Article

Utilization of Social Media Platforms for Educational Purposes among the Faculty of Higher Education with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Social media tools are observed to play a vital role in the renovation of the conventional teaching and learning practices across the globe. Though primarily developed for online social communication, social media platforms tend to possess suitable tools that can be used for instructional purposes in order to initiate active learning among students. Additionally, the social publishing features that support User Generated Content (UGC) act as powerful drivers in converting social media sites into informal, networked and constructive virtual learning environments.

The present study aims to analyse the use of social media platforms for educational purposes in developing nations such as India. The study intends to examine the penetration and reception of social media platforms in higher educational institutions in urban as well as the technologically deprived rural areas. An extensive survey was conducted among the faculty members in the higher educational institutions in the state of Tamil Nadu, India. The research reveals the present diffusion level of social software in the academic sector of Tamil Nadu, a state containing a varied technological landscape due to its internal digital divide and many other infrastructural discrepancies. Additionally, factors that induce and the barriers that affect the pedagogical employment of social media tools by the higher education faculty members have been identified.

Keywords

Social media, Higher education, education, learning, pedagogy, teaching

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Introduction

The rapid propagation of social media outlets has been marked as the most prominent phenomena of the digital era. Social media refers to a wide range of online applications that enables its users with power and control over data/information (Maloney, 2007). These applications provide services to create and disseminate User Generated Content (UGC), thereby empowering the users to be the most influential entities of the Information Architecture (Alexander, 2006). Prior to these social web platforms, the conventional media outlets (such as newspapers, radio and television) endorsed a more authoritative approach towards its end users. Online social platforms have made information gathering and knowledge sharing an effortless process, thus transforming the passive consumers of the conventional media into active content generators.

In the academic sector, the interactive characteristics of the social web have led to the evolution of several innovative pedagogical practices such as student publication, social learning, dynamic learning resources and so on. The educational benefits of social media tools have been already highlighted by numerous studies (Avci & Askar, 2012; Brady, Holcomb & Smith, 2010; Manca & Ranieri, 2013) conducted in the last decade. Web 2.0 platforms hold features that are ideal for enabling a strong teaching and learning environment grounded on the principles of constructivism (Ferdig, 2007). High flexibility, easy to use interfaces and varied dynamic functionalities found in social media outlets make it a highly favourable instructional medium. The read/write feature of web 2.0 technologies are observed to enhance the faculty–student interactions, thereby leading to an active learning process enhancing the level of students' satisfaction and promoting in-depth learning (Redecker et al., 2010).

With a relatively large number of institutions encouraging its faculty members in using social media platforms for pedagogical purposes (Wankel, 2010), it is crucial to analyse the role played by social media in the higher education classrooms of developing nations that are experiencing unequal infrastructural growth and dissemination of resources. Hence the present study aims to analyse the reception and use of social media tools in the colleges/universities present within the state of Tamil Nadu in India. The two major research questions addressed in the current study are listed below:

1. **Research Question 1:** What is the diffusion level of social media tools as educational aids within the higher education classrooms present in a developing state such as Tamil Nadu?
2. **Research Question 2:** What are the significant factors and barriers that influence the intention to use/current use of social media tools by higher education faculty members to supplement classroom communication?

Social Media for Educational Purposes

According to Prensky (2001), individuals of the present generation are termed as 'Digital Natives' who are experiencing the omnipresent nature of the digital and social web technologies. The Digital Natives use these technologies not only for

accessing content and information but also for connecting information from various sources and generating new information that can be further shared with others, making it an iterative cycle of knowledge creation and consumption (Maloney, 2007). Hence, these platforms serve as ideal learner-centric environments where the students can engage themselves in a collaborative and constructive learning process.

Liburd and Christensen (2013) have claimed that social media tools motivate students to actively participate and engage themselves in constructive learning through online interactions and collaborations. Special focus has been given to wikis, blogs, social networking sites, media/resource sharing sites and discussion forum of the social media spectrum in research studies investigating the educational applications of the social web (Luo, Zhang & Duan, 2013; Manca & Rameri, 2013; Tess, 2013).

Social Media for Higher Education

Research on social media in higher education is at its formative stage (Davis et al., 2012; Gupta, 2014). These platforms are currently evolving as popular interactive learning tools tested and employed in various universities and colleges around the world. Due to various exclusive features that the social web holds, it enables virtual connections between the faculty and students. Sobaih and Moustafa (2016) argue that these social tools can be used for academic purposes, especially for teaching and learning in higher education since the students are already active in these online networks. Social networking sites such as Facebook support open communication between the faculty members and students yielding an enhanced learning platform. Sugimoto et al. (2015) claim that these enhanced learning experiences also aid in increasing the students' engagement level within the classroom. Al-rahmi et al. (2015) report that social technologies are assisting in gaining a collaborative learning environment, thereby increasing the overall academic performance of the students.

Unlike the students' usage which has been examined in many studies, the faculty members' usage of social media tools is rarely given importance in the studies conducted till date. A few studies highlighting the faculty's activities in the social web showed that they used these tools for enhancing their professional identity (Fitzmaurice, 2013), strengthening scholarly communication for research collaboration and for publishing their ideas or academic opinions rather than for pedagogical purposes (Li & Greenhow, 2015). Though most faculty members hold a positive attitude towards the pedagogical application of social media tools, only a very few implement them (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008). Hew (2011) stated that faculties and institutions hesitate to employ social tools for pedagogical purposes mainly due to their stereotypic view of social media being a source for social and entertainment activities, making it distracting and unsuitable for educational applications. Other barriers to integrating the social software in teaching and learning process include privacy (Rambe, 2013), lack of control or monitoring features and the credibility of content (Au, Lam & Chan, 2015).

Factors Affecting the Pedagogical Application of Social Media Tools

Earlier studies focusing on a teacher-centric approach in analysing the perceptions of the instructors regarding the application of social media technologies for teaching purposes are rare to be found. Ajjan and Hartshorne (2008), Cao and Hong (2011) and Cao, Ajjan and Hong (2013) are the three most recent and prominent studies published in this area of enquiry. While Ajjan and Hartshrone (2008) embraced the decomposed theory of planned behaviour (technology acceptance model) to understand the faculty's intention to use social media, Cao and Hong (2011, 2013) developed a new model—Social Media Utilization model—integrating the key factors found in various technology acceptance theories. The factors for the present study (Table 1) were derived from these three studies based on their significance and relevance. It is evident from the table that an extra factor—Infrastructural and Technological resources—which is not present in any of the three models used in the earlier studies has been added. Since the geographical location of the current study is set up in a developing nation unlike the previous studies, it is crucial to add an extra factor to identify whether the unequal infrastructural growth rate and distribution of technological resources play a significant role in influencing the intention of the faculty members to use social media tools for teaching purposes.

Methodology

An extensive survey among the faulty members of the universities/colleges present in Tamil Nadu was conducted for the present study. The state of Tamil Nadu was selected for the study due to its high educational quotient. According to Rani

Table 1. Factors Analysed in the Present Study

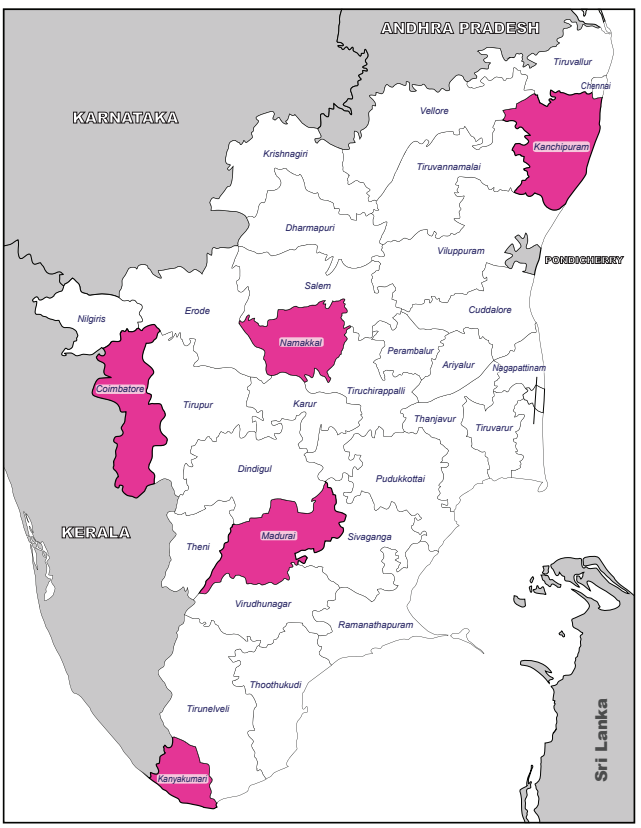
Factors	Ajjan and Hartshorne (2008)	Cao and Hong (2011)	Cao et al. (2013)
Self-efficacy/social media readiness	✓	✓	✓
Students' influence	✓	✓ (under external pressure)	✓ (under external pressure)
Perceived usefulness	✓	✓	✓
Task compatibility	✓	-	✓
Perceived risk	-	✓	✓
External pressure (peer group & superior)	✓	✓	✓
Infrastructural and technological resources	-	-	-
Attitude	✓	-	-

Source: Primary data compiled by authors.

(2010), in the entire nation, higher growth rate has been recorded in Tamil Nadu in terms of the number of higher education institutions during the last decade. Currently, there are a total of 2,531 colleges in Tamil Nadu (Department of Higher Education, 2016).

In order to gain the appropriate samples representing the overall topography of the intended population—higher education faculty members in Tamil Nadu—Multilevel Mixed (MM) Sampling technique was adopted. Multilevel Mixed (MM) Sampling techniques are ideal for research focusing on systems in which the unit of analysis retains a nested relationship with one another where the samples selected from one level is derived from a subset of samples selected in the previous level (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The graphical representation of the sampling mechanism is given in Figure 1.

Initially, information regarding all the higher educational institutions present in Tamil Nadu were collected and complied into a database. It is vital to note that in India, all states contain different stages of digital divide such as urban–rural divide, the have and the have nots, literate–illiterate divide and so on (Rao, 2005). From the database, five districts having more than 100 colleges and universities



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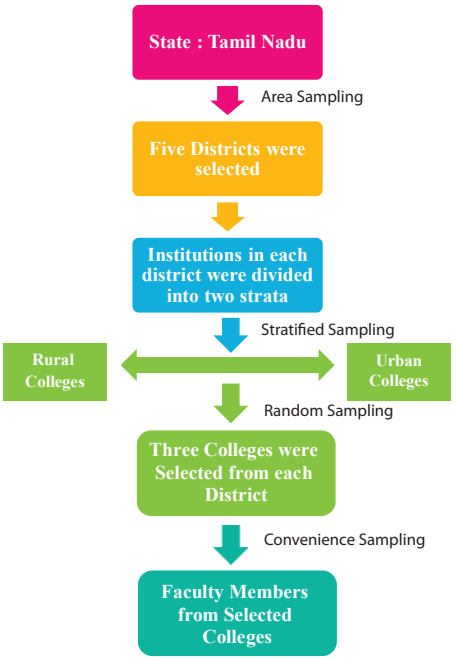

Figure 1. Overview of the Mixed Method Sampling Technique used for the Present Study

Source: Primary data compiled by authors.

within Tamil Nadu were selected—Coimbatore, Kancheepuram, Madurai, Namakkal and Kanniyakumari. Although the district of Chennai had more than 200 higher educational institutions, it was not selected for the present study to maintain uniformity among the sample distribution.

In the next level of filtration, all educational institutions present in each of the selected five districts were divided into two strata—rural and urban—and proportionate stratified sampling method was applied for selecting a total of three institutions from each district. From the 15 colleges selected, the responses using the research instrument were collected from a total of 100 faculty members, based on convenience sampling technique.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire for the current study was designed primarily to assess the reception of social media applications for pedagogical purposes and to identify the factors and barriers that influence the uptake of the social web by the faculty members of higher education in Tamil Nadu. Hence, the questionnaire consisted of three main categories—demographic profile of the respondents, questions

measuring the reception and use of social media applications by the respondents at present and questions measuring the factors and barriers affecting the social media penetration in the academic sphere.

Self-efficacy/social media readiness, students' influence, perceived usefulness, task compatibility, perceived risk, external pressure, infrastructural and technological resources and attitude were identified as the eight crucial factors that influence or induce the use of social media tools for pedagogical purposes in higher education classrooms. All the statements that were used in the questionnaire for examining the significance of these factors consisted of a five-point Likert-scale response measure. The internal consistency of these factors was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha analysis. The alpha values obtained for all the eight factors are listed in Table 2. It can be inferred that all the values ranged from 0.674 to 0.907, which is an acceptable range (Nunnally, 1978) indicating a good internal consistency among the statements used to measure each factor.

Analysis

The Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The faculty members who responded to the survey consisted of 70.5 per cent of male respondents and 29.5 per cent of female respondents. Of the 60 faculty members surveyed from varied academic disciplines (Engineering, Social Science, Humanities, Pure Sciences etc.), 67.2 per cent were assistant professors, 13.1 per cent were professors, 9.8 per cent were associate professors and 9.8 per cent were lecturers. Almost 78.7 per cent were active social media users (44.3 per cent claim that they use social media applications more than five times a day and 34.4 per cent claim that they use them less than five times a day). Also, 93.4 per cent of the

Table 2. Reliability Analysis for the Factors Examined in the Present Study

Factors	No. of Statements Used to Measure the Factor	α Value
Self-efficacy/Social media readiness	4	0.718
Students' influence	3	0.907
Perceived usefulness	3	0.905
Task compatibility	3	0.866
Perceived risk	2	0.674
External pressure	5	0.898
Infrastructural and technological resources	8	0.763
Attitude	3	0.892
Social media use for teaching	4	0.782

Source: Primary data compiled by authors.

respondents state that they are enabled with internet access in their workplace—educational institutions. Facebook (85.2 per cent) and WhatsApp (83.6 per cent) were the most popular social media platforms among the faculty members after Google plus (60.7 per cent), LinkedIn (59 per cent), Google Scholar (52.5 per cent) and ResearchGate (45.9 per cent). Forums and discussion boards (16.4 per cent) were the least preferred social media outlets. It is also crucial to note that 44.3 per cent of the respondents were unaware of the existence of academic blogs—blogs containing educational content generally authored by teachers (professors, lectures and so on)/researchers/experts—prior to the survey.

Lecture Preparation

Of the 100 faculty members surveyed, 55.7 per cent of the respondents indicated that they frequently search social media platforms for collecting information/content/notes while preparing for their classes and lectures. Only 3.3 per cent stated that they never seek social media assistance for lecture preparation.

Figure 2 showcases the different types of educational content that are searched in social media channels by the faculty members surveyed. It can be inferred from

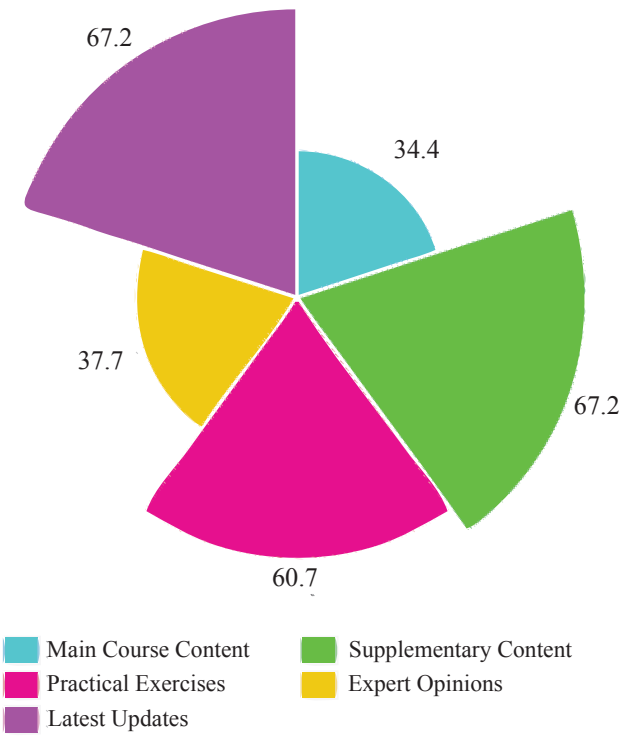

Figure 2. Types of Educational Content Searched in Social Media Platforms

Source: Primary data compiled by authors.

the table below that supplementary course content (67.2 per cent) such as supporting materials, examples, picture, videos etc. and latest updates regarding the course content being taught (67.2 per cent) are the two types of content that are often sought by faculty members in social media outlets. In addition, 83.7 per cent of the respondents claimed that the content or information published in social media channels were useful for their lecture preparation.

Use of Social Media Tools as Teaching Aids

By analysing various studies (Bosch, 2009; McGee & Diaz, 2007; Moran et al., 2011) highlighting the potential use and benefits of social media tools for educational purposes, it was found that blogs/micro blogs, Wikis, social networking sites, media/resources sharing sites and discussion/forum/Q&A platforms were the prominent social media categories used for instructional purposes. When enquired regarding the current use of these social media tools, 42 per cent of the respondents indicated that they frequently used media/resources sharing sites for assisting their classroom lectures. Social networking sites (SNS) were occasionally used by almost 45 per cent of the faculty members. Regarding blogs and micro blogs, 28 per cent claimed that they are planning to use them in the future while 48 per cent were currently using them occasionally. Only 5 per cent of the faculty members stated that they do not intend to use discussion forums/Q&A based social platforms such as Quora, Stack Exchange and so on as aids for teaching (Table 3).

Respondents were also questioned regarding the pedagogical uses and advantages of social media platforms based on their perception and experiences. The overview of their responses is summarized in Table 4. Two prominent social media categories providing pedagogical benefits of high intensity were blogs/micro blogs and discussion/Q&A based sites. According to the responses received, blogs/micro blogs were recorded to hold a large potential in enhancing student–faculty interaction (57.1 per cent) enabling collaborative learning (48.2 per cent), for sharing learning resources (53.6 per cent) as well as to serve as academic

Table 3. Use/Intention to Use Social Media Tools as Teaching Aids

	Don't Use and Don't Plan to Use (%)	Don't Use but Plan to Use (%)	Use Occasionally (%)	Use Frequently (%)
Blogs/Micro blogs	12	28	43	17
Wikis	10	18	36	36
Social networking sites	13	17	45	25
Media/resources sharing sites	10	13	35	42
Discussion forum/Q&A	5	30	32	33

Source: Primary data compiled by authors.

Table 4. Pedagogical Benefits of Social Media Applications

	Blogs/ Micro-blogs (%)	Wikis (%)	Social Networking Sites (%)	Media/ Resource Sharing Sites (%)	Discussion Forum/ Q&A (%)
Improve student learning	51.8	61.8	43.6	56.4	59.2
Increase student–faculty interactions	57.1	32.7	49.1	36.4	53.1
Improve student satisfaction with the course	39.3	30.9	36.4	40	49
For sharing learning resources	53.6	40	43.6	49.1	42.9
Enhancing students' understanding	35.7	38.2	29.1	38.2	44.9
Knowledge enhancement for the faculty	48.2	40	25.5	45.5	51
Useful for collaborative learning	48.2	27.3	27.3	32.7	34.7
Academic reference for faculty	37.5	38.2	25.5	40	44.9
Academic reference for students	46.4	43.6	27.3	41.8	30.6

Source: Primary data compiled by authors.

reference sites for the students (46.4 per cent). Discussion/Q&A based sites tend to have a large influence on improving the level of students' learning (59.2 per cent), students' satisfaction with the course (49 per cent) and students' understanding (44.9 per cent). Social media channels under the discussion category also play a huge role in the knowledge enhancement (51 per cent) of the faculty members.

Figure 3 depicts the rating (1–low to 5–high) given to existing popular social media sites based on their ability to be used as a learning aid. YouTube and Google Scholar were the most highly rated platforms by the respondents for having the potential to assist in the academic learning process. On the contrary, Facebook and Twitter were rated as the least preferred platforms for learning activities. In addition to YouTube and Google Scholar, it can be observed that Slideshare and Academia.edu also enjoy a fairly high rating as educational tools.

Factors Influencing the Intention of Using the Social Web for Pedagogical Purposes

Regression analysis was conducted for each of the eight factors that were identified as the potential influencers initiating the pedagogical application of social media tools by the instructors (faculty members). A separate analysis for each

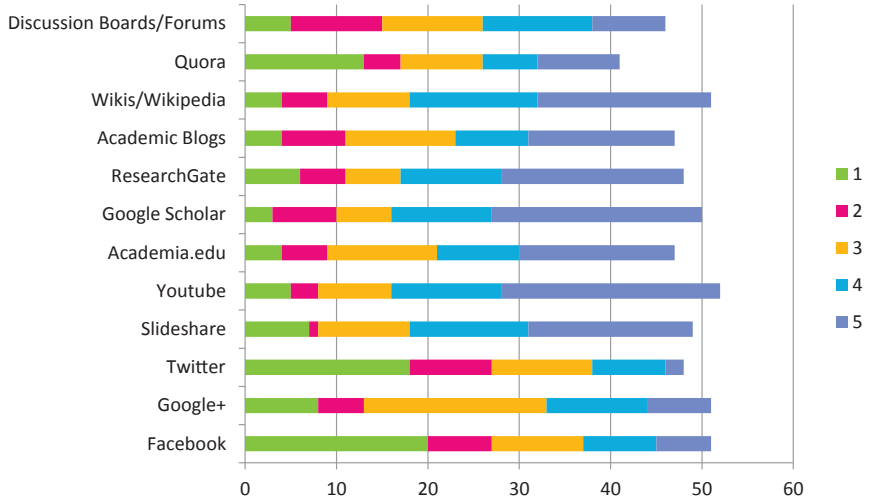

Figure 3. Potential of Social Media Outlets to Serve as a Learning Platform

Source: Primary data compiled by authors.

factor was necessary to identify the power and effect of the individual factors in inducing the use of social media tools in higher education classrooms. Table 5 portrays the regression outputs gained for the eight factors being analysed. Almost all the factors had a significant effect in motivating the faculty members to use social media applications for educational purposes except for perceived risk and infrastructural and technological resources.

Table 5. Regression Outputs of the Factors Affecting the Pedagogical Application of Social Media Use

Factors Affecting the Pedagogical Application of Social Media Use	R^2 (adjusted R^2)	β value (t-scores)
Self-efficacy/Social media readiness	0.267 (0.254)	0.517 (4.517)***
Students' influence	0.532 (0.524)	0.730 (7.982)***
Perceived usefulness	0.320 (0.307)	0.565 (5.128) ***
Task compatibility	0.368 (0.356)	0.606 (5.707)***
Perceived risk	0.010 (0.008)	–0.100 (–0.754)
External pressure	0.389 (0.379)	0.624 (5.976)***
Infrastructural and technological Resources	0.029 (0.011)	0.170 (1.287)
Attitude	0.439 (0.429)	0.663 (6.622)***

Source: Primary data compiled by authors.
Note: *** Regression is significant at 0.000 level.

Students' influence ($\beta = 0.730$, $t = 7.982$) was identified as the strongest factor persuading the faculty members for using social media tools for teaching purposes inside and outside the classroom. Almost 52.4 per cent (adjusted R^2) of the variations that occur in the uptake of social media tools by the faculty members of Tamil Nadu can be associated with the students' encouragement and influence. Next to students' influence, factors such as the attitude of the faculty members regarding social technologies, external pressure and the task compatibility were observed to play a significant role in initiating the use of social media tools in higher education classes accounting for a variation of 42.9 per cent, 37.9 per cent and 35.9 per cent respectively.

Barriers Affecting the Reception and Use of Social Media Tools in Higher Education Institutions

Figure 4 illustrates the potential barriers that can hinder the employment and continuous use for social media tools in the colleges of Tamil Nadu. Lack of infrastructural and technological facilities (47.6 per cent), lack/limited access to social media applications within the campus (44.4 per cent) and lack/limited access to social media applications among students (41. 3 per cent) are identified as the major obstructions that can affect the pedagogical application of social media tools within the college campuses. Concerns about privacy (38.1 per cent) and inability to measure the effectiveness of using social media for educational purposes (36.5 per cent)

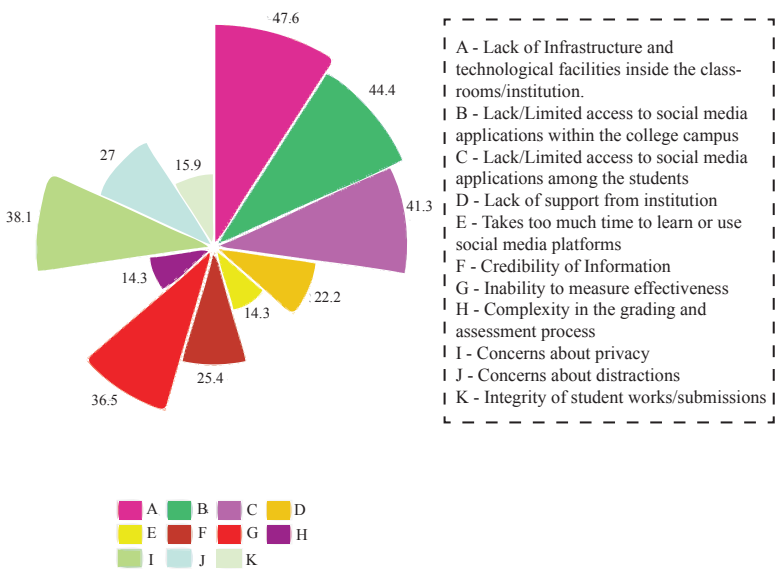

Figure 4. Barriers Affecting the Pedagogical Use of Social Media Tools

Source: Primary data compiled by authors.

can also pose a threat to the penetration of social media use among the faculty members of higher educational institutions. It is also vital to note that most of the faculty members surveyed were ready to spend time and effort in learning the educational applications of social media tools and to employ them in their teaching practices, as only 14.3 per cent claimed that the process was time consuming.

Findings and Conclusion

The present study empirically examined the role of social media tools as a teaching aid in the higher education in the state of Tamil Nadu, India. The diffusion of social media applications for pedagogical purposes is still in its infancy. Though a large number of faculty members showed interest and intention to employ these tools in their classes, only a few (early adopters) were found to be currently experimenting with them which was similar to the outcomes of the study entitled 'Investigating Faculty Decisions to Adopt Web 2.0 Technologies: Theory and Empirical Tests' (Ajjan and Hartshorne, 2008). Almost half of the respondents claimed that they seek social media outlets for academic references for collecting learning resources such as supplementary educational content and information regarding the recent updates in the subject being taught. The study also inferred that though almost all social media tools experienced uniform usage as teaching aids, media/resource sharing sites such as YouTube was the most popular option for teaching as well as learning purposes among the higher education faculty members in Tamil Nadu.

Students' influence was identified as the primary motivators for the faculty members to bring in social media tool into their classrooms. External pressure (peer group and superior influence), task compatibility and attitude regarding social media outlets were also observed to play an important role in initiating the use or the development of intention to use social media for classroom communication. These outcomes correspond with the results obtained in earlier studies focusing on social media usage among the faculty members of higher education such as Ajjan and Hartshorne (2008), Cao and Hong (2011) and Cao et al. (2013).

The present study was conducted in a developing nation with unequal resource distribution and technological advancements—digital divide. Such conditions may provide varied exposure, experiences and problems to the faculty members leading to a difference in perception regarding social media outlets. Though technological and infrastructural resources were not observed to play an important role in shaping the perception of the faculty members regarding the use of social media tools for teaching purposes (i.e., availability and non-availability of resources did not affect/change the faculty's intention), they served as a potential barrier in hindering the process of bringing social media technologies into the higher education classrooms present in Tamil Nadu.

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