

Influence of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) For Blended Learning Approach in Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Due to the advancement in technology, teaching and learning approaches have been changing, with the 21st century embracing the use of ICT tools and the internet. The education system has a considerable potential to deliver on the sustainable development goals (SDGs) especially SDG 4 on providing quality education through blended learning (BL) approaches. The education system is using social networking sites (SNSs) as part of BL platforms which have presented a lot of opportunities to enhance teaching and learning when they are blended with traditional classroom teaching. This study sought to dig deeper into influence of SNSs for blended learning approach in teaching and learning, with much emphasis on the benefits and challenges associated with SNSs for blended learning approach in the primary school, the rationale on the adoption of SNSs as a tool for blended learning approach and the strategies that can be employed in using SNSs for blended learning approach in teaching and learning. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and observations were used for data collection in this research study. A sample of 45 participants was selected from a target population of 30 teachers and 120 students. Selection of participants was done using purposive sampling. Qualitative method paradigm was used and the research design employed was a case study. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic data analysis. Findings revealed that SNSs for blended learning approach has several benefits in teaching and learning even though it is not being efficiently incorporated. It was also revealed that the use of SNSs for blended learning approach also presents challenges by lack of safety and security; unreliable information and financial challenges. Recommendations were made to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education through the district to do encourage teachers to make use of SNSs for blended learning approach in teaching and learning. The ministry can as well aid the procuring of relevant ICT tools and affordable data by engaging other stakeholders. The schools can also harness the adoption by educating parents and students on the use of SNSs for blended learning approach. These recommendations would promote the operational and full of embracing of SNSs for blended learning approach in the primary schools.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites (SNSs); Blended Learning; Primary Schools; ICT Integration; Teaching and Learning; Educational Technology; Learner Engagement; Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the advancement in technology, teaching and learning approaches have been changing, with the 21st century embracing the use of ICT tools and the internet. The education system has a considerable potential to deliver on the sustainable development goals (SDGs) especially SDG 4 on providing quality education through blended learning (BL) approaches. Hence, Akgunduz & Akinoglu (2016) reveal that it has now become a necessity that, rather than using a single learning approach, multiple learning approaches are implemented in a blended way and also that ICT, the internet and social media are made use of effectively. The education system is using social networking sites (SNSs) as part of BL platforms which have presented a lot of opportunities to enhance teaching and learning when they are blended with traditional classroom teaching. Moreover, considering the nature of modern students, that is the pragmatic and investigative and their wide-ranging usage of social

networks, there is need to study the influence of SNSs for blended learning in teaching and learning in primary schools.

Background of the study

The rapid growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the internet, and social networking sites (SNSs) has transformed teaching and learning practices worldwide. Social networking sites such as WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube have become widely used not just for social interaction but for educational purposes as well. Various studies conducted in different parts of the world have shown that SNSs improve communication, collaboration, knowledge sharing, learner engagement, and access to learning resources, thus making them valuable tools for blended learning.

Worldwide, educational institutions have increasingly integrated SNSs into teaching and learning to support Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which seeks to ensure inclusive and quality education for all. Adarkwah (2021) suggests that globally, the internet and SNSs are regarded as a dependable vehicle for facilitating educational reform and development, a platform for communication, and as a means to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). Research from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Romania demonstrate that SNSs facilitate interaction among teachers and learners, support online learning communities, and improve academic participation.

In Africa, countries such as Ghana, Morocco, and South Africa have embraced ICT and social media technologies to enhance educational delivery. Adarkwah (2020) points out that ever since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and declaration of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 by UNESCO, numerous republics including Ghana decided to embrace the lifelong education for all by incorporating ICT and online learning in teaching and learning at all school levels. Studies point out that a significant number of learners use SNSs for academic purposes, highlighting their potential to improve learning experiences and expand access to education.

In Zimbabwe, government initiatives such as the National ICT Policy and collaborations between the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and technology partners have promoted the integration of ICTs in education. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the adoption of blended learning approaches, with platforms such as WhatsApp becoming widely used due to their affordability and accessibility. Despite these developments, research on the use of SNSs in Zimbabwe has mainly focused on universities and colleges, with limited attention given to primary schools.

Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the influence of Social Networking Sites on blended learning in primary schools, focusing on their benefits, challenges, and effectiveness in enhancing teaching and learning in a selected primary school in Reigate District, Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe.

Statement of the problem

Modern-day educational situations require the use or adoption of the Internet and ICT with SNSs as a way of encouraging teamwork, enthusiasm and information sharing among learners. Social networking sites are used as tools to enable users to have social interaction amongst students and teachers and are being used for BL approach countrywide. The use of SNSs complements and enhances the teaching in traditional classrooms (Al-Mukhaini, Al-Qayoudhi & Al-Badi, 2014). Thus, SNSs can be used as tool for BL approach. The researcher observed that most of the teachers in the primary schools are making use of SNSs in their teaching and learning. Lessons are being carried out on a daily basis using these platforms, with WhatsApp in particular taking centre stage due to its affordability. Much of the researches done tend to focus on university or tertiary institutions in relation to the use and adoption of SNS in teaching and learning with limited focus or none at all on primary school education. Since very little has been done in regards to primary schools, there is need to gather evidence on the influence of the use of SNS for BL approach in teaching and learning at primary schools.

Main research question

What is the influence of SNSs in Blended learning approach in Primary Schools?

Sub research question

1. What does SNSs for Blended learning approach in Primary Schools entail?
2. What are the benefits and challenges associated with SNSs for blended learning approach in teaching and learning at Primary Schools?
3. Why has MoPSE adopted SNSs as tool for Blended learning approach in Primary Schools?
4. How are SNSs for Blended learning approach used in teaching and learning?

Justification of the Study

The rapid advancement of technology has transformed teaching and learning, resulting in the increased adoption of blended learning approaches that integrate face-to-face instruction with online learning. Social Networking Sites (SNSs), particularly WhatsApp, have emerged as widely used tools for communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing in educational settings. Despite their growing popularity, there remains limited understanding of the effectiveness and influence of SNSs on teaching and learning, especially at the primary school level.

This study is justified by the need to generate evidence on how WhatsApp, as a commonly used SNS, influences blended learning in primary schools. Understanding its benefits, challenges, and impact on learner engagement and academic interaction can assist teachers in making informed pedagogical decisions and adopting effective technology-enhanced teaching strategies. The findings may also help learners to maximize the collaborative and educational opportunities offered by SNSs beyond the traditional classroom environment. Furthermore, the study will provide valuable insights to school administrators, policymakers, and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in developing policies and guidelines for the effective, safe, and responsible use of SNSs in education. Given the limited research on the use of SNSs in Zimbabwean primary schools, this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge and serve as a foundation for future research on technology-supported learning and blended learning practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Social Constructivist Theory developed by Lev Vygotsky. The theory postulates that learning occurs through social interaction, collaboration, and shared experiences within a particular social context (Vygotsky, 1978). Knowledge is actively constructed through communication and engagement with peers, teachers, and the learning environment. According to Chan and Leung (2016), social networking sites (SNSs) support social constructivism by enabling learners to store, access, and share multimedia information, communicate and collaborate with teachers and peers, and actively construct knowledge through learner-centred interactions that connect new learning with prior experiences. Thus, SNSs align closely with social constructivist principles because they facilitate interaction, collaboration, knowledge sharing, and learner-centred learning. Through SNSs, learners can engage in discussions, exchange ideas, access learning resources, and receive support from teachers and peers. These interactions promote scaffolding and support learners within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), enabling them to achieve higher levels of understanding through guidance and collaboration.

The theory further emphasizes the teacher's role as a facilitator who guides learners in constructing knowledge rather than merely transmitting information. Morchid (2020) suggests that teacher fulfils different roles only to assist learners throughout the process of learning and serves as a facilitator; a guide; a negotiator or an advisor and these teacher-roles are well suited to the theoretical foundation of social constructivism. Consequently, SNSs provide an appropriate platform for implementing social constructivist learning by encouraging active participation, collaborative learning, personalized learning experiences, and continuous interaction beyond the traditional classroom setting.

Social Networking Sites and Blended Learning

SNSs have evolved from communication tools into valuable educational platforms that support blended learning. Blended learning combines face-to-face instruction with online learning activities, allowing learners to access educational content both within and beyond the classroom. Blended learning with social networking has potential to modify the education system from traditional classroom learning mode to an asynchronous 24/7 mode (Chan & Leung, 2016). Studies indicate that SNSs facilitate synchronous and asynchronous communication, enabling learners to interact with teachers and peers regardless of time and location. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media applications support information sharing, discussions, collaborative learning, and continuous access to learning resources. Their integration into education has contributed to more flexible, learner-centred, and technology-enhanced learning environments.

Benefits of SNSs in Education

The literature identifies several educational benefits associated with SNS use:

- **Enhanced learner engagement:** Existing research has demonstrated that social media and networks play an important role in student engagement (George, 2017). SNSs encourage active participation and increase student motivation.
- **Improved communication:** One of the benefits of using social networks in education is that they have strong potential to enhance communication and interaction among students, and between teachers and students (Camus et al. 2016). They strengthen communication among students, teachers, and parents.
- **Collaborative learning:** SNSs to foster collaborative learning as they enable students and teachers to work together jointly towards a common objective (Faizi & El Fkihi, 2018). SNSs support teamwork, peer learning, and knowledge sharing.
- **Access to educational resources:** Social networks can also serve as a digital library of valuable educational materials (Faizi & El Fkihi, 2018). Learners can access a wide range of multimedia learning materials and information.
- **Flexible learning opportunities:** Zinyemba, Nhongo & Zinyemba (2021) highlighted that there has been a shift towards virtual classrooms as a mode of education conveyance with students being taught remotely through electronic platforms like SNSs. Learning can occur anytime and anywhere, extending beyond classroom boundaries.
- **Improved academic performance:** Eden et al. (2020) claim that students' participation in social networking groups influences their self-esteem development and academic success. Research suggests a positive relationship between appropriate SNS use and academic achievement.

These benefits contribute to creating interactive learning environments that support both formal and informal learning experiences.

Challenges Associated with SNS Use in Education

Despite their advantages, SNSs present several challenges:

- A study by Wang et al. (2012) concluded that safety and privacy are the critical concerns related to the usage of the internet in learning environments and SNSs being part of those learning environments. Thus, privacy and security concerns, including cyberbullying, harassment, and exposure to inappropriate content becomes a challenge on the use of SNSs.

- Financial constraints, particularly the cost of internet access and digital devices. Research by Zinyemba et al. (2021) disclosed that it was very difficult to incorporate blended learning with SNSs since not all the learners have the electronic devices that could be used for such.
- Information overload, making it difficult for learners to assess the quality and relevance of information.
- Distractions, as students may use SNSs for non-academic purposes. Bekalu et al. (2019) note that the use of SNSs may cause distraction from the learning environment, affecting their academic progress.
- Limited digital literacy, where some teachers and learners lack the skills required to effectively utilize social networking platforms for educational purposes.

These challenges may hinder effective implementation and require appropriate policies, training, and support mechanisms.

Adoption of SNSs for Blended Learning

The adoption of SNSs in education has been driven by their ability to support communication, collaboration, learner engagement, and information sharing. SNSs benefit students by providing platforms that foster communication and life-long learning and facilitate access to distance and open education, e-learning resources and e-libraries (Saleh, 2020). Their significance became particularly evident during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, when educational institutions increasingly relied on digital technologies to ensure continuity of learning. In Zimbabwe, the adoption of blended learning approaches has encouraged the integration of SNSs into teaching and learning processes. These platforms support self-directed learning, facilitate access to educational resources, and promote lifelong learning skills. Their affordability and widespread availability further contribute to their adoption within educational settings.

Strategies for Using SNSs in Blended Learning

- The literature highlights several strategies for integrating SNSs into teaching and learning:
- Extending classroom discussions beyond school hours. Faizi & El Fkihi (2018) pointed out that students can use these virtual communities to seek help from peers or teachers beyond classroom walls.
- Sharing assignments, learning materials, and announcements.
- Facilitating peer-to-peer support and collaborative learning activities.
- Providing immediate feedback on learners' work.
- Conducting discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and revision activities.
- Supporting administrative communication among teachers, students, and parents. teachers and parents communicate for learners' development to boost their outcomes (Badshah et al., 2021).
- Promoting higher-order thinking skills through problem-solving, analysis, and critical reflection activities.

Effective implementation of these strategies requires thoughtful pedagogical design and active teacher facilitation.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that SNSs have considerable potential to enhance blended learning through improved communication, collaboration, learner engagement, and access to educational resources. Guided by Social Constructivist Theory, SNSs provide opportunities for interactive and learner-centred education that extends beyond traditional classroom boundaries. However, challenges such as privacy concerns, digital inequalities, information overload, and inadequate technological skills may affect their effectiveness. Therefore,

understanding the influence of SNSs on blended learning in primary schools remains essential for informing educational policy and practice, particularly within the Zimbabwean context.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was employed to obtain rich, detailed, and context-specific information about participants' experiences. The approach enabled the researcher to explore attitudes, perceptions, and practices related to the use of SNSs in teaching and learning. A case study research design was adopted to facilitate an in-depth investigation of SNS use within a single primary school context. The target population comprised approximately 30 teachers and 120 learners at a selected primary school in Reigate District, Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were knowledgeable and experienced in the use of SNSs for blended learning. The final sample consisted of five Grade 6 teachers and forty learners.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to obtain detailed insights into their experiences and perceptions. Focus group discussions were held with learners to capture collective views and experiences regarding the use of SNSs in learning. Observations, including the examination of online interactions and screenshots of educational activities, were used to corroborate data obtained through interviews and discussions.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed, coded, and organised into themes based on recurring patterns and meanings. This process enabled the identification of key themes related to the benefits, challenges, and educational influence of SNSs in blended learning. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, methodological triangulation was employed through the use of multiple data collection methods. Prolonged engagement with participants and the research setting further enhanced the accuracy and dependability of the findings.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Ethical clearance and permission were obtained from relevant educational authorities and the participating school. Informed consent was secured from all participants, while parental consent was obtained for learner participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that participants' identities were not disclosed in the research process or reporting of findings.

FINDINGS

The study explored the influence of social networking sites (SNSs) on blended learning in a selected Zimbabwean primary school through the perspectives of 40 Grade 6 learners and five teachers. The findings revealed four major themes: educational benefits, challenges, rationale for adoption, and implementation strategies.

The findings indicate that SNSs play a significant role in enhancing teaching and learning by promoting ease of interaction, communication, collaboration, and learner engagement. 70% of the students noted that an advantage of utilising SNSs for blended learning approach in teaching and learning is the fact that the platform allows eased interaction, be it student to student and/or teacher or vice versa. All five teachers interviewed concurred with the students. This was in line with Camus et al., (2016) view which stated one of the benefits of using social networking sites in education was that they have strong potential to enhance communication and interaction among students, and between teachers and students.

Most participants reported that SNSs facilitate continuous interaction between teachers and learners beyond the traditional classroom, enabling learning to occur anytime and anywhere. Some of the students pointed out that:

"At times in class I will be shy to say what I think but on WhatsApp no one will be seeing me so I can also ask the teacher some questions"

In support some of the teachers responded that:

"You see all students responding to work that has been sent, even those who are never participating in class have something to say in the groups created"

The platforms also supported collaborative learning through group discussions, peer assistance, and knowledge sharing, while providing access to a wide range of digital educational resources, including documents, videos, images, and online learning materials.

Despite these educational benefits, participants identified several challenges associated with the use of SNSs. The most prominent concerns included cyberbullying, privacy and security risks, exposure to unreliable or misleading information, the high cost of internet data and digital devices, and the tendency for learners to become distracted by non-academic social media activities. Some of the students responded:

"You can easily be bullied"

and

"....some of the things posted are disturbing and may not be good for some of us"

Others had this to say:

"...I do not trust some of the information shared on WhatsApp..."

These challenges were perceived as barriers to the effective implementation of blended learning in primary schools.

Teachers specified that the adoption of SNSs was driven by their ability to improve communication, support collaborative and learner-centred pedagogies, integrate digital technologies into classroom practice, and provide flexible learning opportunities through both synchronous and asynchronous instruction.

Others had this to say:

"There is nothing we can do. There is a shift in the teaching strategies and we have to let the students explore with our aid as facilitators or with the help of their colleagues. In fact they explain some concepts better to each other"

and

"Technology enhanced teaching is the way to go if we are to produce learners well-groomed to fit in the digital world"

The findings suggest that SNSs have become an important component of 21st-century teaching by extending learning beyond the physical classroom and promoting active learner participation.

The study further found that teachers employed SNSs in several practical ways, including creating virtual learning environments, distributing learning materials, providing timely feedback on learners' work, conducting discussions, facilitating research activities, and communicating administrative information to learners and parents.

This is how some of the teachers responded:

"No need for teaching and learning process to be strictly within school hours. It continues anytime of the day"

and

"...access to educational resources anywhere and at any time, there are varieties of educational materials on the internet such as audios, videos, e- books, e-libraries that are handy 24/7..."

Inclusively, the findings demonstrate that SNSs have considerable potential to enhance blended learning in Zimbabwean primary schools by fostering communication, collaboration, and access to educational resources. However, their fruitful integration depends on addressing challenges related to digital access, affordability, online safety, information quality, and learner supervision

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings demonstrate that social networking sites (SNSs), particularly WhatsApp, have become an important component of blended learning in Zimbabwean primary schools. Teachers and learners reported using SNSs primarily for sharing educational resources, facilitating collaborative learning, conducting online discussions, and maintaining communication beyond classroom hours. These findings suggest that SNSs provide a practical platform for extending learning opportunities and supporting learner-centred pedagogies.

The most prominent benefit identified was enhanced communication and interaction between teachers and learners, as well as among learners themselves. Participants indicated that SNSs promoted continuous engagement through instant messaging, discussion groups, and timely exchange of learning materials, thereby extending learning beyond the traditional classroom. This finding supports previous studies (e.g., Mbodila et al., 2014; Paliktzoglou & Suhonen, 2014), which reported that social networking platforms strengthen collaboration and learner engagement in technology-mediated learning environments.

Participants also highlighted the collaborative nature of SNS-supported learning. Learners were able to work together on assignments, seek academic assistance from peers and teachers, and participate in group discussions regardless of geographical location. Furthermore, SNSs enabled flexible learning by allowing learners to access educational resources at their own pace and at convenient times. The availability of multimedia learning materials, including documents, videos, images, and audio resources, further enhanced learners' opportunities for independent learning and knowledge construction.

Despite these educational benefits, the study identified several challenges that limit the effective implementation of SNSs in blended learning. The most frequently reported concerns were cyberbullying, privacy and security risks, exposure to unreliable or misleading information, high internet and device costs, and learner distraction caused by non-academic social media activities. These findings corroborate earlier studies (e.g., Wang et al., 2012; Bright et al., 2015; Bekalu et al., 2019), which identified online safety, information quality, and digital distraction as significant barriers to educational use of social media.

Teachers further explained that the adoption of SNSs was motivated by their ability to enhance communication, learner engagement, collaboration, flexibility, and the integration of digital technologies into classroom practice. The platforms enabled both synchronous and asynchronous learning, allowing teaching and learning activities to continue beyond school hours while supporting the development of 21st-century digital competencies.

The study also identified several pedagogical strategies employed by teachers when integrating SNSs into blended learning. These included creating virtual learning environments, sharing educational resources, providing timely formative feedback, supporting learner research, coordinating assignments, and communicating administrative information to learners and parents. Such practices demonstrate that SNSs have evolved beyond social communication tools to become valuable instructional technologies capable of supporting multiple dimensions of teaching and learning.

The findings align with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which emphasises that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and collaborative learning. The use of SNSs created opportunities for learners to engage with teachers and peers, exchange ideas, solve problems collaboratively, and co-construct knowledge within authentic learning communities. Consequently, SNSs supported learner-centred instruction by encouraging dialogue, reflection, collaboration, and active participation in the learning process.

Overall, the study concludes that SNSs have considerable potential to strengthen blended learning in primary schools by improving communication, collaboration, learner engagement, and access to educational resources. However, their successful integration requires addressing infrastructural and pedagogical challenges,

particularly internet affordability, equitable access to digital devices, online safety, and effective monitoring of learners' online activities. These findings suggest that educational stakeholders should develop supportive policies, invest in digital infrastructure, and provide professional development for teachers to maximise the educational benefits of SNS-supported blended learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest that the successful integration of social networking sites (SNSs) into blended learning requires coordinated efforts from educators, parents, school authorities, and policymakers. Teachers should receive continuous professional development to strengthen their capacity to integrate SNSs and other Web 2.0 technologies into learner-centred pedagogical practices. Learners should be equipped with digital literacy and responsible online behaviour skills to maximise the educational benefits of SNSs while minimising risks associated with misuse.

Parental involvement should be strengthened through awareness programmes that encourage the provision of appropriate digital devices and effective supervision of learners' online activities. In addition, school authorities and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should invest in digital infrastructure by improving access to affordable internet services and learning technologies. Partnerships with network service providers and other stakeholders should be explored to reduce the cost of internet data and digital devices, thereby promoting equitable access to blended learning opportunities in primary schools.

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