

Lecturers' Preference on Whatsapp Usage in The Work Environment at Malaysian Private Universities

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Abstract: The use of social media platforms and applications at the workplace has gained much prominence and relevance. Similarly, there is evidence that these digital tools are used widely in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. While there are studies that have investigated their effectiveness as teaching tools, there is not much discussion or debate on their role as the main medium of communication among academics in universities. Hence, this qualitative study aims to explore the perception towards the use of the ubiquitous WhatsApp application among seven academics where it is widely used as a communication channel for work-related matters. The seven academics from different private universities in Malaysia were interviewed through semi-structured questions. Their responses were then analysed thematically using the Technology Acceptance Model. The results reveal that communication via WhatsApp at these universities is used in both formal and non-formal contexts although the communication is within groups set up for work purposes. Largely, the study found that the participants had positive perceptions on the use of WhatsApp as a communication channel, claiming that it is effective and beneficial.

Keyword: *WhatsApp, Work Environment, Private Universities.*

INTRODUCTION

Before the internet became widely used in Malaysia, the mode of official communication was through official letters, the telephone, fax, and printed media (Andaya, 2016). Although the Internet in Malaysia came into use in the early 90s, its usage was limited with only limited usage in education and politics before it became more widespread to the public through commercial ISPs (Saodah & Shafizan, 2017).

In the context of Malaysian education, there are multiple studies that have been conducted on the use and choice of social media for interaction, and teaching and learning where there is the teacher/lecturer-student dynamics at play (Tachie & Brenya, 2022; Larasati & Lolita, 2023). However, there is a gap in terms of studies that had investigated social media interactions within the realm of academics, particularly on its effectiveness as a communications platform in official work-related matters, replacing the email and others. According to Lewis (2019), effective communication amongst colleagues is crucial for workplace success which is also the view shared by Hayashi (2015) who claims that effective communication has the capacity to improve efficiency and productivity (Omar, Nuredayu & Mustaffa, Che Su & Abu Talib, Zuraidah, 2018).

Current literature generally states that communication via social media platforms is cost-effective, fast, and efficient; yet it cannot be denied that there are also contrary views to these claims (Ean & Lee, 2016; Zulqarnain & Wan Puspa, 2019). The most recent statistics from Digital 2022 reveals that WhatsApp is the most popular communication app in Malaysia (Kemp, 2022). Based on these statistics, the researchers investigated the perception of selected lecturers from several private universities in Malaysia on WhatsApp as a communication tool in their departments, with the Technology Acceptance Model as the framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) state that social media has evolved from the traditional online media which has its roots in Web 2.0 while Jan et. al (2012) argued that there are numerous social media platforms that can provide channels for communication and offer the opportunity for exchange of information within a short space of time. On top of all these, social networks (Schauer, 2015) are used in various disciplines, sectors, and domains such as business, entertainment or mere social interactions (Alhabash & Ma, 2017).

Interestingly though, it is WhatsApp that has emerged as the most popular communication medium among youth especially undergraduates. It is also being used as a collaborative learning application in higher education settings (WhatsApp, 2021). It is also being used for continuous learning purposes across the globe due to its popularity and potential to support teaching and learning and its accessibility and spread through mobile phones (Haleem et. al, 2022).

In a recent study (Lee et. al, 2023) claim that because WhatsApp is a platform that is easy to use, it has gained positive perception in teaching and learning environments for the benefits it brings in students' academic achievements and in promoting effective collaboration and social interaction. Meanwhile, Suárez-Lantarón et. al (2022) indicate that in educational contexts, various frameworks are available such as WhatsApp being used only among students or together with their teachers. They add that WhatsApp is also used in both formal and informal settings across various subjects.

WhatsApp is also used in non-educational settings, and according to Kasim et. al (2022), its use in general office settings has only medium-range influence but is still considered a significant medium for information dissemination, communication and social interaction. In a study conducted by Sohayla et. al (2020), it was reported that 100% of staff in a private medical school used WhatsApp for communication with different levels of satisfaction; 8.1% reported that they were extremely satisfied, 61.3% were satisfied, 12.9% were not satisfied, while 16.1% indicated they were extremely dissatisfied. The study noted that other variables such as age, time of communication, and the relevance of the communication had a direct correlation to the results.

In summary, it can be said that WhatsApp has brought about significant impact at the workplace, and it is being more and more widely used. Nevertheless, we need to consider that the use of the social media application as a workplace communication tool must be used with proper planning so that the benefits are optimised.

METHODS

This is a qualitative study, and the participants are lecturers from randomly selected universities. The lecturers were using WhatsApp for their workplace communication. There are 29 universities in Kuala Lumpur as reported in official websites (UPU Online, 2021; MQA, 2023) and the universities that were included in the study were sampled randomly. The names of the academics who were selected were chosen from the university websites. This article will only present the results from analysis of seven interviews. The participants were contacted via emails and followed through with phone calls for the interview sessions based on both the researchers and participants' availability. The semi-structured interviews were conducted after obtaining the consent from the interviewees. The questions were adapted from King and Lee (2016) and the data was analysed thematically. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed before they were analysed.

FINDINGS

Based on the analysis of the interview transcripts, it is established that the two most used social media applications for 'official' communication is WhatsApp (86%) while Facebook, Twitter and Instagram was used by 80% of the participants. All these platforms are used for both formal and informal communication among colleagues. All the participants indicated that they found the social media platforms as viable and important for communication as they promote continuous social interaction.

For example, these are some of the participants that were recorded:

“I normally use the social media applications (Facebook dan WhatsApp) for formal and non-formal interaction only with colleagues” (Participant 1)

“I normally use social media to check for latest issues and also for entertainment purposes.” (Participant 2)

“For me, social media is fast and easy to use and the majority of my friends and family use these platforms for all types of communication” (Participant 7).

Additionally, 86% of the participants believe that WhatsApp provides a viable platform for formal communication. They also agree that it is a great platform for both vertical (to their students) and horizontal communication (to their peers) enabling them to share information without being too formal but still maintaining their professional stature. They also state that the application is very useful to solve any problems that require quick solutions as gleaned from the following assertions:

“This is a great platform for us to network and communicate with our students. When we are communicating with them, it is still important to maintain my professional tone in the messages” (Participant 1).

“For me, e-mail is used for daily work matters while WhatsApp is a more convenient platform as almost everyone owns smartphones although there is a general expectation that we need to quickly respond to any messages that require urgent attention.” (Participant 3).

“More capacity, easier to communicate, keep everyone updated and can cover a wide cross-section of stakeholders” (Participant 4).

“WhatsApp is the medium which I use for formal communication with my colleagues during work hours. However, I still use it for informal communication in other groups which are not work related. I do not use official work groups for informal communication” (Participant 5).

“To update all stakeholders in the department on work developments and to contact acquaintances directly or in the group” (Participant 6).

Other than the above comments, the participants also believe that the platform allows for them to immediately seek clarification if the message sent is not clear:

“If it is informal, I rarely will share any information, but if it is formal, I will use the app. For example, to upload documents etc. I normally use formal language and it is great that my colleagues also respond formally without the use of emojis, etc. (Participant 1).

One interesting response was in responding to messages that are deemed as urgently needed:

“Based on our assessment of a message on its urgency, we will normally respond as quickly as we can. If it is perceived as not so urgent, we will focus on other aspects of our work first – for example, preparation of examination papers will take precedence on us responding to a message that is not so urgent. (Participant 2)

CONCLUSION

Based on the data and analysis of this study, it can be concluded that all the participants are comfortable to use WhatsApp as the main form of social media platform for communication with their peers in carrying out work related to teaching and learning. The other platform that is also popular is Facebook. The majority of the participants believe that WhatsApp is a viable tool to be used for formal communication in universities. It is believed to be particularly effective for communication with the students. Although this is an informal social media platform, the participants argue that formality can be maintained via proper use of language to reflect professionalism. At the same time, the platform allows for better social interaction leading to more efficient collaborative work.

The other major advantage that was expressed by the participants was that WhatsApp is relatively easier to use and can be accessed by anyone at any time provided they have a smartphone. This allows for speed of communication which is an important aspect of growth and progress. The application also allows for a wider sharing and dissemination of information to stakeholders in the universities. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the participants perceived the use of this application as positive. In terms of the motivation for its use, the participants opine that the speed in which responses can be received and sent is a key factor in the positive perception and continued acceptance of WhatsApp as the main communication channel at department-level administration and work at these universities.

In sum, this study concludes that the use of WhatsApp has a positive impact on the participants to extend their network, maintain professionalism, share information, and carry out urgent tasks effectively in a private university setting in Malaysia.

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