

LIM Education and Collaboration among the Developing Countries: An Overview of Opportunities and Barriers in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract:

The use of social media has taken all walks of life by storm. It provides ample opportunities to connect and collaborate with one's peers regardless of their locations. The intelligent use of social media brings various opportunities to improve collaboration among academics at individual, organizational, national and international level. It is generally assumed that formal collaborations are not common among developing countries, let alone among various schools within a developing country such as Pakistan. Social media's (Facebook, Twitter, Skype, etc.) reach is not limited to developed country, rather it is catching up to its popularity in terms of usage in developing countries as well. It is important to leverage social media to foster collaboration and connectivity and therefore, to improve the quality of LIM education. Under this background, it is important to identify the opportunities offered by the social media and the ways that these opportunities may be used to propel collaboration. Furthermore, it is equally important to identify the barriers on the ways of collaboration and connection despite widespread availability and access to social media.

The paper is based on literature review, personal observations, experience as head from 2009-2018 of the oldest and leading school of Pakistan, and interactions with the international professional community of the first author. Furthermore, interviews from the selected members of eight other schools in Pakistan were also conducted to get their opinions on the subject matter. Findings indicate that the social media provides ample opportunities to form successful collaboration among schools and faculties in developing countries. However, lack of willingness, visionary leadership, cultural and political differences are some serving as impeding factors in this regard. The identification of the

opportunities and barriers may provide a map for developing meaningful collaboration among the developing countries using social media. There is a dire need of developing faculty's ICTs skills and inculcate the value of collaborations. The mutual exchange of expertise will help in reducing the gaps in term of curriculum development, its implementation and research quality among schools of developing countries.

Key Words: Collaboration; Collaboration in developing countries; faculty collaboration; research collaboration; collaboration and social media.

Introduction

The social media environment is characterized by “interactivity”, “user generated content”, and “multidirectional communication flows”. The transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 to 3.0 is tremendous. It has shifted “one-way conversation” to a real-time “multi-way conversation,” in which users participate as both creators and consumers of web content (Hudson, 2010). The use of social media has taken all walks of life by storm due to its feature of interactivity. It is used for social networking through various interactive applications such as Facebook, Blogs, YouTube, Wiki, Instagram, SnapChat, WhatsApp, Twitter, etc. It provides ample opportunities to connect and collaborate with one's peers regardless of their physical locations. The popularity of social media, both in personal and professional life, is due to its ease of use, real-time nature of interactions, and economical cost of communication between individuals and groups. The present study uses the general term of social media for all type of options available.

The social media is being used in higher education in the developing countries actively for collaborative teaching, learning and research. Several studies have identified the positive use of social media in the process of collaborative learning, communication and social interaction for academic purposes in higher education (Anderson & Rainie, 2012; Bercovici, 2010; Larusson & Alterman, 2009; Novak, Razzouk & Johnson, 2012). A review of the literature reveals that several aspects of social media in relation to higher education have been explored, such as its use by faculty, student engagement in social media and their academic performance (Al-Rahmi & Othman, 2013; Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Chen & Bryer, 2012; Junco, 2012; and Yang, Wang, Woo, & Quek, 2011). The use of social media to promote international collaboration and partnership among academic libraries is another area and addressed the difficulties, benefits and challenges of forming such collaborations (Atkins, Smith & Dewey, 2005; Sun & Puterbaugh, 2013; Tay, 2012). Simons, Ocepek and Barker (2016) have established the need of integrating contents related to the social media into an MLIS curriculum by analyzing the increasingly emerging social media related tasks of information professionals.

The intelligent use of social media brings various opportunities to improve collaboration among academics at both individual and organizational level regarding any aspect of LIM education. Still, it is observed that formal collaborations are not common among developing countries. Rather, not within a country among various schools such as in Pakistan where each school is working almost in an isolation.

The present study is aimed at identifying the opportunities and barriers on the way of collaboration despite the popularity and expansion of social media in the developing countries, taking evidence from literature, long experience of the first author and interviews from faculty members of various schools in Pakistan.

Literature Review

The idea of collaboration has gained popularity among LIM schools of the developed world to respond to the challenges of globalization, multiculturalism and rapid technological progress. The schools in the USA and Europe are actively engaged in joint projects to address the emerging challenges of globalization, to reorient, transform and strengthen the curriculum and course contents of their academic programs (Blumer, Hennies & Schneider, 2014; Cronin, 2007; Foo, Khoo, Chaudhry & Majid, 2006; Kajberg, 2009; Virkus, 2008). However, there is limited evidence in the literature particularly discussing the use of social media to promote national, regional and international collaboration in LIM education.

LIM education in the developing countries of Africa and Asia share various challenges which include low funding, shortage of faculty, absence of political will, weak professional associations, absence of accreditation, less effective quality assurance systems, inadequate physical and technological infrastructure. However, an urge for collaboration and partnership to meet these challenges and to avail opportunities generated by e-environment is obvious. However, the collaboration among schools in developing countries was largely found informal (Al-Suqri, Saleem & Gharieb, 2012; Foo, Khoo, Chaudhry & Majid, 2006; Ocholla, 2008; Ocholla & Bothma, 2007; Okello-Obura & Kigongo-Bukenya, 2011). Ocholla (2008) has reported that collaborative projects in LIS education were rare, and largely informal in African region. He opined that developing successful collaborations and partnerships required visionary leadership, commitment and involvement that was missing on the part of both organization (the schools) and individual (faculty).

Lin (2004) has reviewed the possibilities and challenges of collaboration in East Asia highlighting the significance of discussion groups and other channels in promoting collaboration on the structure and contents of LIS programs and curriculum among educational institutions. Foo, Khoo, Chaudhry and Majid (2006) have discussed various initiatives for potential collaboration and partnership among LIS educators in the Asia Pacific region. These areas included, “hosting and participating in workshops, symposiums and conferences; implementing a portal for education; developing a repository of learning objects and resources; assuring quality through accreditation; and promoting and sustaining research and scholarship”. Chaudhry (2007) has discussed the possibilities of various collaborative projects in LIS education in Southeast Asia including an accreditation scheme for ensuring quality educational programs, a plan for developing a repository to facilitate the sharing of teaching materials and faculty development. Ameen (2014) found the lack of collaboration at national and regional level among South Asian schools as one of the top-rated challenges.

The literature has reported a lack of collaboration among developing countries and has not addressed specifically the use of social media for collaboration. However, Sun and Puterbaugh (2013) have mentioned that social media can play an important role in planning, initiation, successful implementation and sustainability of international and regional collaborative projects.

In the local literature, a few studies discussing primarily LIM education indicate a lack of collaboration as one of the challenges in the field. During the recent years, a few collaborative activities were noted in the form of training workshops, seminars and conferences jointly organized by library associations, libraries and LIM schools within the country (Ullah, 2016). It has been reported that such collaborations were mostly limited to single activity or event. There is a little evidence from the literature about the existence of

any formal collaboration among LIM schools and faculty members in Pakistan. A recent qualitative study by Malik and Ameen (in press) reveals that collaboration among LIM schools, faculty and professionals is largely weak and informal. However, they were very aware of the benefits of the collaboration. It claimed that visionary leadership, committed efforts and good IT infrastructure were required to promote successful collaboration on projects among LIS stakeholders. When we review the publishing pattern of Pakistani research, it mostly shows the co-authorships between the supervisors and their supervisees. The expansion of inexpensive and interactive social media tools can lead to successful collaboration among schools in teaching, learning and research at national and regional level to pool their limited resources. The present study is aimed to identify the possibilities, challenges and barriers of developing collaboration in the developing countries by using social media while filling the gap of LIM literature in this respect.

Research objectives

- Identification of the opportunities offered by the social media for planning and developing collaboration
- Determining the ways those opportunities can be used effectively to collaborate.
- Identification of the barriers in the way of collaboration and connection despite the presence of social media.

Methodology

The paper is mainly based on the literature review, first author's personal observations, experience as the chair of the oldest and leading LIM school in Pakistan (from May 2009 to May 2018). Furthermore, it reports the findings of face to face and telephonic interviews conducted with eight senior faculty members (professors, associate professors and assistant professors) from eight well established schools on the subject. (List of schools and their programs is provided as Appendix A). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The process of transcription was done with great care by listening to the audios repeatedly. Interview data of faculty members were analysed using a thematic approach.

Findings

This section identifies the possibilities, challenges and ways of collaboration based on the literature, interviews and our insight on the subject.

Possibilities of Using Social Media for Academic Collaboration

The literature has strongly established a need for collaboration to innovate and improve the curricula, ensure quality teaching and research and capture the global market (Virkus, 2008). Collaborative projects would facilitate sharing and transfer of knowledge and skills and lead to solve problems faster even with limited resources (Ocholla, 2008; Kigongo-Bukenya & Musoke, 2011). Khoo (2013) and Al-Suqri (2010) have also argued that the collaborations can be made in terms of students and faculty exchange programs (for delivering and joining courses and training from one country to another), internships, PhD scholarships, joint academic programs, and propagation of new trends and research findings.

The interviewees also shared that by using social media, LIM schools might be able to cope up better with the challenges faced to both profession and education in the developing

countries like Pakistan. They believed that social media tools such as Facebook, Skype, Blogs and YouTube could be used for regional collaboration in education, training and research despite physical distance and time difference. Facebook, a popular tool for social interaction, could be used to form groups of faculty members in virtual environment from various countries to discuss curriculum developments, potential areas for research and professional future trends. Similarly, Skype, a video conferencing tool would facilitate the dialogue among partners to create a close connection and personal rapport. It makes remote interaction and communication economical while connecting with others at their convenience. The participants thought that Blogs could be used for effective brainstorming on various local, national and regional practices, issues and trends of LIM education to create diversity. A regional LIM channel established on YouTube EDU (a host of educational videos) may also be used to upload lectures and other educational videos for collaborative learning. Furthermore, a regional group of faculty members can also be formed on SlideShare, for sharing presentations or PDF documents. The professional and academic networking sites such as LinkedIn and Academia.edu are useful for sharing professional profiles, ongoing projects and research publications.

The participants thought that collaboration and sharing has become easier and speedier in the presence of list serves/ discussion groups, Facebook, WhatsApp and other social networking sites. It enables transferring and sharing of detailed course contents, research publications, ongoing and future research projects at national and regional levels. It was mentioned that the use of social networking sites would expedite the process of sharing new ideas in research and teaching.

It is noteworthy to mention here that the above-mentioned tools facilitate an open and flexible communication, which in turn makes collaboration much easier. The virtual interaction through social media has a huge potential for enhancing the possibilities of cooperation at regional level.

Barriers in Developing Collaboration

The literature and interviewees' opinion revealed quite common barriers in the way of developing collaboration among the developing countries. The mostly referred and discussed barriers are: physical distance, time difference, variations in technological infrastructure and cultural diversity (Al-Suqri, 2010; Khoo, 2013; Ocholla, 2008; Sacchanand, 2012). Sun and Puterbaugh (2013) has stated that either limited or non-existent Internet and IT infrastructure in developing nations poses a serious challenge for collaboration. Cultural differences among various countries and within a country can also serve as a barrier in developing collaborations. Moreover, there are often cultural differences within a country, particularly in large nations (Lenartowicz, Johnson & White, 2003).

The interviewees believed that the poor telecommunication system, internet facilities, frequent electricity failure and disparities in technology hinder mutual exchange of skills. They added a point that a lack of ICTs skills among LIM faculty members in the country is also a hindrance in making smart use of social media. The participants believed that intelligent use of social media for communication saves the cost of physical meetings and communication. In the past collaborations were possible during conventional physical interactions.

The Pakistani faculty mentioned cultural differences and argued that such differences were difficult to overcome and need to be addressed while developing collaboration, particularly across borders. They also mentioned the indigenous administrative practices of an organization and various types of bureaucratic practices prevailing even within a country and across the developing countries as a barrier. Some other barriers mentioned by the interviewees were related to behavioural aspects including reluctance in sharing knowledge due to lack of mutual trust, lack of vision, motivation and commitment. The participants emphasized that the behavioural factors were more critical than the material ones on the way of building successful collaborations.

We would like to add that the serious political differences among certain developing countries, and vested interests at personal level critically hinder the trust building and free exchange of information. These are important factors in developing a meaningful collaboration at national and personal level. Furthermore, language is also a barrier; English is as an acceptable international language to communicate while it is learnt as the second language in developing countries. The level of English language competency differs widely among faculty members even within a country, essentially making the desired communication and rapport an obstacle to work on shared projects.

Strategies for Collaboration

Despite various scholars' pleading the dire need for collaboration among developing countries, we hardly found any significant developments in collaboration among LIM schools. Ocholla (2008) and Johnson and Johnson (2009) have argued that willingness, commitment, adequate resources, sense of shared purpose and values, political realities and mutual trust are the key ways for developing successful collaboration. These factors still remain as relevant in the developing countries as they were when they were first presented ten years ago in the era of web 1.0.

Presently, the interviewees argued that the social media could be useful in planning, implementing and sustaining successful collaboration. However, they also considered a formal commitment, dedication and serious efforts essential in this regard. They advised using multiple social media tools for sustainability in communication. The Sun and Puterbaugh (2013) also discovered from their personal experiences that reliance on single tool was not practical as free networking sites had their limitations.

Another aspect that needs highlighting is that while there are multiple social media applications available for various purposes such as messaging, video/audio collaborations, file sharing, etc., not all of them provide unrestricted access across different regions. For example, some regions such as China and UAE censor or restrict access to certain social media apps and their functionalities. We should, therefore, carefully select the tools which are easily and comfortably accessible by all parties including schools, faculty members and students across all the regions where the collaboration is being done in teaching, research and faculty development training. In our opinion, recognising the outcomes of collaborations, overcoming cultural, religious and political biases and having a strong will to connect are the leading factors in fostering a culture of collaboration. The type of social media to be used for such endeavours comes after that. The old saying applies here very well, "where there is a will, there is a way". And, the social media applications make this 'way' of collaboration quite easy and economical, yet productive and fun to go on.

Conclusion

Social networking sites and tools are universal and available with a variety of features. They have extended the ability of academics to connect, communicate and collaborate at national, regional and global level. Easy, speedy and inexpensive channels of personal and collective communication over social media have fostered the possibilities of international liaisons and partnerships. The widespread use of social media (Facebook, Blogs, Skype, WhatsApp, Google Plus etc.) is also prevalent in the developing countries. It is important that its use be geared towards collaboration and connectivity to share the intellectual and research endeavours among the developing countries to improve both the quantity and quality of LIM education and research, instead of merely using for social interactions. There is an urgent need of developing faculty's skills regarding emerging ICTs, information management tools and social media apps to stay not only connected with their peers but also to enable them to collaborate on shared goals. The mutual exchange of expertise, using social media, may help in reducing the gaps in term of curriculum development and its implementation among schools of the developing countries. However, it is important to note that social media is a vital 'tool' to facilitate collaboration through personal, interactive communication. And, without a strong will, mutual trust, and knowledge sharing culture, it will remain as a means in itself instead of serving as a means to an end; that in our context is COLLABORATION.

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Appendix A

University Name	Establishing Year of the Department	Department Name	Programs Offered
University of Karachi, (KU)	1956	LIS	Master, PhD
University of the Punjab, (PU)	1916	Information Management	Master, MPhil, PhD
Sarhad University of Sciences & Information Technology, (SUIT)	2012	LIS	Master, MPhil
University of Peshawar, (UOP)	1962	LIS	Master
University of Balochistan, (UOB)	1981	LIS	Master
Islamia University Bahawalpur, (IUB)	1983	LIS	BS, Master, MPhil, PhD
Allama Iqbal Open University, (AIOU)	1985	LIS	Master
University of Sargodha, (UOS)	2008	LIS	BS, Master, MPhil