From the pigeon's coo to Twitter's tweet:
An overview of communication messages through Online Social Networks (OSNs) in Open Distance Learning (ODL) with a special focus on Facebook

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Abstract

The unprecedented boom of online social networks (OSNs) has dramatically erased the notion of pigeon as conveyors of messages which was pervasive 2000 years ago. Indeed, the history of communication and its evolution have brought about remarkable progress. All spheres of human life have been affected in one way or another by this heave of online technologies and wireless devices. Handheld devices are becoming ever- increasingly common and electronic tablets are readily accessible for less than USD 100. Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions are quickly harmonizing with the innovations on the market to make higher education formally accessible. All course materials are available in some form of digital format either in PDF versions or in the form of videos on "YouTube". Facebook is the strong platform through which the main activities of universities are showcased and important messages sent via Twitter. This has certainly radically transformed the face of ODL from a remotely-based study centre to a dynamic and interactive interface. This paper focuses on an exploratory study on the use of OSNs especially Facebook among a certain number of universities in the world. The sample consists of a number of university websites of the world and their increasing use of Facebook as a communication tool. The results show that online social media are intensively used by Universities to communicate registration dates, semester time-tables and on-campus activities. This simultaneous and quasi-spontaneous communication provides a platform for students to express their concerns and acquire information readily thus enabling them to save time browsing through the whole university website. However, the sheer immensity of queries remains an eternal challenge as tackling them resembles a Herculean task as messages range from simple demands for fees to explicit information about the preparation for job interviews.

Key words: Innovation, communication, Facebook, Twitter.

Introduction

Social networks are defined broadly as relations between people who share some basic similarity. Light & McGrath (2010, p. 291) state that "Social networking involves social relations amongst people who have (and indeed desire) some type of relationship or affiliation." Social networks appeal to all generations due to their relative ease of use (Pinho and Soares, 2011). Koles and Nagy (2012) have stressed that figures are fluctuating, with millions already utilizing social networks which confirm a general tendency towards the adoption of these innovations.

There is increased government attention to social networks. Indeed, Tony Blair has been known to claim that the web, through social networks is beneficial for democracy (Panagiotopoulos, 2011).

In the past, the higher education sector has been viewed as less vulnerable to change due partly to the impressive ancient infrastructure which conveyed a feeling of austerity. However, a number of revolutions have been occurring inside; state-of-the-art laboratories, top-notch academic support and widened open access to education. The winners in the story have been undoubtedly, the learners. As the marvel of innovations went by, universities became increasingly "virtual". Internet lessened the distance gap and higher education became an ever accessible "jewel" for millions. Physical infrastructure, classroom size and tutor scarcity issues gradually dwindled; indeed with new technologies, education can be delivered to a wider audience with ease. This signaled the introduction of open-distance learning (ODL) institutions in the digital era.

However, management of massive cohorts of learners who are thousands of miles away has been quite a complex task. From the initial contacts through letters, emails and websites, higher education institutions operating on the ODL mode have marked their presence on online social networks (OSNs). The most important one in terms of members, almost a billion and continually increasing is Facebook.

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The primary reason for using OSNs like Facebook remains friendship (West, Lewis and Currie, 2009). This is further supported by the work of other researchers like Hashim and Khodarahimi (2012). In an interesting study on centralities, it was shown visually how students have more bonds with their peers instead of their lecturers (Imamverdiyev et al., 2011). However, beyond "friending", social networks are becoming the links with university students. The accessibility of social networks, especially the ability to be always connected seems to obtain undisputed harmony. Indeed, researchers like Harris (2012, p. 820) affirm that "Facebook offer many practicalities for the teacher: students and increasingly teachers are already "logged on" out of class hours, which allows for course materials posted on Facebook to be subsumed in the after-hours world of the student without hanging over in cyber space nor needing to log off." This omnipresence of students on social networks can be greatly useful in real times of need.

It is no surprise that consumption of social networks is very high among students (Gómez, Roses and Farias, 2012).

When asked the question of which network is the most preferred among international and domestic students, the order of preference was thus: Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr and Google Plus (Saw et al., 2012). This once again demonstrated the prominent place of Facebook on the online scene. In a study among students in a Turkish University, only 6.2 % reported not having a profile on Facebook (Akyıldız and Argan, 2011). This shows a wide acceptance of social networks among university students.

Advocates of Social Media in education are innumerable. Indeed, Ewbank, Foulger and Carter (2010, p. 28) admit that "social media such as Facebook and Twitter are designed to help colleges build a community that values and understands teacher education, that interacts with reform in mind, and that jointly makes a difference."

Research findings corroborate in saying that Facebook remains highly popular among University students (Mehdizadeh, 2010).

It has also been found that as authors Duncan and Barczyk state (2013, p.1) "Facebook facilitated their communities of practice (CoP) in terms of knowledge sharing, collaboration, and learner-centered activities." This aspect is closely related to the learning experience which makes the latter a more accomplished activity as a whole. Use of social networks does not seem to have any adverse effect on academic performance; indeed poor achievers seem to perform less well with or without the use of Facebook (Rouis, 2012). This is interesting to note as skeptics of new forms of media will always find ways and means to be resilient to changes. The need for interaction is ever expanding. Social networks are the stepping stone for other interactive platforms like WebTV (Gazbar, 2011).

Facebook is regarded as a cost effective manner of keeping in touch with learners. In this regard, Ebeid (2012, p. 153) state that "…results would support the notion of using Facebook as an untraditional, cheap, interactive means to enhance the quality of the educational service that provided by the college (producer) and received by the student (customer)."

Social media has become a key tool in election campaigns on campus (Gestal, Fernández-Souto and Pérez-Seoane, 2012). Issues are brought to the attention of voters through social networks and it goes without saying that the psychological warfare at play online largely determines the winners of the election.

The uses of Facebook are innumerable. According to Selwyn (2009, p. 161) quoted in Loving and Ochoa (2010, p. 123) Facebook communications are categorized as follows:

(1) Recounting and reflecting on the university experience.
(2) Exchange of practical information.
(3) Exchange of academic information.
(4) Displays of supplication and/or disengagement.
(5) "Banter" (i.e. exchanges of humour and nonsense).

The role of social networks is not limited to entertainment. Indeed, social networks can be used as a "spin off" for academics. Indeed, Nicolaou and Birley (2003 p. 1719) state that " the importance of networking in the technology transfer process and show how a facilitative network structure can positively predispose the academics to become more actively involved in the process. This highlights the importance for universities to organize networking events showcasing the technology that is generated at universities. It also indirectly calls technology transfer offices to provide a brokering role bringing together surrogate entrepreneurs, external investors, and the inventors."

Social networks are considered vital in the creation of knowledge for goods and services (Soetanto & Van Geenhuizen, 2009). Advertising campaigns have taken a new form since the introduction of social network.

Amidst its entertainment aspect, the academic aspects cannot be ignored. Green and Bailey (2010) describe the academic uses of Facebook thus:

- Study Groups
- Sharing Homework and Answers
- Clubs and Organizations
- Instructor Pages
- Academic Programs Groups

This shows that learners use their interactions on social networks to simultaneously pursue their academic interests.

Aims and objectives

The study will focus on the following main aspects:

- What are the periodic concepts which seem to appear most often?
- What are the main reasons for using Facebook by learners on ODL institutions?
- How are comments interpreted in terms of response time and damage control?

The objectives of the study are described below:

- To compile a list of possible issues raised by learners.
- To analyse comments posted to distinguish trends, if any.
- To propose recommendations based on the way responses are made.

Methodology

A qualitative content analysis has been conducted on a number of Facebook pages of some well-known ODL institutions. The method adopted is purely qualitative in nature. As the study does not attempt to draw any general assumption about all learners on ODL but rather try to analyse generalized gist of feelings of learners in this mode of learning, this methodology was adopted.

The institutions were selected based on their devotion towards open-distance learning. Thus, the institutions below were chosen if the word "open" is included in the name of the institutions and if they are recognized as the key players in ODL in their respective countries and even worldwide. The sample includes at least one ODL institution in every continent, excluding the Americas as follows:

- Open University, UK (http://www.facebook.com/theopenuniversity)
- National Open University of Nigeria (http://www.facebook.com/pages/National-Open-University-of-Nigeria/303362109721)
- Open University Malaysia (http://www.facebook.com/openunimalaysia)
- Open University of Mauritius (http://www.facebook.com/openuniversitymauritius?ref=ts&fref=ts)

- Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (http://www.facebook.com/openpolytechnic)

The Facebook pages of the Universities were carefully studied and information categorized. The results are summarized below.

Results & Discussion
The results show that queries and comments provide a well defined overview of the general problems experienced by learners in ODL. There are some common threads which show that the problems of learners are intensely indifferent. The study also shows that instead of searching for information on the websites of the respective institutions, learners prefer to ask the same questions; this inevitably results in a repetition and an overflow of queries. However, the expectations of students seem to expand on a social networking site; some expecting prompt replies. The main themes are laid below:
- Course/ Programmes of study on offer-This has been observed to be a major query from learners. As Facebook does not display the required information in a website format, asking for such information becomes easier for learners.
- Suggestion for courses-Some prospective learners seem to have a specific course in mind and thus suggest if these courses be made available to them by those institutions. It is noteworthy that one specific demand cannot be used as an excuse for launching a new programme of study as this might not be reflective of the views of a large number of learners.
- Related/unrelated external advertising-Facebook being a communication platform, it is not rare to find many learners or individuals post advertising on the page of the University. In the majority of cases, these seem to be related to higher education but may not be sometimes absolutely linked.
- Course fee information/payment facilities/Scholarships-Course fees remain an ever important issue when referring to higher education. Prospective learners are quite interested with this issue and thus address a certain number of questions regarding payment issues. The choice of a university partly rests on the payment facilities provided by the institution and most often, these are the main queries that learners are most bothered with. In parallel, queries concerning scholarships arise.
- Guidance on use of online systems-There seems to be a distinct trend when it comes to technical problems. All major institutions seem to have general server downtimes and technical glitches which annoy prospective learners.
- Need to generate groups/affiliations for groupwork-Learners use official university platforms to satisfy a central need for affiliations with peers. This is a normal process in all areas where collaborative work is treasured. Undertaking higher studies seems like a "herculean" task and the feelings of loneliness can be quite marked in ODL. Thus, learners feel a need to form part of groups. There is a number of calls for learners to join group 'x' or 'y' to "share".
- Negative feedback/Issue of flexibility-One very important finding has been the issue of flexibility in ODL. As the latter seems to take an entirely flexible approach to learning, students seem to understand matters in some other way. It is worth noting that students use online platforms to articulate their frustration at not being able to conduct exams at their convenience as in "anytime, anywhere". The same applies to

assignments, attendance time for tutorial sessions. This leads to very contentious debates over the exact meaning of "flexibility" in ODL.

- Recognition (Local/International) of Courses/Programmes of study-Though learners do not really know about the reasons for seeking recognition of courses, there seems to be a general feeling for courses to be "universally" recognized. This is impractical as programmes of study are bound to differ for academic, cultural and other factors. Yet, learners regard this aspect as a key priority when choosing an ODL institution.

- Application procedures-It is a recognized fact that application procedures to a higher learning institution can be quite discouraging. An overview of comments on OSNs and Facebook does show that this is considered to be an obstacle for a good number of learners. It is not uncommon to find that some have completed only part of the process and need a step-by-step guidance to continue. Again, OSNs come to their rescue.

- General queries-This category comprises of all other aspects not mentioned above. While there is no clear trend, there appears to be some expected demand for websites to download research papers, questions about the library rules and dates for end-of-year parties and other social gatherings.

- Notes/idea/website sharing-Facebook has been transformed into a vast collaborative learning environment; notes are sought, exchanged and even negotiated. Similarly for past exam papers, websites and specific research papers which have a particular importance to learners.

- Exam/Assignment/Graduation dates/deadlines-Keeping track of dates has been noticed time and again in comments on OSNs. With the commitments of ODL learners, they find it increasingly difficult to remember dates and instead of searching, the queries are posted online and in the majority of cases, the answer is obtained relatively fast.

- Substitute for official replies-It has been quite often noticed that learners try to help their peers on Facebook by responding to queries instead of waiting for the University's official replies. Whilst this shows the "fraternity" of the learning community, the only bottom line is the fear over erroneous information being inadvertently inserted in replies.

- Apprenticeship/work placement-The end product in higher education being employability, students use social networks as a way to establish contacts for opportunities for apprenticeship/traineeship or job placement. The replies are somewhat informative and can be used effectively by learners.

- Financial Support/Scholarships-A number of learners use OSNs to request information about financial support and scholarships on offer. The procedures to be followed seem to pose a significant challenge and thus the learners find Facebook, amongst others, to be a vital interactive platform.

- Lack of motivation/Peer support/Time management tips-ODL learners constantly need to be motivated and most often complain about procrastination, peers to help them or how to manage time more effectively. Again, Facebook appears to accomplish an important task.

- Bad personal experiences/call for boycott-OSNs, unfortunately, can become a double-edged sword. Some learners tend to over-emphasise specific incidents and this can take different dimensions if not dealt with spontaneously.

- Book/manual swapping-One of the basic uses of Facebook is to solicit peers for books and study guides instead of purchasing new copies. This shows the collaborative aspect of OSNs.

The study also briefly analysed what was the main priorties in use of OSNs from a University's point of view. It is interesting to note that this differs quite considerably from the real expectations of learners in general. These include the following:
- Event Management-Universities use Facebook to manage major events on campus like job fair, science& technology fairs etc.
- Enlisting support-Institutions use OSNs to enlist support of learners and followers for their policies. These can include request for funds for extension facilities.
- Breakthrough-Scientific and other (University Based or external)-It is very common to find Universities advertising major scientific breakthroughs. This can be the achievement of the learners or academics of the institution or that of other students.
- Showcasing of notable previous learners-Institutions make it a point to remind learners that some world leaders have been students at their institutions.
- Landmarks in education-ODL institutions also demonstrate the main achievements in the education sector.
- Communicating important dates (exams, etc)-The only similarity between the posts of Universities and those of learners are about important dates like exams, assignments, etc.

Recommendations

Joly (2007, p.72) describes five rules for marketing institutions using social networking sites as follows:
1. Follow the laws of the land.
2. Know whom you are dealing with.
3. Meet the locals.
4. Select and empower good ambassadors.
5. Learn the culture and the language.

The management of OSNs can become quite intricate. Thus, ODL institutions should create Social Media Positions to manage the OSNs where they have official pages.

Conclusion

Online social networks like Facebook have transformed the manner in which education is delivered. The advantages are laudable but if not managed properly, they can be disastrous for the institutions concerned. Plausible initiatives can back fire and project a negative image. An attentive ear to the demands of learners is the key towards success which stakeholders need to adopt as in the majority of cases, these are fully justified. In the ultra-competitive world of higher education, management of learners on online social networks might determine the winners in the race.

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