

Social Media in Higher Education: A Study on Use of Social Media by New Entrants at the Faculty of Dental Sciences, University of Peradeniya, SRI LANKA, during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The transition to online education prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on educational institutions globally, especially in developing countries. The absence of formal online learning management systems (LMS) in many of these institutions presented significant challenges. In response, many educators and higher educational institutions turned in to social media platforms and other digital tools to continue providing education and support the learning process. The present study attempts to understand social media behaviour of new entrants to the faculty of Dental Sciences of University of Peradeniya, more specifically for fulfilling their information need related to academic programs during the CORONA outbreak. The study was carried out at the Faculty of Dental Sciences during the library orientation program for new entrants. Although 117 undergraduates registered with the dental library for the academic year 2022/2023, only 112 students participated in the survey. An online questionnaire made with Google Forms was administered among the research sample.

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According to key findings, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Research Gate were the most popular social media platforms used by Dental Science new entrants for the purpose of academic information during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, 65% of them had been used these online platforms as a tool of searching scientific and academic information related to their academic programs. There were some positive impacts of using social media for academic purposes. One significant benefit was that social media helped them to maintain better relationships with their peers during the CORONA pandemic, facilitating peer support and collaboration etc. However, the students have perceived some negative impacts of social media as well i.e. students found social media to be quite time-consuming. Despite the potential of educational benefits of social media, the study indicated a gap in awareness and utilization of them for academic purposes. A significant proportion of students, about 35%, were not aware of the educational potential of social media. The majority of respondents appeared to prioritize using social media for entertainment rather than accessing educational content or utilizing academic features available on these platforms. On top of these findings, it can be recommended that educational institutions and policymakers in Sri Lanka consider strategies to harness the educational potential of social media for undergraduates. By raising awareness and encouraging the use of social media for academic purposes, they could enhance the learning experience and make better use of digital tools to support education in the context of ongoing and future disruptions.

Keywords: Social Media, COVID 19, Undergraduates, Dental Sciences, Sri Lanka, University of Peradeniya

Introduction

In the contemporary world, social media is performing a significant role in altering each and every aspects of human life. As [Boyd & Ellison \(2008\)](#) identified, these 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. [Lawson & Murray \(2018\)](#) highlighted the application and potential of Social media in higher education. “Social media is one of advancements in technology that has been instrumental in enhancing communication, collaboration, entertainment. Social media is now being widely used in educational endeavors” ([Lawson & Murray, 2018, p.69](#)).

As of today, social media has become a crucial component of many people’s daily lives. It is fair to say that this situation became more acute during the CORONA outbreak. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly transformed the higher education system on a global scale. As this sudden and unprecedented emergence of the pandemic, most of the higher educational institutions of the world had to rapidly transition to online and remote learning to ensure the safety of students and educators. In response to the unexpected outbreak, libraries, like other service-oriented organizations, were compelled to find better alternatives to continue providing their services ([Dharmarathne, 2021](#)). Therefore the ultimate goal of this study was to examine the way of using social media platforms for learning purposes during the CORONA outbreak by the first year undergraduates of the faculty of Dental Sciences of the University of Peradeniya. The study encompasses some specific objectives

as well, i.e. to understand the way of using different social media platforms by new entrants in the faculty of Dental Science specifically for obtaining learning information during the CORONA outbreak, to explore the communication patterns students used on social media platforms to share academic information with their peers and to investigate the perceived positive and negative impacts of social media among dental science new entrants. Since this is an emerging and sudden phenomenon, limited studies have been undertaken in the Sri Lankan context to understand the social media behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic by undergraduates of the university system in Sri Lanka, more specifically for the purpose of learning activities.

Review of Literature

Social media or social networking sites are no longer a new concept in today's information-driven world. It has become a part of daily life in many countries and plays an essential role in building social relationships, work, and gathering information ([Boulianne, 2015](#)). As [Boyd & Ellison \(2007\)](#) highlighted, the ultimate goal of social networking sites was to connect people based on common language or shared racial, sexual, religious or nationality-based identities, shared interests, political views and activities. Unlike in the past, social media's intervention in higher education has dramatically changed over the past decades. The situation has become more acute and transform in to a technological revolution with the sudden emergence of COVID-19 outbreak. Due to this sudden and unprecedented challenge, most of higher educational institutes all over the world have compelled to choose better alternatives to sustain their educational programs rather than continuing of conventional practices. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic has driven policymakers, university administrators, and higher education institutions to

explore alternatives to the traditional in-person classroom learning system ([Sobaih et al.](#)). [Sobaih et al. \(2020\)](#) further states that the global COVID-19 pandemic has compelled higher education institutions to transition from face-to-face to online learning. However, many public institutions, particularly in developing countries, often lack access to formal online learning management systems (LMS) necessary for facilitating communication between students and faculty members. As [Lawson & Murray \(2018\)](#) discovered there are four effects of social media on learning namely; increased student engagement, new knowledge acquisition, life-long learning, and meaningfulness of learning with expert access. Most of the studies that have been undertaken to examine the way of using social networking sites for higher education during the CORONA outbreak and Post COVID period have proved the above statement with substantial evidences.

[Pallathadka \(2020\)](#) carried out a research at the Manipur International University in India to explore the use of social networking sites and video apps by the undergraduate students for online learning during the CORONA lockdown. A total of 188 undergraduates participated in the survey. A questionnaire made with Google forms was used as main data gathering instrument. According to findings, majority of undergraduates agree that the lecturers facilitate learning through video apps like Zoom, Google Meet, LMS, or Edmodo. Also they accept that their learning is exceptional when using social media and that social media gives satisfaction to them. Students believe that social media empower them as citizens. Majority of the respondents feel that every online session makes the domain knowledge grow. Further they believe that they can apply the knowledge obtained from online classes to real-life situations.

Another qualitative study was undertaken by [Papademetriou *et al.* \(2022\)](#) to examine the way of using social media by academic staff and students at a higher education institution in Cyprus during the COVID-19 outbreak. Researchers found that social media has positively impacted in four ways to sustain the educational process and quality of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The four positive impacts are (a) promoting teaching and learning, (b) motivating students to be active participants, and (c) establishing connections in the university community. According to their findings almost all students of the Cyprus universities have effectively utilized social media for teaching and learning activities during the Corona Outbreak. Research outcome shows that 100% of undergraduates of Cyprus universities have extensively used social media for three major purposes during the pandemic i.e. academic and learning purposes, connecting with colleagues, students, peers, and other academics.

In line with above studies, [Zarzycka *et al.* \(2021\)](#) conducted an online survey based on some selected universities in Poland to understand the role of social media in facilitating students' communication and collaboration during the COVID 19 pandemic . A total of 234 students participated in the survey. The researchers discovered that the growing use of Facebook for professional purposes enhances students' communication and collaboration in distance learning courses. The students had been used Facebook and LinkedIn social media platforms as a mode of communication to share ideas with their teachers during the CORONA outbreak.

With the unprecedented emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the countries in East Asia and Africa faced severe difficulties in sustaining

their economies, education and public health in compared to those of countries in the West globe. [Aduba & Mayowa-Adebara \(2021\)](#) carried out a research at the Delta State University in Nigeria to examine the way of using social media and challenges faced in using novel technology by the LIS students and the academia during the COVID 19 pandemic. The study found that, unlike in the past, the novel communication modes such as WhatsApp, Telegram are heavily used by the LIS educators for delivering online lectures during the period of CORONA lockdown. Students highlighted several benefits of receiving lectures through online platforms such as “lecturers are always available, opportunity to store lectures and files for re-use at convenience, collaborative learning, sharing learning materials, freedom in asking lecturer questions, and conducive learning at home” etc. (pp.01). However, students faced several challenges with online lectures, including not having a Smartphone or Android phone, being overwhelmed by the large amount of available learning materials, receiving too many messages during lectures, the high cost of purchasing data for each session, the time-consuming and eye-straining nature of online learning, and frequent network failures.

[Karimeldin *et al.* \(2022\)](#) conducted a cross-sectional descriptive study at the College of Medicine, University of Bisha (UBCOM) in Saudi Arabia to evaluate social media usage and its impact on male medical students' learning during the CORONA lockdown. According to findings, majority of male undergraduates commonly used Twitter for teaching and learning activities followed by YouTube and Facebook. Most of students confirmed that social media has positively affected to enhance their learning activities during COVID-19.

In the Sri Lankan context, so far there have been few studies undertaken to examining the way of using social networking sites for teaching and learning purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic. ([Nafrees *et al.*, 2020](#); [Sellaheewa *et al.*, 2021](#); [Rathnakara, 2023](#); [Ilangarathna, *et al.*, 2022](#); [Mufassirin *et al.*, 2023](#)). A quantitative descriptive study was carried out by [Ilangarathna, *et al.*, \(2022\)](#) to investigate the students' satisfaction with their online learning experience at Sri Lankan universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Undergraduates who were studying in the faculties of Engineering of six state universities in Sri Lanka were selected for this survey. As researchers observed students' participation in the online classes were very low in the initial stage of COVID, however it was gradually improved over the time. Most of students had to face some obstacles in participating online classes such as malfunctioning of devices, power outages and sharing among family members when accessing their digital devices. Further, accessing a proper internet connection, problems associated with the connectivity, data package limitations, inability to purchase an internet connection are some of the other major drawbacks encountered by the students. A quite similar study was carried out by [Sellaheewa *et al.* \(2021\)](#) at the Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka by using 85 postgraduate students. They found that the majority of respondents (65%) were satisfied with online education during the CORONA lockdown. They rated Zoom online console as most preferred platform for their online education due to the user friendliness. Poor internet connectivity (56%) and lack of concentration (34%) than the physical mode were the main issues encountered by postgraduates when they engaged in online education. Based on the outcomes, the researches recommend developing any virtual reality applications for online learning including the features that the student's desire for an effective learning experience. [Nafrees *et al.* \(2020\)](#) conducted a

survey by using 310 of undergraduates at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Based on the outcomes, the researchers confirmed that most of the undergraduates of the Arts stream prefer to have online education, as because most subjects do not have practical. Also students emphasized that they are getting enough support from the academic staff in online education and online education allow them to easy access to subject materials. In a study undertaken by [Rathnakara \(2023\)](#) using 332 undergraduates studying at Management faculties of non- state universities in Sri Lanka identified certain issues in online education during COVID-19 pandemic. Lack of student participation, lack of face-to-face contacts, internet connectivity, and technological concerns were some of the main issues of online education as encountered by the Management undergraduates of non-state universities in Sri Lanka. By the way, they have pointed out some positive impacts of online education. The most significant benefit as raised by the respondents was the ability to work flexible hours. [Mufassirin et al. \(2023\)](#) found a significant association between the time spent on social media and students' performance during the pandemic. The researchers emphasized that overblown social media use, leading to addiction were the main drawbacks that significantly negatively affects to academic performance of the students. The researchers carried out this quantitative cross-sectional survey by using 570 respondents from nine state universities in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

The total population of new entrants registered for the academic year 2022/2023 of Dental Sciences faculty of University of Peradeniya was selected for the study. In order to obtain forthright, independent, and

anonymous answers, a three-page structured questionnaire made by using Google Forms was administered among the research population during their library orientation program conducted in February 2023 and it was administered via Email and WhatsApp communication modes. The questionnaire consisted of both open and closed ended questions. Out of the 84 female and 33 male students who registered as new entrants in the Dental Science library, only 112 students attended the library orientation program. Hence, the final research sample comprised 112 respondents. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was utilized to calculate frequencies, percentages, tabulations, and other statistical measures.

A Brief Introduction to the Faculty of Dental Sciences (FDS) of University of Peradeniya

The faculty of Dental Sciences of University of Peradeniya considered the pioneer institution which plays a leading role in Dental Science education in Sri Lanka. The Dental School was founded in 1943 as an extension of the Department of Dental Surgery within the faculty of Medicine at the University of Ceylon, Colombo. When the faculty of Medicine at Peradeniya was established in 1961, the Dental School also became an academic department within the faculty. Consequently, the Bachelor of Dental Sciences degree began to be awarded by the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya. In 1980, the Dental School was divided into five distinct academic departments and by October 1986, it achieved the faculty status. At present the FDS comprised 07 Academic Departments, 05 Units & 02 Centers. By 2023, the undergraduate population of the faculty was 456 and the total academic staff population was 61 ([University of Peradeniya, 2024](#)). Although several faculties of Medicine exist in Sri Lanka, the faculty of Dental Sciences at the University of

Peradeniya was the country's sole institution dedicated exclusively to dental education until 2021. The University of Sri Jayewardenepura was established a new Dental faculty, marking its ninth faculty and becoming the second dental faculty in the country ([University of Sri Jayewardenepura , 2024](#)).

Results and Discussion

Demographic Information and Response Rate

As all administered online questionnaires could be collected at the end of the library orientation 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%) represented 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 Networking Sites

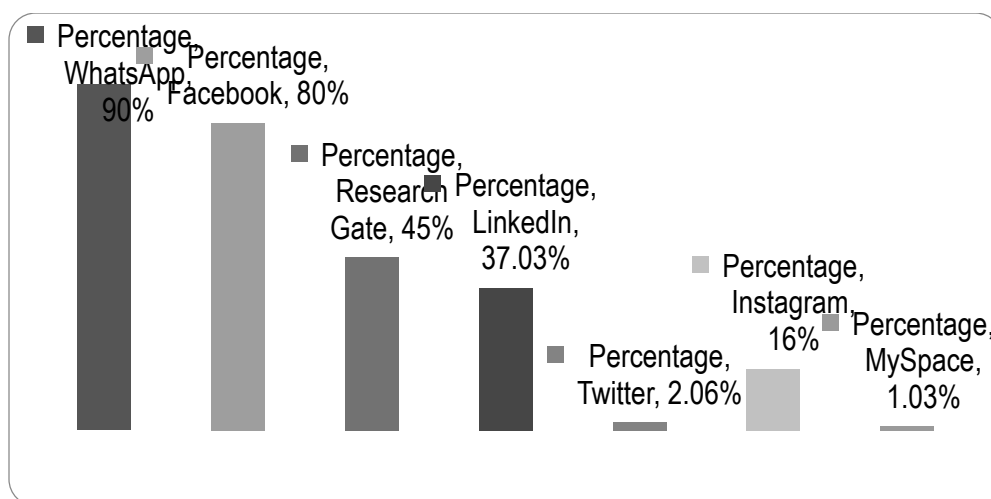
Respondents were asked to state whether they are maintaining user accounts on social networking sites. According to results revealed, WhatsApp was the most popular Social media platform used by the vast majority of Dental science undergraduates (90%), whereas Facebook (80%) was the second most favorite SM platform among the new entrants. ResearchGate (45%), LinkedIn (37.3%), Twitter (18.7%) and Instagram (16%) were in the third level category of preference. Availability of user accounts on Twitter (2.6%) and Myspace (1.3%) was very low.

Beside this, the faculty instructed all students to familiarize themselves with the Zoom platform, as it would be used for delivering online lectures. Therefore all undergraduates were having engaged in online education via the

Zoom online 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. Eighty percent (80%) of respondents reported keeping their social media accounts secure by restricting access to authorized friends and family, thereby ensuring privacy and control. On the other hand, 20% of respondents indicated that they are not concerned about the privacy and security of their social media accounts, hence anybody can view and post on their accounts without getting prior approval and restrictions. The majority of respondents (62.3%) indicated that they have not included their parents in their list of fans but 37.7% mentioned that they have retained their parents.

Figure 01:

Availability of User Accounts on Social Networking Sites

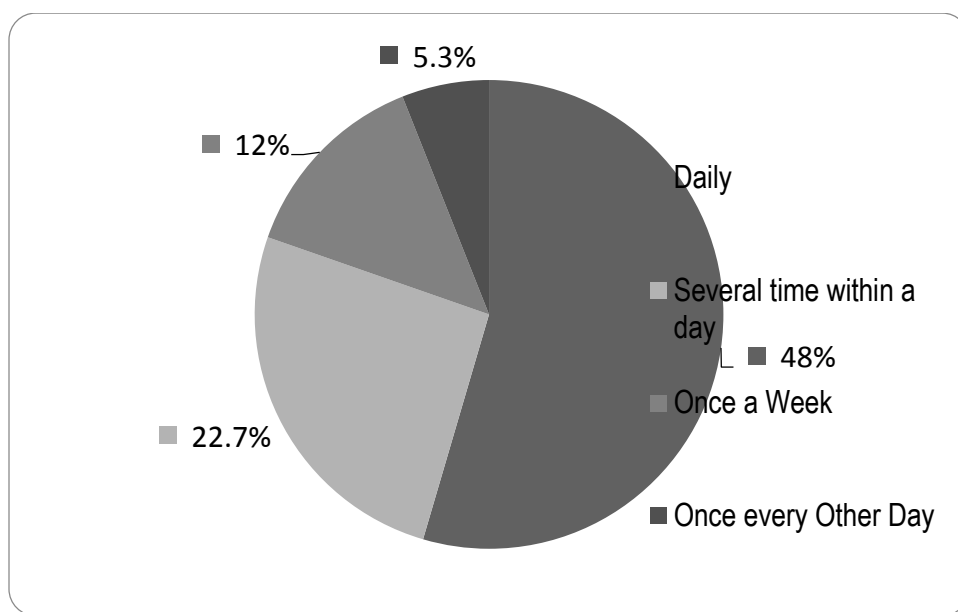


Frequency of Visit Social Media Accounts

In terms of visiting and posting on SM accounts, forty-eight percent (48%) of respondents tend to open their accounts daily basis while 22.7% visit their accounts several times a day. Twelve percent of respondents (12%) open their accounts once a week and 5.3% open accounts in once every other day. With regard to posting and sharing on social media accounts, 58.7% of respondents expressed that they rarely post and share on their accounts. Twenty-four percent (24%) of respondents post on their accounts once a week. About 10.7% of respondents post and share on their accounts once a day while only 1.3% of the respondents post and share many times a day. However, 2.7% expressed that they do not like at all to post on their account

Figure 02 :

Frequency of Visit Social Media Accounts



Purpose of Using Social Media

Respondents were asked to reveal the purposes of using social media. Results show that, majority of first year undergraduates of the faculty of dental Sciences use social media for entertaining purposes (81%). Sixty five percent of them (65%) use them for searching the scientific and academic information related to their subject matters.

Table 01:

Purpose of using Social Media

Purpose of Using Social Media (Top five reasons)	Number	Percentage (%)
Entertainment	91	81%
Scientific & Academic Information	73	65%
Sports Related Information	27	24%
Current Affairs	22	20%
Political/Economic/Business Information	7	5%

Another 24% of members like to view sports related information on social media. Twenty percent (20%) of respondents use social media to access local and international news, current affairs, and similar content, while another 5% of respondents liked to access political and business information through social media.

Using Social Networking Sites for Learning Information during CORONA Outbreak

The primary goal of this study is to explore how new entrants of the Faculty of Dental Sciences used various social networking sites for information activities, specifically for learning purposes, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the closure of the university and libraries, students had

force to explore the alternative information avenues to satisfy their information needs, specifically related to their academic programs.

It is evident that, not only in Sri Lanka but in the global context, social media exist and perform a leading role as an alternative information provider during such a hard situation of the CORONA outbreak. Hence, like many other countries, most of the undergraduates of Sri Lankan universities were also compelled to access these platforms not only for merely entertainment activities but also for the academic purposes. According to results revealed, 65% members expressed that they had been extensively used social media for searching information relating to their academic programs.

Table 02:

Use of Social Networking Sites for Learning Information during CORONA Outbreak

Use of Social Networking Sites for Learning Information during CORONA Outbreak (Top five activities)	Number	Percentage (%)
Viewing Video Clips on YouTube	49	44%
Discussing subject matters with peers using online Chat Consoles	36	32%
Exchange Lecture notes, Handouts & Study materials with friends	24	21%
Making video calls for Academic Purposes	05	04%
Exchange ideas with Teachers and Tutors using WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger etc.	05	04%

By the way, 35% of respondents said that they had not even an idea about using social media for academic information or learning activities. Of

the respondents, who have used social networking sites for learning information during CORONA outbreak, 44% expressed that they access YouTube for viewing video clips in relation to their academic programs. Another thirty two percent (32%) of respondents had used online available Chat consoles e.g. Messenger on Facebook, WhatsApp etc. for sharing ideas with peers in relation to educational and subject matters. Twenty one percent (21%) of students had used social media to exchange the lecture notes, handouts and assignments etc. with their friends. Less number of respondents (4%) had used social media for making video calls for academic purposes and another 4% of them had used it as a platform to exchange ideas with their teachers and tutors eg; Messenger on Facebook and WhatsApp, when it needed further clarification of lectures delivered via Zoom.

Positive and Negative Impacts of Social Media

The present study offers insights into how respondents perceive both the advantages and disadvantages of social networking sites. According to key findings; a large majority, 88% of respondents believe that social media platforms helps them to maintain a better relationships with their friends. Of the respondents, 43% considered that social media as a good platform for maintaining better relationships with family and close relatives.

Table 03:

Positive and Negative Impacts of Social Media

Positive Impacts of Social Media		
Impact	Number	Percentage
Social networking sites helps to maintain better relationships with peers	99	88%
Social media is a good platform for maintaining better relationships with family and close relatives	48	43%
Sports	27	24%
Best and easiest way to get involved in social activities	36	32%
Effectively use social media as a platform to market and publicize cultural events to interest groups and engage in activities performed by others.	18	16%
Easy to involve in political activities through social networking sites	07	06%
Negative Impacts of Social Media		
Impact	Number	Percentage
maintaining social media accounts is time-consuming matter	74	66%
Social media behavior adversely affects in ability to focus on the studies	31	28%
Social media is one of the reasons for breakdown social relationships.	05	04%

Another 32% of respondents believe that social media is the best and easiest way 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 have effectively used social networking platforms to market and publicize of their cultural events among the interest groups and engage in same activities performed by others. A smaller percentage, 6%, of

respondents believed that they can involve in political activities through social media. Some negative impacts of social media were also highlighted by the respondents. Of them, the most significant negative impact is that 66% of them believe that maintaining social media accounts can be time-consuming. Approximately 28% of respondents are in a view that social media behavior adversely affects their ability to focus on the studies. This implies that social media can be a distraction from academic responsibilities for a substantial portion of respondents. A few number of (4%) of respondents indicated that social media is one of the major reasons for the breakdown of their social relationships.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings of the study confirmed that, most of the Dental science new entrants of University of Peradeniya have an adequate awareness and enough technical competencies in operating the different kind of social media platforms and their potential for higher educational activities. They are familiar with various kinds of social media platforms and their functionalities. In compared to other countries in Asia and the West, even though numerous types of social media platforms available in the modern information context, so far only a few types of social media platforms are popular among young adults in Sri Lanka i.e. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram etc. This global picture of social media behavior of young adults was further confirmed by the findings of this study. Even though social media has many potential for learning activities, the findings indicate that a relatively significant number of students were not aware of its importance and relevance for educational activities. Further, the findings confirm that, majority of Dental Science new

entrants primarily use social media for entertainment and recreation activities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, even alternative information sources were needed, it appears that social media was not widely recognized or utilized for educational purposes by students. The majority of new entrants 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 can be suggested 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 in raising the awareness of available educational resources and encourage their use for learning purposes. In addition to that, understanding which specific social media platforms are popular among students can inform targeted educational strategies and interventions.

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