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To use or not to use? Social media in higher education in developing countries

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ABSTRACT

This research is a response to the universal use of social media by students for academic-related purposes. It bridges a gap in knowledge in relation to the value and use of social media as effective teaching and learning tool in higher education in developing countries. A pre-tested questionnaire survey was self-administered to faculty members in the eight public Egyptian higher institutions offering tourism and hotel management programs. The results showed that social media have a great value for academic-related purposes, particularly as teaching and learning tool; however, the actual use by faculty was at a minimal level. In-depth interviews were conducted to identify the perils, barriers and concerns for the minimal use. Several barriers were identified with some specific to developing countries' context. Nonetheless, there was consensus by faculty that if these barriers were overcome, social media could be developed as an innovative and effective tool for teaching and learning. Implications for researchers and policy makers are discussed.

1. Introduction

Hundreds of millions of users are now contributing social media contents using Web 2.0 and social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media are defined as the means of interactions among people in which they communicate, collaborate and share information online in a social dialogue as creators of user-generated content in a virtual community (Grosseck, 2009). Social media is a platform, where users can jointly investigate network contents, share their experience and build up a relation for different purposes, e.g., social or educational (Jiao, Gao, & Yang, 2015). Since its blizzard explosion, social media has drawn the attention of scholars in many contexts. One of these issues, limited but growing research, was the use of social media as a learning tool in higher education (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Canche, 2012; Gupta, 2014; Tess, 2013) or as mobile learning in higher education (Bosch, 2009; Romero, 2015), but paucity of research was found with regard to some particular disciplines, i.e., the use of

social media in hospitality and tourism higher education (Hajli & Lin, 2014; Liburd & Christensen, 2013; Sobaih & Moustafa, 2016).

Universities, particularly public ones, in developing countries, e.g., Egypt, often suffer from poor infrastructure and lack communication technology and formal electronic methods to connect with their students, e.g., Blackboard, university email and student blogs. In addition, they are still depending on the traditionally-based learning management system (LMS) of one-way communication inside classroom and do not use full capabilities of social media in engaging students in virtual learning (Al-Rahmi, Othman, Yusof, & Musa, 2015). The value of integrating social media in higher education rests on socio-cultural learning theories (Liburd & Christensen, 2013). The socio-cultural learning theories (see for example, Vygotesy, 1992) showed that students have different learning styles; however, it was confirmed that interaction between students and educators is the key element in both classroom and the virtual learning environment. Liburd and Christensen (2013) said that the use of social media encourage students to participate and create in-depth learning through interaction, critical thinking and collaboration. Therefore, Sobaih and Moustafa (2016) argued that social media have a great potential to be used as a communication platform for academic-related purposes,

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particularly in relation to teaching and learning in higher education since students already use these networks. In addition, social media could bridge the digital divide between developed and developing countries, especially in Africa, where Egypt is located, which is perceived to be the most vulnerable to such digital marginalization (Tassiopoulos, 2010).

This research was empirically designed to investigate the values and use of social media as a teaching and learning platform in higher education in developing countries using the Egyptian institutions offering Tourism and Hotel Management as a case study. This research identifies the different patterns of using the social media as informal scholarly communication tool. It assesses the extent to which social media can be used in different academic settings as an informal scholarly communication tool. The potential barriers that may exit around adoption of social media as informal scholarly communication for teaching and learning purposes are identified. It also contributes to the general body of knowledge in relation to the use of social media as a platform for academic-related purposes. More precisely, the guiding research questions were as follows:

- What is the extent to which Egyptian higher institutions use social media as informal scholarly communication?
- What are the barriers that may prevent faculty members to use social media as informal scholarly communication? How could these barriers be overcome?
- What is the impact of using social media as informal scholarly communication on learning outcomes?
- What is the potential of using social media in higher education in developing countries

Notwithstanding this, developing countries such as Egypt, do not have other technological communication to connect and interact with their students and thus the social media remain a good tool to rely on and develop for teaching and learning purposes (Sobaih & Moustafa, 2016). Moreover, social media may be the proper platform to bridge the digital divide between developed and developing countries and also between institutions and their digital native students in developing country contexts.

2. Literature review

2.1. The use of social media in higher education

Although social media were established primarily for social communication, it can be developed as an appropriate tool for teaching and learning purposes, particularly to enhance interactions between academics and their students (Dyson, Vickers, Turtle, & Cowan, 2015; Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, & Chang, 2015; Sugimoto, Hank, Bowman, & Pomerantz, 2015). Many studies (e.g., Dyson et al., 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) focus on the integration of social media into higher education programs, particularly at the undergraduate level. Sugimoto et al., (2015) argued that relationships formed on Facebook or other social media tools between faculty members and students opened communication and resulted in an enhanced learning environment whereby students become more engaged in the classroom.

Many higher education institutions are still depending on the traditionally-based learning systems, which actually does not use full capacity of social media to improve global participation of students in learning through collaborative learning in social environment (Al-Rahmi et al., 2015). In addition, studies (see for example, Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, & Dennis, 2015; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010) showed that students report more interest in the potential of social media, particularly

Facebook, as an instructional tool compared to faculty members. Furthermore, Junco (2011) said that students use Facebook to create contents and disseminate to others for social or educational purposes. Nonetheless, Davis et al., (2012) said that using social media by institutions as a tool for engaging and involving students in academic life is likely to yield more positive results and would help institutions to fulfill their objectives. With particular focus on tourism education, Liburd and Christensen (2013) said that social media supports a more reflective approach to learning but also offer the opportunity to make teaching more practical and application-oriented. Hajli and Lin (2014) added that in an era of social learning, social media can play an important role in developing tourism education and support online learning. Sobaih and Moustafa (2016) added that establishing faculty–student relationship on Facebook, and other social media enhances communication between students and faculty members; facilitates peer and social learning; supports students; enhances self-confidence; and builds strong connection and community.

Social media consist of several activities: communication with friends; watching news; sharing photos, videos; involvement in public topic discussion; adding instant message with real-time web chat; and playing games. These are all user-generated content activities resulting in interactive social environment which is appropriate for social and peer learning (Hajli & Lin, 2014). These social platforms can also be a great tool for promoting learning community; students engagement in courses; knowledge discussion; and student mentoring thereby facilitating social instant learning and intelligent messages (Davis et al., 2012; Lan, Gou, & Xi, 2011; Sobaih & Moustafa, 2016) (See Fig. 1).

Social media have the potential to improve student learning, facilitate educator–student and student–student interactions, development of skills and level of satisfaction with new mobile learning involvements (Romero, 2015). Many researchers (e.g. Al-ufi & Fulton, 2014; Hamid et al., 2015) have discussed the broad benefits of social media in higher education. These include its valuable use in connectedness, conversation, community and improving student life satisfaction, trust and participation (Hamid et al., 2015; Romero, 2015; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009); student motivation and effective learning (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007); student involvement (Heiberger & Harper, 2008); enhancing student learning and teaching engagement (Paul, Baker, & Cochran, 2012); and offering self-study course materials (Dyson et al., 2015); students' personal, emotional support and self-confidence (Sobaih & Moustafa, 2016). In addition, social media activities in higher education are valuable for improving academic performance through collaborative learning (Al-Rahmi et al., 2015) where learners and faculty use social media that are appealing to them (Hamid et al., 2015). Hung and Yuen (2010) explored how social networking technology can be used to supplement face-to-face courses as a means of enhancing students' sense of community and, thus, to promote classroom communities of practice in the context of higher education. They found that the majority of participants developed strong feelings of social connectedness and expressed favorable feelings regarding their learning experiences in the classes where social networking sites were used as a supplementary tool. Social media educational activities reduce students' anxiety levels by using a wide range of social media tools rather than raising queries or questions in front of their colleagues (Wheeler, Yeomans, & Wheeler, 2008). Furthermore, for purpose of scholarly communications, faculty can use a wide range of social media tools for exchanging information and communicating with other colleagues or with students for professional development such as promoting each other's work and sharing new research ideas (Al-ufi & Fulton, 2014). Moran, Seaman, and Tinti-kane (2012) reported that faculty are selective about their choice of social media