

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING AT A RURAL UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

While originally not designed for academic purposes, the use of social networking tools has gained popularity in academia. The purpose of this study was to explore student and lecturer views, experiences, and beliefs on using social networks for teaching and learning in a rural context. Utilizing the mixed-methods approach, a questionnaire and face-to-face interviews were utilized to collect data. Stratified random sampling and purposive sampling were utilized to identify respondents currently using social networks in their teaching and learning. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to analyze the quantitative data while content analysis was used to identify emerging themes from the collected data. We conclude that while students were very positive towards the use of social networks in class, not all lecturers have embraced the use of this technology in teaching and learning and have some apprehensive that social networks might disrupt learning. We recommend developing monitoring mechanisms to mitigate any negative use of social networks for learning and teaching and vigorous lecturer advocacy programs to develop positive attitudes and to encourage lecturers to embrace the use of social network platforms in teaching. We further recommend developing standards and procedures for using social network platforms in teaching and providing the tools to integrate them into learning and teaching. The impact of using these platforms need to be considered by designers and those who implement them in learning and teaching.

Keywords: Facebook; twitter; social network, technology, elearning

INTRODUCTION

Educational engagements in higher education have over the past few years been steadily technologized for what is referred to as electronic learning (elearning). Omotayo and Tiamiyu (2017) defined elearning as an inclusive term that describes educational technology that electronically or technologically supports learning and teaching. Horizontal engagements in elearning are rooted on the interactions of students among themselves and with their learning content, while

vertical engagements focus on the relations among lecturers and students. Irrespective of the engagement dimension, lecturers need to utilize social networking platforms to facilitate electronic learning. Within the South African higher education sector, the use of various social media platforms for learning has quickly become a norm in the online world (Budree et al., 2019). Additionally, in the university settings, engagements are facilitated through the use of portals, emails, phone messages, and notice boards. However, students' motivation

levels towards the full-blown use of these systems are extremely low (Shridhar, et al., 2014).

The massive growth of the online community has made it more and more significant for universities to integrate social networking into teaching and learning as a way of attracting students, focusing on their interests, and embracing changes that are centered around the use of social networking in education (Budree et al., 2019; Finley, 2011; Ray, 2012; Whiting & Williams, 2013). The literature has shown that the use of modern technology in teaching and learning has become a global need and its use increases students' interest and engagement and reduces students' dependence on the lecturers (Marongwe et al., 2019).

Social Networking in Higher Education

Social networking systems in the education context improve elearning due to their flexibility and ability to foster collaboration without time and geographical constraints and to enhance the entire teaching and learning experience (Adamson, 2012). These platforms are therefore not only for business-marketing and customer communication purposes, they also have an application in education for both academic and administrative issues (Moran, et al., 2011).

In the past decade, with the rapid growth in the use of modern technologies, most universities in Africa started exploring the opportunities of using digitally networked learning technology for teaching and learning (Carr, 2013). It has been found that not only universities, but also businesses and other organizations have adopted social networking as an integrated system rather than as a stand-alone platform in order to attract online users (Budree et al., 2019; Hanna et al., 2011).

In the South African context, age and familiarization with the technology influence the actual use of social networking in the sense that younger students tend to use social networking better than older students.

A study by Budree et al. (2019) found that the youngest group of participants, ages 18–35, used most of the listed social media platforms (on average) more frequently than that of the older age groups, who use them less frequently. The reason why younger generations tend to use social media is because they grew up with these digital choices at their fingertips to be able to communicate and

interact with each other.

The choice to interact through social networks has been identified as a global social phenomenon whereby the usage and interaction of these online users is dependent on the ability to influence and be influenced by that social interaction (Carr, 2013; Cheung & Lee, 2010). These online users are usually influenced by different factors based on specific interests and environments, which influence their social network usage patterns (Tajudeen et al., 2018). Most universities globally, and in South Africa in particular, have adopted this approach by developing various techniques to support social networking use. These include training, strategies, policies, and guidelines to ensure that the social networking use is structured and monitored for effectiveness and justifiable usage (Wiid et al., 2014).

In addition, the educational fitness of social networking and its ability to support users, such as social networking support of learning through social constructivist pedagogy (Schroeder, et al., 2010), offer a flexible anytime-anywhere, hassle-free access to its infusion and diffusion in education (Brown, 2010). Table 1 represents a detailed outline of the use of social networking in education.

Table 1 highlights many applications of social networking to complement face-to-face engagements, feedback, sharing of course content, global orientation, self-management, and social relations for communicating and relating with other online users. This not only accommodates undergraduate students, but also postgraduate students (through research) and students with physical disabilities (e.g., field trips).

Appropriation Approaches for Social Networking in Higher Education

Institutions of higher education have a task to ensure that the level of social networking appropriation in formal education is properly assessed to maintain the quality of teaching and learning. Appropriation, according to Waycott (2004) is the incorporation of “new tools into users’ activities in both learning and workplace setting” (p. ??). In the context of using social technologies in higher education, the term appropriation is defined as “the process of pedagogically changing the way social technologies are used to help achieve specific

Table 1. Applications of Social Networking in Higher Education (Sheridan, 2014)

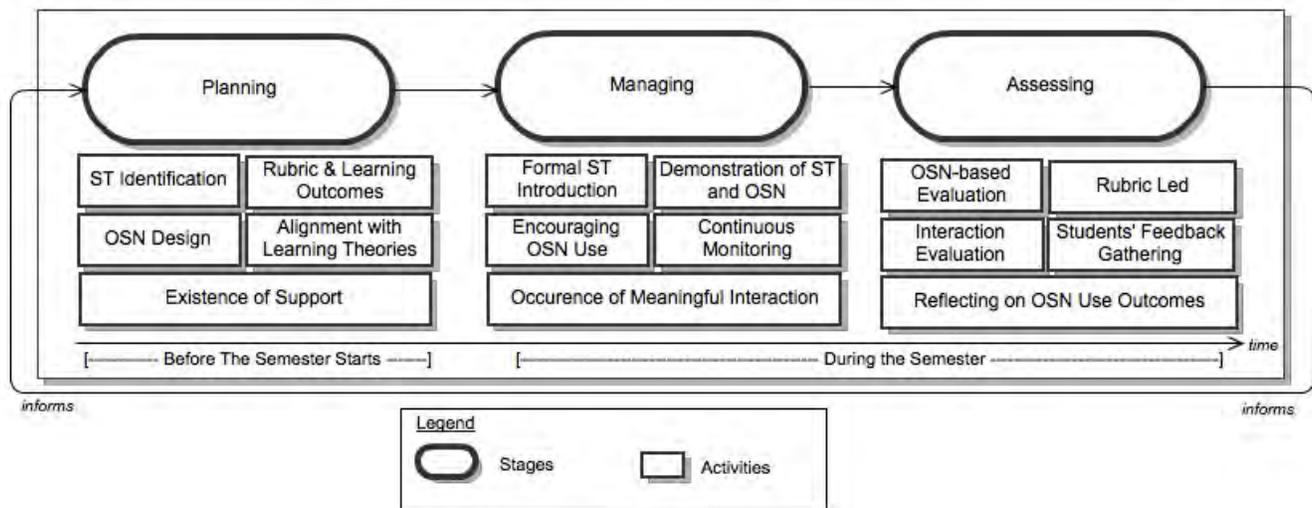
Category	Social Networking Functionality	Social Networking App
Feedback	Answer students' questions Classroom feedback	Facebook, Twitter
Engagements	Live author visits Brainstorming sessions Classroom participation Teacher-to-teacher collaboration Off-campus lectures Socializing	Skype, Tweets, Streaming Media, Campus Buddy Facebook App
Research	Citation practices, location of community service appointments Research sources, Surveys	Cite Me Facebook App, EBSSCohost app, PollApp Facebook App, PollDaddy Twitter App
Study Materials	Homework posting eBook access Subject Flash cards Geographic Information Environmental Studies GPS hunting	Facebook, internet Search, Mobipocket app, Overdrive app, Ace Flashcards, Twitter earth, Google Earth, GPS Mobile Apps.
Updates	Blog updates Conference feedback Current events	Storify, Curated.by, keepstram, Twitter
Motivation	Accommodates shy students Guest speakers	Refdesk.com
Familiarization of students with international relations	Follow globally influential people journalism International perspectives News analysis	Search engines, Twitter, CNN.com, Facebook World News Webcasts
Personal Management	Schedule events Organize assignments Multitasking	Google's free online calendar, FACEBOOK APP, Tweetree and Quote URL
Collaboration	Contact with different classrooms Podcast of different lecturers Showcase students' portfolios	Different social networking platforms, www.openculture.com
Language	Learn different languages Dictionaries	Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Random House Unabridged Dictionary app, Dictionary.com
Cultural Diversity	Relating with different cultures	Pictures on different social networking sites
Work Integrated Learning	Field Trips	Skype

learning objectives through online social networking educational activities” (Hamid et al., 2010, p. ??). Figure 1 shows a model of how social networks can be appropriately and systematically used in formal education.

Figure 1 outlines three phases of appropriation: planning, managing, and accessing. The planning phase covers identification of the appropriate social networking site, designing rubrics and identifying the expected outcomes of learning activity,

and designing the social network platform so its activities fit with the pedagogical frameworks. The managing phase encompasses lecturers posting their final introduction, demonstrating the platform and motivating students to use, and monitoring students’ actual use of it. The assessing phase focuses on online assessments that are led by the established rubric, and the students’ online interactions are assessed followed by the gathering of students’ feedback. This model provides initial and

Figure 1. Appropriation of Social Networking in Higher Education (Hamid et al., 2014)



ongoing support and facilitates purposeful interaction and a thorough reflection on whether outcomes were achieved as planned (Hamid et al., 2014).

STUDY CONTEXT AND SETTING

The setting of the current study is one of the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) in South Africa. In the South African context, the apartheid racial segregation policies favored universities that enrolled white students while universities that enrolled black students, mostly located in rural areas, received very limited resources. Following the attainment of democracy in 1994, the majority of these black universities located in the rural areas were classified as HDIs for the purpose of equity and redress because of various challenges such as poor resources allocation and isolation (Ndebele et al., 2016; Songca et al., 2021). The majority of these HDIs draw their students' population from rural communities that have poor socio-economic backgrounds (Badat, 2012; Mbodila et al., 2020;). Most of these students had little or no access to computer usage prior to entering university but were able to use their mobile phones to communicate, share information, and access social media such as a WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook (Munienge et al., 2014).

When this study was conducted, the university did not have an official Learning Management System (LMS) and lecturers were using their own initiatives to integrate technology into their teaching and learning to get students to collaborate and

engage inside and outside the classroom. However, the university had initiated a process to introduce an LMS and approval had just been obtained to appoint an elearning specialist in the university who would drive elearning. In addition, a team had been assembled to conduct benchmarking of elearning. Conversations in the university had revealed that some lecturers were using social networks in the absence of an LMS to communicate and interact with students, provide feedback on student work, and share content, as well as engage students. Hence this study sought to find out student and lecturer views, experiences, and beliefs on the use of social networks for teaching and learning. The objective of the study was specifically to establish the impact of social networks on teaching and learning at the rural university, to explore students and lecturers' views, experiences, and beliefs on how they benefit from teaching and learning using social networks, and to identify challenges that are centered around the use of social networking in higher education.

METHODOLOGY

In order to capture the impact, views, experiences, and beliefs of how students and lecturers benefit from teaching and learning using social network platforms, we adopted a mixed-method approach to the study that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative techniques.

A survey design was adopted that used questionnaires and face-to-face interviews to collect

data from the respondents. The target population for this study was first-year students and their lecturers from a rural university. Like many other studies on the perception and usability of social media, we viewed the teachers in education and their students as important (Jamal Abdul Nasir Ansari and Nawab Ali Khan, 2020; Li & Wong, 2021). Stratified random sampling and purposive sampling were utilized to identify lecturers currently using social networks in their teaching and learning in the School of Mathematics and Natural Science. This particular school was chosen for convenience as this was where one of us was employed. A total of 110 randomly sampled students and 10 purposefully chosen lecturers participated in the study.

We administered the questionnaires to the 110 students to ensure a high return and 100% of them were completed and collected. For the purpose of triangulation of the data gathered from the 110

students through the questionnaires, we selected randomly ten additional students for interview purposes. To maintain anonymity, a coding system was used for the lecturers and students, who were coded as L1–L10 for lecturers and S1–S10 for students. We used tables and percentages to present quantitative data while verbatim quotations were adopted for qualitative data. We analyzed the data from the questionnaires using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software and content analysis to analyze the qualitative data from the students and lecturers.

ETHICS

Permission was sought from the university to carry out this study and was granted by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. We explained the purpose of the study to the targeted participants and issued consent forms for participants sign. No participant was compelled to participate in the study and participants were assured of the

Table 2. SnS Membership and Use

SNS Membership	Network	Students	Users	Percentage
	Facebook	110	78	71%
	WhatsApp	110	7	6%
	Twitter	110	4	4%
	LinkedIn	110	1	1%
	Twitter	110	1	1%
	Mixit	110	1	1%
	Flixter, Hi5, LinkedIn, Orkur, 2GO, WeChat	110	1	1%
	Bebo	110	1	1%
	Myspace	110	1	1%
	BBM	110	2	2%
SNS Useage	Length of Use	Students	Users	Percentage
	>5years	110	6	5%
	1–2years	110	16	15%
	4 years	110	3	3%
	6 months	110	3	3%
	1 year	110	6	5%
	7–12 months	110	0	0%
	1 month	110	3	3%
SNS Use for Learning	Yes	110	77	70%

Table 3. Summary of Emerging Themes

Theme	Summary of emerging issues under theme
Impact of social networks on teaching and learning	Getting information. Easy access to information. Networking across higher learning institutions. Independent learning without the lecturer presence.
Benefits of social networks in teaching and learning	Arranging meetings with students by lecturers. Posting assignments, notes, and general announcements. Sharing information and ideas among students. Seeking clarification on difficult material from friends. Getting answers and tips. Group chats. Coordinating assigned projects and work.
Challenges associated with the use of social networking in teaching and learning	Temptation to use it for social purposes instead of academic purposes. Need for discipline and self-control. Poor monitoring mechanisms to ensure that students used the networks only for learning. Bullying of students by others through social networking.

freedom to withdraw at any given point without any victimization.

RESULTS

Description of the Sample

The sample consisted of 120 participants comprising 110 students and 10 lecturers, and of the 110 students, 45% were male, 51% female, and 4% did not declare their gender. All the students were first-year students. As shown previously in Study Context and Setting, a majority of first-year students at this university are a homogenous group drawn from the surrounding poor, rural communities. For the participants' age, 94% were below 22 years old with 1% over 30 and 5% not declaring their age. Ninety-two percent of the respondents had matriculated from a government school, with 1% from a former model C school. None of the respondents had computer experience during their primary schooling while only 15% had been exposed to computers during secondary school. The gender distribution of the 10 lecturers was 4 males and 6 females.

Social Network Service (SnS)

Membership and Use

Asked which social networks the participants belonged to and used, the majority used Facebook (71%) followed by WhatsApp with 6% (Table 2). Other networks they used were Twitter, Mixit,

Bebo, Flixter, Hi5, LinkedIn, Myspace, Orkur, BBM, 2GO and WeChat.

Presentation of Qualitative Data

Data collected through interviews were categorized into themes and three themes emerged: (a) impact of social networks on teaching and learning, (b) benefits of social networks in teaching and learning, and (c) challenges associated with the use of social networking in teaching and learning. Participants were asked to give examples of information they accessed through social networking to enhance teaching and learning. They were also asked to identify challenges on the use of social networking in their education for the researchers to establish the feelings of the participants on use of social networks. The themes are summarized in Table 3.

Impact of Social Networks on Teaching and Learning at a Rural University

Responding to a question on the impact of social networks in teaching and learning, the participants expressed a number of positive impacts. Among these were getting information, easy access to information, networking across higher learning institutions, and independent learning without the lecturer. The following examples are excerpts from the data collected from students.

S1 *It is very helpful and easy to get*

information and it assists me in enhancing my learning in so many ways.

S4 *Social networking makes us connect with other students from different higher learning institutions. It is a good thing to do as it helps you find new things that your lecturer has not told us about. Social networking helps me to share information with my group members about research and projects.*

S5 *It helps a lot so I will continue even without a lecturer physically closer to me, I can access all information I want. It keeps things easier when you find that you missed class or there is class which you do not know about, then within hours you would have received that information.*

S8 *I think it opens up the brain as it is quite fascinating and you never get bored, so it's wonderful to know that it educates it is good because you learn in different ways than focusing on one method of listening to lecturers in class it is a good thing because as young people we love using social networking sites so education will be at our fingertips.*

The above quotes show that social networks promote active and independent learning as students look for information on their own and the gap of missing classes is closed. According to S8, the impact is great since it makes students more alert, receptive, and interested because of varied methods used to acquire knowledge, and it focuses their attention on the lecture since they are a technological generation.

The teacher participants had mixed views and some teachers' responses showed that the impact of social networks was negative and relied on students with highly self-disciplined behavior. There were some participants who revealed that although social networking was beneficial, it had to be taken with caution as it could divert student attention from educational work to noneducational social matters and they advised social network users to be careful. The following quotations are examples of lecturer participants' responses:

L9 *It can affect students negatively when*

they spend more time on social networking while they are supposed to study. It can be beneficial and not beneficial at the same time as one will concentrate on talking to friends than focusing on educational knowledge. Some students take lot of studying time for social networking, which is not a good thing.

L6 *Social networking is good only if you are disciplined.*

L3 *It is good if students were to focus on academic purposes than focusing on porn videos and pictures.*

As the above quotations show, lecturers perceived that social networks can have both positive and negative impacts as some students might concentrate on talking to friends rather than focusing on educational content. This is contrary to the students' responses, who expressed that it had a positive impact on their studies as they used it to look for academic information and share challenging academic tasks with other students both within their institution and from other institutions.

How Social Networking Benefits Lecturers and Students in Teaching and Learning

All the participants were asked to respond to the question, "What are the benefits of using social networking in teaching and learning?" Some issues raised in the previous section resurfaced because these questions were almost looking for the same thing to really get to the heart of the matter. Most lecturer participants, though skeptical, indicated that social networking was beneficial to teaching and learning, which echoed what was said by the students. Some of the benefits for lecturers include using it for arranging meetings, posting assignments and notes, and making general announcements. Students were using social networking for sharing information, seeking clarification on difficult material from friends, getting answers and tips, chatting in group, sharing ideas, and coordinating assigned project work, to mention but a few examples. The following responses capture the general sentiments of the student participants:

S4 *We managed to create a group on Facebook that helps us students to ask*

questions on the things that we do not understand which helps me to find some answers that I did not know.

S9 *Social networking benefits me in my studies because it is an easy way to communicate with others and ask problems easily if there are some.*

S10 *It helps me if I want help from other students who have the same questions. I understand way faster when I read through social networks, I get to see what people are asking, so it benefits me a lot in terms of understanding. You ask difficult questions on educational pages and you are assisted.*

S2 *In a good way because if I have a problem, I can ask for help from others through it. As students we have created groups where we talk share information to work in groups and do our assignments together.*

All the student participants interviewed in the study agreed that social networking was benefiting them, which corroborated the data collected through the questionnaires. The students indicated that social networking was the only language they understood these days. Four out of ten lecturer participants did not see the benefit of using social network because students would use their phones for nonacademic purposes and the lecturers hated smartphones because of the negative stories they always heard about social networks. Some of them did not even possess a smartphone. The following responses were from lecturer participants who did not benefit from social networks:

L1 *Presently I am not in any social network, it does not have any effect on my teaching and I do not even encourage my students to use it. I do not even have a smartphone.*

L6 *Not that much I see of its benefit, I have a negative attitude towards use of social networks I have heard about so many bad stories about those social platforms. Your own students can post you in a negative way on the social platforms since I won't have control over them so the*

best is to stay away from such and stick to the traditional methods of teaching and learning.

On the other hand, the lecturers who agreed that the social network platforms were beneficial for teaching and learning and had embraced use of social network platforms to enhance teaching and learning had some skepticism and pointed to issues of unruly students who might use those social network platforms irresponsibly for cheating. They did mention benefits like using them for arranging meetings, posting assignments and notes, and making general announcements about their modules, as shown in the following excerpts:

L8 *If I would like to meet with my students I simply go on the twitter or WhatsApp platform. I also post assignments, notes and so forth but I do that with caution.*

L3 *I am not a fan of social networks; however, my use is limited to posting of general announcements like alerting students about tests, submission dates of assignments, or cancellation of lectures.*

L5 *The social network platforms have made my life easier than before. I do not panic even when I am away because I will always be in touch with my students.*

As the quotations above show, students have incorporated social networks platforms into their studies. With regard to lecturers, some lecturers have embraced the use of social networks while other lecturers have not. We probed interviewees to give examples of information they have accessed through social networking to really understand the benefits. A subtheme emerged as a result of probing as indicated below.

Examples of Information Accessed through Social Networking

Examples of specific information obtained through social networks included finding information on question papers and model answers, English terms, timetables, difficult terms, news, assignments, research material, exchanging information and memos with friends, course information, additional notes, subject specific content, and key terms and bursary applications. The bulk of the responses came from the students as reflected by

the following:

S3 *The lecturer managed to post timetable for exam to us on Facebook. Also conduct meeting on tackling questions.*

S5 *For example, we exchange the memo through WhatsApp and you can get bursaries through social networks.*

S7 *I got every information from my lecturer concerning classes. I can communicate asking questions regarding problems I have and if there is a special class, my classmates who are on Facebook SMS me and this works well for us.*

There was a lecturer participant who indicated that students did not benefit from social networks as he felt it disturbed their schoolwork as shown in this quote: **L6** *No help, it disturbs students' studies.* There were also students who indicated that their use of social networks had nothing to do with learning, as shown in this example by

L4 *We look for sex information, jokes, advise on how to approach women and this distracts us a lot.*

Challenges in the Use of Social Networking for Teaching and Learning

Participants were further asked to respond to the question, "What challenges are faced in using social networking in teaching and learning?" Despite the benefits and positive impacts indicated earlier, both lecturers and students agreed that there were some challenges they encountered in using social networking in teaching and learning. However, unlike lecturers, students, as shown in the ensuing responses, felt that the challenges were insignificant considering how they were benefitting educationally through using social networks.

S10 *The only issue is getting distracted and tempted to use it for social purposes instead of academic purposes and this needs self-control.*

S5 *It needs a lot of discipline but the rest of us cannot suffer because of a few students who lack control because the advantages of using social networks outweigh the disadvantages of using social networks.*

The lecturers on the other hand, had a different view all together as they, unlike the students, identified many challenges, including poor monitoring mechanisms to ensure that students used the networks only for learning in class and the bullying of students by others through social networking.

L7 *The greatest challenge is that there are no monitoring mechanisms to ensure that students are using social networks for academic purposes.*

L4 *Students can fight in class because of posting irrelevant comments or pictures about other students and some of us the lecturers we are not really into social networks.*

The indication here is that if proper monitoring mechanisms were put in place, the majority of lecturers would have no issues with using social networks for learning and teaching.

DISCUSSION

The paper intended to establish the impact of social networks on teaching and learning at a rural university in South Africa. The findings showed that social networking platforms were positively impacting teaching and learning for students, though some lecturers were cautious about their impact. The participants pointed out that social networks made the students more active learners, opened their minds, promoted sharing ideas, compensated for missed lectures, and encouraged independent learning. In this regard, Chigona (2018) concurs that teaching and learning in connected environments allows learners to master the curriculum without worrying about being tied to the classroom.

The findings further revealed that social networks stimulated students' desire to learn because of its variety of processes that grabbed their attention as a technological generation of students. The reason why younger generations tend to use social media is because they grew up with these digital tools at their fingertips and are comfortable using them to communicate and interact (Budree et al., 2019). Furthermore, social network platforms made the lives of students easier because information was always at their disposal. This is in line with Russell (2018), which established that mobile devices are a suitable learning tool for the classroom since many

students felt that they were deriving educational benefit from the use of their devices and many of the features on them. They often found creative ways to employ these features in their schoolwork both at home and at school. The current study shows that students were very positive towards use of social networks in class, though some lecturers were not.

The findings also confirm that the current generation of students understands technology better than some of their lecturers. van Wyk and van Ryneveld (2019) stated that it is a well-known phenomenon that students in higher education grew up in the era of mobile devices and the internet and subsequently use their mobile devices in both their personal and academic lives. As Liebenberg et al., (2018) showed, we are currently seeing a new generation of young people who grew up with the internet and digital technologies and have a natural aptitude and are skilled in using the new technologies and who do not know a life without them.

According to the findings of this study, to appeal to students, lecturers have to integrate technology into teaching and learning as this closes the gap between lecturers and students. Anonymous (2013) observed that smartphones bring life within the classroom, enable students to get answers quickly and connect with other students from around the world, which expands their learning world. It is evident from the above sentiments that the millennium students enjoy using social networking sites and lecturers need to embrace this tool. Academics need to rethink teaching and learning in the 21st century to be able to grab the students' attention and for lecturers and students to understand each other better.

On the other hand, from the same findings, it emerged that some lecturers were cautious about the use of social network sites for teaching and learning. The lecturers feared disruptions in their lectures, a loss of concentration, and misdirected focus because students would pay more attention to private social communications, watch pornography, and post messages that had nothing to do with their education. According to Omotayo and Tiamiyu (2017), some empirical studies have actually demonstrated that the attitudes of teachers towards technology greatly influence its adoption and integration into teaching and that to successfully initiate and implement educational technology

in teaching depends strongly on the teachers' support and positive attitude. This study reveals that lecturers who are unconvinced about the benefits of social network platforms are mainly those who do not possess smartphones. On the other hand, lecturers who are using the different platforms to post academic work and announcements could help students access information beyond the lecture hall.

Given that nearly every student has a smartphone or a mobile device, lecturers should start relearning to integrate social networks into their classes to attract the students' attention so they can learn together. This is in line with Li and Wong (2021), who indicated that on the school level there is still work to be done to assuage the fears of teachers about social media as pedagogical tool. There is a need for lecturers to embrace the use of social network platforms and develop a positive attitude towards their use in class. Studies have shown that incorporating technology such as social media and online tools in the learning and teaching environment can result in creating an atmosphere of interaction, cooperation, and collaboration both inside and outside the classroom (Mbodila & Leendertz, 2020; Mbodila, et al. 2020; Zarzycka et al. 2021). Carey (2012) maintained that academics should appreciate smartphones because the reality is that this digital technology tool has become inescapable in the classroom and it is up to lecturers to embrace digital technology. Today's students are a generation who are glued to their smartphones and lecturers should take advantage of this and use smartphones in class. In line with this, Ebiye (2018) postulated that smartphones play a very important role in students' lives, especially in teaching and learning, and should therefore be used in classes.

Further, the study shows that students were benefitting a lot in their studies through use of social network platforms. These platforms were helping students to catch up on missed lectures, create groups to assist each other to do assignments or prepare for the tests/examinations, and have academic discussions for the purpose of strengthening their education through cross-pollination of ideas. This helped students to remain relevant and keep abreast of new developments in the use of global technology. Students who are digital natives accessed nearly all educational information via their WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, 2go,

and Mixit, accounts. Liebenberg et al. (2018) stated that,

When it comes to learning preferences, Digital Natives favour receiving information quickly, they are really good at quickly processing information, they choose to multitask, they have a preference for nonlinear access to information, they dislike traditional lectures, favour active rather than passive learning, they depend largely on communications technologies in order to access information and perform social and professional interactions” (p. 161).

This was also confirmed in a study by Mbodila & Leendertz (2020) that investigated social spaces that South African rural students accessed and engaged with for learning.

The results also show that though social network platforms had a positive impact on students' studies and benefitted them a great deal, there were some challenges. The biggest challenge, as pointed out by both lecturers and students, was that of not having monitoring mechanisms to ensure that students were using social networks for academic purposes. There were fears that students would fight in class or post nasty comments or pictures about other students and lecturers and eventually disrupt learning. In this regard, Songca et al. (2021) foregrounded the development of procedures and standards for the use of open access technology for the purpose of learning and teaching with clear consequences for those who breach the standards. Those responsible for designing and implementing elearning programs need to recognize that it is as important to consider the impact on users of any change of technology as it is to solve technology issues (Rossouw & Alexander, 2015).

We believe that monitoring mechanisms should be developed to minimize the negative effects of social networks as students were unanimous in their view that the benefits of using social networks outweighed the risks. Magodiolo, Meyers, Motlogi and Motlhabane (2019) argued that the student's voice is essential for a successful teaching and learning environment because students are the best candidates to express how they want to learn and it is important that their voices be heard in all the processes of teaching and learning. If social

network platforms are benefitting them, then let these platforms be embraced in classrooms to create a conducive environment since students would feel engaged. Challenges or no challenges, social network platforms have become a reality that needs to be explored and utilized by academics and students.

CONCLUSIONS AND ECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this study was to establish the impact of social networks on teaching and learning at a rural university in South Africa through exploring the students and lecturers' views, experiences, and beliefs on how they benefit from teaching and learning that uses social networks. The study concludes that social networking platforms impacted positively on teaching and learning and shows that students were very positive towards the use of social networks in class when compared to some lecturers. This is because these young people, who are digital natives, grew up in the internet and digital technologies era have a natural aptitude and high skill levels for using these new technologies. The study concludes, like its precursors, that when it comes to learning preferences, digital natives favor receiving information instantly, are really good at quickly processing information, choose to multitask, have a preference for nonlinear access to information, dislike traditional lectures, favor active rather than passive learning, depend largely on communications technologies to access information, and perform social and professional interactions though digital technology. The study also concludes that not all lecturers have embraced the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning and have some apprehension that students might abuses social networks and disrupt learning. We therefore conclude that social networks indeed have a place in teaching and in the higher education sector.

In light of the conclusions drawn, we recommend the introduction of change management processes before social networking tools can be introduced to adequately prepare lecturers for integrating information communication technologies into learning and teaching. This will make it easy for lecturers to start relearning to integrate social networks in their classes to draw students' attention and achieve more engagement.

We further recommend vigorous advocacy

programs to encourage lecturers to embrace the use of social networks and to develop a positive attitude towards their use in teaching. In line with the management phase of the social network appropriation model discussed in this study, which involves “use-monitoring,” we recommend the development of monitoring mechanisms to mitigate any negative and unintended consequences of social network use for learning and teaching, as students were unanimous in their view that the benefits of using social networks outweighed the risks. We also recommend the establishment of a task team comprising of both academic and technological support staff to assist in developing procedures and standards for the use of open access technology for the purpose of learning and teaching. This will assist in the development of policies with clear consequences for those who breach them.

We further recommend providing the technology tools to all lecturers to motivate them to explore integrating web 2.0 technologies in their teaching. To increase the use of social networking for learning and teaching, we call for those responsible for the design and implementation of elearning programs to recognize that it is important to consider both the impact of the web 2.0 technology usage among students in their teaching and learning process and the impact of the change to using web 2.0 technology on users of the system.

We lastly recommend formalization of learning and teaching with technology in the university through the procurement of a learning management system.

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