How Students Perceive Educational Support Through Facebook

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Abstract
Since the beginning of the 21st century social media has expanded world-wide in all aspects of human lives. Mainly for the youth they have been a natural part of their "digital ecosystem". As the results of the surveys of social media use by teens, carried by the Pew Research Centre, showed, in 2014 in the USA 71 % of teens reported being Facebook users and no other platform was used by a clear majority of the interviewed. In 2018, three further online platforms, other than Facebook, have been reported by the significant majority of the teens. These were YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat. As to Facebook, "only" 51 % of the respondents stated to be Facebook users. Furthermore, smartphone ownership has become a ubiquitous element of teen life. Up to 95 % of teens have reported they have a smartphone or access to one, and 45 % of teens have proclaimed they are online on a near-constant basis. Even more important, they are becoming more and more used, in the time of the world-wide corona pandemic and the need for connection in social quarantine.
As for teachers and their opinions on social media, on the one hand they are aware of their usefulness as regards to sharing information or organizing school tasks. But on the other hand, they identify social media as a reason for the pupils and students` low attention during classes at school. But since the youth devote a lot of time to social media, there is no point of not using these means also in education, as shown by the current efforts to organize education processes during the corona pandemic.
At the Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, we have been aware of the significance of the social media in relation to different aspects of education and pedagogical communication. That is why for several years, attention has been paid to this new education phenomenon. The paper presents the authors experiences with the use of Facebook as a mean of support for education while the main focus is given to the results of a questionnaire survey which examined students` opinions and attitudes towards Facebook (before the pandemic situation), in comparison with Moodle, as a new phenomenon in university education.
Keywords: use of social media in education, Facebook, tertiary education, students` opinions on Facebook as a mean of education support, comparison of the use of Facebook and Moodle in education

Как студенты воспринимают образовательную поддержку через Facebook

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Аннотация
С начала XXI века во всем мире отмечается рост проникновения социальных медиа во все аспекты жизни. Для молодежи они являются естественной частью их «цифровой экосистемы». По данным исследовательского центра Pew Research Centre, в 2014 году в США 71 % подростков были пользователями Facebook и большинство не пользовались другими платформами. В 2018 году значительное большинство опрошенных сообщили об использовании, помимо Facebook, еще трех онлайн-платформ: YouTube, Instagram и Snapchat. 51 % респондентов заявили, что они являются пользователями Facebook. Кроме того, смартфон стал широко распространенным атрибутом подростковой жизни. Около 95 % подростков сообщили, что у них есть смартфон или доступ к нему, а 45 % подростков заявили, что они почти постоянно находятся в сети. При этом во время всемирной пандемии коронавируса использование гаджетов растет в связи с необходимостью поддержания связи на карантине.
Учителя, с одной стороны, осознают эффективность социальных сетей в обмене информацией или организации обучения. С другой стороны, педагоги считают, что социальные медиа являются причиной низкого внимания учеников и студентов во время школьных занятий. Тем не менее, поскольку молодежь проводит много времени в социальных сетях, нет смысла не использовать эти средства и в образовании, как показывают нынешние усилия по организации образовательного процесса в дистанционном формате.
На педагогическом факультете университета им. Константина Философа в Нитре понимают значение социальных медиа в образовании и педагогической коммуникации и на протяжении уже нескольких лет уделяют этому особое внимание. В статье представлен опыт авторов по использованию Facebook в качестве средства поддержки образования. Выводы сделаны по результатам опроса, направленного на выявление мнений студентов о Facebook (до пандемии) как новом феномене университетского образования (в сравнении с Moodle).
Ключевые слова: использование социальных медиа в образовании, Facebook, высшее образование, мнение студентов о Facebook как средство поддержки образования, сравнительный анализ использования Facebook и Moodle в образовании

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century social media has expanded world-wide in all aspects of human lives. Mainly for the youth they have been a natural part of their "digital ecosystem". The results of the surveys of social media use by teens undertaken by the Pew Research Centre, showed that in 2014 in the USA 71% of teens reported being Facebook users and that no other platform was used by a clear majority of respondents. In 2018, a further three online platforms, other than Facebook, were reported by the significant majority of the teens. In particular, these were YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat. As for Facebook, "only" 51% of the respondents stated they were Facebook users (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Furthermore, smartphone ownership has become a nearly ubiquitous element of teen life. Up to 95% of teens reported they have a smartphone or access to

one, and 45% of teens have proclaimed they are online on a near-constant basis. This has nearly doubled from the 24% who reported this fact in the 2014-2015 survey. Another 44% say they go online multiple times per day. Even more important, they are becoming more and more used, in the time of the world-wide corona pandemic and the need for connection in social quarantine.

As for teachers and their opinions on social media, on the one hand they are aware of their usefulness as regards to sharing information or organizing school tasks (Tandale & Raman, 2016). But on the other hand they have identified social media to be a reason for the pupils and students` low attention during classes at school (Hodál, 2016). But since the youth devote a lot of time for social media, there is no point of not using these means in education, as shown by the current efforts to organize education processes during the corona pandemic.

Research problem

A lot of modern digital technology-based learning and teaching tools have been used in university education systems environment (Kostolanský et al., 2019). One of the most frequently used system is the LMS Moodle system. At Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, LMS Moodle is also often used in teaching practice, as this system has undoubtedly many advantages and is well configured for education. At the Department of Technology and Information Technologies of the Faculty of Education we have had many years of personal experience with it. But despite the indisputable advantages of LMS Moodle, we missed better feedback from students and a faster way to communicate with them.

Facebook is an environment that is very well known to students. Moreover, students do not perceive this environment as an educational one, but as a common one in which they move absolutely naturally. That is why we decided to use just this environment as a supporting tool for educational purposes to make the communication with students easier. Further reasons for this decision were the following ones:

– Facebook is more common software environment for students than LMS Moodle, it is less stressing and more motivating for them;

– most of the student population has created their accounts on Facebook;

– as most of the student population uses Facebook services, there is no need to organize any introduction training for students, as it is in case of LMS Moodle;

– neither a server nor any additional maintenance is necessary as it is in case of LMS Moodle (this means zero costs to operate and maintain this system).

Unlike LMS Moodle. the social network Facebook is not intended for education purposes and so cannot be used for complex e-learning education (Šebo, 2013; Manca & Ranieri, 2013; Dillingerová, 2007). Our intention was to use it as a supporting tool for blended learning because, despite the fact that it is not intended for education purposes, it has several functions which enable it to support maily tertiary education effectively. We rank these function as follows:

– creation of a Facebook page of the taught subject (the possibility to create and continually update the subject page which will be usable for several years (Rouse, 2010));

– creation of a Facebook group (In one Facebook group for one lesson/subject, the teacher uploads all necessary teaching and learning materials for students in form of texts, figures, videos, documents or links to other web pages Student can also be contributors (Hejl, 2012));

– sending messages and chat forums (predominantly for fast communication between the teacher and the students, but as well among the students. This means of

communication is very efficient as the students are almost constantly on-line, with this application in their mobiles, as is mentioned in the introduction);
   – immediate sharing of different content (information, texts, audio records, video records, photos, etc.).

Concept and methodology

We had two possibilities how to use Facebook as a means of supporting education processes. One possibility was to create a web page on Facebook and hold information there for students. The main advantage of this possibility was uploading of all the important materials only once. Then all students would have access both to this web site as well as to the information uploaded there for a long time (in terms of years). On the other hand, one of the disadvantages was that the content would be accessible to anybody, what was not what we wanted. Another from the disadvantages was the impossibility of communicating only with selected students (e.g. with a group of students or with only one particular student). But the most significant disadvantage for us was the fact that students could not effectively submit different projects and completed assignments by means of this system. That was why we decided for the other alternative solution which was to support education processes by means of a Facebook group.

Once created, a Facebook group fulfils different tasks and assignments:
   – projects and home works (given to the group by the teacher);
   – files and documents (different files as documents, publications, textbooks, lecture presentations, seminar assignments processed by students, ae uploaded for the whole group both by the teacher as well as by the individual students);
   – photos and videos;
   – references to different web sites (to either interesting pages or pages with information relevant to the particular subject matter);
   – events (the teacher creates in the group different events concerning excursions, dates of tests, exams, assignment deadlines, etc.);
   – communication (for information transfer among the members of the group, i.e. for both types of the communication either teacher – student or student – student);
   – inquiry (serves to monitor opinions of the group members).

At the beginning of the term closed Facebook groups were created for specific taught subjects. For several years we have been using this supporting tool and it only sometimes occurred that somebody did not have a Facebook account.

To have a feedback how students perceive this support of their education, whether or not they appreciate it, there was an inquiry on students` approaches to this form of education support. Research data were collected by means of a questionnaire which consisted of 21 items of both types (closed as well as open questions). The research sample consisted of 228 respondents. The processing the collected data we tried to find answers to two research questions. One research question was how the students perceive the educational support created through the social network Facebook. The second question was how they perceive this support tool in comparison with education carried out through LMS Moodle.

Research results and their discussion

Because of the limited scope hereinafter we do not deal with all 21 questionnaire items and there are presented only the main findings resulting from the inquiry, i.e. those which are the most relevant to these two research questions.

Figure 1 shows in a graphical form results of the responses to the question on which purposes the respondents use Facebook. As it is clear from the results, the dominating

answer is *communication* (97%). The next two most frequent purposes are significantly less (63% and 54%, respectively): getting *news* (pushed to them) and *education*. That is, half of the students use this social network for educational reasons. This finding has proved our assumption that Facebook should be a suitable support to enhance pedagogical communication between the teacher and student, and among the students themselves.

Apart from the purposes presented in Figure 1, respondents also identified several further purposes. These were to monitor/follow friends, to follow appointment dates, work, maintenance of Facebook fanpage, university groups, and business. However, numbers of those who declared these purposes were very small. None of these six purposes scored over 1%. What was very surprising for us was that such small percentage of respondents (<1%) mentioned, monitoring/following friends as a purpose for which they use Facebook.
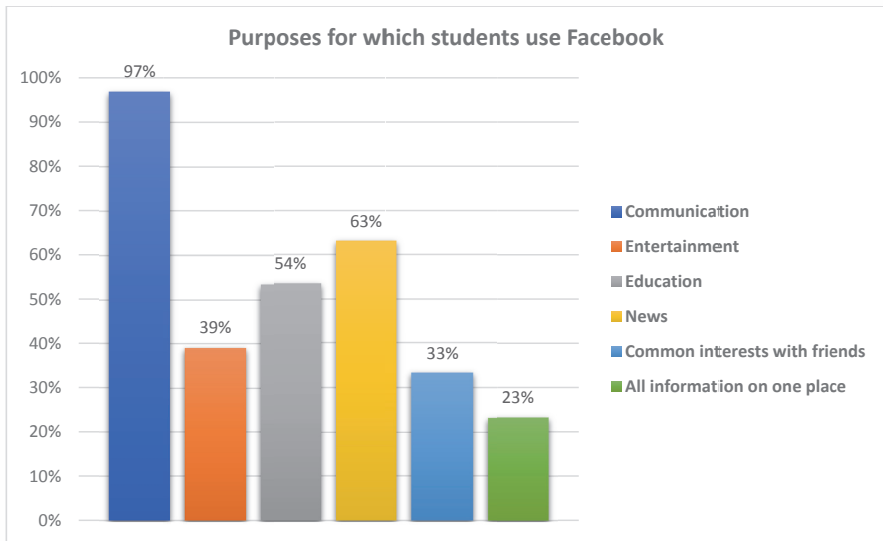

Figure 1. Results of the inquiry question for which purposes students use Facebook in general

Those respondents, who stated that they use Facebook also because of education reasons, were asked to specify the particular purposes. The results are presented in Figure 2.

As Figure 2 shows, the situation reflects that presented in Figure 1. Again, in this case the dominant reason with 93% of respondents, is *communication*, this time mutual communication of students. Communication with the teacher is the third most frequent reason of the use of Facebook (68%). The second purpose is for *homework elaboration submission* (76%). It is interesting that also in this case of the "educational purposes" of the use of Facebook, there is similar gap between the first-ranked purpose and the following two (97% - 63% - 54% vs. 93% - 76% - 68%). For respondents it was very common (56 %) to use Facebook to *upload information relevant to the taught subject*. They saw it a great advantage that they had all information they needed for the subject in one place – in the created Facebook group. If the subject finished with an exam, the students collected basic materials there for the exam (reported by 42% respondents). In general, Figure 2 clearly shows that the students lay stress on mutual communication, as well as on their communication with the teacher, and on gathering important information (materials) necessary to pass exams, or to complete the subject.
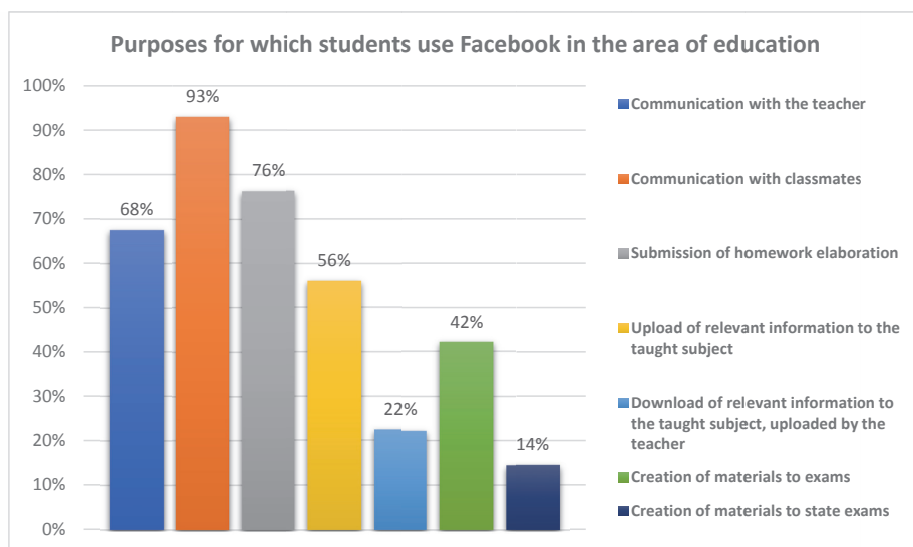
Figure 2. The education-related purposes for which students use Facebook (as a percentage of those using it for education

Within personal questioning done during administration of the questionnaire, students very often expressed that they liked this kind of teaching support and many of them liked it so much that they created their own Facebook groups for some other subjects.

The results mentioned above prove a positive perception of Facebook as an education support by students. This conclusion answers our first research question. But there have been also some further, additional findings in favour of this statement.

In a further question, the respondents were asked whether it was difficult for them to become familiar with working with Facebook. This question was not focused on the fact whether they knew to use Facebook but whether or not it was difficult for them to learn the methodology of education with the support Facebook. According to the survey results, for 40% of the respondents it was very easy, 50% considered it to be easy, for 9% it was of an average difficulty and only for a negligible number of 1% of the respondents was it difficult. Nobody stated that it would be very difficult.

These numbers correspond to the results obtained for the question on how the respondents liked the education support offered by the Facebook mans. 14% of the respondents responded that they liked it even very much, a half (50%) liked it, a third (32%) considered it in a neutral way (neither liked it nor disliked) and only (negligible) 4% stated they did not like it. Strong dislike was not recorded.

More heterogeneous answers were recorded for the question on whether the respondents would use this kind of educational support (i.e. support offered by Facebook means) to support other subjects (other than taught by us). *Definitely yes* was stated by 30% of the respondents, *rather yes* by 22% of them, *may be yes or may be no* by 20%, *rather no* by 22% and *definitely no* by 6% of the respondents. Respondents answering positively were additionally asked to state which subjects they would propose to support in this way. The most frequent response to this item was that they would appreciate to have support for all subjects in this way (39% of the answers). While the answers support the positive perception of this education support by students in a direct way, this result proves it in an

indirect way. Due to a high heterogeneity (in terms of their study fields) of the students, this views were strengthened by a very large scope of the subjects which teaching they would like to have supported in this. Foreign languages and mother tongue (both above 10%) and subjects connected with the ICT issue (7%) scored highly.

With respect to further improvement of the created education support system the students were asked on the one hand to state the disadvantages of Facebook education support system, and on the other hand to propose what or how the system should be improved.

As to the disadvantages, 54% of the respondents had not been aware of any imperfections of the system based on Facebook. But they see a problem in that not every student has a Facebook account (stated by 10% of the respondents). Almost 10% of the respondents would welcome more teachers having their Facebook profiles. Another problem stated was the disturbing influence or impact of Facebook during the education processes. This was stated by the students but also perceived by teachers, too (and not only by the authors, but by teachers in general. See the note in the introduction on the social media as the reason of the students` low attention during classes at school). As Facebook is not intended for education purposes, some disturbing influences can have negative impacts on education processes. But this is considered to be a problem only by 8% of the respondents: not a markedly significant number in this context.

As to the students` proposals how to improve or what should be improved in the education support system that was created, 40% of the respondents would not change anything and 26% offered no views. But the disadvantages mentioned here were suggestions to increase the numbers of teachers on Facebook and at the same time to broaden mutual pedagogical communication with the teachers (12% and 11% respectively).

As the results of the inquiry on the education system created on the basis of Facebook show, students appreciate very much the aspect of mutual communication, mainly pedagogical communication with teachers (Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011). They wish that more teachers were in contact and communicated with them through such a system. In our opinion this results from the fact that communication through social nets is completely normal for students, and quite logically they appreciate this way of communication with teachers. But on the other hand, currently there are still not too many teachers, who would prefer this new communication mean over e-mail.

Our second research question was how the students perceive Facebook as an education support tool in comparison with education support carried out through LMS Moodle.

Not all the respondents participating in our inquiry on students` approaches to the education support system created by us on the Facebook platform had had previous experiences with education support based on the use of LMS Moodle. That was why the respondents of the inquiry were asked whether they had or had not such previous experiences and only those who had were asked to compare some selected aspects of the work with these two systems, i.e. the education support system based on Facebook and the education support system based on LMS Moodle. From the total number of 228 respondents to the inquiry 139 had no experiences with Moodle while only 89 had some. These 89 respondents were asked to express a level of their agreement or disagreement with following statements:

– Moodle is easier to use than Facebook.
– Facebook is more transparent than Moodle.
– To learn to work with Facebook was faster than with Moodle.
– There are more possibilities/ways to use Moodle than Facebook.
– to support education, Facebook is better.
– In most of the taught subjects Facebook as an education support would be sufficient.

To express the level of their agreement or disagreement, following scale was used:
– I totally agree
– I agree
– Neither agree nor disagree
– I disagree
– I totally disagree
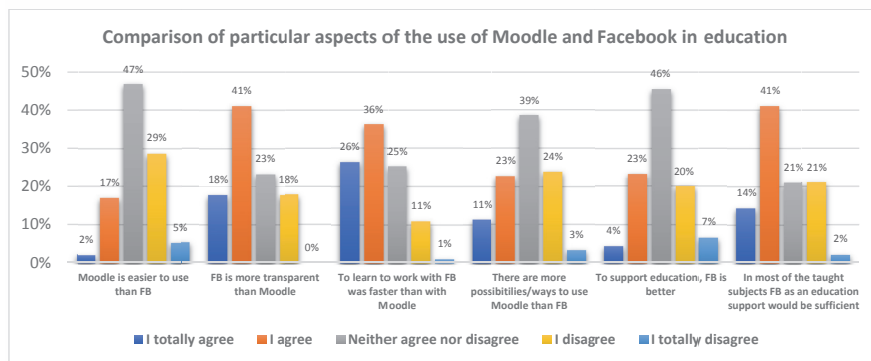Results of this part of the questionnaire survey are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Comparison of particular aspects of the use of Moodle and Facebook in education

As Figure 3 shows, there is a significant group of respondents for which it does not matter whether they work with a system based on Facebook or Moodle (each statement evaluation *neither agree nor disagree*). But aside from this group and its neutral statements, the rest of the total measures of agreement (total sums of *I totally agree + I agree*) or disagreement (total sums of *I totally disagree + I disagree*) are in favour of Facebook.

Conclusion

Social networks have become one of the most important communication means. However, many teachers and teacher educators have remained uncertain about how to meaningfully integrate this technology into education or how to assess its impacts (Greenhow, 2011; Halverson, 2011). Paradoxically the horrible pandemic, which we are facing, also helps us to discover different possibilities and the real potential of these means. We all are forced to transform our pedagogical activities, and according to our previous (pre-pandemic) experiences Facebook is a tool which can be used as an addition to formal educational settings (Kolychalov & Pushkareva, 2018). A primary reason to adopt it is because it is familiar to almost everybody and also because it does not cost and requires minimal training.

Our experiences with the use of Facebook as a mean of support for education in higher education institutions prove that this tool mainly supports communication, but here it is important to stress that we mean pedagogical communication. At the beginning the intention was only to simplify communication of teachers with students to enhance the transfer of study sources to the target groups of students with no need to instruct students how to utilize the support systems we created. That was why we decided to use Facebook as a platform for the system. For all students Facebook is more or less a natural environment in which they are used to move and moreover in which they feel comfortable. Thus, they get accustomed to use the Facebook environment as a support tool to education very quickly. An added value was that the students also get accustomed to use Facebook

environment as a support tool with respect to their own education activities, either individual (personal) or group activities. Some might argue that our intention could also have been achieved by implementing another application into the developed system. As to this, the findings presented in connection to the second research question speak in favour of our choice of Facebook as a platform for the education support system.

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