WhatsApp in Action: An Exploration of Time Use by Academics

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Abstract

The digital revolution has permeated and impacted immensely on almost all walks of life and professions; the academia included. The global use of social media platforms such as, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and others, are revolutionizing the way people communicate, interact and socialize. This article, with attention to the use of WhatsApp as a social media platform, concentrates on the issue as to when the academics use WhatsApp, particularly on the issues of the patterns of submissions of responses, times between the submissions, and the periods of submission. With a Google Form-based questionnaire, data was collected through sharing a link on WhatsApp to 127 academics. With a response rate of 55%, data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel. It was found out that the that the more the days pass, the less the number of submissions; it was also found out that the more the days passed, the more time it took between submissions; additionally, it was found out that the time for attending the WhatsApp was mainly in the evening between 18:00 hours and midnight. The paper recommends that in order to make effective use of WhatsApp when communicating with Academics, the evening hours are used; additionally, as there is tendency not to attend messages three days and above old, a reminder is necessary, if more submissions are desirable.

Keywords*: Social media, WhatsApp, Academics, research*

Introductory background

The social media has permeated and it is impacting a lot on almost all walks of life and professions, the academia included (Boateng & Amankwaa, 2016). According to Boateng & Amankwaa (2016, p. 2), social media is "the application that allows users to converse and interact with each other; to create, edit and share new forms of textual, visual and audio content, and to categorize, label and recommend existing forms of content". In the same vein, but with more emphasis on the technology behind social media Kaplan (2015, p. 197) defines social media as a "group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content". Social media is nothing other than simply interactive pathways on the internet to perform relationships and network with others without leaving one's desk (Rogers, 2019).

The global use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and others are revolutionizing the way people communicate, interact and socialize; with the different social media platforms, users share and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities, making it possible for people to network with others who share similar or common interests, dreams and goals (Sharma & Shukla, 2016). As Rogers (2019, p. 5022) puts it, "a key theme for social media is engagement". The use of social media platforms is on the increase. Masele & Magova (2017, p. 37) point out that while in 2012, the users were 1.41 billion, they have continuously risen to 1.61 billion in 2013, 1.82 billion in 2014, and 2.99 billion in 2015. According to (Rogers, 2019, 5022), there were 3.397 billion users as at the beginning of 2019. Social media platforms, with the strong foundation of the ICT technologies, have capacity to acquire and spread information faster on so many domains, such as business, entertainment, science, politics, education. Not only can social media, through analytics, support researchers to answer their different research questions (Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2014), but also can save isolated researchers who are disconnected

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from their research communities due to physical barriers, unfamiliar research topics, diversity, and the nature of the supervisory relationship (Reeve & Partridge, 2017).

One of the fastest growing social media platform is the WhatsApp, a smartphone and web-based instant message application that allows users to exchange information using a variety of media including text, image, video, and audio messages (Sahu, 2104). According to Irfan and Dhimmar (2019, p.573), WhatsApp had 200 billion monthly active users in April 2013, 500 billion monthly active users in April 2014, 800 billion monthly active users in April 2015, and 1300 billion monthly active users in July 2017, and it was over from 1 billion monthly active users in February 2016

Figure 1. WhatsApp worldwide users 2013-2017

It is free, easy to use, fast, convenient, personal, and user-friendly with groups (Gasaymeh, 2017, p.1). Not only is it widely used in the fields of health services, tourism, and business, but also in education whose use effects are viewed differently. For instance, Ahad and Lim (2014) found that WhatsApp is popular among undergraduate students, and that they use it on a daily basis due to its ease of use, speed, real-time messaging, and low cost. Students use WhatsApp to create immediate connections, encourage reflection, and facilitate coordination in informal and formal learning (Gachago, Strydom, Hanekom, Simons, & Walters, 2015); for Tarighat and Khodabakhsh (2016), WhatsApp was useful in language assessment when students recorded their speech and shared them with their teachers and other students. Additionally, in determining the effectiveness of using a WhatsApp Messenger as one of mobile learning technique to develop students' writing skills, Fattah (2015) found out that in terms of punctuation marks, sentences structures and generating ideas, the WhatsApp technique yielded significant effects on students' writing skills compared to those who were taught through textbooks.

Negatively, Yeboah and Ewur (2014) in a Ghanaian environment argued that the use of WhatsApp by students took much of their study time, brought in procrastination related problems, destroyed students' spellings and grammatical construction of sentences, led to lack of concentration during lectures, led to difficulty in balancing WhatsApp and academic preparation, and distracted students from completing their assignments and adhering to their private studies time table. In the same tone, Ahad and Lim (2014) argues that much as young men and women perceive WhatsApp as a convenient communication, it is also brings about distractions and exposure to unregulated messages or information.

It is very difficult to get statistics about WhatsApp in Tanzania. However, it is assumed that the users are growing with the growing Internet coverage, as is elsewhere in the world. According to Digital Tanzania (2019), 23 million people are Internet users; the active social media users are 4.9

million people. Of these active 4.9 social media users, 4.4 million people are active on social media through mobile phone devices. The local social media platforms, apart from Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, LinkedIn, Blogs, and Instagram, include, for instance, Michuzi blog, Milard Ayo blog, Bongo 5 blog and other. The growing use of social media in Tanzania is premised on the adoption on mobile broadband technologies of the 3G (40%) and 4G (4%); with the 25.2 million mobile phone subscribers, there are around 11 million mobile Internet subscribers sharing the internet penetration of 18.5% (Okeleke, 2019, p. 7-8). The mobile service providers in Tanzania and their market shares are Smile (1%), Smart 91%), TTCL (1%), Zantel (2%), halotel (9%), Airtel (26%), Tigo (29%), and Vodacom (32%) (Idem p. 7)

There are some studies that have linked the use of WhatsApp to education. For example, a study by Mwakapina, Mhandeni, and Nyinondi (2016) found out that the use of WhatsApp when blended in the grammar course helped students in learning English interactively and collaboratively. In a recent study to explore the use of WhatsApp by the lecturers and ICT students, it was found out that WhatsApp was used for sharing study materials in the form of links, notes, assignments, and coursework and to enhance communication between teachers and students; students, on the other hand, used WhatsApp to help one another and to cater for anywhere anytime learning; the identified benefits included staying up to date, facilitating collaborative problem solving, increasing motivation to learn and reducing the cost of material production; the challenges encountered were mainly lack of privacy due to limited options, misuse of the group due to the lack of rules, and exclusion of students without smart phones (Mzomwe & Mazana, 2018)

The issue

Interestingly, though, while there are lots of studies in the education realm that link students to the use of WhatsApp in terms of the different aspects of use and effectiveness, for example, there is hardly research that brings out the different aspects of use and effectiveness with regard to the academics at the tertiary educational institutions. As WhatsApp use continues growing, the time of use by its different categories of people becomes critical to know, and hence the inevitability of research on when the academics use WhatsApp for this paper. The academics refer to the people who are involved in educational and management matters at the tertiary educational institutions of Tanzania. Particularly, the paper focuses on the exploration of the preferred period to use Whatsapp, specifically on the patterns of submissions of responses, times between the submissions, and the periods of submission.

Methods

Data for this study was collected by use of a questionnaire, prepared on Google Forms and distributed on Whatsapp. Sedoyeka (2016) used this method in his study to establish the current usage of Internet, activities, quality perception, issues that Internet users found important. The potential participants were all tertiary education academicians who were participants in two Whatsapp groups for academics in Tanzania. The purpose for forming these groups was to communicate academic issues. A first message was sent to them, requesting for their availability and participation in the survey. For those who wished, they would respond to the questionnaire and those who did not wish, they simply would decline filling in the questionnaire. A link with the questionnaire was shared on WhatsApp to 127 academics. The responses from the filled in Google Forms (submissions) were downloaded in a CSV format, saved to a Microsoft Excel format, ready for descriptive statistics.

The data used to explore the preferred time use by the users of WhatsApp comes from a survey that was launched on the 29th of August 2019 at 10:30 hours and the final questionnaire was received was on the 07th of September 2019 at 16:19:20 hours. The survey aimed at finding out the types of social media that are used by academics, the purposes for which they use them, the benefits, and the challenges of using such social media. Parallel to the data on these issues, however, there was more data regarding the time when the respondents submitted the responses of the online questionnaire. This is the data that is core to this paper.

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Tanzanian academics and whatsApp use

Respondents' profile

Most academics were male (72%). The biggest proportion of these academics was composed of ages between 30 and 49 (88%); again, the biggest proportion of these academics was composed of Assistant Lecturers and Lecturers (70%). Table 1 summarizes the profile of the respondents.

Table 1. Profile of the respondents

	Variables	Frequency	Percent
Sex	Male	20	28
	Female	51	72
Age	Between 20 & 29	3	4
	Between 30 & 39	30	42
	Between 40 & 49	33	46
Position	Above 50	6	8
	Tutorial Assistant	5	8
	Assistant Lecturer	33	47
	Lecturer	16	23
	Senior Lecturer	8	11
	Professor	7	10
	University manager	1	1

Submissions per date

Table 2 and Figure 2 present the number of submissions per day during the survey period. The survey was closed on the tenth day, with the response turn up of 55%. The actual days of submission were 5. The first two days were active with the total submissions of not less than 87% (more than 45% for the first day and 41% for the second day). The number of submissions reduced drastically to 8% on the third day. No submission was made on the fourth day, and around 3% happened on the fifth day. From the sixth to the ninth day, nothing was submitted till the tenth day when there was a submission of only one. From the data, the submission trend is that the more the days pass, the less the number of submissions

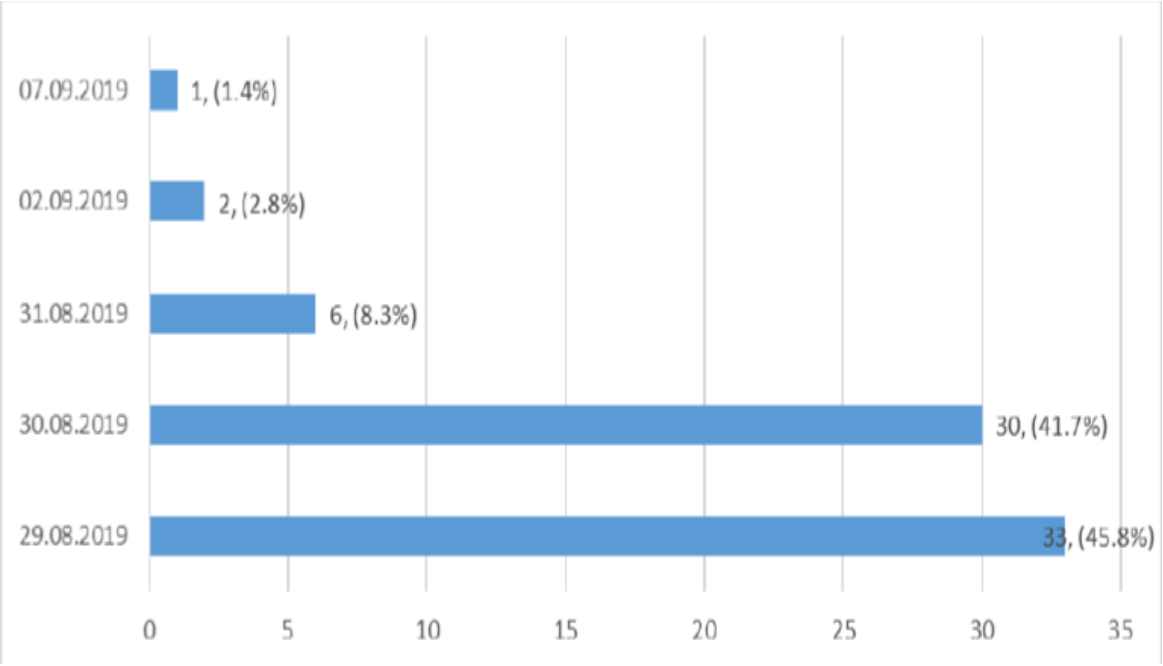

Figure 2. Submission per date

Time taken between submissions

Table 3 presents the differences of time taken between the first and the last submissions of the day. According to the data, while it took 385 minutes to make 33 submissions in the first day an average of 12 minutes per submission, the submissions went on taking more time as far as an average of 1,407 minutes in the tenth day. Hence, the more the days passed, the more time it took between submissions.

Table 3. Time taken between submissions in a day

Date	Start time	Finish time	Number of submissions	Time taken (minutes)	Average time per submission (minutes)
29.08.2019	15:53:44	22:19:02	33	385	12
30.08.2019	0:44:36	23:52:26	30	21388	46
31.08.2019	23:52:26	22:10:29	6	1338	223
02.09.2019	13:25:25	17:50:24	2	265	133
07.09.2019	16:52:39	16:19:20	1	1407	1407

Periods of submission

Most of the respondents (54.2%) did their submissions between 18:00 hours and mid night, most of them being males (36.1%). Significantly, there were also many respondents (27.8%) who submitted between mid-day and 18:00 hours in the evening, most of them being men (20.8%), as well. Hence, the time for attending the WhatsApp was mainly in the evening between 18:00 hours and midnight. Table 4 and Figure 4 summarize these findings

Table 4. Period of submissions

Date	Between 06:00 & 11:59	Between 12:00 & 17:59	Between 18:00 & 23:59	Between 00:00 & 06.59
29.08.2019	0	3	30	0
30.08.2019	5	13	7	5
31.08.2019	2	1	2	1
02.09.2019	0	2	0	0
07.09.2019	0	1	0	0
Total	**7 (9.7%)**	**20 (27.8%)**	**39 (54.2%)**	**6 (8.3%)**

This pattern is similar to a pattern established by Rosenfeld, Sina, Sarne, Avidov, and Kraus (2018, p.11) who found out that most messages are sent between 12:00 hours and 23:59 hours. Similarly, Hussain, Mahesar, Shah, and Memon (2017, p.18) in their study that establishes the periods of choice to use WhatsApp by students, among other issues, show how the numbers of WhatsApp users continuously increase from afternoon to evening, and they are at the peak at night.. The evening and night hours are moments when people are out of professional activities, and hence they have some time to attend WhatsApp messages.

Conclusion

How do academics attend WhatsApp messages in terms of time? Data has shown that the more the days pass, the less the number of submissions; the more the days pass, the more time it takes between submissions, and; the time for attending the WhatsApp is mainly in the evening between 18:00 hours and midnight. Hence, academics tend to attend WhatsApp between evening and mid-night and they tend to take their time to respond or ignore completely three days and above old messages.

In order to make effective use of WhatsApp when communicating with Academics, the evening hours are recommended. This is because most of them will be off formal/official work and attending private issues, among which WhatsApp messages. As there is tendency not to attend messages three days and above old, a reminder is necessary, if more submissions are required.

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