

## **Disaster Preparedness: the use of social media for academic information during the COVID-19 pandemic by new entrants of the Faculty of Dental Sciences at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.**

**Dharmarathne, W.G.A.**

ajanthad@pdn.ac.lk

### **Abstract**

*The shift to online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on educational institutions worldwide, including those in developing countries. In response, many educators and institutions turned to social media sites and other digital tools to continue delivering education and sustaining the learning process. The present study attempts to examine the way of using social media by the new entrants to the Faculty of Dental Sciences of the University of Peradeniya, specifically for the information requirements relating to their academic programs during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The study was undertaken at the Library of the Faculty of Dental Sciences during the orientation program conducted for the new entrants. Even though 117 students registered in the academic year 2022/2023, only 112 students participated in the survey. An online questionnaire was used as the main data-gathering tool. Findings indicated that WhatsApp, Facebook, and Research Gate were the widely used social media platforms by Dental Science undergraduates during the COVID-19 Pandemic specifically for academic purposes. Sixty-five percent of them (65%) used social media for searching Scientific and academic information related to their subject matters. The major positive impact perceived by the students was that social media helps them to maintain better relationships with their friends; however, at the same time, they believe social media behavior is quite a time-consuming matter. While social media has the potential for educational purposes, the findings indicate that a significant number of students (35%) are not aware of its importance and potential for educational activities. The majority of responded seem to*

*pripritize the use of social media for entertainment rather than for accessing seem to prioritize the use of social media for entertainment rather than for accessing educational content or features available on these platforms. Based on these findings, it may be beneficial for educational institutions and policymakers in Sri Lanka to explore ways to promote the educational potential of social media platforms among students.*

**Keywords:** *Social Media, COVID 19, Undergraduates, Dental Sciences, Sri Lanka, University.*

## **Introduction**

Social media or social networking sites have been performing a pivotal role in making changes in every aspect of human life in the modern information world. According to Boyd and Ellison (2008), social network sites are profile-based websites that allow users to maintain social relationships by viewing, visiting, and sharing their lists of social connections with other members. As Hamade (2013) explored these sites can be used for work-related issues, personal issues, romantic relationships, and shared interests such as music, arts, sports, politics, etc. As of today, social media has become a part of many people's everyday lives. It is fair to say that this situation became more acute during the COVID-19 epidemic. The COVID-19 pandemic indeed had a profound impact on the higher education system worldwide. As a result of the pandemic, many countries and institutions had to rapidly transition to online and remote learning to ensure the safety of students and educators. Due to the sudden and unprecedented emergence of COVID-19, libraries are also forced to choose better alternatives to continue their services similar to other service-oriented organizations (Dharmarathne,2022). Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to examine the way of using Social Networking Sites for academic information during the COVID-19 Pandemic by new entrants in the

faculty of Dental Sciences, University of Peradeniya. The specific objectives are to find out the extent of use of different social networking sites by new entrants in the faculty of Dental Science specifically for academic information during the COVID-19 pandemic, to examine ways of communication that they had with peers using social media platforms to share academic information, to identify the positive and negative impacts of social media as perceived by Dental undergraduates. Though this is an emerging and sudden phenomenon in the modern information world, limited studies have been undertaken in the Sri Lankan context to examine the use of social media during the COVID-19 Pandemic by undergraduates of the university system in Sri Lanka.

### **Materials and Methods**

All new entrants registered in the academic year 2022/2023 of Faculty of Dental Sciences, University of Peradeniya were selected for the study. In order to obtain forthright, independent, and anonymous answers, a three-page structured questionnaire created using Google Forms was administered among the sample during their library orientation program conducted in February 2022. Even though there were 84 female and 33 male students registered in the Dental Science library, only 112 new entrants participated in the library orientation program. Therefore, the final study sample comprised 112 respondents. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was used to get frequencies, percentages, tabulations, and other statistical measures.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Demographic Information and Response Rate**

Since all administered online questionnaires could be collected at the end of the program, the response rate was 100%. Of the one hundred and twelve respondents (112) , eighty (71.42%) were female and thirty-two (28.57%) were male. The majority of the students (90.7%) were in the 21-24 age group and rest of them (9.3%) were in the 17-20 age group.

### **Availability of User Accounts on Social Media Platforms**

Respondents were asked whether they have user accounts on social networking sites. Results show that WhatsApp was the vast majority used social media platform (90%) whereas Facebook (80%) rated as the second most favorite site by Dental Science undergraduates. Research Gate (45%), LinkedIn (37.3%), Twitter (18.7%) and Instagram (16%) were in the third level of favorite sites. Availability of user accounts on Twitter (2.6%) and Myspace (1.3%) was very low. Apart from the above, all students were instructed by the faculty to maintain a Zoom user account. All undergraduates had to engage in online education via this social media platform during the CORONA outbreak. None of the respondents had an account on Flickr. Accordingly, WhatsApp and Facebook were the most popular social media platforms among the Dental Science new entrants in the academic year 2022/23. In terms of privacy and security of their accounts, 80% of respondents maintained controlled accounts. Only authorized friends and relatives can view these accounts. However, 20% of respondents expressed that they are not concerned about the privacy and security of their accounts, which means anybody can view and post on their accounts without prior

permission and restrictions. The majority (62.3%) of the sample expressed that they have not included their parents in the fans list but 37.7% mentioned that they have retained their parents.

### **Frequency of Opening and Posting on Social Media Accounts**

Sixty percent (60%) of respondents open their accounts daily while 22.7% frequently visit their accounts within a day. Twelve percent (12%) open their accounts once a week and 5.3% open accounts in once every other day. With regard to posting on social media accounts, 58.7% of respondents said that they do post on their accounts rarely. Twenty-four percent (24%) of respondents post once a week. Ten point seven percent (10.7%) of respondents post on their accounts once a day while only 1.3% of the respondents post many times a day. However, 2.7% expressed that they don't like to post on their accounts.

### **Purpose of Using Social Media**

Majority of new entrants in the faculty of Dental Sciences used social media for entertaining purposes (81%). Sixty-five percent of them (65%) used social media for searching the Scientific and academic information related to their subject matters. Another 24% of members like to view sports related information on social media. Twenty percent (20%) of the respondents used social media for accessing the local and foreign news, current affairs etc. while another 5% of respondents liked to access political and business information through social media.

### **Using Social Media for Information / Academic Purposes**

It was expected to examine the way of using social network sites for information activities specifically for the academic purpose by the new

entrants in Faculty of Dental sciences during the CORONA Outbreak. For this, 65% members expressed that they had been extensively used social media for searching information relating to their academic programs. However 35% of respondents said that they had not an idea about using social media for academic information. Some of the respondents had used social media for certain educational activities during their A/L examination period. Of the respondents who used Social Media for academic information, 44% had used the YouTube for viewing video clips related to their subject matters. Thirty-two percent (32%) of students had used online chat consoles eg; Messenger on Facebook, WhatsApp for discussing the educational and subject matters with peers. Twenty-one percent (21%) of them used social media to exchange the handouts, study notes and assignments etc. with their friends. Four percent (4%) of respondents used social media for making video calls for academic purposes and 4% used it as a platform to exchange ideas with their teachers and tutors eg; Messenger on Facebook and WhatsApp.

### **Positive and Negative Impacts of Social Media**

The survey provides insights into how respondents perceive the positive and negative impacts of social media. Among the key findings; A significant majority, 88%, of respondents believe that social media helps them maintain better relationships with their friends. 43% of respondents view social media as a good platform for maintaining better relationships with family and close relatives. A notable 32% of respondents positively use social media to get involved in social activities. This could include joining groups or participating in events related to shared interests or causes. About 16% of respondents engage

in cultural activities through their social media accounts. A smaller percentage, 6%, of respondents believes that they can be involved in political activities through social media. The most significant negative impact identified by respondents is that 66% of them believe that maintaining social media accounts is time-consuming. Approximately 28% of respondents believe that social media behavior adversely affects their ability to focus on their studies. This implies that social media can be a distraction from academic responsibilities for a substantial portion of respondents. A smaller 4% of respondents indicated that social media is one of the reasons for the breakdown of their social relationships.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Most new entrants in the faculty of Dental Science of University of Peradeniya have a good understanding and adequate awareness of how to use social media. They are familiar with the platforms and their functionalities. Similar to many other countries, certain social media platforms are popular among young adults in Sri Lanka. This was further confirmed by the findings of this study. While social media has the potential for educational purposes, the findings indicate that a relatively significant number of students (35%) are not aware of its importance and potential for educational activities. According to findings, many students primarily use social media for entertainment and recreation. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when alternative information sources were needed, it appears that social media was not widely recognized or utilized for educational purposes by students. The majority of respondents seem to prioritize the use of social media for entertainment rather than for accessing educational content or features available on these platforms. Based on these findings, it may be

beneficial for educational institutions and policy makers in Sri Lanka to explore ways to promote the educational potential of social media platforms among students. This could involve initiatives to raise awareness of available educational resources and encourage their use for learning purposes. Additionally, understanding which specific social media platforms are popular among students can inform targeted educational strategies and interventions.

### **References:**

Boyd, D.M. and Ellison, N.B. (2008). Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship, *Journal of Computer-mediated Communications*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 210-230.

Dharmarathne, A. (Sept-Dec.2021). Social media as a tool of library marketing's brief review on experiences of selected countries in Asia. *University of Peradeniya Library Newsletter*,01(03), pp.14-16. Available at : <http://www.lib.pdn.ac.lk/library-newsletters/vol-1-issue-3.pdf>

Hamade, S.N. (2013). Perception and use of social networking sites among university students, *Library Review*, Vol. 62, No 6/7, pp. 388 – 397.