ERD 2021
9th International Conference Education, Reflection, Development

THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ONLINE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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Abstract

In recent years expressions such as" social media" or" social network" is very often part of our daily vocabulary. They usually refer to various platforms, Internet based, where several communities of users may enter and interact with other users. These social networks are part of the global phenomenon, called Web 2.0. Among the most popular networks, according to their popularity reflected in the number of active users per month, we mention: Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Messenger and Instagram. In this paper we will refer to the use of social media, implicit social networks, in the online learning and teaching process by investigating what is the main use of these in the interactions that teachers have with their students, but also which networks are chosen by them in this process. Thus, we intent to investigate the integration of social networks in the teaching-learning process during online learning. As a tool for investigation, we developed a survey of 10 questions that was completed by 700 teachers from pre university school level.

Keywords: Online teaching, social media, social networks

1. Introduction

Social media involves several social networks which are virtual environments created specifically to mediate the daily interaction between people with similar interests to inform each other about various information, share the latest news or simply socialize.

The young population is a massive consumer of such networks, using them to share various content relevant to them with friends and colleagues or **to chat online with them (Wang et al.**, 2018). The age at which young people are eligible to create an account on a social network (Facebook, Instagram) is 13 years, but the number of real users under this age is quite numerous. It is estimated that over 7.5 million children under the age of 13 have Facebook accounts, some of which were created with the modified year of birth. Many of the accounts were created with parental support or consent (Consumer Reports, 2011).

Among the most popular networks, according to their popularity reflected in the number of active users per month, we mention: Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Messenger, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Snapchat, LinkedIn and Pinterest. The TikTok platform was in massive growth in popularity among young people in Romania, in 2020.

According to Influencer Marketing Hub, in 2019 there were around 2.77 billion people worldwide using social networks. According to a statistical study conducted in the first quarter of 2020, Facebook is accessed daily by over 1.7 billion active users, and monthly accesses to this platform are made by over 2.6 billion users. YouTube has over 2 billion users a month who watch over 250 million hours a day of content of this application (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2021).

Since 2008 with the advent of Facebook and until now, this online social space has registered over 2.6 billion users. As a reference for increasing their number worldwide, in 2014 there were about 1.6 million users, and in 2020 the number of permanent users increased to 1.8 billion (Iqbal, 2021). In Romania, in November 2020, there were around 11 million active Facebook accounts.

2. Problem Statement

For young children and youth, social media is perceived more as a time-consuming activity rather than a positive learning environment. The mission of teachers who want the harmonious integration of these applications in the classroom is to effectively direct the use of that time that pupils or students inevitably spend on these networks. Because part of the target audience of these platforms is made up of pupils or students, undoubtedly these networks have been integrated into learning, either offline, face to face, by approaching Blended Learning strategies, or online, recently, due to the obvious shift of mass of the school in virtual environments.

We anticipate that the value of using technology in education, more specifically online instructional tools, did not decrease with the physical return of students to school, as the long-term benefits they have in the normal context of face-to-face school operation cannot be neglected. The advantages for these environments especially created to support instructive-educational activities are valuable, regardless of the conditions imposed by the school context. We consider remarkable the visible transition -especially the one that Facebook has made- from the initial goal of supporting the connection

and communication between people, to the implicit mission that it has defined during 2020: to be the most popular environment for hosting educational events, conferences, workshops etc., by making numerous professional connections, which, in a context prior to the 2020 pandemic, would not have been accessible to the specialized public and those interested in the educational dimension of virtual social media. We refer here to everything that involves educational content or related to education (Catalano, 2021).

3. Research Questions

Do teachers use social network platforms for teaching purposes? Do they know the advantages of integrating some of their functionalities in the online lesson? Have they managed to access the facilities that these platforms offer?

4. Purpose of the Study

In the present study, we investigated the extent to which pre university level teachers chose to use social networks in online learning-teaching activities. We considered the most popular social networks, according to the number of registered users: Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and Instagram. With these questions we wanted to identify the extent to which social networks are perceived only as content providers or as content develop platforms. We aimed to follow the inclusion of the social networks in teachers' online activities and to make a quick preview of the face-to-face classroom, already happening when sharing the survey in the teachers' communities.

5. Research Methods

For our finding study, the investigation method was a questionnaire-based survey. We developed a questionnaire with 10 items, from which we tried to find out if teachers use social networks in the classroom. The survey had closed questions with one or more answer questions, at the choice respondents' choice. The questionnaire was developed by us, on the Google Docs platform and distributed online on some of the Facebook groups of teachers. The Google Docs link was also directed to some school principals to be distributed further to teachers. The questionnaire was developed by us in Romanian for the community of pre university teachers in Romania and translated into English for this paper.

The first item of the questionnaire was meant to record the level of schooling the respondents teach (Preschool, Primary, Secondary or High School)- single choice.

The second item was about the use of social networks in the online activities within the teaching process (as an integrated platform in the classroom)- single choice.

For the third question, we aimed to identify the way to integrate (or lack thereof) these social networks in online lessons, rather than to watch existing content (videos, posts), to develop original content (videos, class, group, discipline pages) or none of these- single choice.

In the content of the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh question, we sought to identify the way to integrate in the online lessons the platforms targeted by our investigation (Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and Instagram)- multiple choice.

Question number eight and question number nine were aimed at identifying the most used way of communication in the online learning period between teachers, students, and their parents- single choice.

The last item of the survey referred to the intention of teachers to integrate social networks in face-to-face learning, not just online- single choice.

6.   Findings

As it can see in Figure 1, exactly 700 teachers answered this survey. The questionnaire was written in Romanian and applied to teachers in Romania.
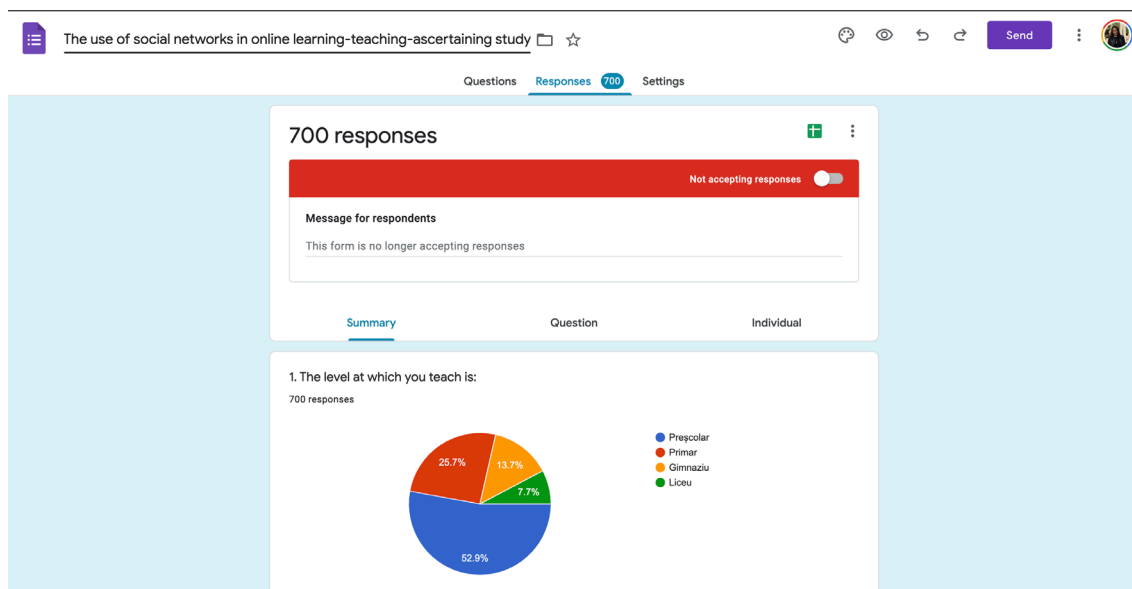

Figure 1. A preview of the survey response page

At the first question we identified the school level that the respondents are teaching, and they are distributed as follows: Preschool- 52,9%- 370 answers, Primary- 25,7%-180 answers, Secondary-13,7%-96 answers, and High School-7,7%-54 answers. More than half of the teachers who answered are from preschool, so we consider that this category was receptive to our request or to be involved in this investigative study. The answers are summarized by ranks, in percentages, below in Table 1.

Table 1.   Question number 1- single choice

The school level at which you teach is:	Rank	%
Preschool	1	52.9
Primary	2	25.7
Secondary	3	13.7
High School	4	7.7

For the second question related to the most used social platform, the participants chose WhatsApp as preference: 52,4 %- 367, YouTube- 23,4%- 167, Facebook -17,7%- 124, Instagram- 0 and 6,4%- 45- they did not use platforms or social networks in online teaching. Because the most voted network was WhatsApp, we tend to believe that the first idea for including social media in teaching was concerned with the way we make and keep connections fast and easy with pupils and their parents. On the opposite level, with 0 votes, it is Instagram, the less popular in online classroom, but in fact very popular among young pupils. The answers are summarized by ranks, in percentages, below in Table 2.

Table 2. Question number 2- single choice

In the online activities carried out in the previous period, you used the following social network the most in the teaching process (as an integrated platform in the classroom):	Rank	%
WhatsApp	1	52.4
YouTube	2	23.4
Facebook	3	17.7
Instagram	5	0
I did not use platforms or social networks	4	6.4

For the third question -about the way the social networks are integrated in online classroom- we received the following answers: 35,3% -247 use the social platforms just to watch the existing content, 33,3%- 233 use it to develop original content- videos, class, group, discipline pages, 25%-125 use the social platforms for both (to follow the existent content and to create the original one) and 6,4%-45 they don't use them at all. The answers are summarized by ranks, in percentages, below in Table 3.

Table 3. Question number 3- single choice

You have integrated social networks in your learning-teaching activities, rather for:	Rank	%
To watch existing content (videos, posts)	1	35.3
To develop original content (videos, class, group, discipline pages)	2	33.3
To watch existing content and to create original content	3	25
You have not integrated social networks into teaching activities	4	6.4

Through question number four we intended to identify the different kind of uses of the Facebook facilities during the online teaching period. Thus, most of the teachers use Facebook to follow online educational events (courses, workshops, conferences) - 55,7%- 390, then to communicate with colleagues from professional educational groups- 33,9%- 237 or to create pages or groups for classes, groups, or disciplines- 30,9%- 216 and 25,3%- 177 don't use Facebook for teaching purposes. The answers are summarized by ranks, in percentages, below in Table 4.

Table 4. Question number 4- multiple choice

During the online teaching period, you used the Facebook facilities:	Rank	%
To follow educational events (courses, workshops, conferences) online	1	55.7
To create pages or groups for your class, group, or discipline		
To communicate with colleagues from professional educational groups	2	33.9

You did not use Facebook for teaching purposes	3	30.09
	4	23.3

With the fifth item of the survey, we wanted to investigate the way in which the facilities of one of the most popular platforms, YouTube, are used. Watching already existing videos integrated in the online activity/lesson was the preferred answer, so 83,3%-585 of the teachers chose that variant. 27,2%- 190 teachers opted for the elaboration of videos for didactic purposes, 6,3%- 44 teachers responded positive for the option of making videos with the support of students or children and 4,35%- 30 teachers answered positive for the option to create a class, group, or discipline channel. A small percentage, 3,6%-25 of the respondents never used YouTube for education purpose. The answers are summarized by ranks, in percentages, below in Table 5.

Table 5. Question number 5-multiple choice

During the online teaching period, you used the YouTube facilities to:	Rank	%
Watching already published videos integrated in the online activity / lesson	1	83.3
	2	27.2
Elaboration of videos for didactic purposes	3	6.3
Creating a class, group, or discipline channel		
Making videos with the support of students or children	4	4.35
You did not use YouTube for teaching purposes	5	3.6

For question number six, regarding the use of the most popular social platform, WhatsApp, in order to communicate in the online teaching period, 79,8%- 558 of the teachers chose the first option: communicating with students /parents using the Chat function. The second choice of the respondents was about the distribution of learning-teaching materials using the Chat function, preferred by the 49,2%- 344. The use of the Video function to stream recorded activities or lessons had a percentage of 21,5%- 150 respondents and for the use of the Video function to stream live activities or lessons we got 11,3% -79 answers. A small percentage, 8,4%-59, did not use WhatsApp/Messenger for teaching purposes. The answers are summarized by ranks, in percentages, below in Table 6.

Table 6. Question number 6-multiple choice

During the online teaching period, you used the WhatsApp facilities to:	Rank	%
Communicating with students / parents using the Chat function	1	79.8
Distribution of learning-teaching materials using the Chat function	2	49.2
Use the Video function to stream recorded activities or lessons	3	21.5
Use the Video function to stream live activities or lessons	4	11.3
You did not use WhatsApp/Messenger for teaching purposes	5	8.4

The item number seven refers to the features of Instagram the teachers use during the online teaching activities. That platform is the last popular for didactic purpose. Thus, 88,9%-622 of respondents do not use Instagram for teaching purposes. However, 7%- 49, use the platform to follow educational events (courses, workshops, conferences) online, 5,9%-4 to follow professional educational pages and 2,6%-18 use Instagram to create pages or groups for your class, group, or discipline. The answers are summarized by ranks, in percentages, below in Table 7.

Table 7. Question number 7- multiple choice

During the online teaching period, you used the Instagram facilities:	Rank	%
To follow educational events (courses, workshops, conferences) online	2	7
To create pages or groups for your class, group, or discipline	4	2.6
To follow professional educational pages	3	5.9
You did not use Instagram for teaching purposes	1	88.9

The question number eight, regarding the communication between teacher, students or parents during the online school period received the following answers: the most used way to keep in touch was by WhatsApp/Messenger- 82,9%-580, then SMS/Phone- 9,6%-67, E-mail-5,4%- 58- and 2.1%- 15 have not set a clear channel of communication between teacher, students, and parents. The answers are summarized by ranks, in percentages, below in Table 8.

Table 8. Question number 8- single choice

The communication between you, students or parents during the online school period was mainly facilitated by:	Rank	%
WhatsApp/Messenger	1	82.9
SMS/Phone	2	9.6
Email	3	5.4
We have not set a clear channel of communication	4	2.1

The ninth question was about the same communication channel, but in a face-to-face version of the school. Most of the respondents still find the WhatsApp chat function very useful even after returning in offline mode to the classroom- 58, 9%- 412, but 33,3%- 233 of the responding teachers keep only face to face communication mode, 3%-21 select SMS/Phone, 2,7% -19 still have not set a clear channel of communication and 2,1 %- 15 select Email as the main communication channel. The answers are summarized by ranks, in percentages, below in Table 9.

Table 9. Q question number 9- single choice

After returning to face-to-face teaching, you continued to communicate with students on:	Rank	%
WhatsApp/Messenger	1	58.9
SMS/Phone	3	3
Email	5	2.1
Exclusive face to face	2	33.3
We have not set a clear channel of communication	4	2.7

The last question of the survey aimed at the intention of the teachers to maintain the integration of social platforms in teaching activities after returning to face-to-face teaching. Hence, 65,3% - 456 of teachers want to keep it in the classroom, 20,6%- 144 haven't decided yet and 14%- 98 do not want to integrate the social networks in face-to-face classroom. The answers are summarized by ranks, in percentages, below in Table 10.

Table 10. Question number 10- single choice

After returning to face-to-face teaching, you anticipate that you will want to integrate social networks / platforms into teaching activities:	Rank	%
Yes	1	65.3
No	3	14
I don't know	2	20.6

Through this survey we intended to follow the way of using the social network facilities in the online lesson, but we also wanted to find out about the teacher's intention to integrate them in the offline classroom. The teachers responded to the questionnaire quickly and easy, and we managed to collect data quite accurately and in short time.

The headlines of our investigation are focussed on the following issues:

1. The star of all social networks use in online learning-teaching activities is WhatsApp (52.4% of respondent teachers chose WhatsApp as preferred network)

2. The most common way to communicate in online school mode is the Chat function of WhatsApp (favourite also in offline teaching mode)

3. YouTube is the most used network for the content, and it is the second favourite among teachers

4. The Facebook facility most used by teachers was the follow-up of educational events

5. The less preferred social network for educational purposes is Instagram, despite of its big popularity on the social media.

7. Conclusion

Monitoring and analysing the data presented above, we summarize the following conclusions: most of the responding teachers use WhatsApp only for communication, less to stream recorded or live activities or lessons by video function; YouTube is used to watch the existing content, rather than develop new original videos and Facebook is mainly used to track some events, professional pages or to chat with pairs, more than to create their own content or pages for the classes. We presume that the lack of popularity for Instagram in online classroom is given by some limitations of the features, mainly because it is a mobile based network and chat function is not that approachable like others, the visual content is not always that easily to distribute like videos on YouTube and that network is basically 100% perceived like social media with no educational functionalities. However, Instagram can also be used effectively at the classroom level. This allows you to create a class account, or a dedicated page. The visual component of this platform is extremely attractive, and it is recommended that we use this asset on this platform. Even if the pupils, so-called digital natives, can use social networks for personal communication and entertainment purposes, they do not always manage to exploit the real dimension of social networks as a strategic tool for professional development (Addyson-Zhang, 2017).

Following the opinions of teachers who answered our questionnaire, we conclude that there was an integration of social networks in the online lesson, only that this blending was done rather randomly, not

necessarily analysing the facilities that popularity of a social network offers for real. The good news is, however, that many teachers (33.3%) use the social media networks to develop original content.

In our opinion the big challenge for the educators is to involve the children and the pupils in the process of building social network based original content by creating different pages for their classes, making videos for didactic purpose, editing educational posts and so on. Many of our children spend so many hours on social media, among many networks and it is so important to do something practical with that time, not let it waste and transform the big scary wolf aka. social networks for kids into a safe and fun virtual learning environment. The mission for the teachers is to learn to use properly all the features of the networks themselves and then to work using those with their students. Educators can launch a series of activities especially designed for these applications: conducting individual or group work topics, developing posts dedicated to topics of interest by discipline or general interest (we can invite students to identify current topics or to challenge each other with different curiosities in the fields of study), generating discussions specific to the chosen topics, etc. Practically, choosing to bring social networks in online teaching-learning or even face-to-face will stimulate the learning activities to be more dynamic.

We state that the victory of teachers in the process of integrating social networks in lessons will be obvious when students go on that social platforms or pages from "Scrolling through ..." to "Spotting it"). We believe that at the level of this change of emphasis, effective learning would take place (Catalano, 2021).

If they are properly used, social networks could positively influence the way students learn and process information in the classroom. Incorporating social media into a traditional learning environment can challenge students to explore their creativity, encourage them to work harder and be more involved.

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