The Effects of Cell Phone Use on Academic Performance in Tertiary Education

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Abstract*: Social media has become an integral part of academic life as shown in Lepp, Barley, &Karpinski (2015) and in Mingle & Adams (2015) research findings. As society and media users adopt the new media landscape, going online and being connected are no longer unfamiliar and strange (Fourie, 2017). Among those susceptible to this change are the youths especially those at tertiary institutions. The actual experience of students in relation to cell phone use brings in a multifaceted plethora of opportunities and possibilities, a conclusion supported by O'Keeffe and Pearson (2011). These possibilities come with a caution that uncontrolled use of these devices can pose a threat and negatively affect students' academic performance. The findings of this study is consistent with this view and revealed that 62 per cent of the respondents agree that if used appropriately cell phones can add value to academic work while 48 per cent disagree. This study was conducted through a triangulation approach of both quantitative and qualitative research designs to surface the impacts of cell phone use in academic settings by media studies students. An interview was used to collect data from participants while a questionnaire was employed to collect quantitative data from the respondents. The study used non-probability sampling to ensure that equity and equality aspects were entertained during data collection.*

Key Words: Cell phones, Academic performance, Technology, Communication
Research Area: Social Science
Paper Type: Research paper

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2016 academic year, the University of Namibia had a population of 25 000 student population. About 600 are media studies students from which this sample quota was drawn to form part of the unit of analysis of this study. The research population constituted 20 per cent first year students, 22 per cent second years, 30 per cent third years and 28 per cent fourth years. There were 28 per cent females and 72 per cent males and their ages ranged between 19 years to 25 years of which 74 per cent were national students and 26 per cent constituted international students. A total of 76 per cent of the students possessed smart phones and 24 per cent simple phones.

The recent advances in communication technology such as Web 2.0 and especially the participative social media internet, has had dramatic impact in transforming the patterns of communication (Fox & Jones, 2009). Sata (2013, p 103) calls it "an extended history of innovation and advancement". Social media, in particular, has increased both connectivity and participation in all spheres of social life, transforming what was previously known as audience to netizens (Luoma-aho, 2010). This transformation has been observed in Namibia where the number of people using internet daily has risen from 16 percent in November 2012 to 39 percent in September 2014 (Stoman & Stoman, 2014). Namibia is privileged to be one of the African countries with a high rate of smart phone penetration, due to marketing and advertising initiatives of companies like the Mobile Telecommunications Company (MTC)

which runs promotions aimed at migrating their customers from basic mobile to smart mobile phones. According to Malumo (2012) approximately 470 000 Namibian citizens had access to mobile cell phones with potential access to internet while figures from the Internet World Statistics (2016) indicate that the number has grown to 520 000 in 2016 representing 23.4 percent of the 2.2 million population.

The use of cell phones is on the increase with the global cellular phone market standing at 1.8 billion subscribers in 2007 and was estimated to increase to 3 billion by the year 2010 (Reid & Reid, 2007). It is estimated that 95 per cent of young people use web based enabled mobile phones in Japanese societies with voice calling being the commonly used and brings about 80 per cent revenue. This growth is not limited to Japan, but has been observed in African countries such as Namibia. Significant growth has also been observed in the use of Short Message Services (SMS), a trend observed among young cell phone users. The increasing use of SMS is predicted to dominate both traffic volume and is likely to boost revenue generation for cell phone operators.

2. DISCUSSION

The use of technology among students is observed to be on the increase and technological devices such as cellular phones, lap tops and other digital devices are now accessed and used by almost everyone. Mutonga (2017) puts the number of Namibians using social media devices at 520 000 in 2016 and the majority of technological devices used are smart phones. Media students as prospect communicators are expected to take advantage of every communication instrument to retrieve information and to use them in their prospective professions. They also use them for collective discourse with their peers. These are more susceptible in adopting the use of mobile phones; in some cases, the uses of these technological devices have become part of their curriculum and it can be argued that the utilisation of these technologies has positively impacted on the education system. As Ling (2001) puts it, the line between a computer and a smart phone is increasingly becoming blurred as smart phones now function as computers and are increasingly being used for academic purposes.

Cell phones as communication devices serve a very potent and imperative role in the academic settings. Hendrikz et al (2009) carried out a study on the effects of SMS on distance student's performance at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. The findings of this survey show that distance students who had academic rapport with their lecturers via SMS performed much better than those that did not use this platform. The finding of this study is significant in that it shows that cell phone use can aid the learning processes by simplifying the communication between students and their lecturers.

Ravichandran (2009) study shows that a mobile phone is a total blessing to human life as it provides a collection of communication media which add value to the quality of human life A mobile phone is a combination of a clock for time management, a calendar to manage daily activities, a camera to take pictures and build memories, music player for entertainment, a radio to keep one informed of the latest happenings and is an Internet device to surf and download items and therefore, it is perceived as a mobile library.

3. NEGATIVE EFFECTS

Nonetheless, cell phones use can also be addictive according to Jones (2014) which can negatively impact on personal interactive skills of users create emotional distance and discourage physical learning process. Although mobile phones provide a convenient form of

information sources, they, however, lead to lackadaisical tendency as students don't see the need of patronising the libraries as information is readily available on their mobile phones. Instead of using the mobile devices for academic purposes, some students visit wrong and harmful sites to which they become hooked. At the end, these affect their desire and commitment to learning and, if not controlled, as Cui (2014) observed, could lead to the abandonment of their studies. Thus, mobile phones have a double effect on students which consist of the good and the bad. A great number of students tend to fall victims of their own privilege as they end up hooked to harmful sites digressing from their academic commitment.

4. THE COST FACTORS

A study that was done by Patrick (2011) among Zambian school learners shows that owning a cell phone does not come cheap. Students incur increasing spending on their mobile phones. Students who took part in this survey stated that having a cell phone is like having a car and vouchers are like fuel. The students further argued that for one to be interacting and be socially functional, one needs to have ample money to buy vouchers. Consequently, this has led to students swindling money meant for school work in order to buy vouchers for their cell phones. Another associated cost is the price of smart phones; they are still regarded as luxurious goods that only a certain class of people can afford to buy. Regardless of the price factor, as is observed in Li (2010), who identified determinants such as the durability of the device, its quality, brand name and price as factors which influence purchase decisions.

5. PUSH FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO A LARGE INFORMAL SECTOR

5.1 Impact on academic performance

The opinion among media studies students differ; there are those who sense the risk caused by cell phones use in academic setting while others only see the glamour that comes with cell phone use. For example, the majority (64 per cent) of the students who took part in this study are of the opinion that cell phones aid with academic work while 36 per cent disagree. A total of 38 per cent of the students agree that cell phones can cause failure if misused while 62 per cent disagree. These statistics show that media studies students do not acknowledge that misuse of cell phones can lead to poor academic performance. It can be deduced that they face the prospects of failure as a number of research have shown a correlation between cell phone misuse and poor academic performance.

5.2 Cell phone use

A total of 30 per cent of students across the programme, use cell phones for leisure; however, the figures begin to drop as they advance to senior years in their programme. For example, more first year students (10 per cent) use their cell phones for leisure compared to 8 per cent of second year students, 8 per cent third year students and 2 per cent fourth year students. Consequently, 20 per cent of fourth year students use their cell phones for academic purposes, 10 per cent third years, 8 per cent second years and 4 per cent first year students. The disparity in figures shows that as students advance to senior years, the demands and commitment to academic life increases and that they also become mature in handling the challenges of academic life. The respondents were also asked to explain how they use cell phones to complement their academic work. A total of 44 per cent use it for research topics, 34 per cent for accessing class notes and only 8 per cent use them for studying. Of those that use them for study purpose, 44 per cent believe cell phones make significant contributions to their academic performance as opposed to 38 per cent who disagree.

5.3 The impact on academic performance

Students were asked to explicate the impact of cell phones use on their academic performance. The respondents gave a multiplicity of responses. Although there were answers that were very dissimilar in nature, in conclusion (56 per cent) students indicated that cell phones really contribute meaningfully towards the academic performance of a student, as long as they are used responsibly. Conversely, (34 per cent) students claimed that cell phones digress attention of students and make them pay attention to non-academic issues such as entertainment.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that a substantial number of students use smart phones and only a few possess simple phones. This is indicative of two things; one is the widespread use of cell phones among university students and secondly the migration from simple phone uses to smart phones among university students.

This is compatible to Prinsky's (2009) observation that many people walk around with computer-like phones in their pockets. The increase in the use of smart phones could be attributed to their functionality that allows students to use one device for various media platforms. Internet connectivity through desktop and laptop computers is still low in Namibia. Out of 2.4 million Namibian populations, only 22.3 per cent are connected to the Internet compared to Botswana 27.5 per cent, Mozambique 9.0 per cent with South Africa having the highest (51.9 per cent) internet users. As reported by Mutonga (2017), 520 000 Namibians are using social media devices such as smart phones through which they easily access the Internet. He further observed that the majority of technological devices used are smart phones. The Global Economy puts the number of mobile subscribers in Namibia at 2.55 million in 2015.

This study also shows the negative effect of cell phone use in academic settings such as lecture rooms. Although Gilroy's (2003) findings, shows that the use of cell phones in learning environment is not something negative, but rather the root cause of negativity lie within the individual students and learners who own cell phones. This conclusion is in harmony with Ends et al (2010) who observed that cell phone use in classroom situations can cause distractions and affect the attention of students during lectures.

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