SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING IN ABA SOUTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, ABIA STATE

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Abstract

The paper ascertained social media platforms for promoting lifelong learning in Aba South Local Government Area, Abia State. The study was guided by two specific purposes and two research questions. Descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The population of the study was 1,152 learners in National Teachers' Institute Aba. Simple random sampling technique was used to sample 331 learners in National Teachers' Institute. Instrument for data collection was a questionnaire titled Social Media Platforms for Promoting Lifelong Learning (SMPLLL). The instrument was face validated by three experts. The reliability coefficient values of 0.71 and 0.90, were obtained for Clusters A and B respectively, with overall reliability index of 0.81 calculated through Cronbach alpha method. Data were analysed using mean and standard deviation. Findings revealed that the extent to which Facebook can be used to promote lifelong learning was high, the extent to which WhatsApp can be used to promote lifelong learning was high. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that the CEO of facebook should collaborate with education institutions to design learning contents that meets the different needs of different categories of learners. The CEO of facebook and the educational institutions should also create other features that cater specifically for learners such as personalized learning paths, educational groups, and resources for online courses. Again, the study contributes to existing knowledge by showing how social media platforms like WhatsApp, and Facebook support lifelong learning in Aba South LGA, Abia State. It highlights the role of these platforms in promoting informal education and digital literacy among adults.

Keywords: Social media platforms, Facebook, WhatsApp, Lifelong learning

Introduction

This study is driven by the need to explore how social media platforms can be used to promote lifelong learning in Aba South LGA, Abia State, where access to continuous education is limited. With their flexibility and accessibility, social media tools provide an opportunity to support ongoing learning through the use of internet services. Information communication technology has influenced every aspect of human life including economy, health and education, especially open and distance learning programmes. Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2011) stated that the evolution of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) especially the internet gave rise to the social media platforms. Social media platforms are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile, 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 (Boyd & Ellison, 2015). These platforms facilitate networking, communication, and content sharing across diverse groups of people. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2017), social media platforms refer to internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, allowing the creation and exchange of user-generated content. This definition emphasizes the participatory nature of social media, enabling users to engage in interactions, share information, and contribute to the online content pool. Operationally,

social media platforms are applications built to function with the internet which enhance interaction, as well as teaching and learning in open and distance learning. Social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Badoo, Wechat, Youtube, WhatsApp, among others. These social media platforms promote learning in open and distance learning programmes.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programme refers to educational approaches that allow learners to study at their convenience, free from the constraints of time and location. It makes use of technological advancements to enable flexible learning opportunities. According to Akinyemi and Adediran (2016), ODL is defined as a method of education where learners access course materials and instruction remotely, using digital platforms to engage with instructors and peers. This system promotes accessibility, allowing learners to overcome geographic and time-related barriers. Similarly, Olatunji (2017) describes ODL as a flexible educational system that provides learners with the opportunity to study independently, with guidance from educators through online and offline platforms. It is particularly designed to reach those who are unable to participate in traditional, in-person learning environments due to various constraints. In this study, open and distance learning programme is defined as a system of education where learners are separated from the facilitators in time and space, where different kinds of media is used to facilitate learning. Open and distance learning programmes have distinct features that differentiate them from conventional educational systems. Eze (2019) outlines the following as the key characteristics of open and distance learning programme: flexibility, accessibility, use of technology, learner autonomy, and varied delivery modes. The rationale for implementing ODL is driven by the need to increase access to education and provide opportunities for lifelong learning. According to Nwafor and Obi (2020), ODL is crucial in bridging the educational gap, particularly in countries where access to higher education is limited by infrastructural and economic factors. In Nigeria, the demand for higher education far exceeds the capacity of traditional institutions. Therefore, ODL serves as an alternative to accommodate a larger population of learners who would otherwise be excluded from the formal education system. Ayo (2015) notes that ODL also addresses the needs of adult learners, working professionals, and individuals who require a more flexible learning environment due to work, family responsibilities, or physical limitations. Additionally, ODL supports the development of a skilled workforce by providing continuous training opportunities that align with the evolving demands of the labor market. Social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp promote lifelong learning through open and distance learning programme.

Facebook is a social media platform that allows users to connect, share content, and communicate with friends, family, and the broader public. It was created by Mark Zuckerberg and launched in 2004. In ODL, Facebook enables the creation of private or public groups where students and instructors can interact. Okafor and Aniche (2020) stated that facilitators can create dedicated groups for courses, allowing learners to share resources, discuss course materials, and participate in collaborative projects. This enhances learner engagement, promotes peer learning, and builds a sense of community among distance learners. More so, Nwosu and Nwafor (2018) are of the view that through Facebook Live, educators can deliver real-time video lectures which students can attend from any location. These live sessions can also be recorded and made available for future reference, offering flexibility for students who might not be available during live broadcasts. This feature is particularly beneficial for ODL students who may have varying schedules. Again, Adebayo (2019) noted that Facebook supports the sharing of various multimedia formats such as documents, videos, and images. This allows facilitators to upload lecture notes, videos, and

other instructional materials, while learners can share their assignments and participate in media-based projects. In Aba south LGA, it is not yet known the extent to which Facebook is utilized for lecture delivery, record videos, and used for sharing of multimedia contents. WhatsApp is also utilized in ODL programmes.

WhatsApp is a widely used mobile messaging application which provides an accessible, cost-effective, and user-friendly platform for learners and educators to communicate and collaborate. In open and distance learning programmes, WhatsApp can enhance collaborative learning by enabling learners to communicate with their peers and facilitators through group chats, direct messaging, and broadcast messages. These interactions can foster a sense of community and encourage peer-to-peer learning, which is essential in ODL. Studies have shown that group interactions help learners share ideas, ask questions, and provide support to one another, ultimately enhancing their academic experience (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Again, WhatsApp supports various media formats, such as PDFs, Word documents audio and video which can be used to share learning materials. Okeke (2017) pointed out that educators can upload reading materials, lecture notes, recorded lectures and other resources directly to WhatsApp groups. This ensures that learners have easy access to essential content regardless of their location. In Aba south LGA, where internet bandwidth is a challenge, the low data consumption of WhatsApp makes it an ideal tool for resource distribution. However, it is not yet known the extent to which open and distance learners in Aba south LGA use WhatsApp to form study groups, exchange notes, and discuss challenging concepts. Although Information Communication Technology, alongside the internet brought about social media platforms which has changed almost everything about human existence including education, especially open and distance learning programme; the extent to which these social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp can been utilized in open and distance learning programmes in Aba south LGA is not known. Hence, the need for the study utilization of social media platforms in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba south LGA, Abia State.

Statement of the Problem

In the digital age, social media platforms have emerged as vital tools for enhancing teaching and learning in open and distance learning (ODL) programmes. Ideally, platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp should be effectively integrated into ODL systems to facilitate continuous interaction, promote collaboration, and provide learners and facilitators with access to diverse educational resources. When properly utilized, these platforms can improve learner engagement, foster communication across geographical boundaries, and support the delivery of instructional content, discussions, and timely feedback. However, in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State, the use of social media platforms in ODL programmes appears to be limited or inconsistently applied. The extent to which platforms like Facebook are employed for lecture delivery, video recording, and the sharing of multimedia content remains unclear. Similarly, the degree to which WhatsApp is used to form study groups, exchange academic materials, and address learning challenges has not been sufficiently established. Existing literature provides limited empirical evidence on how effectively these platforms are being integrated into the learning experiences of ODL students in the area. This underutilization may be linked to factors such as insufficient technical skills, lack of institutional support, or perceptions that social media tools are irrelevant to formal education. Therefore, the problem of this study is to investigate the extent to which social media platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, are being utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba South LGA, Abia State.

Purpose of the Study
The general purpose of the study is to ascertain the utilization of social media platforms in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba South LGA, Abia State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. examine the extent to which Facebook is utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba South LGA, Abia State.
2. find out the extent to which WhatsApp is utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba South LGA, Abia State.

Research Questions
> The study was guided by the following research question

1. To what extent can Facebook be utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba south LGA, Abia state?
2. To what extent has WhatsApp been utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba south LGA, Abia state?

Methods
The study adopted descriptive survey research design. Nworgu (2015) described descriptive survey research as those studies which collect data and describe in a systematic manner the characteristics, features or facts about a given population. This design is considered appropriate for the study since the study collected and describe in a systematic manner, information obtained from learners in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba South LGA, Abia State. Aba south LGA was chosen to check if ODL programmes in the area are benefiting from the provisions of social media platforms, especially in enhancing learning outcomes. The population of the study was 1,152 learners in National Teachers' Institute Aba. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 331 learners from the population to ensure that every individual had an equal and independent chance of being selected, thereby minimizing sampling bias and enhancing the generalizability of the findings (Osuala, 2014). The Instrument for data collection was a questionnaire titled Social Media Platforms for Promoting Lifelong Learning (SMPLLL). The instrument for data collection was face validated by three experts. Two from the Department of Continuing Education and Development Studies and one from Measurement and Evaluation Unit of the Department of Science Education, all from Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The reliability coefficient of 0.71 and 0.90, were obtained for Clusters A and B respectively, with overall reliability index of 0.81 showing that the result of the reliability was high and the instrument was reliable for the study. The researchers collected the data for the study virtually. The data collected for the study was analysed using mean, and standard deviation. 2.5 was set as the decision rule. Items whose associated mean is 2.50 and above were accepted, while those below were rejected.

Result
Research Question One: To what extent has Facebook been utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba south LGA, Abia State?
Table 1: Mean Responses on the Extent Facebook can be Utilized in Open and Distance Learning Programmes of Tertiary Institutions. (n = 331)

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Facebook provides various communication features to learners including private messaging	3.62	.48	HE
2	Allowing students to form group chats.	3.23	.45	HE
3	Serving as platforms for learners to discuss course materials	3.40	.86	HE
4	Providing platform for learners to support one another.	3.09	.52	HE
5	Allowing students to work together on projects	3.42	.63	HE
6	Instructors can use Facebook to share educational resources	3.25	.57	HE
7	Helping to create a dynamic learning environment	3.54	.60	HE
8	Creating a supportive environment for learning among the students	3.77	.54	HE
9	Allowing facilitators to monitor learners' progress continuously	3.06	.58	HE
	Grand Mean	**3.37**	**0.58**	**HE**

Table 1 revealed the mean responses on the extent Facebook can be utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions. From the table, the mean responses ranged between $M = 3.09 – 3.77$. Therefore, the grand mean score of 3.37 and SD of 0.58 showed that all the items in this cluster were accepted as the extent to which Facebook can be utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba south LGA, Abia State.

Research Question Two: To what extent can WhatsApp be utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba South LGA, Abia State

Table 2: Mean Responses on the Extent Whatsapp cab be Utilized in Open and Distance Learning Programmes of Tertiary Institutions. (n = 331)

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
10	WhatsApp enables instant communication among students	2.85	.61	HE
11	Facilitating communication among students and instructors.	2.95	.53	HE
12	Fostering an interactive learning environment.	2.74	.65	HE
13	Bridging communication gap between learners and	2.76	.59	HE
14	facilitators	3.73	.44	HE
15	Allowing for quick feedback	3.89	.30	HE
16	Allowing students to form study groups	3.54	.66	HE
17	Enhancing collaboration among learners	3.45	.66	HE
18	Enabling students to share resources	3.16	.55	HE
	Allowing learners to share various types of media	**3.23**	**0.55**	**HE**
	Grand Mean			

Table 2 showed the mean responses on the extent WhatsApp has been utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions. The table showed that the mean responses ranged between $M = 2.74 – 3.89$. Therefore, the grand mean score of 3.23 and SD of 0.55 showed that all the items in this cluster were accepted as the extent to which WhatsApp can be utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba south LGA, Abia State.

Discussion

Finding from research question one showed that the extent to which Facebook can be utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba south LGA, Abia

state was high. This is because Facebook provides various communication features to learners including private messaging. It allows students to form group chats, serving as platforms for learners to discuss course materials. Facebook also provides platform for learners to support one another. According to Garrison and Akyol (2015) Facebook groups can serve as platforms for learners to discuss course materials, ask questions, and provide support to one another. Facebook groups can be used for collaborative learning, allowing students to work together on projects, share resources, and provide feedback. This collaborative approach aligns with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in learning (Benson & Torkington, 2017).

Additionally, Facebook allows students to work together on projects. Instructors can use Facebook to share educational resources, it also helps to create a dynamic learning environment, and a supportive environment for learning among the students. Research by Kear (2015) highlights the role of social media in building supportive networks among distance learners, enhancing their educational experience. Facebook can facilitate quick and informal feedback mechanisms. Instructors can create polls, quizzes, or discussions to assess students' understanding of course materials. This method aligns with formative assessment practices, allowing educators to gauge student progress continuously (Hattie & Timperley, 2017). Students can also provide peer feedback within their groups, enhancing their critical thinking and evaluative skills. Therefore, Facebook can significantly enhance Open and Distance Learning programmes in tertiary institutions by facilitating communication, promoting collaborative learning, enabling resource sharing, creating a supportive learning environment, and providing avenues for feedback and assessment.

Findings from research question two showed that the extent to which WhatsApp can be utilized in open and distance learning programmes of tertiary institutions in Aba south LGA, Abia State was high. This is because the respondents agreed that WhatsApp enables instant communication among students, facilitates communication among students and instructors, and foster an interactive learning environment. This finding is in agreement with Al-Mukhaini et al. (2020) who stated that WhatsApp serves as an effective communication tool that bridges the gap between learners and educators, allowing for quick feedback and support, which is crucial in distance education contexts. WhatsApp supports group messaging, allowing students to form study groups and collaborate on projects or assignments. This feature encourages peer-to-peer interaction, enhancing collaborative learning. Moreso, WhatsApp bridges communication gap between learners and facilitators, it allows for quick feedback, allows students to form study groups, enhances collaboration among learners, and enables students to share resources. This aligns with the findings of Aydın and Tüzün (2016) who highlights that WhatsApp groups can be used for joint assignments, enabling students to share resources, discuss topics, and work together effectively, even from a distance. Again, WhatsApp allows users to share various types of media, including documents, images, and videos. Educators can utilize this feature to distribute lecture notes, study materials, and multimedia content to students. Zheng et al. (2018) noted that educators can enhance the learning experience by using WhatsApp to share relevant articles, research papers, and other educational materials, thus enriching the curriculum.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that the extent to which Facebook can be used to promote lifelong learning was high, the extent to which WhatsApp can be used to promote lifelong learning was high.

Educational Implications of the Study

The implication of the study is that Facebook and WhatsApp can effectively bridge geographical barriers in education. This encourages institutions to invest more in leveraging these platforms to enhance accessibility for learners in remote areas. Again, social media platforms, as revealed by the study, provide interactive and engaging learning environments. Tertiary institutions should incorporate these platforms into their teaching strategies to boost learner participation, motivation, and engagement in ODL programmes. The findings further suggest the need for educational policymakers to develop frameworks and guidelines for the effective use of social media in open and distance learning programmes.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made

1. The CEO of Facebook should collaborate with education institutions to learning contents that meets the different needs of different categories of learners. They should also create other features that cater specifically for learners such as personalized learning paths, educational groups, and resources for online courses.
2. Open and distance learning institutions in Aba South LGA should leverage the potential of WhatsApp platform by creating dedicated learning groups, organizing live educational sessions, and incorporating collaborative learning strategies to further improve accessibility and interaction among learners.

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