Digital and Social Media Usage for Academic Purpose among Distance Learners in selected Higher Education Institutions in Addis Ababa: Practices and Challenges

Manaye Adela, St. Mary's University

Abstract

Distance education is demanding connection and communication while learners are physically in a dispersed location from the center of the institution. In such platforms, communication, and technological means, digital media is the most important which takes place in nearly all activities. The main aim of this study was to assess digital media usage and challenges in distance learning. The digital era has brought the dynamics in learning and assessment by using digital media and social networking. Stratified random sampling was used for selecting 198 participants. The strata were made in academic year level and department. The descriptive survey design was implemented with a mixed approach. Questionnaire and interview were tools for data gathering. Numerical analysis was done for the data from questionnaire and thematic analysis was used for qualitative data from the interview. The study unveiled that digital media usage creates ease of learning and enhances better access to reference materials and sample exam questions in electronic copy. Telegram, YouTube, and Facebook are mostly used in distance learning systems through computer and smartphone gadgets. The most commonly found challenges are connection-related; internet cost-related challenges; source less credibility and less trustworthiness (both on telegram and YouTube); data management-related challenges; gadget-related challenges and difficulty in using digital devices; application-related difficulties; difficulties related to Computer-Mediated Communication due to technology literacy related problem. It is conceivable to deliver education for distance learners by expanding and providing digital media platforms.

Keywords: Digital media, social media, LMS, YouTube, Telegram, Twitter, Facebook

Introduction

The usage of information and communication technology (ICT) in education is occurring much faster than the developments in all other fields. Its efficiency in education has been increasing day by day. The digital age compels students to use digital media which affects the increase of quality education conveyance. The contribution of reference materials could be given as examples of this increasing effect. As for education, there are a lot of applications that have significant advantages and support for distance learning. Examples of these applications are online examination systems and systems providing follow-up for the lessons via the internet. Recently, the applications depending on the control of the relationship and interaction between the learner and the tutor have become more important (Chien, 2012; Mardiana, 2016; &Scholz, 2010).

A lot of educational administration software has been developed for this purpose. Paper and pen-dominated learning and learners' engagement has changed following the inception of digital media and technology (Sharma & Gupta, 2021).

The fact that social media tools have a structure increasing the social interaction of people independent of time and place gives rise to more effects than in any other technological environment. When an educational environment that is independently designed and an educational application performed over social media are compared, it could be observed that the social media application has a higher interaction, more favorable results, and is much more efficient (Mardiana, 2016).

This study, the search on digital media that has been used recently as an educational platform, has come up with the suggestion for distance education.

Nowadays, students have demonstrated a high amount of internet usage, and surprisingly, they have shown more and have consumed a lot of time using social media. Not only college students but also educators believe in social media sites because, in general, social media and the internet are very helpful; they have found what they needed in education. Facebook, for example, is a resource for education, when linked to other sources. Mardiana (2016) has shown the implication of social media to the education process and found out about the numerous positive and negative ways.

Distance education is dominated mainly by paper-based learning activities. Modules preparation and material distribution to distance learners are the major tasks in every semester work. Duplication of assignment papers and dispatching to learners are also the main tasks of distance education institutions. Such paper (hardcopy) material preparation and distribution are costly. The costs include production overhead costs and transportation (Chien, 2012).

These days, emerging technology is bringing alternatives and opportunities to use an electronic copy for reading and learning through using Digital Media (DM) and gadgets. Social media and information communication technology bring ease to learning through better connectivity among learners and educators. This includes access to reference materials and assessments, too.

Statement of the Problem

Though tools do not exceedingly outshine instructors, gadgets and other digital education platforms are easier to adapt and use for learning purposes (Scholz, 2010). Digital media is being in use by millions of people across the globe. Learners in all levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) use digital media, in general, and social media, in particular, for communication, entertainment, sharing information, experiences sharing, announcements, news, etcetera (Papademetriou, Anastasiadou, Konteos and Papalexandris, 2022). But, of all these and other purposes, entertainment appears to be the dominant purpose in the use of social media. Despite the ever growing use, there are challenges and difficulties in the use of digital media among individuals.

These days, in the milieu of higher education, the impending of digital media has been recognized to facilitate learning. Nevertheless, digital learning set-ups are still applied rather than optionally. High digital tool application among university students reveals a desire for applicable skills and lessons thereof.

Recently, digital media in general and social media networking in particular has brought opportunities for making the learning processes affluent. However, learning how to learn through and using digital media is an indicator that simple internet access is not enough. The crucial point is the way how learners catch up the academic activities effectively and meaningfully.

In education, the use of digital media allows learners to access supplementary beneficial materials communicate and, find opportunities to learn. In the innovative process, diverse forms of digital media, such as laptops, video, and online inquiry have been amalgamated into daily education. The advent of digital media is positively contributing to the education system. According to Chien (2012), achievement of meaningful learning via digital media continues to be a major concern in contemporary education as the everyday use of all forms of digital media is part of learners' lives and, therefore, becomes a key component of education. Both how to learn and what to learn in digital media appeared so significant.

Distance learning is a means to deliver education to learners at a distant through ways such as computer, video, multimedia technology, satellite, graphics, module, and audio. Stating that the learner and the teacher are not in the same physical environment, scholars emphasize that electronic means or written and printed materials should be used in this educational program. Distance learning is composed of two main parts: teaching including the teacher, and learning including the learner. When in-class activities could not be performed because of limitations in conventional learning-teaching methods, thanks to distance learning, a teaching method providing communication and interaction among learners, planners, and practitioners of educational studies could be used from a certain center through teaching units specially prepared for several environments. In addition, distance learning is an institutional education program that puts the learner, the teacher, and the teaching materials in different environments together via communication technologies (United States Distance Learning Association - USDLA 2004; Sharma, &Gupta, 2021; Shilpa, 2014; Steinbeck, Matthiessen, & Vladova, 2019).

The distance learner, in contrast to any other student, can reach her/his learning environment; get in touch with her/his classmates and teacher synchronously or asynchronously. So, the internet has caused the biggest change in education ever since the advent of the first printed books. These days, distance learning methods are being used in universities effectively. That's why distance learning should be available to the public. At the same time, the content of the LMS programs should be appropriate for all participants, due to the situational properties of language learning (Shilpa, 2014).

Social networks were the issue of many researchers in the field of sociology before they became the study field of ICT. These studies aimed to analyze the social interaction among people and the advantages and disadvantages of the results of this interaction. Another study forms the basis for the evaluation of social network interaction with neighborhood relations analyzed. The increase in the efficiency of social networks in the study field of ICT has been parallel to the increase in the use of the Internet. The spreading rate of individual ideas in the applications has given prominence to the Internet which is a new socialization field. Especially blogs, Twitter, podcasts, wikis, social network sites, virtual worlds, video sharing, and photo sharing applications are important applications that provide the formation of social network structure (Scholz, 2010; Shilpa, 2014).

When the applications are analyzed, it is seen that they mainly depend on the sharing of individual ideas with followers or visitors. This sharing and follow-up increased social interaction. This interaction has advantageous results in many fields such as trade, politics, and especially education.

The Social Network Tools

There are many social network means through which people interact over the Internet. These means have been designed with different data structures and qualities. For example, Twitter provides people with sharing their ideas as a short text over a webpage with their followers; YouTube makes it possible to share videos prepared about any subject; and Facebook provides the sharing of ideas, videos, and photos. According to the data, every month, more than 1 billion individual visitors watch videos that have a 6-billion-hour running time on YouTube. Videos over 100 hours are added to YouTube every minute. In another research, it is seen that the number of active users of Facebook is over 1.1 billion and Twitter has 228 million active users. These results show us how easily you can communicate with the people (Shilpa, 2014).

The interaction between people over social network tools and the contribution of this interaction to learning could be accepted as the basis for social network-based learning techniques. Previous studies (such as Shilpa, 2014; Sharma, &Gupta, 2021) indicated that in an education system, the advantages of collaborative learning have been put forth with the research as a result of some social network analysis. The research revealed that social network-based education methods have a positive contribution to the participants including academic achievement. These methods contribute to the formation of a more successful and enjoyable education element.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Learning through Social Media

Education methods developed depending on social networks have many advantages, but they have some disadvantages as well. The strong aspects include the following: has almost unlimited access possibility to the education environment; a qualified data source providing reliable information; a remindful, intensifier, and productive information source sharing also in-class conversation; progress steps of productive learning under the control of the learner; the learner gains access to

more learning sources; and extension of education timing to the life of the learner ((Mardiana, 2016; Scholz, 2010; Shilpa, 2014).

The weak aspects or disadvantages of learning through social media include: the learners are required to have a high ICT experience and background; the applications to be realized through only social network-based education tools are under the control of the learner; as the number of the sources is high, it is difficult to find and use the best and the most reliable one; even if many filtrations are done, many data sets are confusing; there is lack of gestures and facial expressions, and time spent to reach advantageous content.

The structure of social networks supporting the interaction has a quality to lead the education model formed. The suggested model depends on a social-based interaction between the teacher and the learner. With the educational administration strategy and by using social network tools, a cloud-based network will have been established between the teacher and the learner. The social network interaction between the teacher and the learner is stated with a graphic. When the model is evaluated, it is seen that the interaction over the social network between participants leads to a learning effect among peers. This behavior could be shown as the most important advantage provided by social network tools when compared to other ICT-based teaching methods. When a learner shares educational material over Facebook, the largest social network, this can make the extension effect of educational material increase with the learner's peer influence (Mardiana, 2016; Scholz, 2010).

A great transformation is seen from books and libraries to mobiles, computers, and digital media in the era. DM is treading its path to make learners carve a niche for educational engagement in the competitive realm (Shilpa, 2014).

Literature indicated that there are opportunities to leverage DM in distance education to deliver content and to engage students and educators in further ways which were not previously possible.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study were:

- ✓ How are the practices of using digital media for academic purpose?
- ✓ What types of digital media do distance learners use for academic purpose?
- ✓ What types of social media do distance students use for transferring and receiving data in their academic activities?
- ✓ What are the challenges of digital media use among distance learners?

Significance of the Study

This study is helpful for intervention in support of distance learners to use digital media. The findings of this study can help distance educating institutions and other stakeholders in the processes of digitalization of learning.

Delimitation

This study is conducted among learners from distance education coordinating centers in Addis Ababa. The main theme is on the practices and challenges of using digital media for academic purpose.

Operational Definition

Digital media: - refers to electronic devices, gadgets with or without internet connection e.g. computer, mobile, laptop, flash disk, external hard disk, and the like.

Social media: - represents technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information, through virtual networks and communities and using social connection channels such as Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, TikTok, Twitter, Viber, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and the like.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed descriptive survey design. A mixed approach through triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data was used.

Locale, Population, and Sampling

The study was conducted in Addis Ababa. Hence the population of the study refers to distance learners in Addis Ababa. Stratified random sampling was used for selecting 198 participants. The stratification was done by year level and departments of distance learners.

Data Sources and Instruments

Data gathering was done by using face-to-face questionnaire distribution and interview. The questionnaire contained close-ended and open-ended questions. Semi-structured interview was used.
The above instruments/tools were major sources of primary data. Secondary data sources were the channels from internet and social media groups, such as Telegram and Facebook groups.

Methods of Data Analysis

The quantitative aspect was analyzed by using IBM SPSS software version 25. The descriptive statistical part is portrayed accordingly. The qualitative data from the interview and secondary sources was analyzed using step-by-step thematic analysis. Sources of secondary data were caught by screen shot and recording.

Data Analysis and Results

This part of the research deals with data analysis and findings. The data analysis shows how the participants respond to the following questions.

✓ What types of digital media do distance learners use for academic purpose?
✓ How are the practices of using digital media for academic purpose?
✓ What are the challenges of digital media use among distance learners?

Among the distributed 198 questionnaires, 198 of them were properly and found feasible for analysis.

Participants Characteristics

This part of the study portrays demographic characteristics of respondents. Four variables with their corresponding categories are displayed.

Table 1: Participants Demographic Characteristics

SN	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender of Participants	Male	101	51.5
		Female	95	48.5
		Total	196	100.0
2	Age of Participants	Below 18 years old	30	15.3
		18-25 years old	84	42.9
		25-30 years old	60	30.6
		Above 30 years old	22	11.2
		Total	196	100.0
3	Educational Background or College/Faculty of Participants	Accounting	25	12.8
		Economics	56	28.6
		Management	63	32.1
		Education	23	11.7
		Sociology and Other Social Sciences	19	9.7
		Others	10	5.1
		Total	196	100.0
4	Year Level of Participants	First Year	55	28.1
		Second Year	78	39.8
		Third Year and above	63	32.1
		Total	196	100.0

Source: Own Survey (2022)

Greater numbers of participants are male due to population proportion in the study area. Age wise, among the respondents 30 (15.3%) are below 18 years old, 80 (42.9%) are from 18 to 25 years old, 60 (30.6%) are from 25 to 30 years old, and 22 (11.2%) are above 30 years old.

Regarding educational background or department or college/faculty distribution, 25 (12.8%) of the respondents are from Accounting Department, 56 (28.6%) are in Economics (Financial, Agricultural…), 63 (32.1%) are from Management Department, 23 (11.7%) are from College of Education and Behavioral Studies, 19 (9.7%) are from Sociology and other Social Sciences, and the remaining 10 (5.1%) are from other departments. As to the year level of the respondents, 55 (28.1%) are first year students, 78 (39.8%) are second year, and 63 (32.1%) of the respondents are third year and above students.

Digital Media Use/Practices

Participants of the study indicated that they have exposure to using or attending lecture video/tutorial (education) on YouTube, note/material accessing, listening academic related motivational speech, and others including academic writing.

Telegram is exceedingly being in use. Public channels and public groups are frequently used as sources of learning materials and information sharing or exchanging (sending and receiving). But the interaction and exchange in audio-visual materials is not as common as the transfer of documents in pdf, power point and word. Old (previous) examination papers are frequently shared among group members. Most of the respondents considered home-based Wi-Fi access using different electronic gadgets as an opportunity to use social media for academic purpose

For a question raised on "Which electronic device do you use most for academic purpose?", most respondents i.e., 82 (41.8%) indicated that they use their mobile gadget. From the participants of the study 51 (26%) showed that they use two or more electronic devices for academic purposes. 22 (11.2%) responded that they use computers, 10 (5.1%) tablet, 19 (9.7%) laptop), 5 (2.6%) use video camera and audio recorders, and 7 (3.6%) said that they use no electronic device.
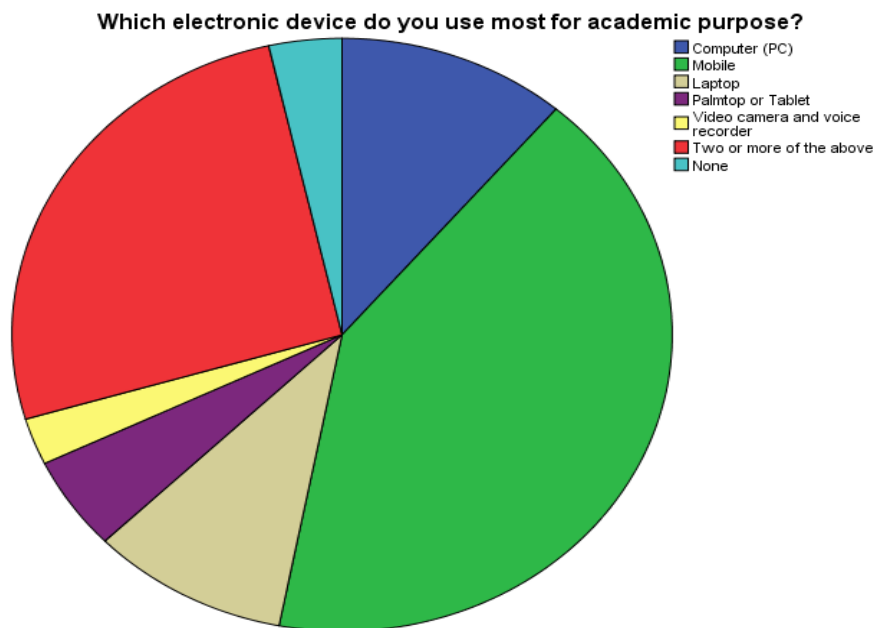
Which electronic device do you use most for academic purpose?

- ■ Computer (PC)
- ■ Mobile
- ■ Laptop
- ■ Palmtop or Tablet
- □ Video camera and voice recorder
- ■ Two or more of the above
- ■ None

Figure 1: Electronic gadget use among distance learners
Source: Own Survey (2022)

For the question: "Which social media do you use most for academic purpose?" 77 (39.3%) of the participants indicated that they use Telegram, 19 (9.7%) use YouTube, 11 (5.6%) use Facebook, 62 (31.6%) use two or more types of social media, 17 (8.7%) use none, and with similar figure for each 5 (2.6%) TikTok, and Twitter. Telegram is highly used among distance learners for sharing and sending information.
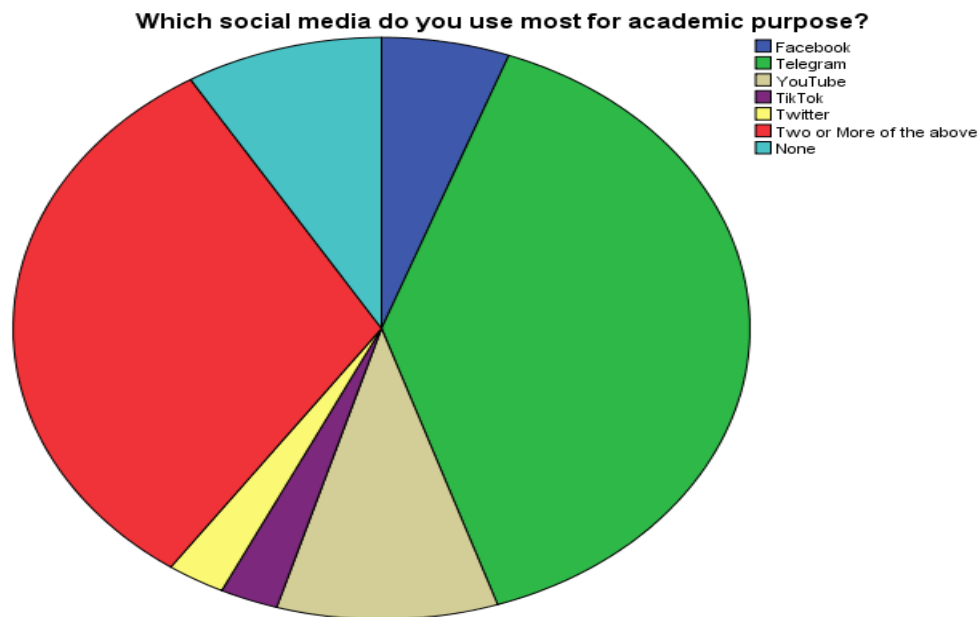
Which social media do you use most for academic purpose?

- Facebook
- Telegram
- YouTube
- TikTok
- Twitter
- Two or More of the above
- None

Figure 2: Social media use among distance learners
Source: Own Survey (2022)

Impact of Digital Media on the Distance Learner

This section of the study is about the impact of digital media on the academic performance of distance learners.

Table 2: Responses on Impact of Digital Media on Distance Learning

SN	Item		SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
1	I consider using digital media has a positive impact on concentrating more on what I am learning.	f	12	12	25	86	61	196
		%	6.1	6.1	12.8	43.9	31.1	100
2	I consider using digital media has a positive impact on feeling more independent in my learning (e.g., go over work again; find out more about things I am interested in).	f	12	8	23	81	72	196
		%	6.1	4.1	11.7	41.3	36.7	100
3	I consider using digital media has a positive impact on understanding what I am learning more easily.	f	12	9	15	115	45	196
		%	6.1	4.6	7.7	58.7	23.0	100

			SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Total
4	I consider using digital media has a positive impact on remembering what I've learnt more easily.	f	9	5	14	107	61	196
		%	4.6	2.6	7.1	54.6	31.1	100
5	It is really important to me to work with digital media for learning.	f	12	3	19	97	65	196
		%	6.1	1.5	9.7	49.5	33.2	100
6	Using digital media for learning is really fun.	f	9	10	16	81	80	196
		%	4.6	5.1	8.2	41.3	40.8	100
7	I use computer and digital media for learning because I'm very interested in them.	f	11	2	12	116	55	196
		%	5.6	1.0	6.1	59.2	28.1	100
8	I lose track of time when I am learning with a computer.	f	11	8	19	112	46	196
		%	5.6	4.1	9.7	57.1	23.5	100
9	It is really worth using a computer for learning because it will help me in my future life as an adult.	f	13	9	29	88	57	196
		%	6.6	4.6	14.8	44.9	29.1	100
10	I use a computer to learn as it will help in the work that I want to do later.	f	10	12	29	99	46	196
		%	5.1	6.1	14.8	50.5	23.5	100
11	I learn things using computers because it will help me to get a job.	f	9	5	23	90	69	196
		%	4.6	2.6	11.7	45.9	35.2	100
12	Learning with a computer is important for me because I need it for what I want to study later on.	f	5	8	23	92	68	196
		%	2.6	4.1	11.7	46.9	34.7	100

Source: Own Survey (2022)

*SD (1) – Strongly Disagree; D (2) – Disagree; N (3) – Neutral; A (4) – Agree; SA (5) Strongly Agree.

For the item which asks whether they consider using digital media has a positive impact on concentrating more on what they are learning: most participants indicated agreement (strongly agree and agree options) (*M = 3.88; SD = 1.11)*.

153 (78%) of participants agreed (*M = 3.98; SD = 1.09)* that they consider using digital media has a positive impact on feeling more independent in their learning (e.g. go over work again, find out more about things they are interested in). On the other hand, 23 (11.7%) of the respondents were neutral, 8 (4.1%) disagreed, and 12 (6.1%) strongly disagreed.

160 (81.7%) of distance learner participants consider that using digital media has a positive impact on understanding more easily what they and learning (*M = 3.88; SD = 1.02)*. However, others 9 (4.6%) disagreed, 12 (6.1%) strongly disagreed, and the remaining 15% (7.7%) were neutral.

Respondents were provided with the item: "I consider using digital media has a positive impact on remembering what I've learnt more easily". For this item, 168 (85.7%) of the respondents agreed (have chosen agree and strongly agree) (*M = 4.05; SD = 0.95)*, 14 (7.1%) were neutral, 5 (2.6%) disagreed, and 9 (4.6%) strongly disagreed.

161 (82.1) of the participants agreed that using digital media for learning is really fun (*M = 4.09; SD = 1.05)*. This shows that they are enjoying digital media. For this item, 16 (8.2%) chose neutral, 10 (5.1) disagreed, and 9 (4.6%) strongly disagreed.

From the selected sample, 171 (87.3%) of the respondents agreed that they use computer and digital media for learning because they are very interested in them, while 13 (6.6%) disagreed, the remaining 12 (6.1%) were neutral.

158 (80.6%) of the respondents indicated that they lose track of time when they are learning with the computer (*M = 3.89; SD = 0.99)*. For the same item, 19 (9.7%) chose neutral, 8 (4.1%) disagreed, and 11 (5.6%) strongly disagreed.

A great number of participants, i.e. 145 (74%) agreed (*M = 3.85; SD = 1.09)* that it is really worth using a computer for learning because it will help them in their future life as adults**.** On the other hand, 29 (14.8%) were neutral, 9 (4.6%) chose disagreed, and 13 (6.6%) strongly disagreed. So, we can conclude that most respondents have positive view towards digital media use.

For an item that asks whether they use a computer to learn because it will help in the work that they want to do later, 46 (23.5%) of the respondents strongly agreed, 99 (50.5%) agreed (*M = 3.81; SD = 1.03)*, 29 (14.8%) were neutral, 12 (6.1%) disagreed, and 10 (5.1%) strongly disagreed.

159 (81.1%) of the respondents agreed that they learn contents/things using computers that will help them to get jobs (*M = 4.05; SD = 0.99).* On the other hand, 23 (11.7%) were neutral, 5 (2.6%) chose disagreed, and 9 (4.6%) strongly disagreed.

For an item that describes about learning with computer is important because learners need it for what they want to study later, 68 (34.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed, and 92 (46.9%)

agreed (*M = 4.07; SD = 0.93*). For the same item, 23 (11.7%) were neutral, 8 (4.1%) disagreed, and 5 (2.6%) strongly disagreed.

Challenges in Using Social Media for Academic Purpose

This part of the paper contains the challenges faced while using social media for academic purpose.

Table 3: Responses on challenges in using social media for academic purpose

SN	Item		SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
1	I am not aware of the sources or support centers to use internet for academic purpose.	f	15	12	13	125	31	196
		%	7.7	6.1	6.6	63.8	15.8	100
2	I cannot get computers easily.	f	14	11	16	99	56	196
		%	7.1	5.6	8.2	50.5	28.6	100
3	Internet cost is a challenge for me.	f	8	6	18	100	64	196
		%	4.1	3.1	9.2	51	32.7	100
4	There are browser related complications that hassle me.	f	13	9	13	82	79	196
		%	6.6	4.6	6.6	41.8	40.3	100
5	Computer skill gap is a challenge to use them for academic purpose.	f	17	12	26	110	31	196
		%	8.7	6.1	13.3	56.1	15.8	100

Own Survey (2022)

*SD (1) – Strongly Disagree; D (2) – Disagree; N (3) – Neutral; A (4) – Agree; SA (5) Strongly Agree.

Most of the participants of the study are not aware of the sources or support centers to use internet for academic purpose (*M = 3.74; SD = 1.05*). For the item whether getting or access to computers is a challenges, 155 (78.8%) of the participants showed their agreement (chose strongly agree and agree) while only a few disagreed, 25 (12.7%).

A large number of the respondents, 164 (83.7%) agreed (strongly agreed and agreed) that internet cost is a challenge for them (*M = 4.05; SD = 0.95*). Very few, i.e. 6 (3.1%) disagreed, and 8 (4.1%) strongly disagreed. 18 (9.2%) remained neutral. A great number of the participants have internet browser related complication that hassle them.

For the item whether computer skill gap is a challenge in using them for academic purpose, 31 (15.8%) strongly agreed, 110 (56.1%) of the participants agreed (*M = 3.64; SD = 1.09*). 26 (13.3%) were neutral, 12 (6.1) disagreed, and the remaining 17 (8.7%) strongly disagreed.

The challenges of digital media usage with or without internet include the following: connection problem, internet cost related challenges, source less credibility and less trustworthiness (both on

Telegram and YouTube), gadget related challenges and difficulty in using digital devices, application or software related difficulties, difficulties related with Computer Mediated Communication including technology literacy gaps.

As there are learners with inadequate digital media use literacy, a few distance learners try to misuse DM and gadgets for cheating during exam. This misuse of tools may lead to improper usage which could lead to academic infidelity.

Extraordinary internet cost, poor connection quality, poor or vague content delivery, less instructiveness and blocking of social media are among the challenges.

Discussion

Though digital media has huge assistive role, it is not being intensively used in distance education. As compared to practices indicated in various sources (Scholz, 2010; Chien, 2012; Mardiana2016), the practices are at infancy stage indicating that much should be done.

The increasing number of You Tubers who upload lectures prepared in local language, such as Amharic, has made learners to show much interest in using social media for academic purpose. Lecture videos that learners get in various sources, especially on YouTube, have become catchy and serve for bringing ease of understanding some concepts.

Learning materials are becoming easily accessible by browsers. Many participants of this study have concerns on overloading different materials. Hence selection process and electronic data management issues are now challenges. There is also fear of virus attack in addition to security related dread.

The practices in digital media have positively contributed to learners' engagement and learning process and influenced learners' view due to the challenges indicated so far. Technology and digital literacy is critical, because ever-changing equipment supporting the digital experience provides dynamism and contrasting ways of connecting with peers. The research revealed students' enjoyment and effort in this new form of learning experience similar with Chien (2012), which enhanced their massive usage in two or more types of electronic devices/gadgets and two or more types of social media in their academic activities. The challenge is to continually review and design educational approaches supporting distance learners towards using the tools meaningfully and within a defined learning experience, and continuing to help students become active participants and authors of their own identity and creativity. Hence, educators need to find how best digital media technology can be used, providing students every advantage towards reaching an informed international perspective (Chien, 2012).

Though there is the move to mobile media has been accompanied by the rise of social media, such as Facebook, video–sharing sites like YouTube (Nielsen, Cornia, &Kalogeropoulos, 2016), the move of using digital media in academics is not as much as for the news purpose.

For example, Bic Walker (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4xxXpoQt_4) in her presentation entitled, "*How to use TikTok as an Educational Platform*", indicated that it is possible to marry content and information with entertainment.

Conclusion

Most of the participant distance learners have interest in using digital media for academic purpose. Distance learners create telegram groups when they physically get during face-to-face tutorial time. They exchange power point (ppt) and pdf materials which are short notes.

Distance learners use their smart mobile phone very frequently as compared to other gadgets. They use mobile phones for recording during tutorial, for downloading texts and reference materials, sending and receiving assignments, and communication through social media. In the social media use, Telegram is the most widely used for the aforementioned purposes. Use of two or more types of social media and YouTube take the second and third rank, respectively, in usage among distance learners for their academic purposes.

These days, there is massive usage of social media for exchange of idea/message and electronic materials such as hand-outs and/or short-notes in PDF and ppt. mode. In addition, respondents affirmatively indicated that they watch lecture videos of different courses from YouTube. The lecture videos prepared in native languages are more preferred due to the ease to understand. Moreover, to avoid credibility related challenges, participants indicated that they use sources where instructors whom they know upload lecture series.

The digital media environment has brought fertile ground and opportunity for the renaissance of higher education, in general, and distance education, in particular. However, the challenges are also painstaking and demanding critical intervention from stakeholders. Nevertheless, the change towards digital media and hybrid usage appears to be as slow as tortoise walk.

In response to challenges, participants responded that the major challenges of using digital media, in general, and social media, in particular, are: costly internet cost, high price of gadgets (such as computers/laptop, and smart phones), slow network and interruptions, source credibility problems, and time consuming sources (materials).

In addition to the above mentioned challenges, many participants expressed that technology related literacy problem is another troubling factor in the use of digital media for academic purpose. Gadgets technical failure and maintenance costs are additional challenges.

Recommendations

It is conceivable to deliver education for distance learners through expanding and providing digital media platforms. In light of this and the findings of the study, the following recommendations are forwarded:

➢ In order for students to learn more effectively and efficiently, stakeholders in distance education (both private and public higher education institutions) are principally responsible to make the platform for digital media usage and social media implementation for academic purpose.

➢ There should be a centralization source for credibility of contents being delivered to user/learners.

➢ Even though technology use and practices are not yet properly directed for academic purpose, augmentation of online (zoom) tutorial practices should be initiated and encouraged parallel with face-to-face or paper based learning-teaching so as to make distance learners to learn in group. The teamwork and cooperative learning by using virtual techniques will help them to master courses.

➢ Distance educating higher education institutions should give training to their students in digital media use for academic purpose.

➢ Attempts to figure out those learners who do and do not use digital media and work for intervention should be made.

Recommendation for Further Study

A study can be done on predictors of digital media usage and academic achievement variables in investigating how digital media use affects academic achievement. Distance learners in rural areas tend to have different demographic characteristics as compared to the urban distance learners. So a study can be conducted in this area, too.

Since this study was conducted in Addis Ababa where access to digital gadgets (computers and devices) is relatively better as compared to the countryside and/or distance centers in rural areas, it is difficult to make generalization. Hence, a study in similar theme but different locale could be conducted.

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