other technologies such as social media or social networking technologies which are not owned or controlled by the institutions are widely used to support learning and teaching (Flavin, 2012). Disruptive technologies are those that disrupt established practices, often starting with a small number of users, but growing over time to the extent that they displace a previously dominant, incumbent technology. Christensen's theory of Disruptive Innovation (1997) emphasizes that the disruptive technologies are not designed explicitly to support learning and teaching in higher education, but have educational potential. The theory propounded by Christensen (1997) shows that new technology can disrupt existing practices which may run a risk of rejection, but also that the new technology can go on to change the practice itself. Facebook is a success story in higher education when compared to other social networks because of easy to use features and is deemed as a lightweight technology (Boyd & Ellison, 2010). As such, educators' interests have increase both in use and research of Facebook.

However, Facebook, Google, and other web based applications can simultaneously seize and fragment a human being's attention. They have the possibility to subvert higher-order reasoning activities, that include the kind of focus, concentration, and persistence that is necessary for critical thinking and intellectual development (Wisconsin Centre for Education Research, 2011).

**Significance of technologies in higher education**

Social media supported learning seems to be occurring more outside the formal higher education system as opposed to the internal systems since several platforms are being used to distribute learning content and courseware, and a list among them include YouTube, EDU, iTunes U, Academic Earth. Applications used by students do differ from across the continent although there is a list of popular interfaces widely accessed, (Selwyn, 2011). In the South African context, MXit which is an indigenous mobile social networking platform, has played a crucial role in the spread of the mobile Internet in South Africa (Bosch, 2008; Chigona, Chigona, Ngqokelela, & Mpofu, 2009; Nitsckie & Parker, 2009). The cost of social media technology is minimal to such an extent that students can be able to afford both the devices and amount of data required to access applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Mixit. For example, more than 7.4 million registered MXit users (Worldwideworx, 2014) in South Africa pay only 1 South African cent (US$.0012) per instant message. A latest encouraging trend among the general population that will entail the overall population of students was the announcement by CNBCAFRICA (2014) that gave East African customers free access to Facebook social networking site across all mobile networks after a strategic partnership with Tigo. A very positive development was the ability of the Facebook site to be offered in English and Swahili, the national language of Tanzanians and the majority of people in East, Central and Southern Africa. Below was a quote from the general manager, Diego Gutierrez.

*"Facebook has been a fantastic driver of data on mobile networks. With this unique partnership, we are making Tigo stand out from the crowd and giving many customers their first taste of the internet and social media, including in Swahili. That's what creating the digital lifestyle all is about, and it reinforces our strategy to encourage more Tigo customers to use data as part of their daily communications activity,"*

Paliktzoglou and Suhonen (2014)'s research findings support that using Facebook can increase student engagement through communication and collaboration which makes it an important educational tool to support Problem Based Learning, (PBL).

Past research indicates that incorporation of social media in learning and teaching has the power to bring new ways of enquiry, communication, collaboration, knowledge development; in addition it can have negative or positive cognitive, social and emotional impacts. (Gao, Luo, & Zhang, 2012; Greenhow & Burton, 2011; Pimmer, Linxen, & Grohbiel, 2012; Ranieri, Manca, & Fini, 2012).

## Methodology

Case study approach was considered most suitable for this study as it seeks to *"build up a rich picture of an entity, using different kinds of data collection and gathering the views, perceptions, experiences and/or ideas of diverse individuals relating to the case."* (Hamilton, 2011). Yin (1994), defined a case study as *"an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and it relies on multiple sources of evidence"*. This enhances the understanding of the reality in the rural settings thereby enhancing the development of conclusion that will enable to determine the contribution of social media technology in higher education. This research covered Vhembe Further Education Training College. A questionnaire was used to collect primary data. It comprised of three sections namely demographics, experience in the use of social media and

benefits of using social media technology. A random sample of 105 students from all the departments (Business and Finance Engineering, Hospitality and Tourism) at the institution were drawn that formed sample size of the population. Thirteen students were used to pre validate the questionnaire. A mixed methodology approach for this research was adopted and a combination of quantitative and qualitative data was collected, through the use of a case study that involved questionnaires being administered. A single case study was used as this enabled data to be collected data from a wider range of different subjects which in the case are students. The case study approach allows for multi-perspective analysis in such that there is the interaction of the researchers and a relevant group of actors involved (Tellis, 1997).

## Results

This section shows the analysis and discussion of results of the study that was conducted after the survey. In this analysis, there were various presentation of graphical tools used to illustrate varying responses that were solicited from the survey.

Table 1. Gender of respondents

| Gender | Frequency | Percent |
|--------|-----------|---------|
| Male | 58 | 55.2 |
| Female | 47 | 44.8 |
| Total | 105 | 100.0 |

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the participants. A total number of 105 students participated in the survey and their gender showed that there were 55.2% male and 44.8% female students as shown in table 1.
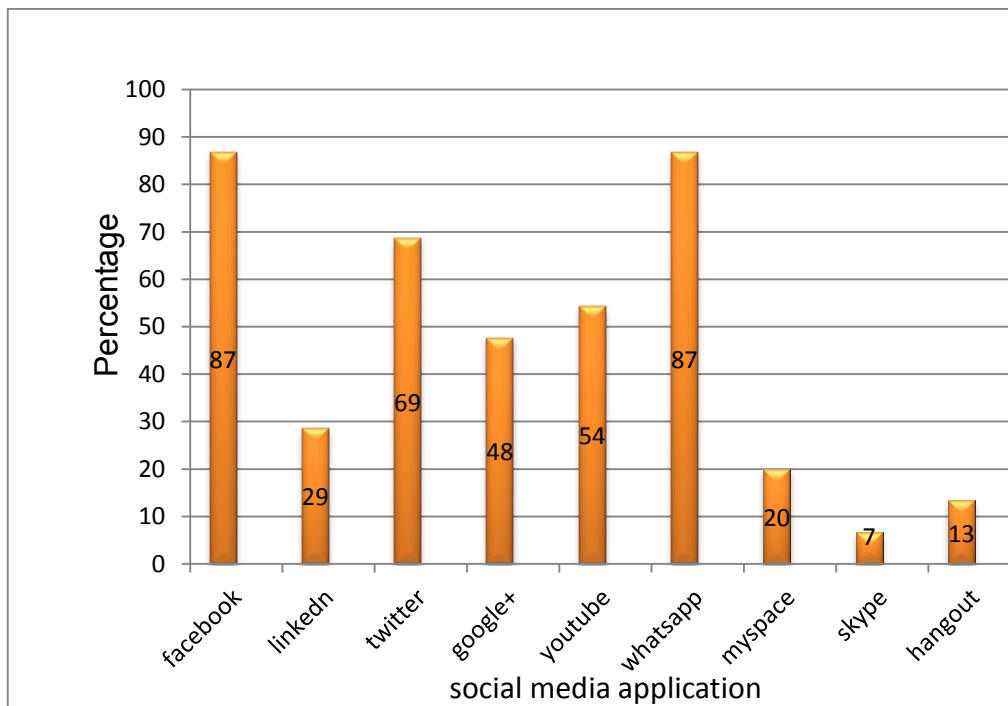


Figure 1. Social media application usage

Figure1 shows the responses of the students and their frequencies to the use of various social media application. High usage of the applications can be noted on Facebook which has 87%, and WhatsApp (87%) which are at par, followed by Twitter (69%), YouTube (54%) and Google+ (48). Although there are other applications included in the survey, their usage among students is below 30% and these include LinkedIn, MySpace, Skype, and Hangout.
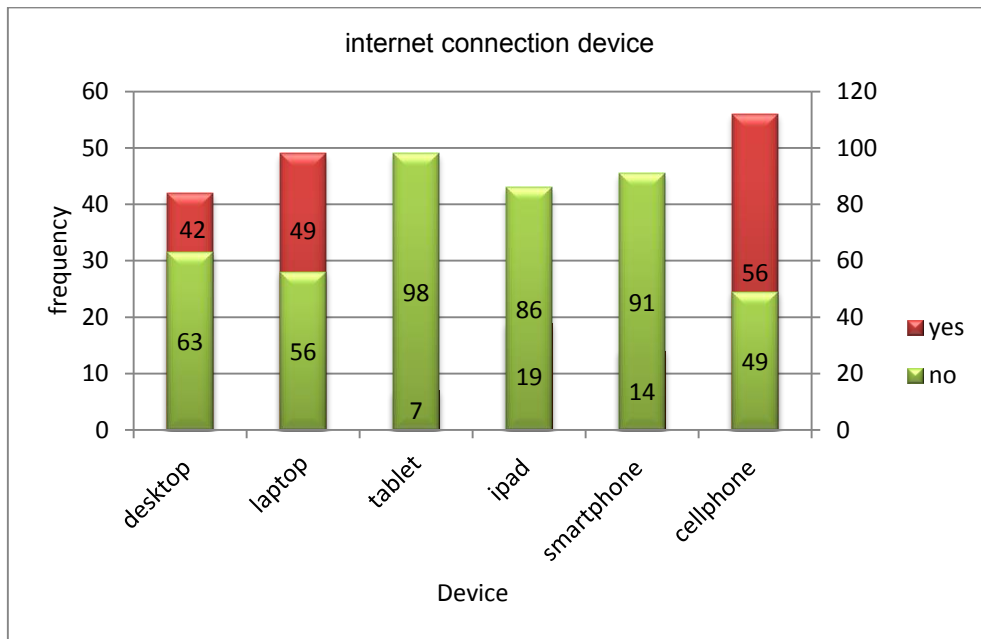
Figure 2. Devices used to connect to internet by students

Figure 2 shows the devices used by students to access internet connectivity. The highest percentage is depicted on cell phones which tops 56%, followed by laptop (49%) and desktop (42%). This indicates that students access internet from their mobile devices through the use of 2G or 3G network. All other remaining handheld devices that include tablets, iPads and smartphones, rank low in terms of their usage by students (below 20%).
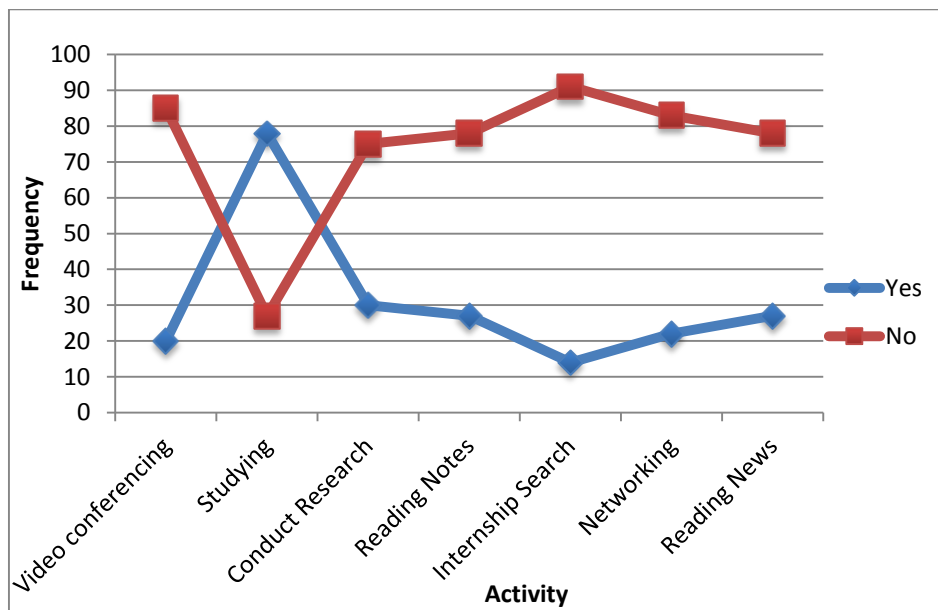


Figure 3. Social media usage

A result depicted in Figure 3 indicates that students use the social media application in their various study activities which are listed along the horizontal axis. Highest response confirms that social media is being widely used for studying purposes followed by research, and reading both news and notes.
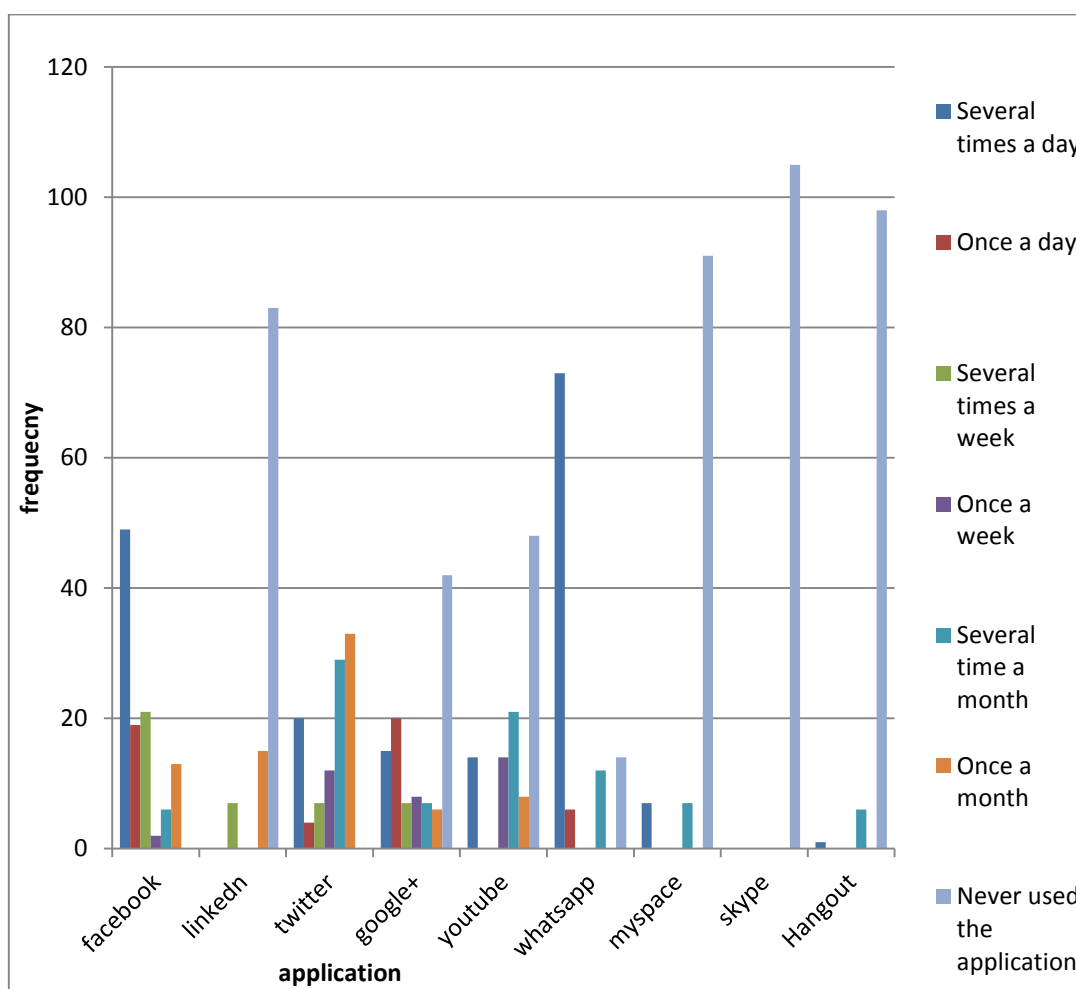
Figure 4. Time spent on various social application media

Figure 4 shows the frequency of access to a wide range of social media applications used by the students who were involved in the study. It can be deduced that they spent more time on the social networking sites. WhatsApp is being the popularly used application on a daily basis. Facebook is the second in category and twitter being on third position. However results indicate that there are applications which were rarely used and this point to MySpace, Hangout and Skype.
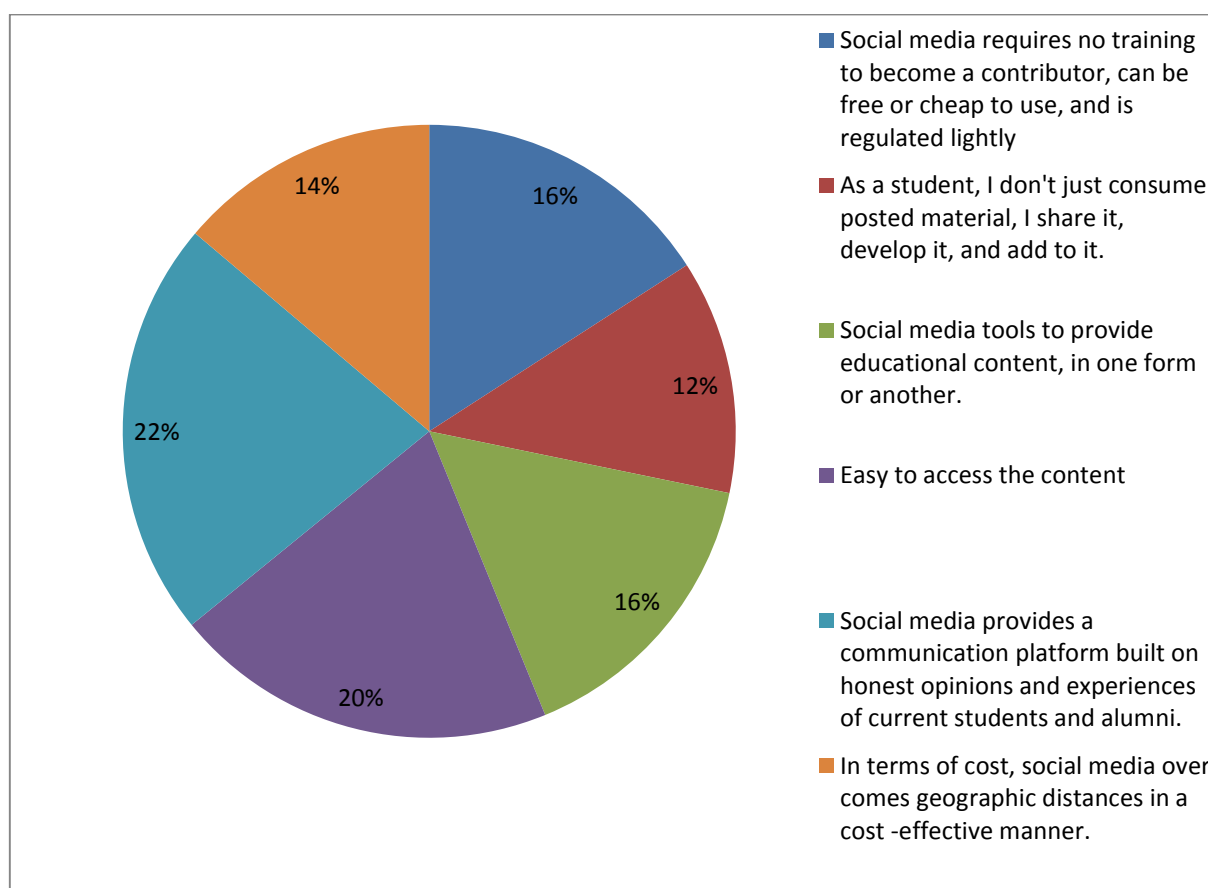
Figure 5. Benefits of using social media technology

The results in Figure 5 shows that summarize the benefits gained by students through the use of social media technologies. 22% of the respondents highlighted that social media enabled them to learn from the past experiences of their current and former counterparts who shared information, 20% indicated the easy access to content. 16 % of the respondents indicated that they either used social media as source of educational learning content or its affordability with less training required. Geographic distances and costs are reduced as indicated by the 14% population of the respondents who participated in the study.

**Discussion**

Research findings indicate that the popularly used social media applications by the students are Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube. Furthermore the results showed that students spent quite a considerable amount of their time as shown by the frequencies of access to these applications. These findings conform to the results of Reuben (n.d.), Paliktzoglou and Suhonen (2014), Pewinternet (2013) which reflects a growing number of Facebook users on comparative basis of year 2012-2013. WhatsApp which has become the most popular tested application as it is distributed among various smart-phone platforms is being widely used by the students because of reasons that include affordability of smartphones, decreasing data costs and improved internet bandwidth, (Schrittwieser, Frühwirt, Kieseberg, Manuel, Mulazzani, Markus Huber, & Weippl, 2012).

Findings show that social media technology has infused a new culture of learning among students which is in line with the research of Thomas and Seely-Brown (2011). In addition, students attending the Vhembe FET in the rural settings are benefiting from use of technology through interaction and exchange of information online with counterparts from within the local community

and outside the geographical boundaries. It is evident that internet is replacing traditional publishing, digital camera on handheld mobile devices is replacing film photography, and downloadable media such as movies from YouTube are replacing theaters, mobile cell phones are replacing pay phones and hardwired home phones, massive online open courses (MOOCS) are replacing the traditional classroom, Redding and Walberg (2012). In addition, the students have opted for the technologies as they enable them to create self-content as depicted in Figure 5. Furthermore results from the study indicate that students have adopted the new technologies which are enhancing their learning and networking process in college setting.

## Conclusion

The use of social media in higher learning enables student interaction with content they can create individually or share with other students. Furthermore, potential learning occurs outside the classroom or independent of location as students can be able to access educational resources as long as they are connected to internet. Results indicate that students enjoy and indeed benefit from the use of social media technologies that have positive effect on their performance and growth. This concurs with findings from the research results of Zanamwe, et al. (2013); Gikas & Grant (2013).

However it is worth mentioning that one specific limitation of the study was that the students who participated were from a single rural further education training college. It would be advisable to expand further studies with a broader set of participants from institutions across provinces in the country. As a result there was no opportunity to carry out a comparative analysis of more than one institution which would have enabled the researchers to gain a broader view of social media technologies in higher education institutions located in rural settings. Further research is required to cover institutions in the whole region of South Africa.

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