# The Effect Of Students' Usage Of Social Media Tools: A Study Of Two Tertiary Institutions In The Northern Region Of Ghana

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*Abstract: This study sought to understand the effects of tertiary students' usage of social media tools using the Tamale Technical University and the University for Development Studies (UDS), Tamale campus as the case. The study observed that students depend highly on social media tools for academic and social activities on campus. So significant are their smart and android phones connected to the internet to them that they use such devices as a replacement to the libraries. Those devices serve as their libraries and special pals that aid them academically and sustain their stay on campus. Using focus group and observation as study method, it was revealed that, the 21$^{st}$ century information centric notion has made these students dependent on social media tools.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

"Student's access to technology and the internet may allow them to pursue their education to a greater degree than they could otherwise. At a school in Arizona, students are issued laptops instead of textbooks and some of their school buses have Wi-Fi internet access. As a results, bus rides including the long trips that are often a requirement of high school sports are spent studying" (Lule, 2014:288). This argument is like a coin with two sides as research from same scholar has proved that students who spend many hours browsing social media have lower GPA scores than those who do not.

The proliferation of smartphones in Ghana has increased the number of social media users in the country thus producing a new form of social communication network among groups such as family, friends, acquaintances, school mates and work colleagues. These network of social groups enhances easy communication within and among people of similar interests and ideologies. Despite its significance, its adverse effects on human behaviour cannot be overlooked because of the gratifications derived which could make it potentially addictive (Otu, 2015).

The use of social media tools for academic purposes among students of higher learning institutions has increasingly become necessary given the pervasive nature of these facilities among students of these institutions in Ghana. Social media sites are web-based public and social platforms that allows the general public to engage in interactive information sharing and communication. Apeanti and Danso (2013) indicate that social media could be used to create personal profile, upload and post photographs either by private or public thereby creating platforms for social empowerment and identity.

Selwyn (2012) explained that social media are internet applications that allows shared digital content to be authored, critiqued and re-configured by mass of users in textual, visual and audio content. Levinson (2013) states that social media, otherwise known as new media has empowered everyone in this 21$^{st}$ century to be producers and disseminators of information and predicted that such a revolutionary process is going to change in the way people live, work and play.

The Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing (GINKS) in (2013) underscored the significant use of social media tools in developing and shaping the skills of students of higher learning stressing that "The African child should be encouraged to use social media platforms in doing everything he/she needs to do because the technology had been made available to their generation and for their time". Generally speaking, there is no specific definition of what constitutes new media otherwise social media but scholars have attributed

the phenomena to features that enable interactivity between and among mass social group.

McQuail (2009) is of the view that new media is not easy to define but the focus should be on those new media applications that directly or indirectly enter the sphere of mass communication with the resultant resting on 'traditional' mass media. "Attention focuses mainly on the collective ensemble of activities that fall under the heading 'Internet', especially on the more public uses, including online news, advertising, broadcasting applications (including downloading of music, etc.), forums and discussion activities, the World Wide Web (WWW), information searches and certain community-forming potentials. We are less concerned with private e-mail, game-playing and many other more or less private services provided by way of the Internet" (McQuail, 2009:116).

"Social media allows an unprecedented volume of personal, informal communication in real time from anywhere in the world. It allows users to keep in touch with friends on other continents, yet keeps the conversation as casual as a Facebook wall post. Now, news can be distributed through many major outlets almost instantaneously and different perspectives on any one event can be aired concurrently" (Lule, 2014:286). Despite these seeming advantages of social media, Lule however averred that the social media platform creates difficulties in the work of Journalists to the extent that most people find it difficult to decipher credible and objective news as against ramours and opinions.

Addy and Ofori-Boateng (2015) expressed the view that significant university students and Lecturers are adopting different Information Technology Tools (ICT) in teaching and learning across the country, thus surpassing the idea of confining pedagogical methodology in the classroom. This they indicate, "Has created a lot of chances for lecturers, students and other stakeholders in the universities in Ghana. The National School Board Association in Ghana enumerated that students who have access to technologies also perform well on standardized tests and various companies like Google and Apple are bringing educational applications which combines techniques with educational materials which increase learning and creates innovative ways of retention than a textbook" (Addy & Ofori-Boateng, 2015: 24).

Available studies on students use of social media in schools in Ghana has mainly focus on academic institutions based in the Southern part of the country. Some of the studies have indicated that students at the university level are addicted to the use of social media while other studies points to the fact that the use of social media has affected the quality of students spelling abilities (Otu, 2015, Mingle & Adams, 2015). This current study investigates the effect of students' usage of social media tools in two tertiary institutions in the Northern Region of Ghana. The focus is on the Tamale Technical University (TATU) and the University for Development Studies (UDS).

This study is guided by some objectives which includes; to understand the usage of social media tools among tertiary students in the Northern region. It is to analyse the implications of the use of social media tools on the qualitative academic performances of tertiary students. Besides, the study is to explore the most used form of social media tool used by the students for academic purposes.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the contemporary world, nowhere is an Island neither is any new idea about the world hidden forever hence the need to illustrate and examine some few related research work on students use of social media in higher education in order to make sense of the subject under discussion. These related literature would also enable us make sense of the outcome of the current research and provide room for comparison of findings.

Otu (2015) conducted a study on social media addiction among students of the University of Ghana using a quantitative descriptive methodology where questionnaires were used to collect data from a sample of 200 students in a probability sample. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software in arriving at a conclusion. The study sought to investigate and identify the social media platforms used by the students of the University of Ghana. It also determined what students used those platforms for and whether they were addicted to the platforms and the levels of the addictions.

Findings from Otu's research indicated that the students used all the popular social media platforms with WhatsApp being the most regularly used. This was followed by Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Skype. Students according to the findings use the social media platforms for entertainment, create media content and share opinions, create awareness, meet new friends and reconnect with old relationships. The findings also confirmed existence of addiction of social media use among students of the University of Ghana. It categorised the levels of addiction from mild, moderate to severe levels of addiction.

Gikas and Grant (2013) conducted a study on "mobile computing devices in higher education: perspective on learning with cellphones, smartphones and social media" in some selected universities in the USA, using a qualitative research method in collecting and analyzing data. Data was collected through student focus group interviews. Two major themes emerged from the interview which were; advantages of mobile computing devices for students learning and frustrations from learning with mobile computing devices. The purpose of the study was to explore teaching and learning when mobile computing devices were implemented in higher education.

Gikas and Grant (2013) found out that the use of the mobile devices enabled participants to learn in diverse ways including quick access to information, communication and content collaboration, variety of ways to learn and situated learning. It also identified frustrations from the use of mobile devices for learning as challenges to the participants and enumerated some of the challenges as anti-technology instructors in some of the class, device challenges while others see the devices as distractions to them. The students overall acknowledged the use of the mobile and social media devices made learning more participatory and more beneficial than their high school experiences because they felt the mobile devices helped them engage with the content.

Mingle and Adams (2015) studied social media network participation and academic performance in Senior High schools in Ghana aimed at identifying social media sites and

their usage among students and how they participated on social media platforms. The study also looked at the effect of social media on students' grammar and spelling and overall effect on academic performance. The study which adopted a mixed research approach, used the social learning and the uses and gratification theories to analyse the data.

Findings indicate that whatsapp and facebook were mainly used by respondents in making friends and chatting with each other but respondents benefited positively and negatively in social media participation. "Negative effects such as poor grammar and spelling, late submission of assignment, less study time and poor academic performance due to the heavy participation on social media networks. Furthermore, there was a high addiction rate among students in the usage of social media networks. Nevertheless, there were cases where others experienced improvement in their readings skills as a result of participation on social media networks. Also, respondents shared ideas, discussed and shared examination questions among themselves on social media networks", (Mingle & Adam, 2015).

## III. METHODOLOGY

The approach to this study is qualitative case study research approach, where focus group interview and observations were used to collect data from students of the Tamale Technical University (TATU) and the University for Development Studies (UDS), Tamale campus. Merriam (2002) describes qualitative case study as an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution or community. The approach seeks to study phenomenon in-depth to unearth details data about the subject under study. In this circumstance, both institutions are considered as a single case study as the phenomena under investigation here is seen as the same in both institutions.

The design of this research is a single case study with embedded units. Baxter and Jack (2008) are of the view that a single case study with embedded units can be used to study the same issue with intriguing differences. A case study with embedded units would enable the researcher to explore the case while considering the influence of associated attributes. "The ability to look at sub-units that are situated within a larger case is powerful when you consider that data can be analysed within the sub-units separately (within case analysis), between the different sub-units (between case analysis), or across all of the sub-units (cross-case analysis). The ability to engage in such rich analysis only serves to better illuminate the case" (Baxter & Jack, 2008:550).

Inductive data analysis procedure as one of the features of qualitative data analysis was adopted to analyse the large volume of data collected. By using this procedure; patterns, categorisation of data and thematic analysis were used to interpret the data collected. As indicated by Creswell (2009), patterns, categorisations and themes are built from the bottom up through organising data into abstract units. This process demonstrates effective working relationship between the themes and database until a comprehensive set of themes are arrived at. This enables the researcher especially this researcher to make sense of the entire data collected since as responses were subjected to good analysis after inductive analysis without any bias or manipulation of any data.

Respondents to this study were purposively selected from the two institutions to form a focus group for the study. While the focus group for that of UDS were eight-member group, that of TATU consisted of seven students who responded to some opened-ended questions on students' usage of social media tools. Findings were analysed along the research questions which flowed from the objectives of the study. Some themes emerged from the data and have dully been analysed to make sense of the large volume of data collected.

## IV. FINDINGS

Findings for this study have been analysed thematically along the objectives of the research which is aimed at understanding the effect of students' usage of social media tools in two tertiary institutions in the Northern Region of Ghana. These institutions are the Tamale Technical University and the University for Development Studies, Tamale campus.

### A. RQ1. WHAT IS THE LEVEL OF USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS AMONG TERTIARY STUDENTS IN THE NORTHERN REGION?

Social media has been a common place and platform for people of all walks of lives but among the students of these two institutions, the usage of social media is very common since almost every student is either seen with one mobile phone or the other all of which have social networking platforms for chatting, browsing the internet, making calls and taking pictures. Students who were not using smart and android mobile phones before reporting to school for the first time, soon begun to use the device because one is seen as socially excluded without one. In a focus group interview, one respondent remarked that "When I first reported to school, I did not have internet browsing phone so I found it difficult completing my assignments on time and had to be relying on my friends who use such devices but this time, I have one and suffer less to accomplish same task".

The use of social media tools among tertiary students of these institutions appear to discount the belief that the Northern part of Ghana has very high poverty levels because almost every student is seen with a phone with at least a street value of not less than GH300. This couple with the fact that these students will have to buy data in order to access whatever application or feature that the said mobile phone uses. In order not to be left behind, students do everything possible to meet the economic needs of their mobile phones at all times and even download movies and music content as well as word documents either for academic work or for leisure.

These downloads do not come at a cheaper cost irrespective of the network one is using. A respondent disclosed that she spends close to GH50.0 each month on data alone, explaining that her mobile phone is her number one friend since she cannot do without it. "I use it to make calls, chat with friends, buy goods online and play games and watch movies with it at my leisure time….I cannot do without my

phone". The fact that students cannot live without their social media tools speaks volumes of the significance attached to such devices. This also has implication for those who come from very poor backgrounds and cannot afford to buy such devices. They may drop out of school or continue to rely on their friends in order to meet the minimum standard of these tertiary students.

## B. RQ2. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS ON THE QUALITATIVE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCES OF TERTIARY STUDENTS?

It appears that many if not all of the students have not considered the implications of the use of the mobile phone on their academic performances since they consider the mobile device as part and parcel of their lives. It is the new order of living, hence whether negative or positive that the mobile device and its application brings to the students, they count them as blessings and progressive. Respondents appear to be indifferent to the negative implication of social media on their academic performance and for that reason, they do not even think of the negative consequences. What however is not in doubt among many of them is the fact that using the mobile phone on social media could produce negative and positive results depending on the user but little is thought about its negative implication on academic performance by the students.

Respondents also indicated that they rely on the services of their devices to produce all necessary information relating to their academic work and any other thing that they need to the extent that they do not even consider going to the library or buying textbooks for their courses with the justification that their social media tool could serve them better. "Since I came to this University, I have never gone to the library to study nor borrow any book to read. All I need is my smart phone and data and I can read any material that I want for my course work. Most of the books at the library are archaic and is even boring reading them". Respondents also complained of lack of adequate textbooks for some courses at the library and because of these and other reasons, the students rely extremely on their social media devices as source of library.

The use of mobile phones by students during lectures is also very common among students especially at the Tamale Technical University where I teach. It is a common practice to see students scrolling through their phones to either confirm the concept being explained to them by the lecturer or to find answers to questions being thrown to the class. This practice of students do not only distract the users but distract other students who might also be stretching their necks to read what their colleague is reading on his/her phone and at the end, they all end up confusing themselves with the information obtained from the internet and the concept being explained by the lecturer. This has serious implication for academic progression of students. Students who do that appear not prepared for the lecture and are possibly afraid if questions are thrown at them hence the quick search for answers. Since respondents used their devices to aid them academically, it is logical to state that their academic performances depends much on the qualitative use of social media tools. Usage of social media tools in these

institutions is therefore correlated with good academic performance.

## C. RQ3. WHAT FORM OF SOCIAL MEDIA TOOL DO TERTIARY STUDENTS USE THE MOST FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES?

This question produced interesting results from the respondents. Most of the respondents mentioned google as the most used form of social media tool for academic purposes while a few mentioned facebook. What makes their responses interesting is the fact that google is only a search engine and does not qualify as a social media tool. Though it is possible to be on any social media platform such as facebook, twitter, Wikipedia and a few others and search for any information be it academic or not but those functions are highly under utilised by the respondents. What is however common is the creation of group platforms on social media pages for academic and social interaction among the students. Such platforms are used to share information relating to assignments, lecture schedules and any other academic activity. It appears that knowledge of available software applications for academic purposes is limited among these students hence their quick resort to the use of google to search for academic materials.

Aside academic work which students rely heavily on the use of social media tools, some students have created social media platforms where they engage in other nefarious activities such as pornography. Some of the respondents admitted belonging to one or two of such groups where pornographic materials are shared and discussed on those platforms. Their justification of joining such platforms is to educate themselves on sex as well as entertain themselves by watching porn videos. However justifiable such platforms maybe, it has a high potency to corrupt the morals of the respondents and to dissuade them from their academic activities. Though they are adults and can engage in any social activity of their choice, it is debasing for them to be watching pornographic materials whereas they could have used such periods qualitatively on their academic work which is the main reason for them being in school.

## V. DISCUSSION

### A. HIGH PATRONAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media receives a very high patronage among students of the Tamale Technical University and University for Development Studies (UDS). This is evidenced by the ubiquitous number of students seen using such devices on campus and in the lecture halls. This findings is not quite different from Otu (2015) where students of the University of Ghana were described as being addicted to social media use from a rate of mild, moderate to severe levels. This current study also corroborates same that students use social media platforms highly for entertainment, create media content and share opinions, create awareness, meet new friends and reconnect with old relationships.

The high patronage of social media devices is confirmed in these response from a respondent, "I use it to make calls,

chat with friends, buy goods online and play games and watch movies with it at my leisure time….I cannot do without my phone". Gikas and Grant (2013) had similar findings in their study of some selected universities in the USA. They found that the use of the mobile devices enabled participants to learn in diverse ways including quick access to information, communication and content collaboration, variety of ways to learn and situated learning. Their study also confirmed that the students overall, acknowledged the use of the mobile and social media devices made learning more participatory and more beneficial than their high school experiences because they felt the mobile devices helped them engage with the content.

## B. SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS REPLACES LIBRARIES

The fact that electronic learning is common does not imply the internet should replace the resource center of learning often referred to as the library but this study has proven that the availability of e-learning materials, accessible through the mobile phone is enough grounds to classify these social media tools as libraries. Students simply will not go to the library to search for any academic material but their smart and android phones. "Since I came to this University, I have neither gone to the library to study nor borrow any book to read. All I need is my smart phone and data and I can read any material that I want for my course work. Most of the books at the library are archaic and is even boring reading them". This revelation from a respondent totally confirms the fact that the libraries are currently not being put to good use because of the influence of social media.

A justification can be inferred from Lule's assertion that "At a school in Arizona, students are issued laptops instead of textbooks and some of their school buses have Wi-Fi internet access. As a result, bus rides including the long trips that are often a requirement of high school sports are spent studying" (Lule, 2014:288). This logically implies making learning materials handy for students could replace libraries in the not too distant future should government make the necessary investments in that direction. It is also a wake-up call for policy makers and education planners especially at the high level to restructure libraries and lecture theaters with high internet connectivity with social media tools available for students to aid them in learning.

## C. ACADEMIC PROGRESSION COULD BE ENDANGERED BY SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

Lule (2014:287) believes social network, especially facebook has been a distraction for students explaining that instead of them studying, "students will sit in the library and browse facebook, messaging their friends and getting nothing done". It must be pointed out that findings from this study also agrees with this author that social media tools despite its advantages to education, could have dire consequences for the academic development of students and society in general if its use is not properly managed and controlled. It makes it pertinent to agree with Mingle and Adams (2015) that "Negative effects such as poor grammar and spelling, late submission of assignment, less study time and poor academic performance due to the heavy participation on social media networks and addiction" endangers academic work steadily.

Again, the fact that most of them use the social media tools to engage in other social activities such as chatting, watching movies, playing games and buying online stuff instead of on academic work only means their attention could be distracted hence lowering attention to learning. This also means that students have become more dependent on social media for their needs. Baran and Davis (2010) clarifies that point further that "From a macroscopic societal perspective, if more and more people become dependent on media, media institutions will be reshaped to serve these dependencies, the overall influence of media will rise, and media's role in society will become more central. Thus, there should be a direct relationship between the amount of overall dependency and the degree of media influence or centrality at any given point in time" (Baran & Davis, 2010).

## D. DEPENDENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA COULD BE DANGEROUS

Social media tools are the 21st century technology spurring innovation, infusion on diversity thus propelling the information superhighway. It is therefore not surprising that tertiary students are dependent on these tools. This is in fact the aggregate of what the information society theory proposes that the contemporary culture is manifestly more heavily information-laden than its predecessors which means life is quintessentially about symbolisation, about exchanging and receiving – or trying to exchange and resisting reception – messages about ourselves and others. "It is in acknowledgement of this explosion of signification that many writers conceive of our having entered an information society", (Webster, 2006).

Students are expected to learn, acquire new knowledge to enable them contribute in development of their societies in the normal scheme of things. Engaging in activities that are beneficial to their academic progression is the surest way for any serious-minded students. Despite this, some deviate from this simple logical norm to the extreme of wasting academic periods in watching pornographic movies on social media at the expense of their books. Absurd as it may appear, it has the tendency of degrading societal morals. Social media tools could also be the breeding grounds for immorality, profanity and explicit sexual behaviours.

## VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is significant to note from the findings that social media tools are playing critically compelling roles in education in general and tertiary students in the Tamale Technical University and the University for Development Studies specifically. Their lives and studies are dependent on these social media platforms where they either learn or engage in other social activities on campus. Social media tools therefore serves as learning reservoirs and best pals for these students' continues progression in the academic ladder since they just cannot do without these tools.

One cannot deny the obvious that social media tools play significant roles in the educational systems of tertiary students of all walks of lives. It is also not farfetched that having free usage and access without any control at all for social media tools could have precarious consequences for the nation. This could pose serious threat to national security and the safety of society. The fact that some tertiary students could spend hours browsing, chatting and doing anything pornographic on social media without monitoring or control is risky as it could potentially negate the morals of society for good. Notwithstanding the fact that social media makes learning easier for these students who are young adults in any case, there is still the need for school authorities to put restrictions to certain sites so that students could focus purely on their academic work using the available social media platforms and tools to enhance their studies without addiction or distraction.

It has also emerged that social media tools are fast changing the dynamics of learning and the library system which has over the years been a major learning and resource center for acquisition and preservation of knowledge. Students do not fancy libraries as integral part of academic successes rather they confine themselves either in their halls or any place of convenience and with their mobile phones handy, learning is easy to go, as they can search for any academic material to aid them in their course work. This brings to the fore the need to reconsider our library system as a country. It is not everybody who may want to go and sit in the library to borrow books or search for books to learn however, they maybe countless out there who may just want to have e-libraries to digest volumes of books. Government has a huge responsibility here to invest in e-library system and retooling of all libraries across the country to meet the needs of 21$^{st}$ century information centric society.

It is imperative to suggest that further studies in this area should focus more on quantitative or a combination of quantitative and qualitative in order to unearth and widen the frontiers of issues surrounding the effects of social media usage among tertiary students in Ghana. It is just not enough to have a single case study of this nature to address myriad of issues camouflaging this sensitive but interesting field. A comprehensive nationwide or large scale study on the effects of social media on the youths and educational institutions in general could be a better bet.

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