An Exploratory Study On Social Media Trends Among The Students In Omani Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The use of social media is pervasive across the world particularly among the young generation. The aim of this study was to investigate the use of social media applications among the students pursuing higher education in Oman. Under COVID-19 circumstances, the data collection was done through an online questionnaire. A total of 214 students from various higher education institutions participated in the survey. The study revealed that Instagram is the most frequently used social media application among the students followed by the WhatsApp and YouTube. For most of them, the key reasons to use social media are entertainment and social networking. Interestingly, the majority (84%) of the students use social media for three hours or more every day. The analyses also reveals that 72% students use social media for longer time than intended whereas 62%, despite of realizing, find it difficult to limit their time on social media. Around 60% of the respondents feel the time spent on social media is negatively affecting their progress in studies and they often face complains from their family on social media usage. It’s quite obvious from the study that the level of addiction to use various social media applications is on the rise among the students.

Keywords:
Social Media, Higher Education, Addiction

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Introduction

The technological developments in the recent digital era have altered the ways of social interactions, accessing, and utilizing the information. The use of social media has risen exponentially and seemingly become an integral thread in the fabric of the globe. Social media networks like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube provide a broader reach in terms of real-time communication, display of information and sharing experiences, pictures, and videos with other users. Several studies reveal that the interaction of people on social media instigates a sense of belongingness with the community (Skelly J. 2005). The frequency of using social media platforms among the masses in itself is enticing for various researchers. For different people, there are diverse reasons or specific purposes to use social media applications (Grau, S., Kleiser, S. and Bright, L. 2019).

Social media can be utilized in education primarily to collect and spread information among students, peers, and the community at large. The use of social media applications can promote online discussion particularly between students and staff outside the formal environment (Gray, K., Chang, S., & Kennedy, G. 2010). The digital knowledge sharing through social media can aid to bridge gap between formal and informal learning (Christine G., & Cathy L., 2016). Recently, academic staff at some of the British universities started using TikTok to share various ideas on research as well as to spread messages on any social cause or similar purposes. Social media can help to foster communication and to develop online platforms for mutual learning among students, staff, and the community (Cox and McLeod. 2014). However, the use and misuse of the social media applications need to be determined carefully.

Students, apparently, spend a lot of time on social media every day and this practice can have a significant impact on their lives. The prolonged use of social media has more adverse impact particularly on the students (Woods and Scott, 2016) as some of them find it hard to limit their usage of social media applications. Spending more time on social media can result in reduced physical activities which can further lead to some other diseases (Melkevik et al., 2015; Zou et al., 2019). Nowadays, due to the greater exposure of the children to use electronic gadgets, like smart phones, engage them in using social media applications at a very young age. Likewise, the trends of using social media among the students in higher education is on the rise. Students interact freely with their fellows, friends, and community through various social media platforms. Keeping this frame in sight, the present study is aimed to analyze these trends of social media usage and the potential reasons behind this.

Objectives of the Study
The research is aimed to
a) evaluate the utilization practices of social media among students
b) analyze the reasons behind using social media applications

c) examine the level of addiction to use the social media platforms

Research Method
The study aimed to analyze the usage and trends of social media among the students in higher education institutions. Due to the prevailing situation of COVID-19 in Oman, the researchers opted online survey approach to ascertain information from the students through their volunteer participation. The population of the study comprised all the students enrolled in higher education institutions in Oman. A structured questionnaire was designed through an online website and the link was circulated among the students through massive emails. The statements in the questionnaire were kept simple for better understanding of the students with an intention to obtain exact information from the non-English speaking respondents. A total of 214 students from different higher education institutions participated in the survey. In terms of ethical considerations, a statement was included in the first part of the survey stating the purpose of study, ensuring anonymity of the respondents and contact details of the researchers.

Results
The students’ responses are analyzed through MS-Excel as per the following parameters.

Figure-1 exhibits the gender distribution of the participants. Out of 214 respondents, 152 (71%) were females and 62 (29%) were male. The ratio of female participants in the survey was significantly higher as compared to the male participants.

Figure1. Gender

Figure-2 reflects the various age groups of the respondents. Most of the students (99, 46.3%) belonged to the age group of 23-26 years whereas the second largest age group of the respondents (75, 35%) was 19-22 years. Among others, 33 (15.4%) students were above 26 years of age while only 7 (3.3%) students of 18 years or less volunteered to take part in the survey.

Figure2. Age Group

Figure-3 indicates the education level of the respondents in this study. According to the figure, majority (135, 63.1%) of the students were enrolled in Bachelor’s degree which is quite obvious as it’s a minimum four years’ degree programme. Among others, 58 (27.1%) students from Diploma, 17 (7.9%) students from Foundation programme whereas only 4 (1.9%) students from Masters degree contributed in the survey. Hence, the data collection ensured the participation of students with a range of higher education levels.
Figure 3. Level of Education

Figure 4 reveals the average time per day spent by the students on social media. Interestingly, 53.8% students reported that they spent at least 4 hours or more every day on social media whereas 29.4% students spend 3–4 hours and 14.5% do so for 1–2 hours on daily basis. Only 1.9% (4 out of 214) students informed that their daily use of social media was for less than one hour. The overall results indicate how frequently the social media is used by the students in routine life.

Figure 4. Average Time Spent on Social Media Per Day

Considering the fact that social media users are more likely to use more than one platform, students were asked to rank six social media applications according to their usage. Figure 5 shows which social media application students preferred the most to the least. The data indicated that majority (31.3%) of the students mostly use Instagram whereas 26.1% students primarily use WhatsApp. The usage of YouTube was ranked third (18.2%), Facebook on fourth (12.7%), TikTok at fifth (10.3%) whereas the least used (1.4%) social media application was Twitter. A previous study revealed WhatsApp application as the most frequently used application by the students for educational purposes, however the analysis was based on the responses of students from one university in Oman (Al-Qaysi N., Mohamad-Nordin N., Al-Emran M. 2020). The revelation of the present research found Instagram as the most preferred application and the blend of social media tools investigated in this research is not tested before on the students in higher education institutions of Oman.
The reasons to use social media applications by the students are presented in figure 6. Students ranked the reasons from 1 to 6 considering top reason as 1 and the least as 6. As the data disclosed, 44.9% students used social media for entertainment, 15.4% prioritized learning through it, 12.7% to pass spare time, 12.1% seek fame through social media, 8.4% for social networking and only 6.5% used it to impress others. Thus, for majority of the students, entertainment was the key reason to use social media applications whereas the least considerable reason was to impress others. This reflects that most of the students use social media applications for non-academic purposes. Overall, the top three reasons to use social media by the students included entertainment, social networking, and learning respectively.

Figure 5. Social Media Application Used by the Students

Figure 6. Reasons to Use Social Media

Figure 7 reveals the self-reflection of the students on using social media for longer than intended time. Interestingly, 71.9% students reported to use social media for longer time than their planned duration whereas it isn’t a case with 9.8% students. The finding of the prolonged use of social media is aligned with the investigation of Kolhar, M., Kazi, R.N.A., Alameen, A. (2021).

Figure 8. Difficulty in Reducing the Time Spent on Social Media

As exposed in figure 8, 61.7% students realized that they should spend less time on social media however they find it difficult to do so. The addiction of using social media is found more among university students (Azizi et al., 2019). Students, once addicted to use social media, found it difficult to limit its usage.
Figure 9 analyses if prolonged use of social media decreases the concentration of students from other essential tasks. Majority (66.4%) of the students reported that they experienced lack of concentration on important tasks due to their social media usage and only 8% felt otherwise. Excessive use of social media can overload sensory perception which eventually impact the capacity to learn and memorize (Rotondi et al., 2017). Hence it can result in lack of concentration on other tasks by overlooking or forgetting about those.

Figure 9. Social Media Usage Reduces Concentration on Other Tasks

Figure 10 identifies the impact of excessively using social media on the progress of studies. Out of 214 students, 131 (61.2%) realized the negative impact on their studies due to spending more time on social media whereas 32 (16.8%) disagreed with this. Various studies (Owusu-Acheaw and Larson, 2015; Abbas et al., 2019) revealed that spending more time on social media negatively impacts the academic performance. The over-usage of social media is negatively with their academic performance (Ravizza, Hambrick, and Fenn 2014).

Figure 10. Negative Impact of Social Media Over-usage on Studies

Students when attracted more towards online chatting, watching movies, shopping, making friends, playing games, and engaged in related stuff on different social media applications would be more prone to decreased performance in academics.

Limitations of the study
The gender distribution of the respondents is skewed more towards female respondents (71%) which could have made relatively equally distributed. As the questionnaires were sent through emails and convenience sampling was used, which is although easier however future studies can consider simple random or other sampling techniques. There were 214 respondents who could be increased to enhance the generalization of the research.

Conclusion
The study investigated the use of social media and on-going trends among the students in higher education institutions. It was revealed that Instagram was preferred more by the students, and they mostly used social media for entertainment purposes. The study has found excessive use of social media by the students and its addiction is clearly observed in the results. Students, in this research, felt that the prolonged use of social media was deviating their attention from other important tasks and negatively impacting their progress in studies. This study has made a reasonable contribution by shedding new light on understanding the social media trends among students in Oman. It’s important to intervene and educate the individuals to reduce their social media usage and make it healthier. Students can use time-tracking function available in their smart phones to limit their usage on social media. Same feature is presented by some social media applications as well like Facebook and Instagram.
References
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