

USING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR LEARNING UNDER COVID PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF MOROCCAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

As an emerging country, Morocco has not invested much in the use of technology for distance learning in the academic context. With the outbreak of Covid 19, which imposed a lockdown and the closing of all educational institutions, Moroccan faculty and teachers were forced to adopt all available means to face the situation. With only minor or no prior training in using technological platforms for teaching, instructors at different educational levels tried to exploit some of the most commonly used social media platforms and adopt them as means of instruction.

Students went through a lot of frustration throughout this experience. The aim of the present paper is to investigate Moroccan high school students' attitudes towards the use of social media, namely Facebook, WhatsApp, and Google plus in teaching and learning. The main objective is to reveal to what extent these platforms have proven to be beneficial to students during those critical moments. The study adopts a mixed approach making use of both quantitative and qualitative research instruments. A survey was designed for Moroccan high school students who experienced distance learning using social media tools. They are enrolled in 27 public institutions from three regions of the country. Due to the restrictions imposed by the lock down, Google forms were made online and participation in the survey was voluntary. The survey population sample includes 108 students. Semi structured interviews were also conducted to collect qualitative data. The study addresses and tries to answer three research questions, namely (i) What challenges have students faced with the use of social

media platforms and applications in their learning process? (ii) What are the students' attitudes towards the use of social media tools for online education? (iii) What is required and would help students learn more effectively and benefit from their online courses in the future?

Keyword: Distance learning, online / off line, Social Media, high schools

1.INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, social media has invaded almost all elements of our life including the way we socialize, communicate, learn and study. Covid-19 lockdown forced many educators to resort to internet based tools of entertainment and mass communication to keep the learning pace and provide the necessary support for their students. As this was a unique situation, many were not prepared or trained for such a scenario. State agencies and ministries across the world came up with various contingency plans in an attempt to save the academic year, especially for high school students. This research paper is an attempt to assess the impact of this unprecedented experience marked by the use of social media platforms as teaching instruments. The paper also provides an account of the context of the study and the purpose for conducting the research. All the data collected are analyzed with the ultimate goal to answer the research questions and draw some conclusions.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA & ONLINE LEARNING: LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers in social studies have agreed that social media is hard to define (Caleb & Rebecca, 2015; Aichner et al., 2021; and Kapooret al., 2018). The term

holds explicit socioemotional communication functionality as the content formulation process involves individuals or even groups of people sharing a significant amount of values and interests (Greenhow and Robelia, 2009). All that content is monitored and made available via the internet thanks to the various updates brought with Web 2.0., which O'Reilly (2005) considers natural as he argues that "Like many important concepts, Web 2.0 does not have a hard boundary, but rather, a gravitational core". In other words, the Web 2.0 is an updated version of the web which is constantly evolving thanks to the various tools and applications made for users to be able to generate a more unique content. The process may require collaboration of many users who eventually become part of the audience as well. The significant influence of the virtual network where all interaction takes place encouraged Russo et al(2008) to highlight, in his definition of social media, "those that facilitate online communication, networking, and/or collaboration"(p. 22). This supports the birth of newly inherited values quickly shared among people who contribute to discussions and share ideas. It is even critical to question the impact of using such platforms and applications when used for educational purposes. Greenhow & Robelia (2009) explicitly argue that inviting social media to the educational world may trigger new psychological or intrapersonal challenges for learners and can even result in social disturbance, as it may affect the personal identity and the sense of belonging to the community.

At this stage, and in order to clear any possible misunderstanding, it is very helpful to draw a clear distinction between the Web and the Internet. The World Wide Web stands as the frontline network with its protocols merged within the internet communication platform by means of IP addresses and applicable browsers. The internet on the other hand is the existing connection relying on computers and various devices across the globe. Within this scope, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "A group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61). Kaplan and Haenlein also argue that thanks to advanced updates revealed by Web 2.0, all content generated is "continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion".

Learning takes place in various manners, and every time new tools are involved in the process, additional patterns are enforced. In basic terms, online learning is simply described as a process where learning experiences take place by means of technologically connected devices (Conrad, 2002; Benson, 2002; Carliner, 2004). According to Benson (2002), online learning is an upgraded version regardless of distance and physical presence, which fits extremely well in distance learning procedures. Additionally, Hiltz and Turoff (2005) claim that such new relationship combining distance learning with online learning gave birth to more complex and advanced ways of information delivery where learners are in a much advanced position to actively interact with their instructors and the learning materials as well.

This interactivity is even considered crucial by Triacca et al. (2004) and Ellis (2004), as it opens the space for questioning the facts introduced and accelerates sharing knowledge. This ultimately resulted in the introduction of new variables while selecting materials for teaching that fit adequate connectivity restrictions and offer the minimum required space for flexibility to make it eligible for necessary interaction and discussion (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). This encourages additional discussion related to E-learning as the highly adopted version of online learning protocols. According to Nichols (2003), E-learning is exclusively related to the web connectivity solutions involving either wired cables or built over a wireless network. With that being said, internet connection easily enables instructional delivery and information sharing practices between educators and learners. Additional broadcasting channels may also be involved from a larger impact (Clark, 2002; Benson et al., 2002; Ellis, 2004).

To assess the implementation of social media in the field of education and in the teaching and learning process, various studies have been conducted by a number of researchers. Alhumaid (2020) for instance, adopted a qualitative approach where he assesses the effectiveness of using digital and social media in the teaching and learning process. Halil (2012) was more interested in the students and teachers' social network usage tendencies. This helped him identify the existing social and educational activities within their networks. McKinney & Rill (2009), on their side focused on the analysis of YouTube's effect on the audience. Livingstone's (2008) study focused on the assessment of

high school students' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy, and self-expression. The present study investigates the use of social media applications like WhatsApp during the lockdown as a contingency plan. The main objective is to find out more about the challenges teachers and students faced and the degree of effectiveness of these tools, especially that both instructors and students are familiar with them and use them on a daily basis.

3. CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

As it was the case in all countries around the world, Covid-19 took Morocco by storm, driving the country into a total lockdown starting March 16th, 2020. Overnight, all educational institutions were instructed to switch to an online teaching mode with no prior preparation or necessary training for teachers and students. In fact, discussions around the possibility of adopting online teaching and learning did not start until recently, and they have evolved around a limited number of higher education institutions. Educators' personal initiative and their creativity kicked off in a way to support the learners for the remaining months in an attempt to save the academic year, especially for high school students. Because of the regulations dictated by the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training, the baccalaureate exam is extremely crucial for all students and decisive for their eligibility to highly competitive colleges or universities. In Morocco, the term "Common Core" level refers to the first year spent in high school followed by two additional years named the First Year and the Second Year Baccalaureate. A regional exam is mandatory upon the completion of the First year of Baccalaureate, covering mostly the general subjects studied. On the other hand, students enrolled in the Second Year Baccalaureate must take the national exam which includes the core subjects listed as essential for the chosen branch.

The use of social media tools and platforms was quickly embraced by the students, which facilitated the work for teachers. The adoption and adaptation of these tools to the teaching reality was not an easy shift to operate and noticeably generated significant pressure and frustrations for both teachers and students. This situation required necessary research to be conducted as the evolution of the pandemic proved to continuously

haunt the natural flow of the educational system in Morocco and worldwide.

Like their peers in all other countries, Moroccan high school students belong to the "Tech" generation. This means that they are familiar with most of the popular technological innovations and frequently consume websites and mobile applications to network and socialize. When asked to invest their digital profiles in a new learning style, many students were under shock and could not see how a platform they used to login for fun can turn into a classroom for serious business and instructions.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a mixed approach design, making use of both quantitative and qualitative research instruments. Such a choice is meant to overcome the limitations of each instrument, as quantitative figures are supported by qualitative recorded data (Creswell, 2013). The present study addresses and tries to answer three research questions, namely

- What challenges have students faced with the use of social media platforms and applications in their learning process?
- What are the students' attitudes towards the use of social media tools for online education?
- What is required and would help students learn more effectively and benefit from their online courses in the future?

To answer these questions, a questionnaire was designed using a Google form to collect data from participants. Based on convenience sampling techniques (Patton, 2002), this study exclusively targeted Moroccan high school students. Teachers and instructors helped with the data collection process by sharing the Google form survey on WhatsApp or Facebook groups used for teaching. Three regions were covered across the country reaching 108 students from 27 public institutions. Boys and girls were involved with 42.6% males and 57.4% females. Common core students represent only 13% of the population, while First Year Baccalaureate students represent 19.4%. The highest rate of participants is Second Year Baccalaureate students, with 67.6% of the population.

The survey was provided in English, French, and Arabic to avoid the linguistic barrier students may face. The first

section of the survey targets the demographic information (gender, age, educational interests...), while the second section includes fourteen questions about social media usage and tendencies. The main focus third section is to find out about the students' attitudes towards the use of social media tools for learning and the types of difficulties they had to deal with.

The survey includes Likert-scale items, multiple choice questions and three open ended questions. Besides, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven students who volunteered. Students were asked to tell about their experiences and recall their emotions in such unconventional context of studying.

The quantitative data collected from the survey is coded and processed using the SPSS software to retrieve descriptive statistics including: frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. A Chi-square test is also run to find out if gender has any influence on being in favor of the implementation of online learning in the Moroccan educational system. The null hypothesis (H0) claims that there is no relation while the alternative hypothesis (H1) reveals the existence of a relation between the variables. The recorded interviews were transcribed and thematically processed, and two significant themes were identified: 1) The psychological factors, 2) The difficulties faced during the experience. Each of these issues will be discussed in the following sections.

5. FINDINGS

The data collected is presented according to the research questions addressed. The analysis is organized into three sections, extensively addressing each aspect related to the topic under investigation. The first section discusses the difficulties students had to deal with while learning by means of social media tools. The second section reveals the students' attitudes towards their online learning experience as well as the implementation of distance learning in the Moroccan educational system. Finally, the third and last section discusses and introduces some of the requirements that would help students learn more effectively and benefit from their online courses in the future.

6. CHALLENGES WITH SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS AND PLATFORMS FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES

As they belong to the "Tech" generation, Moroccan high school students were all exposed to most of the existing social media platforms as they use them on a daily basis. This explains why they got quickly used to online teaching during Covid-19 lockdown. As it appears in figure (1), 73.4% of the students used WhatsApp and 65.3% adopted Microsoft Teams, 53.2% used Zoom, while 42.5% used Facebook, and 32.5% opted for Google meet. A low rate, with 8.9% made use of Skype and 11.8% selected Google+. It is crucial to note, at this stage, that only 4.6% of the students have free access to internet and can easily connect whenever they want. The majority, with 95.4%, had to pay for the Wifi at home or used the 4G mobile services. This is extremely painful for their parents as the price of cable internet is not affordable for low income families. All the figures discussed are presented in figure (1) below.

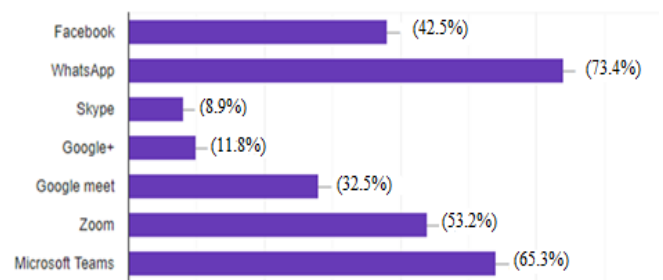


Figure1: Social media platforms used by students for online learning.

The difficult access to internet is supported by the interview data as well. Mouhsine (18 years old), a high school student from Kenitra, confesses "I am sharing the 4G connection with my brother, who is enrolled in his second year of junior high school... My dad is unable to pay for multiple charges given the life expenses he has in charge... He is just a regular worker in a factory" Data analysis also reveals that only 18.5% of the students admitted having received some training on how to use and adopt distance learning by means of online tools (figure (2)). Significantly, 13.9% of those who benefited from the training were not satisfied, for the content did not meet their expectations or needs. Additionally, 67.6% of the respondents who received no training at all relied mainly on their own personal initiatives to enhance their skills. Figure (2) below illustrates the above facts.

7. Have you ever received any training related to distance learning? [.]

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	20	18.5
No	73	67.6
Yes, but not sufficient	15	13.9

Figure 2: Received training related to distance learning.

In the second section of the survey, students were asked to rate the quality of their online courses during the Covid-19 lock down. Their answers revealed a striking reality as 26.9% of the students consider those courses as average, 22.2% think they were good, while only 13.9% believe they were excellent. Significantly, 13.9% ranked the courses below average, while 23.1% described them as being poor.

The fact that most of the existing social media platforms are designed for mobiles made it painful for the students to follow the pace of their teachers. Imane (17 years old, from Kenitra) reported that "It was difficult to see all the elements of a map on the mobile screen...It is too small and this frustrates me". This means that if courses would require detailed teaching materials, the visual size has to be taken into account by the educators. Mahmoud (18 years old, from Casablanca) also explains that "It is very difficult to catch-up with WhatsApp discussion pace and I cannot keep track of the participation of the other students...Once the session is over, I have to go back to all the elements posted by the teacher and other friends".

These testimonies reveal that certain mobile applications were not adequate to keep students engaged and effectively monitor the discussion and participation. Such context may cause a lot of frustration and lead to the students' lack of concentration. Kamal (18 years old, from Fes) had a storage issue when he reported "We received valuable files in Pdf format and my mobile became full quickly... I wish I had a laptop". This exposes additional difficulties students had to deal with, as mobiles with the built-in capacity are quickly overwhelmed by the teaching content.

7. STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS FOR ONLINE EDUCATION

Students had a unique experience during the Covid-19 lockdown with the use of social media as learning tools overnight. While this scenario may be the first experience with online learning for a number of students, many have tried it before. Precise data listed in figure (3) shows that 46.3% never experienced an online course before, while 53.7% took at least one course online prior to the lockdown. Figure (3) below reports these facts.

8. Have you ever taken an online course before?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	58	53.7
	No	50	46.3

Figure 3: Online course experienced prior to Covid lockdown

The lack of experience with online learning had a significant impact on the students' attitudes towards online teaching/learning mode. When asked about whether they support the implementation of online learning in the Moroccan educational system, only 40.7% are in favor, while 59.3% are firmly against. A chi-square test has been run so as to assess the existence of a relation between the gender variable and the students' position towards the implementation of online learning in the educational system. The results reveal that 41% of males are in favor while 59% are against. On the other hand, 40% of females are for the implementation, while 60% are against (figure 4).

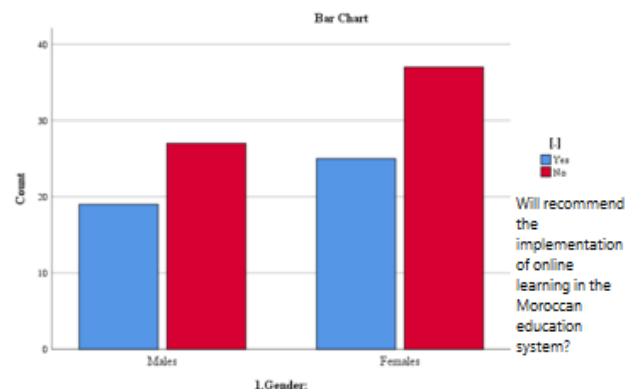


Figure 4: Will recommend the implementation of online learning in the Moroccan education system?

Additional results of the Pearson Chi-Square test show that the P value is 0.918, which is greater than the Alpha value of 0.05. This leads to conclude that there is no statistically significant association between gender and the support of the implementation of online learning in the Moroccan educational system, which confirms the null hypothesis (H₀), as the two stated variables are independent from each other.

Requirements for Successful online learning:

The significant number of students who are in favor of implementing online courses in the Moroccan educational systems reveals an awareness of the future learning challenges. Shifting towards new tools is inevitable and high school students like Karim (17 years old, from Rabat) are asking for "More time to get familiar with Microsoft teams...we see the various helpful built in applications, but many teachers are not yet mastering all their functionalities". Additionally, many concepts need to be institutionalized for more credibility. The assessment process was highly criticized during the lockdown learning experience, as a large number of students felt unable to provide accurate answers when examined. Most of the reported feedback pointed out the technical variables and the absence of adequate tools for content delivery. Yousra (17 years old, from Meknes) was frustrated as the internet connection was unreliable when she was reading out her answers. She explains that "The teacher could not hear my answer clearly while using Zoom... I turned the camera off, but it did not serve much". According to students, many teachers came up with alternative scenarios to be able to assess their students Recording answers offline and posting them in due time helped Ahmed (17 years old, from Sale) a lot. He reported that "It is difficult to answer all at the same time when using WhatsApp... The Arabic teacher instructed us to record our answers and post them in the discussions once called out".

8. CONCLUSION:

Covid-19 pandemic was a situation of crisis that has had an impact on all the life sectors all over the world. Morocco, like many other countries, was not prepared for all the challenges, especially in the educational sector. The circumstances called mostly for positive

initiatives and teachers invested the best they could while using social media tools for teaching practices. Data shared throughout this study proved that students did not fully benefit from their online classes, which turned to be more demanding than regular ones. The shift to online learning was inevitable and both students and educators were aware of its importance for their educational progress. An efficient and well build training system is highly needed, without which any professional platform would be useless. Institutional bodies like the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training, together with the philanthropic associations are called upon to build up a new national charter that supports the implementation of largely accessible learning management system (LMS), affordable for all students across the country. Finally, as this study covered only high school students, a more exhaustive research should be carried out to include additional educational levels with more input from the educators and policy makers as well.

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