

# Perception of Social Networking Usage by Distance Learners in Academics: A case of Counselling and Family Therapy Programme from IGNOU

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## Abstract

Social networking among the youth population in the present times is strengthening individuality with social connectivity. In the contemporary world, usage of some form of social media has seen a phenomenal rise. Some of the educators are now also exploring the use of Web 2.0 technologies and services for use among distance learners for academics. With the change of time and need of the society, there has been massive influence of mobile network on learning. This paper is based on the study done to find out the perception on usage of social networking sites for academic purposes by distance learners pursuing post graduate counselling and family therapy programme from Indira Gandhi National Open University. The participants were learners pursuing counselling and family therapy programme from Indira Gandhi National Open University who were enrolled at learner support centers located in Delhi-NCR. Structured questionnaire was used to elicit information. For selection of the respondents incidental sampling procedure was adopted. The findings indicate high use of social networking by the respondents for personal interactions and comparatively lesser for sharing of academic information. The paper discusses whether social networking can be a medium for academics and more-so for distance learning to bridge the gap between teacher, learners and peer group.

**Keywords:** social networking, social media, counselling and family therapy, academics, distance learning, peer group.

## Introduction

Social networking uses Web 2.0 technology to connect and interact. Bingham & Conner (2010) stated that social media are Web 2.0 technologies that facilitate social interaction and collaboration and foster a sense of community. Mangold and Faulds (2009) defined social media as the “set of online word of mouth forums, which includes blogs, discussion boards, forums or social networks.”

Some of the popular Web 2.0 technology and services for social networking sites among the youth in India are Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Skype, Facebook Messenger, YouTube, WhatsApp Messenger, Hike Messenger, Google +, WeChat, LinkedIn, Viber, imo-chat, Nimbuzz, Messenger, etc. Babac (2011) pointed out that although social media was quickly adopted by the practitioners, it is still an area that lacks empirical evidence and academic attention. Bernard & Peltó (1987) pointed out that technology influences the course of human life culminating in changes in human behaviour, attitudes, social interaction, values and beliefs of societies and defined technology as “all those machines, devices and other physical apparatuses made and used by human for instrumental purposes and the physical products of those machines and devices.” Ejechi (2016) pointed out that information and communication technology (ICT) is covered by this description because “it makes use of machines and devices such as satellites, computers, internet, mobile phones and audio-visual

facilities and is transforming global society; and reduces communication distance via internet, enhances dissemination of information and images and increases network of human relationships via mobile devices (e.g. Smartphone)".

Giles (2010) pointed out that new technologies such as social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, "are changing the way people communicate, work and play" (p. 3). Results of a study conducted by Serrano & Yambao (2015) showed that Facebook was viewed as a venue for online students to exchange ideas, share resources, collaborate, and socialize. They found that use of Facebook proved to be a useful tool to foster academic collaboration among students and create ideas for future projects. Serrano & Yambao (2015) also pointed out a number of challenges and difficulties faced by the students while using Facebook for academic purposes, among which are coordination, communication, connectivity, commitment, harmonization, and integration. ICT has been useful for promoting education by open and distance learning in low-income countries especially sub-Saharan Africa (Mwilongo, 2015; UNESCO, 2004). Many researchers have reported that integration of ICT into teaching and learning process depends on the teacher, the subject, the students and the cultural setting (Yuen, Law, & Wong, 2003; Khan, Butt, & Zaman, 2003; Sutherland et al., 2004; TLRP 2006; Adebayo, 2008).

Eucharia O. Ejechi (2016) conducted a study on the use of ICT by Nigeria's university students and found that ownership/access was 100, 30.9 and 1.0%, for cell phones, laptops and desktops, respectively while the use was 100.0, 35.0 and 9.3%, respectively. The data was obtained from 1500 students with a structured questionnaire. Prevalence of the use of ICT for social/leisure-related activities was markedly higher than for academic work. Further, Ejechi (2016) pointed out that mature ( $\geq 30$  years) and post graduate students were more likely to use ICT for academic purpose than younger students ( $< 30$  years) and non-postgraduate students. While the younger students used ICT more for social/leisure activity. Ejechi (2016) found that desktop or laptop was associated with academic work. Ejechi (2016) concluded that students should be encouraged to use laptops as compared to cell phones so as to limit the distraction of social applications facilitated by cell phones.

Lepp, Li, & Barkley (2015) in their research report indicated that students see cell phones as devices for pleasure and so spend time social networking, listening to music, watching video, playing games, sending and receiving messages and video/music download. A number of research studies have found out that ICT is also used by students for social interaction and leisure (Selwyn, 2008; Corrin, Bennett & Lockyer, 2010; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010; Edmunds, Thorpe & Conole, 2012; Okoye 2012). Kevin P. Brady, Lori B. Holcomb, and Bethany V. Smith (2010) based on the results of their study suggested that education-based social networking sites (SNSs) can be used most effectively in distance education courses as a technological tool for improved online communications among students in higher distance education courses.

Regardless of the fact that there are relatively abundant researches on distance teaching and learning as well ICT usage for distance learners especially in the developed countries as well as some in India, but still there is paucity of research on the usage of social networking sites for academic purposes especially in India. The use of ICTs by higher education institutions across the world has begun to emerge fast and in coming years would be more evident in our Indian scenario also with the rise of MOOCs development, a Government of India initiative through SWAYAM and SWAYAM PRABHA. Therefore, the purpose of this study is not to look into such several factors which enable ICT usage in higher education. The key assertion of this paper is to study the use of social networking sites (SNSs) among the students especially in higher education through open and distance learning system, the published studies for which are few, especially pertaining to the distance learners in India.

## Objectives

The aim of this research paper is to examine the perception of web-based social networking usage by distance learners pursuing the post graduate programme of study in counselling and family therapy from Indira Gandhi National Open University. Specifically, the objectives of this study were to examine: -

- (a) the extent of use of social networking sites by distance learners pursuing counselling and family therapy post graduate programme;
- (b) the extent of social networking usage for academic purposes by the distance learners; and
- (c) the challenges faced in using social networking sites for academics by the students.

Thus, this study was designed to address the following questions:

1. How do distance learners pursuing post graduate counselling and family therapy programme perceive their use of social networking sites in everyday life?
2. How do distance learners pursuing counselling and family therapy post graduate programme from Indira Gandhi National Open University perceive their use of social networking sites for academic purposes?
3. What challenges are faced by distance learners pursuing counselling and family therapy post graduate programme from Indira Gandhi National Open University in using social networking sites for academic purposes?

## Methodology

This research made use of survey research method. The population for this study comprised all students pursuing counselling and family therapy post graduate programme from Indira Gandhi National Open University, offered in modular form as Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Family Therapy and Master's degree in Counselling and Family Therapy, who were enrolled at learner support centers in Delhi-NCR region. Structured questionnaire was used as a tool for data collection. The questionnaire contained items to examine the usage of social networking sites by the participants, use of social networking sites for academic as well as personal purposes, and the challenges as perceived by the participants so that it can be made a success story for counselling and family therapy distance learners across the country. Respondents were drawn from four study centers in Delhi-NCR region. For selection of the respondents incidental sampling procedure was adopted. A total of 102 students agreed to participate in the study.

The total number of respondents for the study was 102. The number of participants from 4 learner support centers located in Delhi-NCR region were 27, 39, 24, and 12 respondents respectively.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

(N=102)

Gender	No.	Percentage (%)
Male	29	28.4
Female	73	71.6

(N=102)

Age Group	No.	Percentage (%)
21-30 years	30	29.4

31-40 years	31	30.4
41-50 years	33	32.4
51-60 years	4	3.9
61-70 years	3	2.9
71- 80 years	1	1.0

As seen from Table 1, 71.6% of the respondents were females and 28.4% were males. Further, it was observed that approximately 30% participants belonged to each of the age groups 21-30 years, 31-40 years, and 41-50 years. While there were 4 participants in the age group 51-60 years, 3 participants in the age group 61-70 years and 1 participant in the age group 71-80 years.

Further, it was observed that since this was a post graduate level programme, all the respondents were graduates. Some had also done masters degree in some other subject before joining this programme. About half the respondents were working as teachers, doctors and nursing staff in this group.

It was found that except for 9 participants who never used the social networking sites, all other respondents used social networking sites. The following description of perception on use of social networking sites is thus of 93 respondents.

## Results and Findings

The results for the present study have been discussed below as per the objectives of the study.

- (a) The extent of use of social networking sites by distance learners pursuing counselling and family therapy programme.

Responses from the participants indicate that 81.7% of distance learners used social networking sites every day (see Table 2). Ubiquity of social networking sites and popular usage among the adult population is thus evident.

Table 2: Reported usage of social networking sites by distance learners

N= 93

Duration	No.	Percentage (%)
Every day	76	81.7
Once in 2-3 days	11	11.8
Weekly	6	6.5

Table 3: Reported usage of social networking by male respondents

N= 25

Duration	No.	Percentage (%)
Everyday	21	84
Once in 2-3 days	4	16
Weekly	-	-

Table 4: Reported usage of social networking by female respondents

N= 68

Duration	No.	Percentage (%)
Everyday	52	76.5



Once in 2-3 days	9	13.2
Weekly	7	10.3

Results from Table 3 and Table 4 depicting the usage of social networking sites by male and female distance learners pursuing counselling and family therapy post graduate programme indicate that as compared with females, male respondents use social networking sites more often on everyday basis. While some of the female respondents spend time only on weekly basis on social networking sites but none of the male respondents. Self-reported perceived level of importance given to usage of social networking sites by both male and female respondents is high.

Table 5: Reported popular usage of social networking sites

N= 93 (Here participant could opt for more than one choice)

SNSs	Most frequently	Frequently	Less frequently
Facebook	78	9	6
Twitter	2	48	43
WhatsApp	88	3	2
WeChat	27	26	40
Viber	22	14	57
Snapchat	49	29	15
Instagram	15	26	52
Hike	18	22	53
Pinterest	4	4	85
Jiochat	34	12	47

From Table 5, it is observed that the most popular social networking sites among the distance learners pursuing counselling and family therapy programme are WhatsApp and Facebook, followed by Snapchat, Twitter, WeChat and Jiochat. It was seen that most of the respondents used more than one social networking sites to connect with others.

(b) The extent of social networking usage for academic purposes by the distance learners.

Table 6: Reported reasons for using social networking sites

N= 93 (Here participant could opt for more than one choice)

Reasons to use social networking sites	Most likely	Likely	Least likely
Talking to friends	93	-	-
Connecting with family/relatives	89	4	
Taking part in academic discussions	13	11	69
Sharing knowledge - study material related	35	25	33
Sharing information regarding schedule of counselling sessions for theory courses	31	40	22
Sharing information regarding schedule of counselling sessions for practical courses	12	26	55
Discussion regarding assignment	24	51	18
Discussion regarding internship	8	28	57

Discussion regarding dissertation	7	22	64
To be in touch with the study center	21	28	44
To be in touch with the academic counsellor	45	44	4
Helping with practical	22	28	43
For examination preparations	16	34	43

Looking at the purposes of social media uses by the participants, the results depicted in Table 6 indicate that talking to friends, and connecting with family/relatives, are the primary reasons for usage of social networking sites. The results show more importance laid down to non-academic work than to academic activities. Further, it can be said that to some extent social networking sites were being used as forum for academic learning also. It was observed that sharing information regarding schedule of counselling sessions for theory courses was most popular usage of SNSs for academic purposes among the participants followed by discussion regarding assignments. Participants shared information regarding schedule of counselling sessions for practical courses to some extent but discussions regarding either internship or dissertation was quite less. Further, it is observed that participants used SNSs more often to be in touch with their respective academic counsellors than with the study center. Also, SNSs were not commonly used for discussions or helping each other in practical related work as compared to using SNSs for preparation of examinations.

It was observed that all the participants reported having received academic help through SNSs usage at least a few times which included receiving help from the academic counsellor, peer group and study center. All the participants were unanimously of the opinion that social networking can be effectively used for all the academic purposes as stated above. The majority of respondents also observed that encouragement of the same by study center, including proactive measures such as formation of group on social media, with guidelines n suggestions for use of the same for various academic purposes, would facilitate peer learning, and provide increased motivation to complete the programme of study.

(c) The challenges faced in using social networking sites for academics by the students.

The reasons for the lesser usage of social networking for academic purposes by the distance learners of counselling and family therapy post graduate programme were further explored. It is observed from Table 7, that less than half of the participants owned a laptop/computer while all the participants possessed a smartphone. Further, less than half of the students were aware of all applications of SNSs while many were not aware of the same. Most of the participants did not have electricity problem or internet problem. It was found that many participants reported being encouraged by the academic counsellors for the use of SNSs for academic purposes as compared with the learner study center in-charges. It is observed that sharing of information of counselling sessions for theory sessions was promoted by the academic counsellors, while the same was not encouraged with respect to the practical courses.

Table 7: Perceived challenges in using social networking sites for academic purposes

N= 93

Challenges perceived in using SNSs	Yes	No
Electricity problem	16	77
Internet problem	11	82
Own a laptop/ computer	37	56
Possess a smartphone	93	-
Unaware of all SNSs application usage	34	59
Academic counsellor does not encourage use of SNSs	28	65
Study center does not encourage use of SNSs	41	52

Sharing of information of counselling sessions for theory activity not promoted by academic counsellor	27	66
Sharing of information of counselling sessions for practical activity not promoted by academic counsellor	33	60

## Discussion

All the respondents in the present study had a smartphone, varying the cost range, which they used frequently for the social media access purposes. Some of the learners were not computer savvy but aware of mobile technology of sending and receiving audio-video files. A few of the challenges faced by the respondents were that all did not own a laptop or computer personally and further had limited internet access. From the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that almost all the participants used social networking for personal purposes and comparatively much less for academic purposes. It was observed that the participants of those learner support centers which made WhatsApp group, the respondents were active on it and the same was true for the academic counsellors with whom the learners interacted through SNSs. Many academic counsellors provided a specific time to interact with the distance learners on SNSs. On the other hand, some academic counsellors did not give the learners their contact details as reported by the respondents. It was observed that sharing of information regarding counselling schedule of theory sessions was promoted by both the learner study center and academic counsellor. But, for practical courses participants were not encouraged to do so. The reason for this not being encouraged by the academic counsellor could be that academic counselling for practicals is an individualized activity in this programme of study; as is true for internship and dissertation as well. Thus, the scheduling of the academic counselling sessions for these components of the programme of study varied from one participant to another, which may account for the fact that the participants did not share the related information with each other. Also, nearly half of the participants were yet to commence with internship and dissertation.

There was felt need that the academic counsellors should encourage group formations to foster use of social networking sites for academic purposes. The most important fact that came out was that all the respondents at some time have been helped by a peer, academic counsellor or study center for academic purposes through the usage of social networking sites. Among the major activities of the learner support center and the academic counsellors in open and distance learning system are to reduce distance learner's perceived loneliness and providing pragmatic, psycho-social and academic support to the students to facilitate the learning process. Usage of social networking sites would certainly help bridge the gap between teacher, learners and peer group; motivate the distance learners to attend the counselling sessions; enhance peer learning through interactions and group discussions; encourage healthy competition among distance learners by promoting meeting deadlines of submissions of assignments and practical files etc. Thus, social networking can be a medium for promoting the teaching-learning process in distance education by bringing together the distance learners and their teachers for academic purposes.

## Conclusion

This study focused on the perception of distance learners pursuing counselling and family therapy post graduate programme from Indira Gandhi National Open University. It is a well-known fact that today's adult learners are more exposed to various technologies and actively engage with at least some social networking sites through their mobile phones. This study would contribute to the still relatively small set of studies done for the use of social networking sites for academic purposes by the distant learners.

Social networking in the present times holds important promising prospects for engaging in learning purposes along with non-academic activities. From this study, as discussed above it is seen that even though participants used social networking sites more often for personal reasons and less often for academic purposes but still all the participants have felt benefitted through social networking sites for academic purposes. Results indicate that usage of social networking sites for academic purposes can be integrated in the counselling and family therapy post graduate programme. The same can be extrapolated to other programmes of study offered through distance mode. To facilitate the same, some systemic features may need to be incorporated to promote use of social networking for sharing of information and greater academic interaction, so that the distance learner is connected with peer group and academic counsellor/teacher through a more constructive and integrated approach. At the same time, safeguards need to be put into place to prevent misuse or harassment. Given the increase in the usage of social media among the Indian population in the recent times, modalities for optimal utilization of this potential for facilitating the distance teaching-learning process needs to be explored further.

A limitation of the present study was that the sample size was not large and the data was drawn from Delhi-NCR region, and thus, generalizing of the data needs to be cautiously done.

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