THE ROLE OF ROMANIAN STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE INTERNET IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

Silvia Maria Chireac and Alina Țiței
"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract: The Internet is not only seen as a powerful driver of change, but also as a valuable tool and significant educational component in students' life. Technology development and Internet considerably affect students' motivation, performance and interests, making it possible for learners to collaborate, learn and share ideas among each other. Attitudes towards the Internet within the context of Romanian secondary education are an important factor in the age of globalization. This paper aims to explore teenage students' attitudes towards the use of the Internet, thus helping us to identify benefits, as well as potential negative effects of social media. According to our findings, no relevant differences have been noticed between male and female students as regards the negative attitudes towards the Internet. Furthermore, results have also indicated advantages in the use of generic social network sites such as Facebook, besides other networking services.

Keywords: social media, Romanian students, effects of social media, attitudes, education

§.1. Introduction

The integration of technology into education is an issue of great importance for educational innovations and learning purposes. It is well known that Internet-based learning can promote students' knowledge construction and meaningful learning, as well as enhance learner's motivation towards research, writing, editing and presentation of work. Digital media have been shown to increase satisfaction, involvement and engagement in collaborative problem-solving (Oncu and Cakir, 2011; Badge et al., 2012). Learners perceive the Internet differently when they use it, and their perceptions generate different attitudes along with a disposition to extend knowledge seeking. A focus on these attitudes reveals that learners see the Internet as a communication tool and a source of information. Social networked learning includes weblogs, social bookmarking, social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, MySpace), podcasts, e-portfolios, del.icio.us, YouTube, Skype, online office and tagging, and allows users to post, publish and write articles or comments on sites such as Facebook and Google (Christoffersen et al., 2012).

Statistics from Internet World Stats report that in Romania there were 11,178,477 Internet users on December 31, 2014 and 8,100,000 Facebook subscribers on November 15, 2015. As we can notice, Facebook is a social networking website that has been undergoing an explosive growth in the last few years. Today, students need to be effective communicators, critical thinkers, and problem solvers in the age of social networking – a way to connect people and make technology more efficient for everyone (Beverly Crane, 2012).

Social media available on smart phones and tablet devices are nowadays changing people's lives across the world. In Romania, the adoption and use of this tool within the educational environment is still in a nascent stage. While students use social networking for

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virtual socializing, allowing them to connect with other students or people around the world, in Romanian education it is not very frequently used inside the classrooms for carrying out learning activities. By participating in social networked learning, learners are actively engaged in the learning process and flexible environments for communication, global information sharing, personalized learning and independent learning with respect to place and time.

Understanding the attitudes of learners in the context of secondary education is important in order to exploit not only the benefits, but also the negative effects of social networking for the school life and for the learner's education. The use of social media and, particularly, Facebook in education has been extensively studied. However, there is still little data available regarding the attitudes towards the Internet within the context of Romanian secondary education. Learning with social networking facility in the secondary education sector would bring new opportunities for students, namely: acquisition of new acquaintances, awareness of an environment-friendly means of communication, enhanced communication skills, and the opportunity for collaboration and inter-crossing relationships. Nevertheless, social media can also create risks related to social and cognitive development. This research presents teenage students' perception of both positive and negative effects of social media in Romania. In addition, based on the findings of the study, we believe that schools, universities and other institutions could take advantage of social media in secondary education.

§.2. Method and Data Sample

The participants of this study were a group of 125 teenage students from three public schools in secondary education situated in the northeastern region of the country ("Dimitrie Cantemir" from Iaşi, 15 students, "Emil Racoviţă" from Vaslui, 93 students, and "Marcel Guguianu" from Zorleni, Bârlad, 17 students). The research – which supposed the application of a linguistic instrument in the 2015-2016 academic year –, is based on the results we have obtained from the essays that students had to elaborate in Romanian, as a mother tongue, during 30 minutes. We have considered the topic of the role of social media interesting because students use this tool every day and because we have noticed that it is becoming a rising trend. We have also perceived that many students post frequently and tell everything they are doing via status updates. They connect to an open worldwide community (Griffith and Tengnah, 2011) and share information freely writing on "walls" or via personal messages.

§.3. Research Question

In our paper, we pose the following research questions:

- What are the positive and negative impacts of social-networking in the Romanian secondary education in particular?
- How social-networking is affecting teenage students in Romania and what lies ahead for it in this country?
- What are Romanian students' attitudes towards the use of social networking in secondary education?

We have created a questionnaire and tried to gain information about the respondents' age, sex, grade, occupation of their parents, languages studied in secondary education, etc. The age of the participants ranged from 14 to 18 years and they were all studying Spanish as a third language.

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§.4. Results

Generally, students tend to view the Internet in a positive light, as a functional instrument that facilitates information acquisition, communication and trade. The positive factors emerging from the students' perceptions of the Internet are given in Table 1.

Table 1. *Positive factors/advantages of social networking*

Factor 1. Communicate and collect information
Factor 2. Maintain current relationships and establish new networks
Factor 3. Learn new information and knowledge
Factor 4. Complete the studies more quickly and do the homework
Factor 5. Connect with the peers and relatives from others countries
Factor 6. Help students with disabilities

From the above data evaluation, we can conclude that students mainly use social networking to communicate and collect information, with 80% mentioning benefits to their studies. This aspect may be hypothetically explained by the fact that students realize that social networking sites are reliable sources of information and, consequently, they use these sites so as to obtain current information which assists them in completing their tasks and study activities more quickly. Our findings are in line with the studies related to worldwide practices of social networking carried out by Alkindi and Alhashmi (2012).

We have also noticed that Romanian teenage students mostly use Internet for fun and entertainment and that are not fully informed about the maximum potential of the social networking, such as how the positive use of these sites can enhance their study and relationship with their peers. Students agree that the best part about technology is the fun they can have with it. Smart phones and tablets give them the chance to connect with friends and family in many ways. In relation with Facebook, all students know that they can create their own timeline and profile page and that friends and family can comment on their thoughts and pictures. Romanian students find Facebook useful for giving them the opportunity to share their thoughts, photos, or videos with others, a beneficial "way to voluntarily engage with other people and construct identities" (Albrechtslund, 2008).

Another interesting aspect we should note is that students think that social media is a great tool they need for school, to do homework, to study, research topics for a science project, or memorize basic facts. It allows them to keep in touch with people who live far away, watch movies from anywhere, or read their favorite books.

On the other hand, the analysis of social networking negative effects (Table 2) indicates that the highest area of concern is related to mental illnesses and addiction, because excessive use of social media has serious detrimental consequences and may over time contribute to poor mental health. For some students, social media can be absolutely lethal, primarily for teenagers with depression and other psychological problems who are more likely to overuse the Internet.

Table 2. *Negative factors/disadvantages of social networking*

Factor 1. Mental illnesses
Factor 1. Addiction
Factor 3. Illiteracy
Factor 4. Aggression and violence

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Factor 5. Incommunication
Factor 6. Cyberbullying
Factor 7. Isolation
Factor 8. Security risks

As to the third factor, *illiteracy*, Romanian students admit that when they get bored, they want to see with whom they can communicate via text. Therefore, with the rise of texting comes the lack of communication skills, the lack of ability to read verbal cues, and impatience. They noticed that they do not want to read books and that they are unable to write sentences correctly, which could virtually place them in the position of becoming persons without future or family. It is much easier for them to browse social networking sites, blogs, websites and magazines than to read books.

Regarding the fourth factor – *aggression* and *violence* –, we can link it with the sixth one – *cyberbullying* –, when bullying occurs over the Internet or through text messages, phone calls, and emails. Romanian students noticed that it is easier to cause emotional damages through text messages than face-to-face. If the cruel behavior is not stopped and one student continues to hurt others intentionally, teachers and parents must solve the problem and put an end to the bullying before it goes too far. As we could see, students' opinions about the negative relationship between *aggression, violence, cyberbullying* and social media were strongly manifested.

Moreover, students also described the negative effects of social networking in terms of *incommunication* and *isolation*, viewed as a lack of contact between them and other people. Students complained about not having their parents' full attention. They detect a disconnection with their parents (Jenkins et al., 2006) and, therefore, they feel alone together.

Concern was also expressed about the *security risks*. Our participants understand the nature of the data they are sharing and generally they think that social media affect their privacy and security. While social networking presents benefits, it also introduces risks with respect to our privacy and security (Köse, 2016).

The results of this study indicate that Romanian teenage students are open to express their opinions about the benefits and the negative effects of social media, as well as to demonstrate positive and negative attitudes when using the Internet. In line with the findings of Tsai (2004), our results suggest that students' perceptions of social media may shape their attitudes and behaviors. A further examination was performed on the gender differences of students in relation to Internet attitudes, but we did not find any differences between male and female students. According to the findings obtained in this research, we have shown that the related research questions indicated above have been answered properly with the performed work.

§.5. Conclusion

The results have demonstrated that teenage students are aware of the fact that the use of social media is associated with positive and negative attitudes as well, and also revealed their clear understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of using social networks.

Yet, this research, meant to gauge the effects of social media, has the main limitation of an evaluation process including only a student-based target group; hence, it reflects only their opinions on the matter. If our purpose would be that of finding out what the effects of social media are on people in general, then a similar research project but employing users from different spheres of activity should be carried out.

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Still, the present paper is a valuable reference in order to have an idea about Romanian teenage students' perspectives on social media – the most powerful communication and interaction tool of today's modern world.

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