

Social Media in Higher Learning: Is it a tool for Social or Academic Purpose? A Comparative Study between MoCU, Tanzania and LUANAR, Malawi

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Abstract: This study was carried out to investigate the extent and purposes of social media uses among higher learning students. The study was conducted at the Moshi Co-operative University (MoCU) in Tanzania and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) in Malawi between May and October 2014. A total of 140 randomly selected students, 70 from each university, were surveyed using a cross-sectional research design. Results showed that more than 80% of students from each University use social networking sites (SNSs), with MoCU students being more active users when compared to LUANAR students. Facebook was the most popular SNS in both Universities, used by more than 90% of students. Students in both Universities use SNSs for both social and academic reasons. However it was interesting that 60% of students in each University use SNSs for social reasons. The study recommend that Universities should take the high rates of SNS uses among students as an opportunity within which academic uses can be applied.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites, University students, Tanzania, Malawi

1. Introduction

There is a substantial increase in Internet adoption rates in Africa, as in other parts of the world, with penetration at 26.5% (as of June 2014) and more than 297 million active users across the continent [1]. New developments in the technological world have made the Internet an innovative way for people to communicate. Applications such as social media, which according to [2] are internet social networking sites (SNSs) that connect people together for different purposes, have created a phenomenon on the internet that has gained popularity over the last decade.

In countries such as the UK, the USA, Russia, the Czech Republic and Spain, about half of all adults now use SNSs, where almost three quarters (72%) of online adults use SNSs. Although the growth of social network users in those countries and in other developed countries in the world has been slowing down due to market saturation, it shows no sign of stopping [3] [4]. According to [5] social media penetration in Africa lags behind the rest of the world at 7% (tied with South Asia) ahead of Central Asia. This is primarily as a result of the lack of affordable, accessible Internet on the continent. However this penetration represents a 2% increase from 2013. [6] added that by 2016, 19.8% of the population in Africa (and the Middle East) is expected to be accessing social networks. A major shift to mobile Internet use in Africa is expecting to contribute to the increased social network users [7].

SNSs which make use of Web 2.0 technologies have, in recent years, received much attention in higher education as increasing number of young people have made use of public systems such as Facebook and Twitter. Such systems coupled with other Web 2.0 tools help individuals to readily create or find and then share knowledge [8]. [7] added that social media is a way to make connections, not only on campus, but with friends outside of school. Research reveals that 85% of higher learning students use SNSs as a major method of communication [9]. In fact, [8] pointed out that university students are the primary users of SNSs.

According to [10] university students' engagement in social media can be divided into two categories; social and academic. Several researchers have identified social identity, racial identity, and social capital as primary reasons to why university students use social media so frequently [11]. Experts, on the other hand, have stated that social communications, which are enhanced by SNSs, among higher learning students can become a main contributor to successful learning [10]. This is why [12] said that due to continuous growth of user generated content and the subsequent ability to share and even collaborate online, the SNSs have emerged to be of great importance. The importance is not only in information sharing but also in education processes. However [10] pointed out that the use of SNSs have shown to improve students' social engagement and decrease academic engagement. This creates impasse as to whether social media usages among university students are for social or academic purposes. Together with the said dilemma, little is known about the use of SNSs amongst higher learning students in the African context. It is pointed out by [12] that despite the publications and studies on social media use by university students done elsewhere including America and Europe, much has not been done in the developing world. As a result this study was carried out to establish the motives for social network uses among African higher learning students. The Moshi Co-operative University (MoCU) and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) were used as case studies. The objectives of this study were to:

- Identify the commonly used SNSs among MoCU and LUANAR students
- Establish the frequency in which the identified SNSs are used amongst respondents
- Identify the primary purpose for which the MoCU and LUANAR students use the social media

In order to achieve the objectives of the research as stated above, the study looked ahead to answer the following questions:

- To what extent the MoCU and LUANAR students use social media?
- Which SNSs are commonly used by MoCU and LUANAR students?
- How frequently are the identified SNSs are used among respondents?
- For which primary purposes do the MoCU and LUANAR students use the social media?

2. Literature Review

As defined by [2] social media are Internet social networking sites that connect people together for different purposes. According to [12] the SNSs are the web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. SNSs are believed to be the most popular with prominent activities within the Web 2.0 platform.

Web 2.0 is the second stage of development of the World Wide Web (WWW), characterized especially by the change from static web pages to dynamic or user-generated content [13]. [2] pointed out that Web 2.0 is a term that describes the changing trends in the use of WWW technology and web design that aim to enhance creativity, secure information

sharing, increase collaboration, and improve the functionality of the web as we know it (Web 1.0). These have led to the development and evolution of web-based communities and hosted services, such as SNSs (for instance Facebook and Twitter), video sharing sites (for instance YouTube), wikis (for instance Wikipedia), blogs, etc. While understanding significance and related characteristics of other technologies under Web 2.0 platform such as video sharing sites and blogs, this study focused only on SNSs.

There are currently many SNSs in use, and different organizations have created rankings on the mostly used SNSs. In most rankings Facebook leads followed by other SNSs, mostly Twitter and LinkedIn. For example [14] provided a list of top 15 SNSs. In that list, the top five were Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn and Instagram. According to [15] the top five SNSs used in the world in 2014 were Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Myspace and LinkedIn. The eBizMBA rankings show that by December 2014 the top five SNSs were Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Google+ [16]. Research has also shown an increased number of SNSs users. For instance, [3] showed that almost three quarters (72%) of online US adults were using SNSs in 2013. The authors went further to say when they first started asking about SNSs in February 2005, just 8% of online adults said they used SNSs.

SNSs are meant to socially connect community of friends together. Members of this community of friends may be people of like minds and interests that could be continents apart [2]. Computer and mobile devices has contributed to the widespread of SNSs uses [12]. As said by [9] social media technology has become commonplace among higher learning students and have made them to become reliant on it. [8] said that over the years, social networking among university students has become more and more popular. It is a way to make connections, not only on campus, but with friends outside of school.

Several researches have indicated that university students use SNSs for social reasons. For example, in a study by [17] the most important reason for SNSs use by higher learning students was to communicate with family and friends. Entertainment and boredom were also indicated as prominent reasons for SNSs use. Furthermore [18] found that students use SNSs to pass time, be entertained, and maintain existing relationships with others. According to the author higher learning students use SNSs to communicate with others as well as to occupy free time when they were bored. [19] pointed out that many college students do not have a primary focus on academics but rather on being socially connected, thus they use SNSs for social purposes. This is also supported by [10] who said that the use of SNSs has been shown to improve students' social engagement and decrease academic engagement. Furthermore [2] stated that while students tended to use more Web 2.0 technologies during their free time than in school, they don't use Web 2.0 technologies for school purposes.

Numerous SNSs have however been shown to create a positive learning environment for students. It is said by [20] that as students create online communities, through social media, they are able to engage with other students in their class. Research has suggested that through peer interaction and group collaboration with social media a positive impact on student learning can occur [8]. SNSs are used to enable students to interact with each other and provide constructive criticism on various academic activities [20]. Studies have furthermore shown that universities which incorporate some level of technology, such as social media, into the curriculum have seen positive academic results [10]. Through an increase of class collaboration through social media, professors can facilitate learning and positively utilize the social learning habits of university students.

As presented in the surveyed literature, some studies indicated that the uses of SNSs by higher learning students are for social reasons. But other studies indicate academic purpose as a reason for SNSs use. There are also literatures that indicate that SNS are used for both

academic and social reasons, see [21] for example. This is why [20] cautioned that positive academic results will occur only if social media is utilized within students' courses.

3. Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional descriptive research design to identify the purposes for SNS usage amongst higher learning students. The study involved students from Moshi Co-operative University (MoCU) in Tanzania and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) in Malawi. The study was conducted between May and October 2014 in the two countries. MoCU and LUANAR are public universities. The study population comprised of all undergraduate students in both universities. A total of 140 undergraduate students (70 from each university) were selected at random using a simple random sampling method to comprise a sample size for the study. Self administered questionnaire consisting of both closed and open ended questions was used as instruments for data collection. The collected data were coded and then analyzed by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Demographic data of respondents

A total of 140 undergraduate students; 70 from MoCU and 70 from LUANAR were involved in this study. In both universities the number of male students exceeded that of females; 44 (62.9%) males and 26 (37.1%) females were involved from MoCU and 41 (58.6%) males and 29 (41.4%) females from LUANAR. A big portion of these respondents were aged between 18 and 25 years; 56 (80.0%) and 55 (78.6%) from MoCU and LUANAR respectively. None of the respondents from MoCU was either below 18 or above 45 years of age, 13 (18.6%) were aged from 26 to 35 years and one (1.4%) was from 36 to 45 years. In the case of LUANAR, two (2.9%) respondents were below 18 years of age, 12 (17.1%) were from 26 to 35 years and one (1.4%) was from 36 to 45 years of age. None of respondents from LUANAR was above 45 years of age. Most of these respondents were residing off campus; 48 (68.6%) from MoCU and 44 (62.9%) from LUANAR.

4.2 Extent of SNS Uses

The study established that most of students in both universities; MoCU (68 equivalent to 97.1%) and LUANAR (60 equivalent to 85.7%) use SNSs. This tells that social networks have an impact, whether positive or negative, on students in both universities. However in comparison, as shown in Figure 1, MoCU students are relatively more active social network users than LUANAR students.

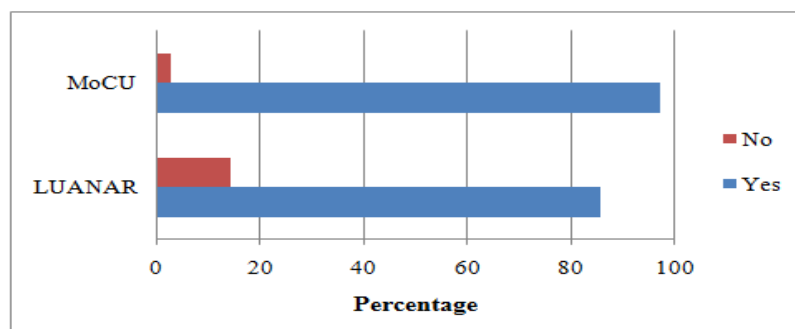


Figure 1: Respondents' memberships to SNSs

4.3 Commonly used SNSs

Findings revealed that Facebook is the mostly used SNS in both Universities. 66 (97.1%) and 57 (95.0%) of MoCU and LUANAR students respectively who are social network users are members and thus users of Facebook. The subsequent commonly used SNSs differed between the two Universities. At MoCU Instagram was the second commonly used, with 43 (63.2%) respondents followed by Twitter used by 42 (61.8%), Academia.edu used by 35 (51.5%) and LinkedIn were used by 18 (26.5%) respondents. In the case of LUANAR, the second commonly used SNS was MySpace with 23 (38.3%) respondents followed by 22 (36.7%) respondents using Twitter, 18 (30.0%) using Academia.edu and 11 (7.3%) using LinkedIn. Other SNSs that have been indicated to be used by respondents are as shown in Figure 2. As the Figure shows, MoCU students are more active users in all of these social networking sites except MySpace where LUANAR students were leading in terms of usage, which indicates that MoCU students are likely to be relatively more affected by social networks as compared to their counterparts in LUANAR.

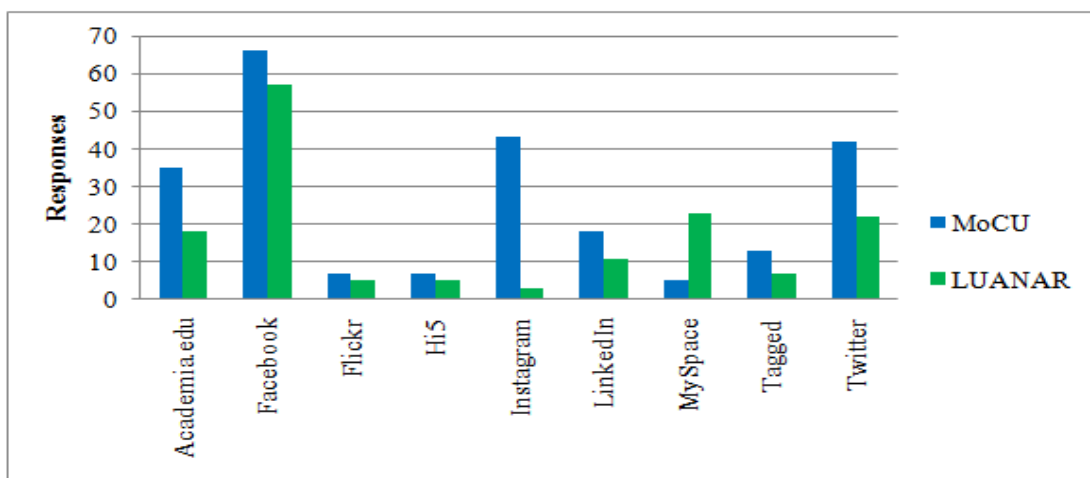


Figure 2: SNS as commonly used by respondents

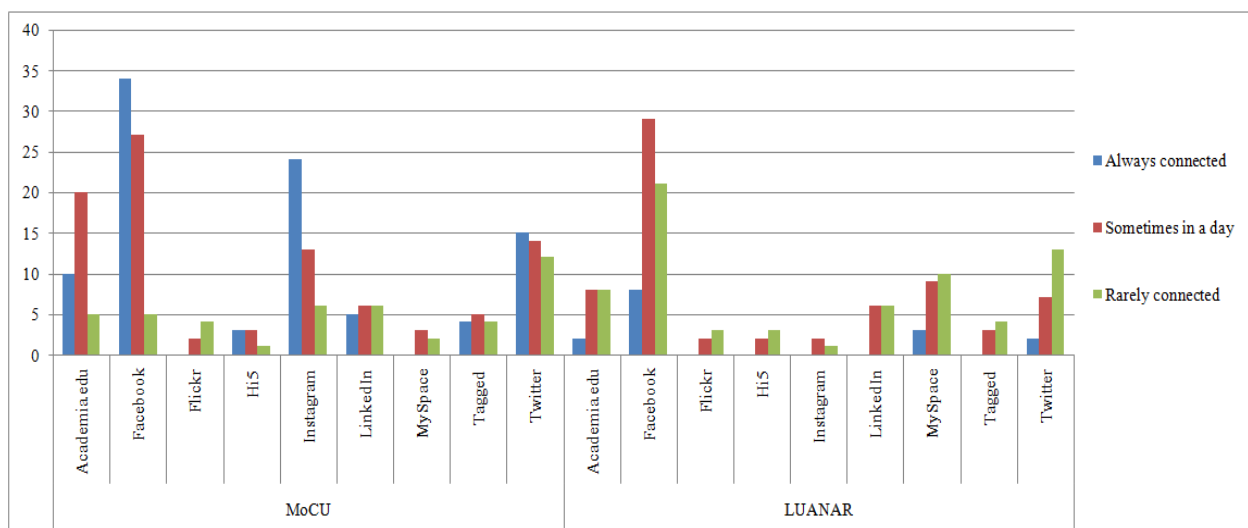


Figure 3: Frequency in which respondents use SNS

The study went further to establish the frequency of uses in each of the indicated SNSs. A three point Likert scale, “always connected”, “sometimes in a day” and “rarely connected” were used to capture respondents’ frequency of uses in each of the SNS they indicated to have been using. As shown in Figure 3, findings revealed that MoCU students are always connected to Academia.edu (10 responses), Facebook (34 responses), Hi5 (3

responses), Instagram (24 responses), LinkedIn (5 responses), Tagged (4 responses) and Twitter (15 responses) as compared to their counterparts in LUANAR who indicated to have been always connected to Academia.edu (2 responses), Facebook (8 responses), MySpace (3 responses) and Twitter (2 responses). Generally, findings showed empirical evidence that in connection to having more social network users at MoCU, most of MoCU students spend more time on SNSs than LUANAR students.

4.4 Purposes for SNSs use

Respondents who are members of SNSs were asked to indicate reasons to why they use social networks. Findings showed that respondents from both Universities use social networks to have connection with friends as a main reason. As shown in Table 1, this reason was provided by 59 (88.1%) and 52 (86.7%) respondents from MoCU and LUANAR respectively. Other reasons for social networks use were; to find friends (21 (31.3%) and 25 (41.7%) responses from MoCU and LUANAR respectively), academic purposes (41 (61.2%) and 31 (51.7%) responses from MoCU and LUANAR respectively) and looking for professional opportunities (30 (44.8%) and 16 (26.7%) responses from MoCU and LUANAR respectively). The study furthermore found that 11 (16.4%) and 12 (20.0%) MoCU and LUANAR students use SNSs just because of pressure from peer groups, 16 (23.9%) and 4 (6.7%) MoCU and LUANAR students respectively use SNSs for getting news and updates, and 12 (17.9%) and 8 (13.3%) MoCU and LUANAR students respectively use SNSs just to have fun.

Table 1: Reasons to why MoCU and LUANAR students use SNSs

	MoCU		LUANAR	
	No	Percent (%)	No	Percent (%)
Connect with friends	59	88.1%	52	86.7%
Find friends	21	31.3%	25	41.7%
Academic reasons	41	61.2%	31	51.7%
Look for professional opportunities	30	44.8%	16	26.7%
Pressure from peer groups	11	16.4%	12	20.0%
News and updates	16	23.9%	4	6.7%
Just to have fun	12	17.9%	8	13.3%

**Note that percentage does not sum to 100 because of multiple responses

For the purpose of this study, connection with friends, finding friends, pressure from peer groups and having fun are considered as social aspects for SNSs use. Academic reasons and looking for professional opportunities, on the other hand, are regarded as academic aspects. It is therefore revealed in this finding that SNSs are used amongst respondents from both Universities for both social and academic reasons. But further analysis of this finding showed that 62.6% of MoCU students use SNSs for social purposes and 37.4% for academic purposes, and in LUANAR 68.2% of students use SNSs for social purposes while 31.8% use it for academic purposes. Thus in both Universities social reasons carries more weight than academic. This confirms the finding by [21] who found that students' use of SNSs for social purposes were more than those using SNSs for academic purposes.

The study sought to find out the more specific academic uses of SNSs amongst respondents. An open ended question was set out to those respondents who indicated to use SNSs for academic reasons to provide their reasons. As depicted in Table 3, the main academic reason for students in both universities to use SNSs was sharing of academic

materials. This was indicated by 24 (52.2%) MoCU students and 16 (48.5%) LUANAR students. Other academic uses of SNSs as indicated by respondents are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Academic uses of SNSs

	MoCU		LUANAR	
	No	Percent (%)	No	Percent (%)
Downloading lecture notes posted by Lecturers	0	0.0	9	27.3
Asking questions to Lecturers	6	13.0	6	18.2
Uploading assignments	0	0.0	5	15.2
Accessing various university related information	3	6.5	3	9.1
Sharing of academic materials with others	24	52.2	16	48.5
Discussion space for academic matters	18	39.1	15	45.5
Tutorial space	5	10.9	2	6.1
Searching for academic materials	16	34.8	5	15.2
Downloading academic materials posted by others	6	13.0	3	9.1
Getting various updates relating to academics	11	23.9	8	24.2
Searching for scholarships	5	10.9	3	9.1

**Note that percentage does not sum to 100 because of multiple responses

4.5 How do respondents access SNSs

From the study's findings it can be deduced that the high rate of SNSs use amongst respondents in both Universities surveyed is contributed much by the availability of affordable internet enabled mobile phones. This is so because when asked (through a multiple response question) to indicate on how they access SNSs most respondents in both Universities, 51 (77.3%) in MoCU and 53 (88.3%) in LUANAR) said that they do so through mobile phones. Apart from mobile phones, 41 (62.1%) and 26 (43.3%) responses from MoCU and LUANAR respectively indicated laptops (connected to universities' Wi-Fi) as a second mostly used tool for accessing SNSs. In the case of MoCU, the subsequent tools for accessing SNSs were computer labs (21 responses, equivalent to 31.8%), tablets (18 responses, equivalent to 27.3%) and internet café (11 responses, equivalent to 16.7%). In LUANAR, the subsequent tools for accessing SNSs were tablets (7 responses, equivalent to 11.7%) and computer labs (2 responses, equivalent to 3.3%). None of the LUANAR students indicated to have been accessing SNSs through Internet café, the reason being unavailability of an Internet café at LUANAR. Figure 4 summarizes these findings. Despite of availability of computer labs in both Universities, few students use them to access SNSs as compared to how they use mobile phones and laptops. The identified reason for that was computer labs in both universities are mainly accessible to students during formal lab sessions only.

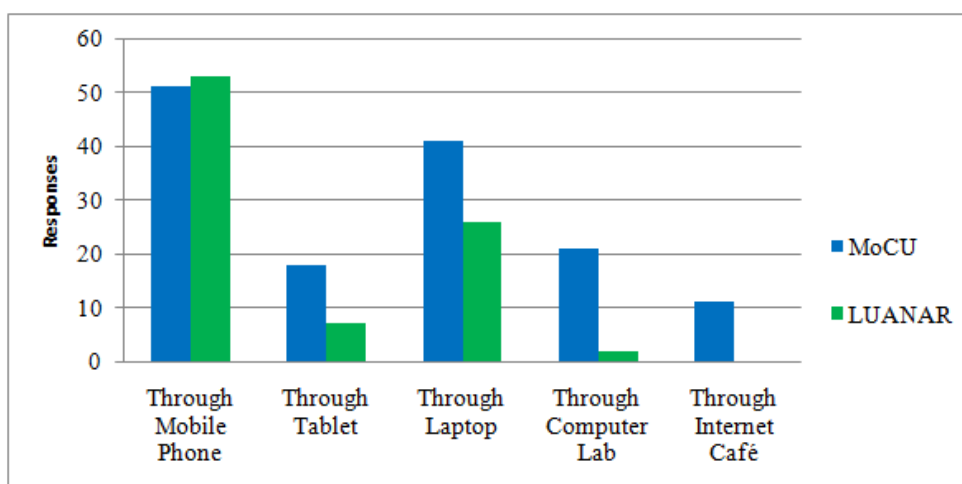


Figure 4: Academic uses of SNSs

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the empirical evidence in this study, more than three quarters of students in both MoCU and LUANAR use SNSs, with MoCU students being relatively more active users than LUANAR students. The high rate of SNSs use amongst respondents in both Universities was observed to be contributed much by the availability of affordable Internet enabled mobile phones. In terms of SNSs use frequencies, MoCU students were observed to spend more time on SNSs than their counterparts in LUANAR. Facebook was the leading SNS in terms of being used amongst respondents in both Universities as it is used by more than 90% of students in each University. Other commonly used SNSs amongst respondents, though used in a low extent than Facebook, were Twitter, Instagram, MySpace, Academia.edu, LinkedIn, Filckr, Hi5 and Tagged. These SNSs had, as well, a varying extent of usage. These SNSs are used amongst students in both Universities for both social and academic reasons. However social reasons carried more weight than academic because more than 60% of students in both Universities use SNSs for social reasons and the remained portion is what uses it for academic reasons. Academically, SNSs are used mainly for sharing of academic materials. The study thus recommends that University students should learn to balance the use of SNSs so as academic use to be of equal importance as social uses. Furthermore, MoCU and LUANAR and other similar institutions should improve infrastructures that will facilitate easy Internet access to all students, including those who don't have Internet enabled mobile phones and laptops. These institutions should also take the high rates of SNSs use among students as an opportunity which can be used for academic purposes.

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