

SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE CLASSROOM: WHATSAPP A NEW COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR ENHANCED CLASS INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study is grounded in the author's personal experience of using WhatsApp as a communication tool in a mathematics classroom. This platform was used to supplement the normal face-to-face communication between the lecturer and ICT students. WhatsApp was used during the first semester in 2015/2016 at the College of Business Education Dar Es Salaam campus. The class groups consisting of a first-year diploma and bachelor degree students were created and then passed on to another three lecturers who utilized this platform for communication. WhatsApp is a Smartphone application for instant messaging. One of the unique features of this application is its ability to enhance communication within a group of people. Besides, classroom communication between lecturers and students in higher learning using WhatsApp has not yet, to the author's knowledge, been researched particularly in Tanzania. Therefore, this study explores the use of WhatsApp as used by the four lecturers and ICT students in enhancing class communication. More specifically, the study investigates the ways WhatsApp were used by the students and lecturers, the benefits and challenges of using WhatsApp for classroom purposes as perceived by the students. Data was obtained through in-depth interviews with 10 randomly selected students as well as observation of the group chats. Data was analyzed qualitatively based on categories and major themes. Results show that WhatsApp was used for sharing study materials in the form of links, notes, assignments, and coursework, it was used to enhance communication between teachers and students, students used WhatsApp environment to help one another and to cater for anywhere anytime learning. The benefits obtained were Staying up to date, facilitating collaborative problem solving, increasing motivation to learn and reducing the cost of material production. Challenges encountered include lack of privacy due to limited options, misuse of the group due to the lack of rules, and exclusion of students without smart phones. Implications of using WhatsApp for class instructions and student engagement are provided.

Keywords: Social media, WhatsApp, communication tool, ICT students, Tanzania

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Recently, social media has exploded as a category of an online platform where people create content, share it, bookmark it and network at a high rate (Acheaw & Larson, 2015). The use of social media has become common among people of different age groups. What used to be a hobby for some people has now become a style of life. Young people have embraced social media as a platform for communication and sharing information (Olaleke, Iroju, & Olajide, 2015). These technologies are known to act as an indispensable role in collaboration, community building and participation. Even though they are somehow structurally different, social media platforms that have become a part of users' daily lives, they are now used in education (Cetinkaya, 2017). And they are changing the ways knowledge is digested and taught in classrooms by providing teachers and students new avenues for communication, curriculum delivery and learning (VanDoorn & Eklund, 2013).

According to Georgieva (2014), social media is the use of Facebook, Blogs, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn for the purpose of communication, sharing photos as well as videos. However, for the purpose of this study social media is captured by the use of internet through WhatsApp for communication, sharing of ideas, study materials, assignments, coursework results, links, photos and videos by students and Lecturers. WhatsApp is a Smartphone application that runs on most devices which allow people to create groups and communicate within its boundaries. One of the unique features of this application is its ability to enhance communication within a group of people that makes it the most widely downloaded applications having more than 600 million users globally (Husain & Adamu, 2014). This communication tool has quickly become pervasive and popular among tertiary education students (Yin, 2016). There are Various reasons explaining why people adopt WhatsApp as their main communication tool. Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) note the following : The low cost of the application, the ability to send an unlimited number of messages, the immediacy, the desire to feel a part of the trend since their acquaintances have already adopted the application, the capacity to conduct an on-going conversation with many friends simultaneously, the knitting together of a community of friends or family, and a sense of privacy relative to other social networks.

WhatsApp like other social media platforms constitute several features which contribute to the learning process, such as encouraging collaborative learning, active participation in class, learning any time, any place, enhancing relationships, improving learning, motivation and offering personalized course material (Al-Rahmi & Othman). However, research reveals that this tool isn't widely implemented (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore classroom communication between lecturers and students using WhatsApp at the College of Business Education (CBE) in Tanzania, probing on the benefits and challenges encountered by students' and future implications for the use of WhatsApp as a platform for classroom communication are discussed.

2.0 SOCIAL MEDIA IN EDUCATION

The study by VanDoorn and Eklund (2013) that aimed at exploring the potentials of computer mediated communication (CMC) using Facebook established that, the students studied were reassured by the real-time dialogue with their lecturer. The students perceived the CMC as actively scaffolding their learning and that the synchronous communication provided distinct benefits, including neutralising distance for distance learners, reducing "unapproachability" of teachers thereby establishing an environment where the student-teacher division was legitimately blurred, and that students were encouraged to engage with learning material, encouraging participation and creating a collegiate environment. On the issue of students and teachers' class interactions, the study revealed that 87% of the participants agreed that the use of the Facebook network on mobile phones helped them to interact and get feedback from the lecturer hence enhanced ease of communication with the lecturer. The use of Facebook in the course study was found to have a significant impact on student's collaboration and engagement (Mbodila, Ndebele, & Muhandji, 2014). The study results indicate that students, tutors, and instructor were highly engaged in the learning process in ways that transcended traditional classroom activities.

According to Junco, Heiberger† and Loken‡ (2010) the use of social media has improved contact between students and faculty as they provide an avenue for contact communication that encouraged cooperation among students. The assignments undertaken through Twitter promoted active learning by helping students relate the course material to their own experiences both inside and outside of the classroom. The Twitter platform allowed teachers to provide prompt feedback. The study established also that, students and faculty were both highly engaged in the learning process in ways that transcended traditional classroom activities.

The study of Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) found that the use of WhatsApp in school enables learning beyond the classroom as it helps with the easy and quick transfer of links to study materials compared to other technologies. Using WhatsApp to send study materials ensures delivery of the message intended for a class in any form to everyone even if it is sent after school hours. Learning approaches using social media are seen to promote pedagogical innovation as they encourage teaching and learning processes that are based on personalization and collaboration (Redecker, Ala-Mutka, & Punie, 2010).

To the contrary, the study by Wang, Chen, and Liang (2011) found that only 20% of the students studied agreed that social media helps with school assignments. They revealed that students who used social media to post or respond while completing homework, their efficiencies and grades were affected. The study concludes that social media has to some degree an effect on the lives of college students including their grades as students fail to balance between academics and use of social media tools for social interactions. The authors proposed an establishment of a mechanism to create a balanced relationship between social media and academic study so that college students can think more about the balancing equation of social media and academics.

Despite contradictory results, social media networks have become a shared platform that enhances accessibility, encourages cooperation, and intensifies motivation to take an active part in learning (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014). However, many times students would prefer to have real-time chat, via face-to-face discussions with their teachers, which is not convenient at times when students and teachers are off-campus. In the evolving, flexible learning environment, viable and effective technology-mediated communication alternatives to face-to-face teaching need to be explored (VanDoorn & Eklund, 2013). However, these alternatives will only work if proved to be useful to students and lecturers. Besides, contradictory results warrant more exploration of the topic. Thus, this paper considers student reactions towards WhatsApp as a class communication tool, probing on how it was used, benefits and challenges as perceived by students.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research approach, whereby 3 in-depth face to face and 7 telephone interviews were conducted among students who used WhatsApp as a communication tool in their course of study as well as taking advantage of teacher students WhatsApp chat content. The study participants were diploma and bachelor degree students in ICT intake 2015/2016 at the CBE. Prior to interviews students were asked for their consent to participate and they all agreed but the consent was given verbally. Students who were interviewed were randomly sampled and for those who were interviewed through telephone, their phone numbers were randomly picked from the WhatsApp group

participants list. The telephone interviews took about 10 to 15 minutes while the face to face interviews lasted for about 20 to 30 minutes.

The sample size in qualitative research is determined by the data saturation criteria. The proposed criteria involve selecting the initial analysis sample where at least 10 interviews are conducted, the stopping criteria is that after the 10th interview, 3 successive interviews are conducted until there is no occurrence of new themes (Yahya & Mutarubukwa, 2017). The data saturation for this study was reached at the seventh interview and confirmed with three more interviews.

Data were analyzed qualitatively where, The interviews were hand written as field notes which were transcribed verbatim, coded then summarized according to emerging major categories. The transcriptions were read by two different people to confirm the codes. Content analysis of WhatsApp messages was considered where lecturer, students' text messages and exchange of documents were used (Denscombe, 2010, pp. 219,226) to describe the way teachers and students used the group to benefit teaching and learning . Consent was sought from both the teachers and students who used this group to use their chat content in reporting results.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 WhatsApp usage

Themes arose after analyzing the data regarding the way students and lecturers used WhatsApp are; Exchange of links and documents, students used WhatsApp to help one another, they used to easy communication, to support anytime anywhere learning and to support social interactions. These are discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

4.1.1 Exchange of links and documents

The WhatsApp groups helped lecturers and students to share study materials in the form of documents and links, assignments, past examination papers, coursework results and school timetables. The following messages exchanged between students and teachers or students themselves illustrate the point.

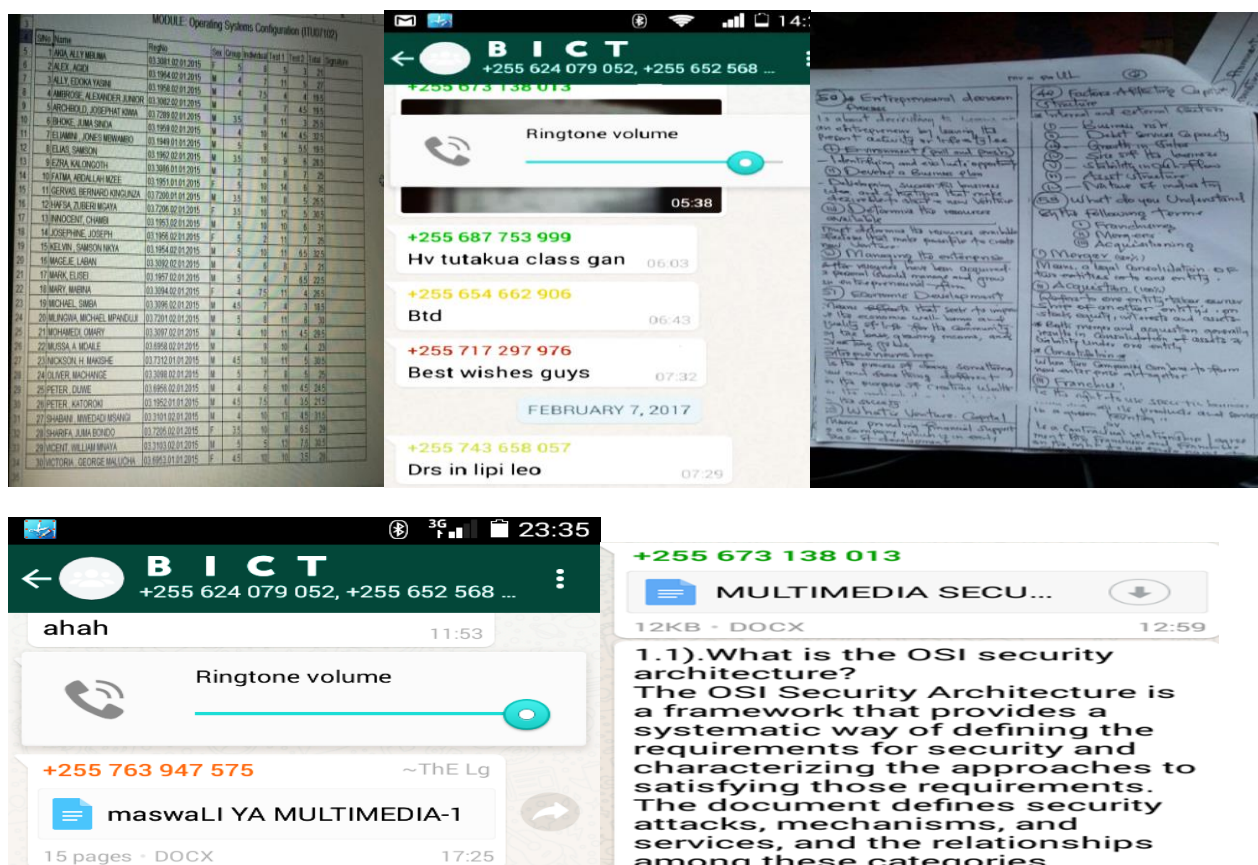


Figure 1. Examples of shared documents including course work, lecture notes, assignments and a screenshot of WhatsApp students' chats.

It was also revealed that students and lecturers found it convenient to share assignments and questions via the WhatsApp platform. The assignments were sent as normal text messages or attached files to the group as shown in Figure 1. This is also supported by the following text message sent by the bachelor degree in ICT (BICT) class representative "... PC

Maintenance: Group assignment. Question: In not than more four pages describe important features of SCSI and USB. Describe preventive maintenance, Mode of presentation soft copy pdf...” A link to study material was shared by one of the students “ <http://nou.edu.ng/uploads/fileuploads/69Jvd1jBzG1437568547.pdf>”.

During the interview one student also revealed that lecturers and students used the group to exchange educational materials such as past examination papers, notes and the like “ *For about 70%, the group is used to communicate school information such as past papers, notes,...*”

Students used WhatsApp environment for sharing the college timetable. The class representatives used this platform to send class schedules as a text message or an attachment to other members of the class. This shows that, students find it convinient to share important information that requires immediate action through the WhatsApp group so that even those who are not at the college are updated. The following message is illustrative “... *Timetable: J3-BTG1: Advanced Office Automation, BTH-Web design; J4: BTF-Networking, BTG-System Analysis, and design...*” In this message J3, J4... are the days of the week Monday, Tuesday... and BTG, BTH represent classrooms. Together with this message, images of the said timetable were also shared. Figure 2 shows examples of class and test schedules to support the findings. In this case, a student does not require to visit one of the Noticeboards in order to see the timetable, they are able to get hold of it quickly and wherever they are. Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) argue that WhatsApp helps with the easy and quick transfer of links to study materials compared to other technologies.

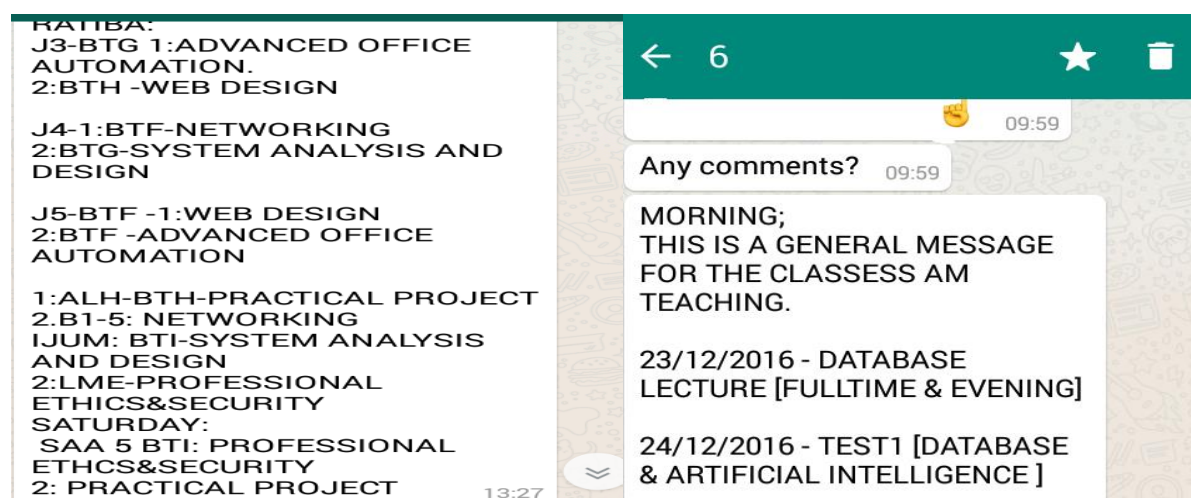


Figure 2. Examples of shared tests and class schedules

4.1.2 Students used WhatsApp platform to help one another

Bachelor degree students, especially those studying in the evening session used this platform to their advantage as they used this opportunity to ask some questions, to get clarification regarding their assignments. And at times they used the group to discuss the questions that others felt they have not understood or could not solve. In this way, other students offer some clarifications or collaboratively solve the question together. The following messages quoted from WhatsApp chats are used to support the point “ *Hi friends I have been challenged with a question here...Is execution time the same as bust time???...I just wanted to know if that execution time is the same as bust time... what queue do you use?*” another student replied “ *...Yes, it is...*” One interviewee during the interview also said that “ *If you send notes or questions and if some people have not understood they ask and get an instant help...*”. This is supported by the finding of Tulika and Dhananjay (2014) who established that through using WhatsApp students were eager to post videos, texts on the problems and were willing to solve others problems.

4.1.3 Teachers and students used WhatsApp to easy Communication

Students and teachers used the group for communication in various ways; they used the group to communicate issues regarding coursework problems, availability of the teachers and other announcements. While going through the chats, the following conversations were evident “ *Hi all, I want to upload your OS coursework, is there anyone having problems with what I shared?... Nyanya (Nickname to hide identity), your coursework will not be uploaded until you bring your test 2 to me...*”, “ *...Guys could you come to sign coursework for computer graphics later...?*”, “ *...Teacher, it seems some of us our assignments have not been considered in the coursework results...*”, “ *Teacher it looks like you have given me 5 in assignment 2, I did not score 5 marks...*” If it was not for this group these students would have to stand in a queue for the same sometimes for hours so as to report these problems in order to sort them out. Another post from one student informed the others that the teacher has entered into their classroom “ *...The teacher has said he will be in the classroom soon room BTI...*”, “ *...Teacher in the classroom B1/5...*” another post from one student was a forwarded announcement from the College Students’ Organization “ *..How are you!!Announcement to all students who made a mistake in selecting*

their courses in SARIS they have been given two days today and tomorrow to work out their problems, failure to do so they will not be able to write their end of semester examinations, thanks...". Follow up interview confirmed the results and disclosed that the group streamline communication between teachers and students as one interviewee noted "... It takes only one to own a smartphone and to give the number to the administrators,...afford an internet bundle package for students you become closer to the rest of the class and your teachers...". This means that this platform has brought teachers and students closer and that class interactions are not constrained by physical boundaries. The study of So (2016) also revealed that the use of WhatsApp can improve communication between teachers and students.

4.1.4 Teachers and students used WhatsApp to support anytime anywhere Learning

Teachers and students used this group to support anytime anywhere learning. In using WhatsApp the issue of time limits and location boundaries seem to blur as these students exchanged messages until midnight and started very early in the morning the next day. More often the chats closed at around 23hrs and begun between 4 and 5 am. This is evidenced by the following chat messages as a timetable was shared at 00:44 am "...The timetable: Here is the next semester timetable after the completion of Java exam tomorrow, Corporate business communication, Financial accounting..." a best wishes message was sent at 05:24 am and a joke at 04:24 am. This show that social media can be used to support learning at all times, the difference of three hours where students did not share anything does not mean that it is not possible to use this platform, it is because even in normal situations there is a point people have to rest. This result concurs with the result of Tulika and Dhananjay (2014) who observed that most of the student's discussions on the group occurred late at night and students opined that m-learning through WhatsApp increase learning flexibility and encourages independent learning at any time and anywhere.

During the interview one interviewee supported the idea of WhatsApp being the ideal tool for anywhere anytime learning. This is reported by a student who was abroad and he had some examinations to catch up later so he used this platform to ask his colleague to post the examination papers that they had attempted and class notes so that he could prepare for his examinations. This is evidenced by the interviewee statement that "...I went abroad to take care for my grandfather who was sick...I requested my friend to send the lecture material and examination papers they undertook...it helped me a lot.. because I was able to prepare myself for special examinations while I was abroad.." other two respondents narrated "...You can get information related to school activities even at home or at some other places... it is not necessary that you have to be physically at the college.." , "...To get information early... it is not until you go to the college to look at the notice board.."

With WhatsApp learning is no longer bound to some local geographical locations, students are able to catch up with school activities outside the classroom. This finding is supported by Tulika and Dhananjay (2014) who said that WhatsApp is ideal for supporting anywhere anytime learning. Although, the study by (So, 2016) cautioned that students especially the married ones slightly rejected the idea of receiving study materials outside college hours so teachers should learn the appropriate time to interact with their students. This study, revealed that even the married students, supported the use of whats to support enytime anywhere learning.

4.1.5 Students used the WhatsApp platform to support social nteractions

Analysis of the chats revealed that students used this platform to discuss some social issues as well as for entertainment. One student revealed during the interview that " We used the group for social... sharing news links, for entertainment... sports news, jokes,...". More often, students' posted some results of football matches or would start a dialogue on the upcoming matches. They also used this platform to make announcements regarding colleagues who happen to have a problem, for example, have been deprived of the beloved one or has fallen ill. This group was then used to offer condolences or to wish them a quick recovery. According to Amry (2014) WhatsApp mobile learning is a good solution to improving community level interaction and social presence among students.

4.2 Benefits

Another objective of this study was to explore the benefits that students obtained in using WhatsApp as a tool to support class interactions. The following themes emerged; Staying up to date, Helps with collaborative problem solving, Increase motivation to learn and reduction of the cost of material production. A detail discussion of these themes follow in subsequent sections.

4.2.1 Staying up to date all the time

The interviewees regard the WhatsApp group as a very useful tool that helps them to stay current even if someone fails to attend a lecture they could catch up of with their fellow through the WhatsApp group. As one Interviewee narrated "...If you were not in class due to sickness, you can get class updates through the group... Information such as the teachers' availability, study materials, upcoming tests is easily shared" This is in support of Amry (2014) discussion that, students used WhatsApp for academic and other purposes. In this system students are quickly informed of every update and any message inserted by a member of the group.

4.2.2 Helps with collaborative problem solving

WhatsApp groups helped students to discuss some questions with their fellow students. Respondents revealed that, they used the group to discuss the questions that others felt they could not solve; In this way, students collaboratively solve the question together. This is evidenced with a quote from one interviewee “... *Facilitate group discussions... If you fail to attempt a question, you post to the platform so that you can discuss it in a group ...*”. This result is in accordance with Yin (2016) who found that 26.7% of the respondents stated that WhatsApp encouraged collaborative problem solving.

4.2.3 Increase motivation to learn

It was discovered through the interviews that the use of WhatsApp motivate students to learn particularly undertaking their assignments even if they were not in a position to do so. This is because during group chatting students may realize that the assignment was not as difficult as they thought it to be and sometimes a student does not feel like doing it but in the presence of others in a group, they find themselves doing it as they discuss with colleagues. This is supported by the statement “...*It motivates because even if you are not in a mood to undertake the assignment you find yourself doing it ...*”, “... *encourages to take the assignment as colleagues chats...*”. Another respondent narrated “...*They send links to the study materials...if you have not read and you see a link of a learning material it encourages you to read because you do not have to go find it yourself ...*”. This finding is inline with the findings of Cetinkaya, (2017) who found that the students studied revealed that WhatsApp has a positive effect on motivation and that its use in other courses would be useful. The study of Dunn (2013) also found that the use of social media increases students motivation and engagement with course materials.

4.2.4 Reduction of the cost of material production

During the interview, it was revealed that the use of WhatsApp helps in reducing the cost of photocopying assignments and lecture materials. This is possible due to the feature that allows people to upload photos or sharing a link to the study materials. Lecturers and students can just take a photograph of what they would want to share and upload that photo to the group. This point is supported by the statement “...*Because somebody can send notes through your phone...it reduces the cost of photocopying...*”

4.3 Challenges

Data were analyzed with regards to the challenges encountered by the students in utilizing the WhatsApp environment to support class interactions. The emerged themes include misuse of the platform due to the lack of rules, exclusion of students without smart phones and lack of privacy due to limited options.

4.3.1 Misuse of the platform due to lack of group rules

The interviewed students were concerned with the class group being misused in such a way that the purpose of the group may not be attained. They pointed to the fact that other students post too many messages that are not academically oriented like football matches, business adverts and the like. However, Learning is a social process, students also need to discuss some social matters even though it should not prevail the academic purpose for which the group was initially created. During the interview, one interviewee narrated “... *other people are not serious... they would send non related stuff into the class group, for example, a person posts a topic about a football match instead of adding an academic issue that can be discussed...*” another interviewee said “... *this is an uncontrolled environment...everyone can post anything they feel like...*” another interviewee reflected on the danger of posting too many jokes that an important message might be missed “...*Too many jokes may result into a person ignoring an important post thinking it was a joke...* This is due to fact that at the initiation stage of the group there was no any rules that were put forward pinpointing of what should and shouldn't be shared and what would happen to someone who shares something contrary to the aim of the group. During the interview, one interviewee narrated “... *administrators and initiators of the groups do not usually introduce group rules, for example, someone may misuse the group... it does not mean they are ignoring... it is because they are ignorant of the rules governing good use of the platform...*”. This means that administrators should set rules governing group use for proper used of the environment and positive results.

4.3.2 The platform exclude students without smart phones

With regards to sharing almost everything regarding class matters through WhatsApp, the interviewed students cautioned that those who do own smartphones have been somehow left out in almost everything that has been shared in this group. This is because the group is accessible to only students who own smartphones. In practice, one needs a smartphone and has to be connected to the internet so that they are online almost all the time. This is evidenced by one interviewee narration “... *Students without phones will miss important class information such as assignments... they can even miss some deadlines...*” another student narrated “...*If you do not have an internet bundle you would not be able to catch up with the rest.. you may go to college only to find out the class has been cancelled or shifted to a nearer time... you find yourself missing the class...*”. Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) had similar findings and argued that if in a classroom there are students who do not possess smartphones even if they are few, teachers will be obligated to use other means of communication.

4.3.3 Lack of privacy due to limited options

The issue of privacy was also raised during the interview with students. In this group, once you send a message everyone gets it. It is not possible to send a message to specified people if a person does not wish to send something to everyone unless they do this outside the group. This is evidenced by the interviewee's comment that "... some students are shy... they may be having difficulties answering a question, but they would like to ask a specific person ... they feel shy to send their problem to everyone ... they are afraid of being neglected...". Another issue is associated with limited options, within this platform, there is no option to send a message to one particular person unless you form another small group for a private chat. The interviewed students had an opinion that it would have been convenient if there was an option for people within the same group to communicate with only one person or just a group of people, for example, communicating with course instructor without having a separate group, this is evidenced by a comment from one interviewee that "... if you want to post to specific people that option is not available...". This finding is contrary to earlier research by Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) who compared privacy issues of e-mail, SMS, Facebook groups and WhatsApp. Their study rated the privacy of WhatsApp, e-mail, and SMS as relatively high.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The study concludes that WhatsApp a social media environment can serve an academic purpose similar to other popular technologies even though each of the technologies have their own benefits and challenges. The main benefits as perceived by the students in this study are; enhancing communication between teachers and students, provide for the collaborative learning environment, provide for anywhere, anytime learning, increase motivation to learn, easy sharing of study materials, brings teachers and students closer, reduce the cost of material production and socialization. However, the use of WhatsApp by students didn't go without some challenges. In this particular case, the identified challenges are; lack of rules and regulations on the appropriate use of the environment, lack of privacy due to limited options and exclusion of students without smart phones in the day to day school interactions. In this case, the use of social media should go hand in hand with rules and guidelines for best practices and also they should be supplemented with other communication means like normal SMS and use of e-mails in order to include everyone in the day to day school activities. However, adoption of WhatsApp in the classroom requires further research employing qualitative research methodology through interviewing lectures, so as to come up with concrete theoretical and practical conclusions that will pave the way to a better deployment of social media in the classroom.

5.1 Implication

WhatsApp is a useful tool not only for socializing, business and entertainment, but it has a role to play in education as it can be used to facilitate anytime anywhere learning. It is also a useful tool in bringing teachers and students together, making teachers unapproachability a history as long as the teacher is a member of the group communication between students and teachers become easy, questions of course work adjustment and reporting problems becomes easy as students do not have to spend hours or days looking for their teachers after classes have ended. Social media is a tool that facilitates collaborative learning and student engagement that are necessary inputs to students' success. Thus the implication for teachers is that they should prepare to work extra time to prepare online materials and assist students in their collaborative work.

The use of social media, especially in the WhatsApp environment needs to be regulated by putting forward some rules and guidelines in order to take full advantage of the environment for academic purposes. Teachers should be members of these groups so as to oversee, regulate and control students' postings in order to maintain group objectives and full potential of environment for teaching and learning purposes. Teachers should supplement WhatsApp communication with e-mails or SMS in order to include everyone in the day to day class interactions even those without smart phones.

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