

Undergraduate students and time spent on social networking sites: A study of the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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Abstract

Social media sites allow students particularly in tertiary institutions to adopt different types of social networking sites to interact; keep in touch with their families and friends and keep up with their academic assignments. Conversely, there has been a growing concern that students at the tertiary level in Nigeria have devoted much of their time to communication through social networking sites at the expense of serious academic work. Thus, the study investigated how the undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria make use of social media sites for academic purposes. It also examined how much time the students allotted to socialisation and academic work in the use of online media. Anchored on the Uses and Gratification Theory, the survey research design was adopted while questionnaire was used as the instrument of data collections. Data were generated from a sample of 600 respondents randomly selected from six faculties from the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Findings showed that most undergraduate students devoted more time to social networking sites mainly for socialisation and only used the sites for academic purposes when they were given assignments or when researching on a particular topic. The findings also revealed that the length of time spent on social networking sites socialising reduced the respondents' ability to concentrate on academic work and eventually led to poor performance of undergraduate students. Based on the findings and conclusion, it was recommended among others, that media literacy education as a course should be introduced and integrated into the tertiary institutions' programmes, especially at the undergraduate level.

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Keywords

Academic work, social media, social networking sites, socialisation, undergraduate students, youth.

Introduction

The twenty-first century is characterised by a high degree of technological advancement and innovation. Now a part of our everyday life, social media and social networking sites have radically altered the way we communicate and interact with one another. Over the years, various household technologies have made their way into homes and have greatly changed the way people live, learn, work and more importantly, the way they spend their leisure time. People had only just begun to settle into the Internet revolution when the key social media platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and YouTube, Whatsapp, Viber changed the face of new media once more. The social media sites – Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, online gaming environments and other tools – according to Zanamwe et al. (2013) have served as a benefit to mankind especially the youth in Nigeria. They have provided people with exposure to the world outside their immediate environment.

Social media have served as platforms to voice people's opinions on all sorts of academic, social and political issues and shared information with one another. They brought easy ways of communication and provided people with easily accessible means to reach out to others in various parts of the world. It allows the students generally and students in tertiary institutions particularly to adopt different types of social networking sites to interact; keep in touch or relate to their families and friends and keep up with their academic assignments. According to Akubugwo & Burke (2013), the advancement in technology would create a favourable impact on students' academic work or learning environment. Nevertheless, Rosen (2007) argued that most of these students spend their time, swimming in the ocean of 'social media diet', accumulating jobs with the overtime, enjoying different types of entertainment, social interaction with all sorts of electronic media technologies.

According to Al-Ammari (2004), students generally have integrated part of their lifestyle with social media, in other words, social networking sites have virtually turned to communal set up where they interact and share information, store and keep their relationships updated, on a daily basis. However, the negative influence of these sites as a result of an overexposure and excessive time spent on social networking sites affect their academic work. Thus, there has been a growing concern that students at the tertiary level in Nigeria have

devoted much of their time to communicating through social media at the expense of serious academic work.

In the last ten years, the online world has changed dramatically. Currently, there has been an overwhelming increase interest in the use of social networking sites among the university students in Nigeria with the emphasis on developing their media competencies. Thanks to the invention of social media, young people now exchange ideas, feelings, personal information, pictures and videos at an amazing rate. However, many undergraduate students are spending countless hours immersed in social media, such as Facebook, Myspace, WhatsApp, Twitter and many others, socialising at the detriment of serious or academic events (Wang et al., 2011).

As observed, today's students prefer going online and socialising with friends quite often to reading books and doing research. Little wonder that the academic performances of the undergraduate students in Nigeria were dwindling compared to twenty years ago when most students spent their time in the library and their money on relevant books. It is believed that there are negative effects of social media on the undergraduate students as regards the amount of time spent on socialisation compared to their academics. In other words, excessive time on social networking sites may have an adverse effect on the students' academic performances. Therefore, this study examines the purpose of using social media sites, the amount of time spent on socialisation and academics and the effects on academic performances of undergraduate students of University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Research questions are the following:

- i. What is the most preferred and used social networking sites by the undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt?
- ii. How often do undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt use social networking sites?
- iii. What is the length of time the undergraduate students of University of Port Harcourt access and use the social networking sites daily?
- iv. For what purpose do the undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt utilise the social media networking sites?
- v. What is the effect of excessive time spent on social networking sites on the academic performances of undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt?

It is necessary to study this sector of the university students because of the negative impact of the social media on the academic performances of the undergraduate students in Nigeria that is greatly noticed. Despite the fact the

university students are heavy users of the social media because most of them have access to mobile phones, tablets, computers and the Internet, most of them lack proper orientation on how to use the social media to boost or aid their academic activities and performances. More so, over one million Nigerian young people are on Facebook (Facebook Statistics, 2010) which is one of the most popular social media web-sites in Nigeria. The high level of usage and excessive time spent on social media are perceived as distraction and may be responsible for the dwindling of their academic performances. Thus, the study argues that if undergraduate students of the university of Port Harcourt in particular and Nigeria in general are properly oriented, they can correctly engage and utilise the social networking sites on worthwhile events to improve their learning processes.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (GUT) developed by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in 1974 (Anaeto et al., 2008). Although, according to Baran (1995), 'The Uses and Gratification theory has its origin in the early audience studies of radio series in the 1920's'. However, the theory actually became empirical in the early 1940's when Lazarsfeld, Sharron and Berelson commenced an empirical investigation into the theory. The UGT is an effect theory that strives to examine and evaluate the effect of the media on the users. Therefore, it considers the audience as active, that is, they actively seek out specific media and content to achieve certain results or gratifications that satisfy their personal needs (Nayyar, 2007).

Its emphasis is on what people do with the media rather than what the media do to their audiences. The theory stresses the fact that the audiences are not passive receivers of the media contents, but that, 'they actively influence the message' in that they 'selectively choose, attend to, perceive and retain the media message on the basis of their needs, beliefs, etc.' (Anaeto et al., 2008). Popoola (2011) also claimed that the effect the media have on their audiences reflects in various things people do, in different ways they use the media and in the ways it affects their attitudes and life perception. Obviously, some media help people achieve their goals, but it depends on the media type and people's interests.

However, citing Blumler & Gurevitch, Popoola (2011) posited that they are five basic assumptions guiding the UGT. The assumptions are:

- (i) The audience is conceived as active.
- (ii) Media choice and gratifications depend on the audience member, that

is, people use media to their advantage more often than the media use them.

(iii) The media compete with other sources of need satisfaction especially face-to-face communication.

(iv) Many of the goals media use can be derived from data supplied by the individual audience members themselves.

(v) It is the individual audience member that makes the decision to view the media based on the value placed on such media.

Based on these assumptions and presumptions of the UGT, one can say that individuals will make their choice of medium/media based on the benefit they are likely to get from whatever choice they make. In other words, the audience members selectively engage media that can meet their needs or satisfy them at any point in time. Thus, according to Adaja & Ayodele (2013), it is not the prevalence or popularity of the medium or media that matters but the relevance and utility of the medium/media to the user.

Literature review

As defined by Powell (2009), a social networking site is a community in which individuals are somehow connected through friendship, values, working relationships, ideas and so on. Similarly, Ayiah and Kumah (2011) perceived social networking site as any web-site designed to allow multiple users to publish their own content. The information may be on any subject and may be for consumption by friends, mates, employers, employees, etc. Social media and social networking are no longer in their infancy. In other words, they have come of age. Nielsen (2012) reported that since the emergence of the first social media networks more than twenty years ago, social media have continued to evolve and offer users around the world new and meaningful ways to engage with people, events and brands that matter to them. Even now, years later, the social media are still growing rapidly and have become an integral part of contemporary people's daily lives.

Currently, social networking can be said to have become a truly global phenomenon. It is one aspect of social media in which individuals are in communities that share ideas, interests, or are looking to meet people with similar ideas and interests. This includes but is not limited to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Instagram and Myspace, as well as the inaugural social networking sites of Cyworld, Bebo and Pinterest.

Most students are thrilled to have social media as a big part of their daily experiences. These media are immensely popular among children and young people, as evidenced by the nearly ubiquitous use of Facebook and the growing

popularity of Twitter (Moreno & Kota, 2014). Specifically, students in the higher institutions of learning adopt different types of social media communication as the utmost medium to interact, keep in touch or relate to their family and friends (Flad, 2010). According to Flad (2010), social media sites like Facebook and Myspace are among the most popular sites that students mostly spend their time in. Presently, students are more concerned about how many friends they have on social networking sites, how many contacts they have on their mobile phones, how many followers on Twitter or likes on Facebook, etc. Confirming this, Facebook Statistics report that the average number of 'friends' Facebook users have is 120, while mobile phone SIM cards can store about 200 contacts. Unfortunately, out of these, they communicate with some often, with others very rarely, while some of these so-called friends or followers they have never met or spoken with (Siapera, 2012).

No doubt, the undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt have embraced the use of social media technology and have become a major part of their everyday lives. In this way, the boundaries between online and 'real world' communities are rapidly broadening, if not completely deteriorating. Particularly, as older people now consider this generation as whom such social media technology exchanges have existed their entire lives, therefore, there is a fluid interchange between digital and physical experiences (Davis III et al., n.d). For this contemporary generation, social media have become a primary means of communication and information seeking, and possibly, a central component of their identity and community building.

On the one hand, social media sites help increase and aid students' academic performances through interactions. These sites encourage continuous learning, as they save time, cut down travel cost as well as convenience compared to traditional ways of learning. University students today can read resources online and interact with other peers and lecturers anytime and anywhere. The benefit of using social networking sites anytime, anywhere, according to Hrastinski (2009), is that students who have restrictions either from work or family engagement can still take part in learning since they allow people to get information or interact with other students online. Also, online group work gives students the opportunity to work with new people from diverse backgrounds to discuss and acquire new knowledge without meeting them in person (Curtis & Lawson, 2001).

Lederer, (2012) further outlined the benefits of utilising social networking sites for learning in colleges and universities as:

- i) The sites help students to increase their engagement and in building their

communication skills by enabling them to feel more comfortable expressing themselves in a less intimidating environment.

ii) They improve the communication between the students and lecturers. The lecturers can provide the media contents of the course, post their assignments, lecture notes, message updates, announcements on upcoming events and other web and multimedia contents.

iii) The students also use social media networking sites for job hunting, where they post a resume and search for potential employers.

iv) Social networking sites also offer students collaborative environments in which they can interact with other students or teachers to enhance their academic work.

The implication of these benefits is that through social networking sites, the communication between students and lecturers can be enhanced in such a way that knowledge and information flow become easier and faster.

On the other hand, Arnold & Paulus (2010) argued that, although social networking sites have been used for academic purposes, the students still use these sites in a manner that vary from these motives. For instance, off-topic discussions that are non-academic take place on social media by the students. Regrettably, students continue to spend more and more time on social networking sites for a purpose not related to their academic work which can make them unproductive. In fact, excessive Internet use may cause parts of youth's brain to waste away. This could also affect their concentration and memory, as well as their ability to make decisions and set goals. It could also lead to 'inappropriate' behaviour (Arnold & Paulus, 2010).

Also, excessive use of the social networking can have a damaging effect on the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) of the students. Lin et al. (2013) argued that as the age of students increases, the rate of off-topic discussions gets higher. This indicates that only mature students are likely to spend more time on social networking for the discussion related to the course contents, while younger ones may likely engage in non-course related discussion. To ascertain this, Hunley et al. (2005) carried out a study that proved that the time spent on the computers at home affects the Grade Point Average (GPA) of students' results.

Vanden-Boogart (2006) also observed that Facebook users (social media users) have lower GPAs than average. In the same vein, Flad (2010) in a study on the effect of social media on students' academic work found that 32% out of 35% of the students that used social media have poor results in their academic work mainly because most of them did not finish their assignments

and homework. Thus, the fact remained that, although social media is good for students to socialise with friends, it has a negative impact on their academic work. Nevertheless, if social networking sites are properly engaged and utilised by the university students, they have the potential to improve the learning process of the students by allowing them to exchange ideas, promote collaborations and discussions, engage and interact with the online discussion.

Methodology

A survey design was adopted for this study. This was considered appropriate design for this work because students' opinions were the main source of data collection. The population of the study comprises all the undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt. According to Okoro (2006), 'population in research <...> stands for all elements of concern in a given study'. This reason justifies the choice of population for this study. The population of the students of the selected university is estimated to be 40,000 as at 2016/2017 academic session. The undergraduate students were purposively selected as subject of this study since it concentrates on the youth sector of the society. Thus, the undergraduate students are a good representation of Nigerian youth.

The sample for this study comprises of 600 respondents following the guideline recommended for multivariate studies by Wimmer & Dominick (2011). The guideline they suggested is as follows: '50 = very poor; 100 = poor; 200 = fair; 300 = good; 600 = very good; 1000 = excellent'. Six faculties were randomly selected using balloting (pick without replacement) technique from the twelve faculties in the university. The data collection period ran for two weeks, during the fifth and sixth weeks of the second semester.

The faculties of Humanities, Education, Social Sciences, Law, Engineering and Basic Medical Sciences were selected to represent the university. Of the 600 students who participated, 288 (48%) were males and 312 (52%) were females ranging in the age brackets of 18 and 35. The sample was purposively drawn from six departments across the university with 92 (16%) in Linguistics and Communication Studies; 100 (18%) from Petroleum Engineering; 94 (17%) from Political and Administrative Studies; 90 (16%) in Educational Management and planning; 88 (16%) in Pharmacy and 96 (17%) from Public and Private Law. As already mentioned, the respondents were undergraduate students in different levels with 204 (36%) students in 100L; 180 (32%) in 200L; 116 (21%) in 300L and the remaining 60 (11%) were in 400L.

The instrument for data collection was questionnaire with open-ended items. The instrument of data collection (questionnaire) was administered

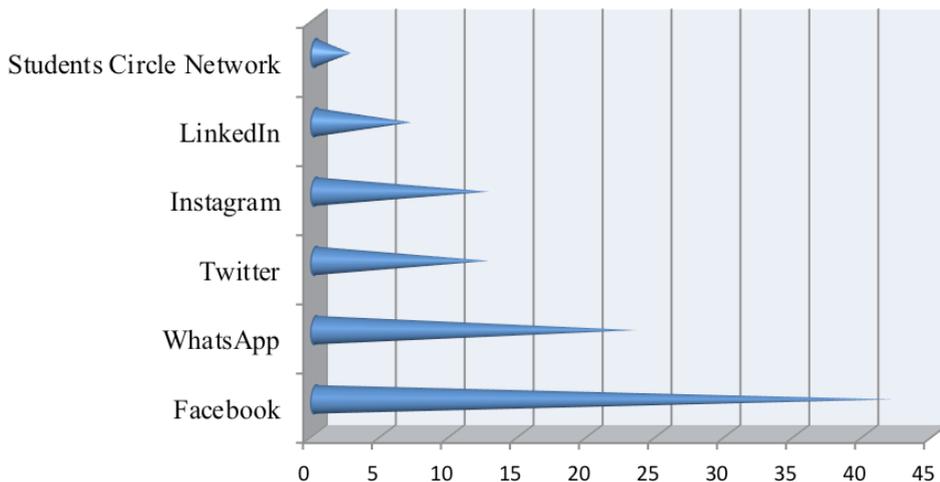
on the respondents immediately after lectures, to ascertain that the class and departments chosen were those that filled the questionnaire. In all, 600 copies of the questionnaire were distributed at random to undergraduate students physically by the researcher and two assistants. Out of 600 copies of questionnaire administered, 580 copies were retrieved which was 93% response rate while 20 copies representing 7% were either poorly filled or not returned. Some of the items in the questionnaire were adopted from Roblyer et al. (2010).

Results

RQ 1: What is the most preferred and used social networking sites by the undergraduate students of University of Port Harcourt?

Figure 1

Respondents most preferred and used social networking sites



The data in *Figure 1* shows Facebook as the most preferred social networking site with 245 (41.9%) respondents, followed by WhatsApp with 135 (23.3%) respondents. Twitter and Instagram have 36 (12.6%) respondents respectively and Students Circle Network sites are the least preferred by the respondents 15 (2.6%).

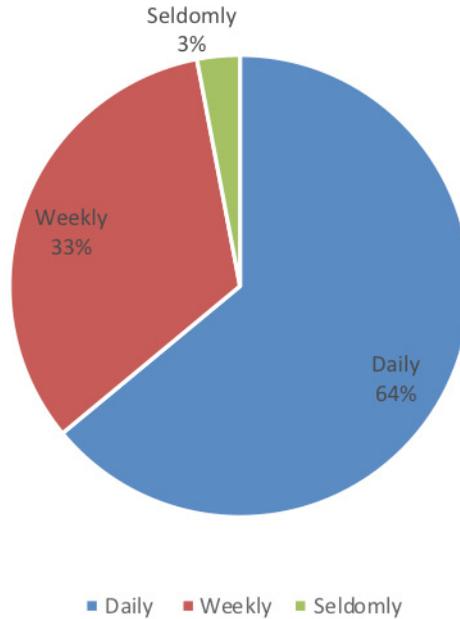
RQ 2: How often do undergraduate students of University of Port Harcourt use social networking sites?

From the data collected and as shown in *Figure 2* below, 370 (64%) respondents used the social media networking sites daily, 190 (32%) used social

networking sites on a weekly basis, while only 20 (3%) used the social media networking sites once in a while.

Figure 2

Frequency of usage of the social networking sites

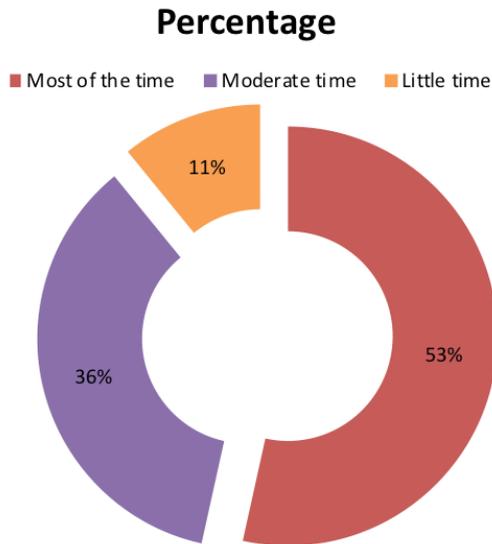


RQ 3: What is the length of time the undergraduate students of University of Port Harcourt access and use the social networking sites daily?

As revealed in *Figure 3*, the majority of the respondents 53% spent most of the time of the day accessing and using the social networking sites of their choice. Of the total percentage of the respondents, 36% claimed to spend moderate time on the new media of their choice daily while 11% spent only a little time on the new media in a day.

Figure 3

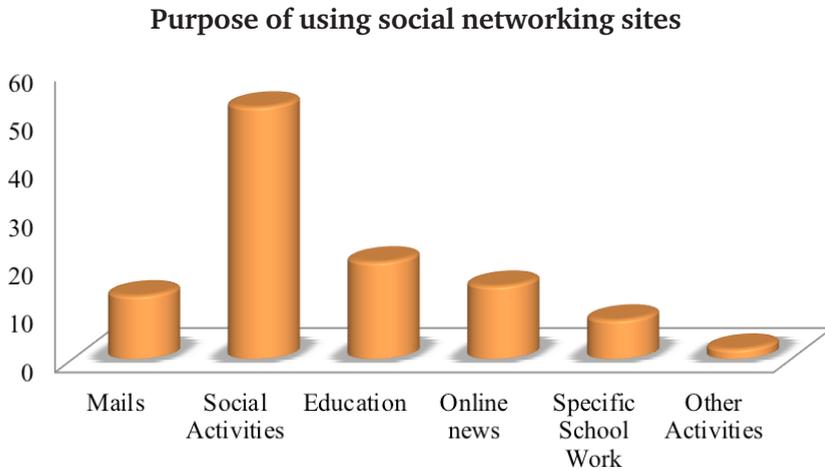
Length of time spent on social networking sites



RQ 4: For what purpose do undergraduate students of University of Port Harcourt utilise social networking sites?

On the purpose for which the students use social networking sites, *Figure 4* below shows that most respondents 52% used social networking for social activities. 13% and 5% used social networking for mail and online news respectively. Also, 20% and 8% respectively used the sites for education and specific school work while only 2% used them for other purposes.

Figure 4



RQ 5: What is the effect of excessive time spent on social networking sites on the academic performances of undergraduate students of University of Port Harcourt?

Figure 5

Effect of excessive time spent on socialising on academic performances

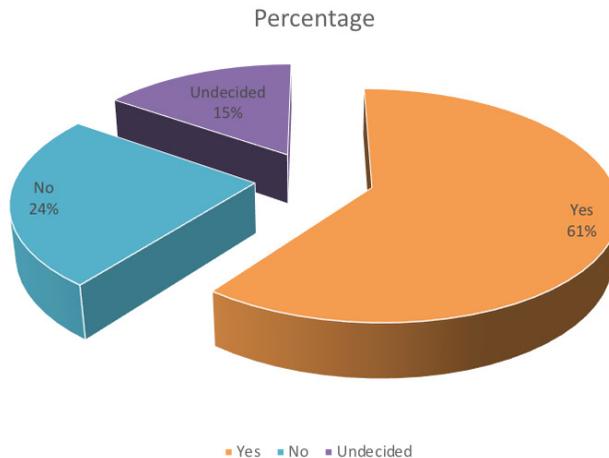


Figure 5 above shows 67% respondents that said that the length of time spent on socialisation increases the loss of concentration and poor performances of students, 27% were against this view while 6% were undecided.

Discussion of findings

On the issue of most used and preferred social networking site, the data *Figure 1* show Facebook as widely used and preferred social networking site (41.6%) by the undergraduate students of University of Port Harcourt. The results show that more students also used WhatsApp and Twitter while social networking sites like Student Circle Network are used by fewer students (2.6%). The findings confirmed the position of Flad (2010) that social media sites like Facebook and Myspace are among the most popular sites that students mostly spend their time in. About the length of time spent on the social networking sites, findings reveal that greater percentage of the students (64%) use social networking sites daily while 33% and 3% of the students use social networking site stand weekly and seldomly respectively. This implies that most undergraduate students use social networking sites frequently and spend a considerable amount of time on them but venture into many unproductive activities. This gravely affects many undergraduate students, and thus, results in poor performances in academic work.

According to the findings, higher percentage (52%) of the respondents mainly used the social networking sites for social activities. However, if we combine those respondents that used social networking sites for education in general (20%) and (8%), we get less percentage (28%) than the respondents that used social networking sites for social activities. These findings corroborate the view of Flad (2010) that students in the higher institutions of learning adopt different types of social media communication as the utmost medium to interact, keep in touch or relate to their family and friends.

In relation to the effect of the length of time spent socialising on social networking sites as against academic work, findings shows that the majority of the respondents (67%), believed that the amount of time spent on social networking sites socialising reduces their ability to concentrate on academic work and eventually leads to poor performances of undergraduate students. This finding was in consonance with the observation of Vanden-Boogart (2006) that Facebook users (social media users) have lower GPAs than average. In the same vein, Flad (2010) in a study on the effect of social media on students' academic work found that 32% out of 35% of the students that use social media have poor results in their academic work mainly because most of them did not finish their assignments and homework. These results indicate that social networking sites may be good for socialising, entertainment and academics, however, to benefit from the rich potentials of social media, students should spend less time socialising on them and utilise them more for school related activities and worthwhile events.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has been able to explore the use of social networking sites among the undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt. The results and the discussion presented should be examined within the scope of the study. It primarily looked at the social networking sites that are being used and preferred, the frequency and length of time spent on them, the purpose of which they use them and the effect on the academic performances of the undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt. The findings of this study showed clearly that social networking sites are being used extensively by the undergraduate students of the University of Port Harcourt. However, it is a thing of great concern that only 28% of the total respondents used social networking sites for the purpose of education or academic related activities. Thus, the more time spent on social networking sites socialising by the undergraduate students resulted into poor academic performances and may lead to low productivity.

Based on the findings of this study, it is imperative to recommend orientation programmes on the positive and creative use of the social networking sites should be organised for freshmen (new students) coming into the university. Students and youth in general should be encouraged to engage the social networking sites proactively and meritoriously to aid their academic performances. Also, as a matter of urgency, Media Literacy Education as a course should be introduced and integrated into the tertiary institutions' curricula, especially in the undergraduate programmes.

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