



Exploring the Perceptions and Usage of Social Networking Sites among Distance Learning Students in Nigeria

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Abstract

Social networking sites have become popular virtual meeting places that allow young adults to interact and socialize with their peers. This study was carried out to investigate the perceptions and usage of social networking sites among distance learning students in Nigeria. The objectives of the study are to identify students' perception of social media networking, to ascertain the various categories of social networking sites used by distance learning students, to examine the frequency of usage of the social networking sites by the students and to examine their purposes of using social networking sites. A descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. Four hundred students were selected by simple random sampling techniques from students of the National Open University of Nigeria. A structured questionnaire was designed, validated and distributed among the sampled students. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse the data. Findings reveal that social networking sites are mostly being used by students for purposes such as interacting with friends, and family, discussing national issues rather than for educational purposes. The distance learning students perceive social networking sites as interesting platforms for achieving academic excellence. The students use social media daily. Facebook was the most utilized social networking site. Seduction in time for studying and providing an enabling environment for cybercrimes were the two major negative effects that social networking sites had on students.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites, National Open University of Nigeria, Open and Distance Learning, Distance Learning Students

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the world has witnessed remarkable changes in information technology (IT). The advancement in IT has led to the emergence of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, and Skype among others. These sites are currently being used regularly by millions of people. The usage of SNSs has become so widespread that it has caught the attention of academics worldwide and is now being investigated by numerous social science researchers because of its impact on society. According to Livingstone (2008), social networking sites represent a moving target for researchers and policymakers. Recent studies have also shown that social media provide opportunities for professional education, curriculum development, education and learning (Al-Rahmi & Othman, 2008). Social networking sites are fast becoming very popular means of both interpersonal and public communication in Nigeria. They provide avenues for students to share information and knowledge, express emotions, and exchange videos, files, text messages, and pictures.

Boyd and Ellison (2008) defined social networking sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to construct public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. Mangold and Faulds (2009) defined social media as “consumer generated media”, and “ a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities and issues”. These sites have attracted millions of users worldwide; hence many people are changing the outlets where they search for news, information, business and entertainment. These social media sites allow those who use them to create profiles and meet online via internet communication in social forums like Facebook, Twitter etc. and other chat sites where users socialize. Users can upload photographs and post what they

are doing at any given time (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert 2008). Onomo (2012) acknowledged that SNSs have become “a widespread tool for communication and exchange of ideas, helping individuals and organizations with just causes to reach a phenomenally vast audience that could not be reached by traditional media”

Thus millions of people, especially young adults make use of SNSs. For example, 16 million Nigerians visit Facebook every month. Facebook said it had 7.2 million daily users from Nigeria with 97% of them accessing the platform via their mobile phones. Ajewole, Olowu & Fasola (2012) in their study on social networking addiction among youth found that the majority of Nigerian students spend more time on social networking sites than on their necessary issues such as their studies. This is a cause for concern. Idankwo (2011) as well as Olowu and Seri (2012) equally noted that Nigerian students spend plenty of time on Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites, and most of them cannot go for two or three hours without checking or updating their profiles, all to the detriment of their studies. It opined that SNSs enable teenagers to get connected and also provide opportunities to learn from one another. It enables them to extend friendship from various places such as schools, religious places, organizations and so on.

There has been conflicting reports on the impact of SNSs on students' academic performance. Ogedebe, Emmanuel & Musa (2015) found that spending long hours on SNSs does not affect a student's academic performance negatively. However, Lorliam and Ode (2014) conducted a study on the impact of social media usage on the academic performance of students. The study revealed that the time spent on social media, the frequency of visits and the total number of online friends has a statistically significant relationship with a student's academic performance.

There are increasing concerns about the negative impact of social networking sites on the youth. Issues such as fraud, pornography, hacking, identity theft and a host of other negative influences abound. According to Amaka Eze (2012) social networking has become perilous as a result of the activities of cybercriminals. The recent death of a Nigerian student -Cynthia Onwkgogu, who was a victim of such activities through the Facebook, is a good example.

These notwithstanding, SNSs are novel phenomena that can be maximally utilized to increase educational interaction between teachers and students.

Distance education is a planned teaching or learning activity, where there is a physical separation of the learner from the teacher in time and space. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) is a single-mode multipurpose institution that operates through open and distance learning. It is the only university in Nigeria that operates solely by open and distance learning mode. The university presently has 68 study centres located in all parts of Nigeria with a student population of over 400,000. It offers certificate, graduate, postgraduate and Masters programmes in Arts and Social Sciences, Science and Technology, Agricultural Science, Health Sciences, Education and Law. (NOUN Profile, 2015/2016). Instructional delivery method in the National Open University of Nigeria is through the use of print media and a wide range of technology ranging from radio, audio and video tapes, computer and internet-based technology.

Social networking sites allow for social interaction and easy creation of content by users, e.g. Twitter, Facebook and so on. They can be effective tools for teaching and learning in higher institutions. They can help connect students to information and help generate a dialogue/chat with their teachers and other students about a course. These services make it possible for teachers and students to communicate without having to meet face-to-face. This implies that SNSs could be integrated into open and distance learning to reduce the physical distance that exists between the learner and the tutor. Therefore it is necessary to explore the perceptions and usage of social networking sites among distance learning students in the National Open University of Nigeria. It is expected that the findings of the study will assist the University in utilizing SNSs to enhance its instructional delivery method.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to find out-

1. The perceptions of distance learners about social networking sites

2. The social networking site that is most frequently visited by distance learners
3. The purpose of using social networking sites
4. The frequency of usage of social networking sites by distance learners
5. The various categories of social networking sites used by distance learners
6. The positive and negative impact of social networking sites on distance learners

Research Questions

1. What are the various categories of social networking sites used by distance learners?
2. What are the perceptions of distance learners about social networking sites?
3. What is the extent of utilization of social networking sites by distance learners?
4. What are the purposes for using the social networking sites?

Method

The descriptive survey method was adopted for the study. The population comprised of the entire students of National Open University of Nigeria. Five study centres of the University were purposively selected for the study. A total of four hundred students were randomly selected from the five study centres. 100 to 400 level students were selected from all the Schools in the university. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire on a 4-point Likert scale developed by the researcher. The questionnaire had two main sections. Section A sought for demographic information of the respondents. Section B sought for information on the categories of social networking sites used by distance learners and their perceptions about social networking sites. It also sought information on the extent of utilization of

social networking sites by distance learners and the purposes for using them. The questionnaire was face and content validated through a pilot study involving thirty students at one of the study centres that is not part of the sample for the study. The questionnaire was also reviewed by experts in distance education and social sciences. The internal consistency of the instrument was 0.75 using Cronbach Alpha formula. Three hundred and sixty copies of the questionnaire were properly filled and returned with an overall response rate of 90%.

Findings

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Age range	Frequency	Percentage
30 & Above	73	20.28
25-29	86	23.89
22 -24	122	33.89
22 & below	79	21.94
Sex		
Male	107	29.73
Female	253	70.27

Majority of the students (33.89%) were between 22 to 24 years of age, while 23.89% fell between the age group of 25-29 years, 20.28% were above 30 years and 21.94% were below 22 years. Out of the 360 respondents, 70.27% were females and 29.72% were males.

Research question 1:

What are the various categories of social networking sites used by distance

The Allowing social networking sites were included in the study namely, - Facebook, Twitter, Youtube Yahoo, Badoo, 2go, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, NOUN-iLearn and Google+, Skype, Blog, Instagram, and Imo.

Table 2

Categories of Social Networking Sites Used by Distance Learners

Social Networking Sites	Frequency	Percentage
You Tube	96	26.67
Facebook	228	63.33
Yahoo	132	36.67
Badoo	57	15.94
Twitter	205	56.94
2 go	64	17.78
WhatsApp	198	55.83
NOUN-iLearn	57	15.83
Google	103	28.61
Talked In	72	20.00
Skype	65	18.05
Blog	75	20.83
Instagram	95	26.39
Imo	59	16.39

The social networking sites used by the distance learning students in NOUN are shown in Table 2. Majority of the students (63.33%) use Facebook, this was followed by Twitter (56.9%) and WhatsApp with 55%. Many of the respondents use more than one networking site. Only 15.83% make use of the NOUN-iLearn which is the social networking site of the National Open

University of Nigeria. NOUN-iLearn enables students to interact with course tutors and course mates from any location using the Internet.

Research question 2:

What are the perceptions of distance learners about social networking sites?

Table 3

Students' Perceptions of Social Networking Sites

Perceptions of SNSs	Frequency	Percentage
SNS is interesting	264	73.32
SNS reduces the time for studying	60	16.67
SNS facilitates research and learning	194	53.89
SNS can encourage cybercrime	178	49.44
SNS helps to strengthen personal relationships	185	51.38
SNS has negatively influenced NOUN students	54	15.00

Table 3 shows that the majority of the students (73.32 %) perceived social networking sites as interesting while 53.89% indicated that SNSs facilitate research and learning. 51.38% of the students perceive SNSs as a mechanism that helps to strengthen personal relationships and 49.44% perceive the sites as platforms that can encourage cybercrimes.

Research question 3:

What is the extent of utilization of social networking sites by distance learners?

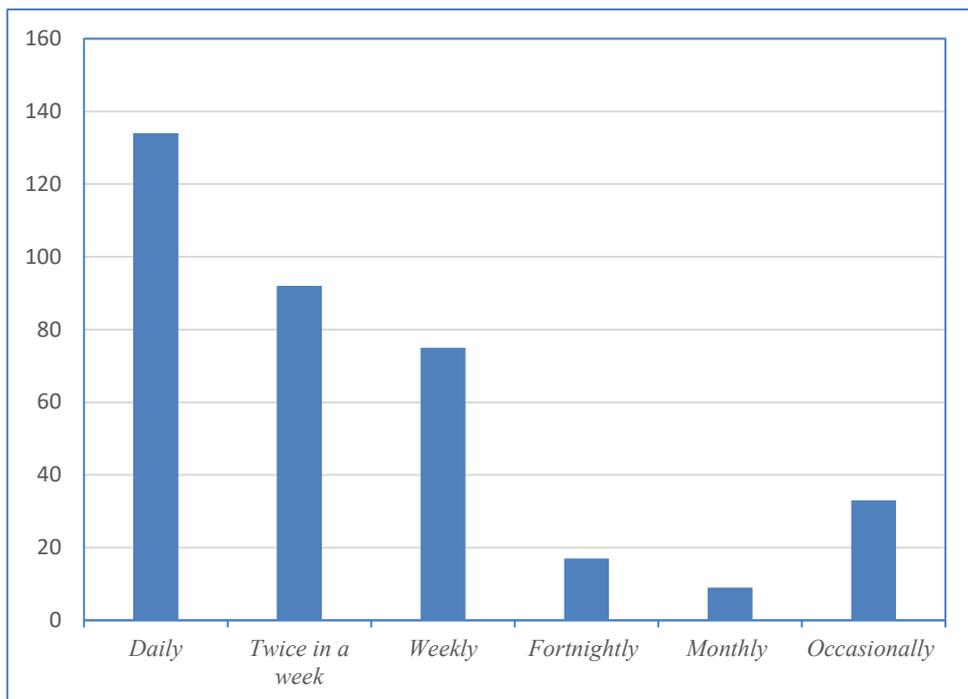
Table 4

Frequency of Using Social Networking Sites

Frequency of Usage	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Daily	134	37.22
Twice in a week	92	25.56
Weekly	75	20.84

Frequency of Usage	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Fortnightly	17	4.72
Monthly	9	2.5
Occasionally	33	9.16
Total	360	100

Table 4 shows that the majority of the students (37.22%) visit the social networking sites daily. 25.56% use the sites twice a week, 20.84% visit the sites weekly while 9.16% occasionally visit the sites. The graph below further illustrates this trend.



Frequency of usage

Figure 1: *Frequency of Visits to SNSs*

Table 5*Time Spent on SNSs per Visit*

Time Range	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1 hour	168	46.67
1 - 2 hours	82	22.78
2-3 hours	73	20.78
Above 3 hours	37	10.27
Total	360	100

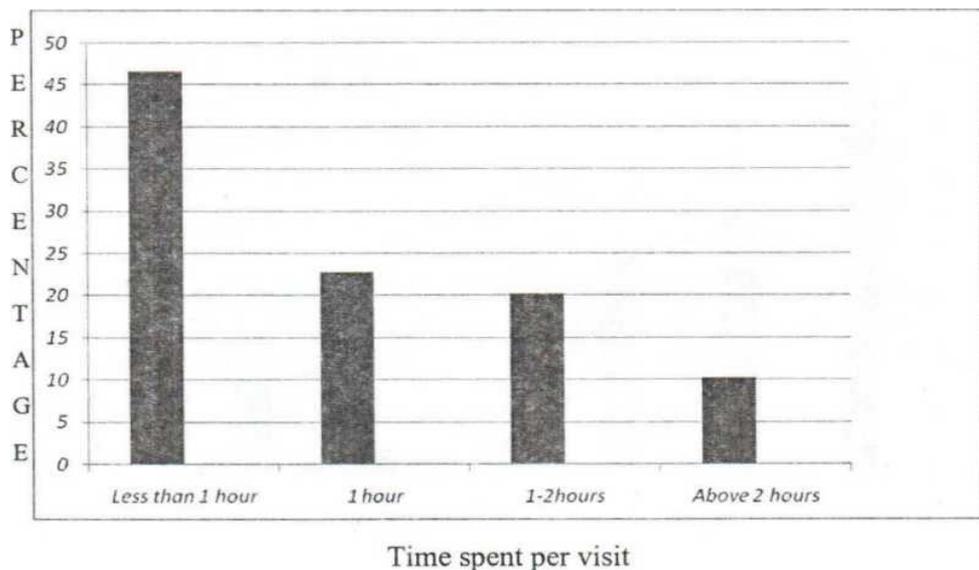
**Figure 2:** *Time Spent on SNSs per Visit*

Table 5 and Figure 2 show that 46% of the respondents spent less than one hour on the SNSs per visit, 22.78% spent one to two hours, 20.78% spend two to three hours and 10.27% spent above three hours per visit.

Research question 4:

What are the purpose of using social networking sites?

Table 6: Purpose of Using Social Networking Sites

Purposes	Frequency	Percentage
Instant messages (Chats)	47	13.05
For academic work and research purposes	157	43.61
To meet new people	98	27.22
To communicate with friends/colleagues	176	48.89
To watch movies	67	18.61
For Uploading photos	144	40.00
To interact with tutors online	68	18.89
Sharing photo files, music and videos	146	40.55
Updating profile information	165	45.83
For entertainment	99	27.50
To search for jobs	105	29.17

Table 6 shows that the majority of the students (48.89%) use social networking to communicate and interact with friends, 45.83% use these sites to update profile information while 43.61% use it for academic work and research purposes. There are 40.55% who use the sites to share photos, files, - and videos, while 40% use it for uploading photos.

Discussion

The study has revealed the various categories of social networking sites used by distance learning students of the National Open University of Nigeria. Facebook was the most visited site followed by Twitter and WhatsApp. This agrees with Larson (2012) who found that Facebook has 900 million users, Twitter 555 million users, Google+ with 170 million users and LinkedIn with 150 million users. The findings also support a report by Arrington (2005) which shows that 85% of college students in the United States had a profile

up on Facebook. The study further revealed that the main purpose of social networking sites is to serve as a social platform where students can reunite with friends, families, colleagues, and stay connected with current ones and even make new acquaintances (Ito, 2008).

The responses on the extent of usage of social networking sites indicate that these sites are frequently used to a great extent. Haneeta and Sumitha (2011) noted that a huge number of undergraduate students use the social networking site- Facebook and that many of them make their profile and personal information publicly available.

The findings of this study show that distance learning students use the SNSs mostly for communicating and interacting with friends and colleagues. These interactions may also be academic as some of them form online study groups. This suggests that distance learning students can view videos of lectures and also interact with the tutors if these are uploaded to the SNSs. Distance learning students in NOUN also use SNSs to search for study/course materials online. Studies have shown that study /course materials are not always available at the study centres for the students to collect (Nnaka, 2013). However, the students can easily access them via the internet using social media networking sites such as Google+. Many of the students perceive SNSs as interesting and as tools that can be used to improve their academic performance and social lives. The findings also reveal that social networking sites have some negative impact on students. These include a reduction in the time that should be devoted to studies and providing a platform that attracts students to indulge in cybercrimes. This is in line with Ahmed (2011) who reported that one of the cybercrimes perpetuated through social networking sites is copyright infringement, among other criminal acts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is a high usage of social media networking sites among distance learning students in National Open University of Nigeria. However, the study revealed that the SNSs are used both for social purposes and for academic work. Facebook is the most popular social networking site among the distance learning students. This study has shown that distance learning

students use social networking sites mostly to connect with friends and colleagues, watch movies, discuss issues, and upload and update profiles. Only a small percentage of the students visit the SNSs for educational purposes. Institutions especially open and distance learning institutions need to develop strategies and tactics that will make social media platforms more attractive to students so that they can use it more for educational purposes. This will equally reduce the negative effects of social media on the students. National Open University of Nigeria should use SNSs as platforms for sharing study/course materials, uploading lectures and videos of practical work, for example by creating Facebook pages, LinkedIn groups etc. in order to enhance interactions and reduce the distance between the students and the instructors. Social networking sites have the capacity to enhance synchronous learning in open and distance education.

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