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## The Use of Social Media among First-Year Student Groups: A Uses and Gratifications Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to explore the uses and gratification of social media among first-year student groups at a satellite campus of a public university in Ghana. The study employed a descriptive survey design. The study involved all 1061 first-year university students in six academic departments of the College. A total of 680 (64%) participants returned validly completed copies of the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were employed for data analysis. The findings indicate that WhatsApp was the most popular application for social media groups, while a need for information-sharing, peer-tutoring and learning, and finding and keeping friends were the primary motivations for joining social media groups. First-year students are involved mainly in reactive activities, as most engage when solving an academic assignment through group discussions. Though challenges persist, such as posting of unwanted images, inadequate participation, and ineffective and irrelevant communication, most are willing to continue their social media groups' membership in the long term. This study provides valuable insight into transitioning students' lived experiences on social media from the group perspective. These insights are valuable conceptually and practically to academic counsellors, librarians and student affairs officers who are expected to provide on-going education on (social) media literacy to first-year students to enhance the adjustment process. The study is the first of its kind in Ghana that investigates social media group participants' exit intentions.

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## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of social media groups has become a mainstay among university students. Student organisations, classmates, groups, and societies in universities establish the semblance of real-world groups by merely creating a “group” online, mostly on social media. Social media improves students’ social presence by opening up a communication; fostering group cohesion, and triggering emotions leading to the concept of mass socialisation (Selwyn, 2012). As Selwyn (2012) points out, social media use can result in any one or all of “collaboration, conviviality and creativity”. Social media enables groups of people with similar interests to develop and maintain an “all-things”, “all-deeds”, and “all-ways” communication.

Previous studies suggest a significant positive relationship between first-year students’ use of social media and a positive experience leading to student retention (Ferguson et al., 2016; Nalbone et al., 2016; Stainbank & Gurr, 2016; West et al., 2015). Related studies have examined the factors responsible for students’ social networking participation (Gazit et al., 2019; Gazit & Aharony, 2018). For instance, (Gazit & Aharony, 2018) explored the factors responsible for WhatsApp group participation among students within the Israeli context and found that psychological factors determined students’ participation level on social media. Gazit et. al. (2019) also examined the effect of demographic characteristics on participation frequency among students in Israel, concluding in favour of a positive relationship between individuals’ motivation and their participation frequency in social media. This study investigates first-year students’ participation in different social media groups at a university in Ghana. The study is unique in the sense that it is the first of its kind in Ghana that investigates social media group participants’ exit intentions.

Despite the rich benefits of social media participation to entry-level university students, other studies point to social media competence challenges during students’ involvement in digital networking activities (Xu et al., 2019). Furthermore, Adalberon and Säljö (2017) concluded that social media use among university students was mostly informal and unregulated. Consequently, within the study’s Ghanaian context, there is limited knowledge of how individual students participate in university-based informal social media group platforms. As social networking is known to intensify during students’ informal learning (Ang et al., 2018), it is imperative knowing what resources (social media applications), factors (motivations), and practices (including challenges) which promote or inhibit social media group participation and how these enhance the adjustment of first-year students in the university.

## 2. Theoretical Context

This study was grounded in the Uses and Gratification (U & G) Theory to describe first-year student groups’ adoption, use, and challenges on social media applications during their first year in university. Uses and Gratification Theory involves understanding the motivations and benefits of using media in a context. According to the theory, individuals express their choice of media based on their needs. Simply put, the theory asks why people use certain types of media compared to others while finding out what satisfies these users (Katz & Blummer, 1974). Several previous

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studies employed this theory to understand the uses of social media in modern society. Whiting and Williams (2013) explored the question of why people use social media using the U & G Theory. Meservy et. al. (2019) also applied the theory to compare how previous studies' findings of social media gratifications associate with production-and consumption-oriented social media activities. The U & G Theory's relevance for this current study lies in its ability to unearth the differences between first-year students' expectations (uses) and fulfilled expectations (gratifications) of social media groups.

### 3. Use and Gratification of Social Media in the Adjustment Process

First-year university students encounter innumerable challenges as they adjust to life in the university. An adjustment may be academic, social, emotional, or attachment (Mittelmeier et al., 2016). In this review, we examine the literature on uses and gratification of social media and their effect on first-year students' academic, social and emotional adjustment from the global context. However, since there are regional disparities in technological preferences and trends, the literature review on students' social media preferences will be mainly focused on developing countries. This aspect of the literature review follows in the next section.

#### *3.1 Social Media Tool Preferences of University Students*

Recent studies in developing countries show that users' demographic dynamic influences social media use (Dadzie, 2019; Dharanipriya & Karthikeyan, 2018; Reeves et al., 2019; Soegoto, 2019). Gazit et. al.(2019) examined the impact of demographic factors (age and gender), Social Networking Site (SNS) importance, social and informational usage, and personality traits on the participation frequency of the four heavily used social networking sites in Israel. These were Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, and Instagram. They found that WhatsApp was used at a medium-high level for group communication among their study's participants. Like Israel, though, is a highly digitalised society, WhatsApp appears to be very popular in many developing countries. WhatsApp's popularity in Africa is noted in the literature (Bailur & Schoemaker, 2016; Koomson, 2018; Yeboah & Ewur, 2014). It is patronised by virtually every demographic group due, mainly, to its ease of use (Al-Rahmi & Zeki, 2017) and low Internet data requirement (Hogan et al., 2019; Madge et al., 2019).

However, the use of social media such as WhatsApp in teaching and learning may be counter-productive with persistent challenges of access to and ownership of hardware and software by students in developing regions (Coetzee et al., 2019). Notwithstanding, social media applications in universities are on the ascendancy in developing countries (Koomson, 2019).

Alabdulkareem (2015) compared the differences in the use of social media for teaching and learning science by teachers and students of middle public schools in Saudi Arabia and found that, among the middle school students, WhatsApp use was prevalent among 72.44%, while 69.43% preferred Instagram, Snapchat 52.41%, Keek 44.73%, Path 29.37%, Twitter 15.96%, Skype 10.24%, Tango 5.72%, Telegram 0.75%, and Facebook 0.31%. The study also found essential disparities between students' use of social media and that of their teachers. While teachers used WhatsApp

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at a 100 per cent rate, students used it at a 75 per cent rate. On the other hand, previous studies report an overall decrease in Facebook use among young people in favour of instant messaging applications that facilitate group communication. Çetinkaya and Sütçü (2017) explored the effects of Facebook and WhatsApp on the students' success in learning English vocabulary in Turkey. Their result indicated that WhatsApp was more effective at improving student success than Facebook. This would explain students' preference for this application.

The fact that Facebook appear to be unpopular compared to WhatsApp for teaching and learning purposes was also shared by Stainbank and Gurr (2016). In their study of first-year accounting students in a South African university, they found that most students perceived Facebook (and Twitter) more useful for providing career information than for teaching and learning. Finally, a recent study in selected public universities in Ghana by Asiedu and Badu (2018) indicate students' overwhelming preference for instant messaging applications (IM) such as WhatsApp compared to Facebook. This may be unsurprising as WhatsApp's dyadic nature enhances its popularity for group communication (Knop et al., 2016). This study explores first-year students' preferences for social media applications for group engagement in light of shifts away from Short Messaging Service applications for group communication.

### *3.2 Social Media Gratifications and Academic Adjustment*

The role of social media in the academic adjustment process of first-year students has been established (Çetinkaya & Sütçü, 2017; Ferguson et al., 2016). Academic adjustment challenges include the inability to independently complete mandatory assignments, attend classes, and pass examinations (Vanstone & Hicks, 2019). Often, failure to live up to these expectations results in negative consequences for the student involved. Some of these include test anxiety, psychological problems, anti-social behaviour, identity and self-esteem issues, and in worst-case scenarios, withdrawal from the university (Ireland, 2019; Yang et al., 2017; Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016)

The steady and progressive use of social media among first-year students predicts positive outcomes. Krasilnikov and Smirnova (2017) explored social adaptation factors among first-year students in the Economics Department of the State University in Russia. They found that higher initial use of social media among the students did not influence their grades, as it did mid-way through the semester. Despite noting that Facebook addiction was detrimental to students' academic performance, Habes et al. (2018), also emphasised, in their literature review, that guided participation in social networking boosted students' academic performance and collaborative skills.

McNallie et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between social media participation and academic self-efficacy among first-year students in two universities in the Flanders and the United States. They found that while Twitter uses improved students' self-efficacy in the US, this was not so with Facebook, as its use decreased the students' self-efficacy. On the other hand, the authors caution against broad generalisations of the impact of different social media applications on academic self-beliefs as these were shaped by disparities in application content preferences, user expectations, and contextual background of users. Overall, the study concludes that first-year students' academic self-efficacy in both countries increased with the use of social media.

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Finally, Dadzie (2019), in his study of two universities in Ghana, also found a positive relationship between students' use of social media and their academic performance. While noting that the sample were third-year students, the study concludes that there was a need to integrate social media topics in academic courses across the curriculum to enhance teaching and learning; a result corroborated in Koomson (2018, 2019).

### *3.3 Social Media Gratifications and Social / Emotional Adjustment*

Previous studies also highlight the positive contributions of social networking activities in students' adjustment to the new social environment in universities and how this affects their self-image and esteem (Lei et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2017; Vanstone & Hicks, 2019; Yang et al., 2017; Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). Yang et. al. (2017) explored the role of online self-presentation on social media in the identity formation of 219 first-year students (aged 18-23 years; 74% female) in the USA. The results indicated that positive social media self-presentation contributed significantly to freshmen adjustment success at the university. On the contrary, Yang et. al. (2018) also examined social media's role in freshmen students' comparison of ability and opinion and how this shaped their self-esteem and identity development. The findings revealed that social comparison of social media ability predicted lower identity clarity; whereas in respect to opinion, the self-esteem and identity clarity of first-year students was not influenced.

Gazit and Aharony (2018) investigated the factors that drive 127 students into participating in WhatsApp groups in an Israeli academic context. They found that psychological factors including social support, extroversion and narcissism were significant predictors of the level of participation in WhatsApp groups. Also, demographic characteristics such as age and personal factors such as the level of group importance, being the group's manager, WhatsApp usage, and group's subject influenced the group's level of participation. Their study's thrust was on the integral role of psychological factors, such as social support, extroversion and narcissism, in determining the use and utility of a significant social media application for group communication. Similar to the U & G Theory, which also emphasises motivational factors used in this present study, Gazit and Aharony (2018) draw attention to individual psychological factors that are likely to positively or negatively affect students' participation social media platform, irrespective of its popularity. These factors include social support, extroversion, openness to experience, and neuroticism.

Demographic factors, such as gender, have also been found to influence social media users' participation frequency. In a study by Gazit et al., (2019) in Saudi Arabia, they found that while males scored higher on psychological variables for Twitter, females scored higher on the variables for WhatsApp and Instagram. Nevertheless, the present study did not measure the effects of gender of social media participation and gratifications. However, in this current study, the authors explore the subject of "exit intentions" and challenges encountered on social media groups related to the subject of "SNS importance" which is an important potential factor for the level of participation on social media groups.

In a South African study, Wope and Van Belle (2018) noted that while Facebook was not recognised as contributing to the overall adjustment process at a local university, the participant first-year

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students admitted, however, that Facebook helped them deal with the social and emotional needs required to adjust in their new environment. This finding suggests that the social media application bridged the distance gap between them and their home and previous school environments. Asiedu and Badu (2018) concur with social media's emotional advantage in easing loneliness and a sense of loss on the among first-year students. In their study of two universities in Ghana, they found that most participants used WhatsApp to keep in touch with distant relatives and friends. This type of communication is very useful to first-year students who may be experiencing independence for the first time in their lives; without their parents, home, or housemasters in boarding school.

These studies imply that social media play a significant role in the well-being adjustment of first-year students in a university, with the potential to cultivate a positive behaviour and facilitate learning and development (Lau et al., 2018). The overall outcome of social media participation is improved students' well-being, boosted self-efficacy, and positive self-images of first-year students, leading to higher student retention.

#### 4. Contextual Setting

The study's setting is the College of Agriculture Education of the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, the largest teacher education university in Sub-Saharan Africa (University of Education, Winneba Corporate Strategic Plan, 2019). The College of Agriculture Education is one of four constituent colleges of the University. As at the time of collecting data for the study (November 2018), the College had two faculties and six academic departments. The faculties, together with their departments, run six (6) different programmes including the Faculty of Agriculture Education with Four (4) undergraduate programmes and; Faculty of Science and Environment Education also with Two (2) undergraduate programmes.

The implication of this is that there were six (6) undergraduate classes at the College at the time of collecting data for the study (November 2018). As course mates, first-year students voluntarily join at least one social media group; in most cases a WhatsApp or Facebook group. Consequently, course groups on social media for first-year students are established by the class members and not a pre-existing class. Also, upon registration, first-year students become automatic members of an "association" of students studying particular programmes of study, for example, there could be an "Association of Agriculture Education Students". In such a case, the group members comprise students from the first year through the final (fourth) year of the undergraduate stream.

Similarly, students also join "old school" clubs or associations, in which case members comprise every student who attended a particular senior high school before enrolling at the university. In such a group, the membership ranges from first-year through the final (fourth) year of the undergraduate stream and those in the postgraduate stream, making it a bigger group. In all these groups, the members also maintain social media groups to facilitate communication. Other first-year students are likely to seek membership of their tribal or ethnic group on campus, their religious group (church or mosque, etc), as well as a particular interest group (e.g. students with interest in a political party). All such groups maintain social media groups which first-year students on their own volition

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choose to join.

## 5. The Purpose of the Study

The study's purpose was to explore the uses and gratification of social media in the adjustment process of first-year student groups at a satellite college of a public university in Ghana.

## 6. Research Questions

Within the context of the problem, the research questions posed to achieve the objectives of this study were:

- What social media applications do first-year student groups use for group communication?
- To what extent are first-year students participants in social media groups?
- What types of social media groups do first-year students belong?
- What motivates first-year student students to join social media groups?
- What activities do the students undertake while on social media groups?
- What benefits do first-year students obtain from joining social media groups?
- To what extent do the students intend to stay in or leave their social media groups?

## 7. Research Method

### *7.1 Research Design*

The study employed the descriptive survey design to gauge the motivations and expectations of gratification on social media groups among first-year university students in Ghana. The use of the survey instrument, with both closed and open-ended items, helped identify patterns of use of social media applications among many participants.

### *7.2 Population and Sampling*

The study was a census of all 1061 first-year students of the College of Agriculture Education of the University of Education, Winneba. The participants were students of the six (6) academic departments of the University namely; Department of Crop and Soil Science Education; Department of Agricultural Economics & Extension Education; Department of Animal Science Education; Department of Agriculture Engineering & Mechanisation Education; Department of Science Education; and Department of Environmental & Sanitation Education.

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### *7.3 The Research Instrument*

The Uses and Gratification Theory guided the research instrument for the study. The instrument was made up of nine (9) closed and open-ended questions. Questions in the closed-ended section consisted of five (5) demographic questions of the respondents and social media appropriations such as dominant social media application for group engagement, participation in social media groups, and social media groups' description. On the other hand, questions in the open-ended section consisted of four (4) themes: motivation for joining social media groups; activities undertaken on social media groups; the benefits (gratifications) for being a member of a social media group; and whether or not members intended to stay or leave the groups.

### *7.4 Process and Ethical Consideration*

The questionnaires were administered in the classrooms of first-year students with research assistants in November 2018, two months after they had enrolled in the university. During this period, they had formed meaningful relationships and would most likely be on several social media group platforms on campus. To ensure adequate participation, the questionnaires were administered 20 minutes before the start of a class. As a result, most of the class members were available to participate in the study. In a bid to meet the requirements of ethical consent, the researchers indicated on the instrument that all first-year students did not need to participate in the study. Furthermore, the aims of the study were explained to them verbally. Finally, the return of a completed questionnaire implied consent on the part of the student (McKenna et al., 2017).

### *7.5 Process of Data Analysis*

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse demographic and background data of respondents and the results represented by frequency tables. Mean scores of dominant social media applications based on the overall respondent population were ranked. Data from the open-ended section of the instrument were analysed with thematic analysis techniques. Thematic analysis has been used successfully by survey researchers to understand entry-level students lived experiences by identifying and quantifying keywords used to express their responses (McKenna et al., 2017).

The process of open-ended data analysis involved the use of summative content analysis where commonly occurring keywords were extracted from the transcript to find common trends and themes in the qualitative data. Two independent researchers were requested to identify recurring keywords from the responses to each of the four pre-identified categories (open-ended questions). Inter-rater reliability was found to be over 80 percent for the selected keywords and this was determined to be adequate. Thereafter, for some questions, subcategories of the responses under each of the questions were created inductively by the researchers based on themes in the literature.

As noted by Hsieh and Shannon (2018), there is a need to complement the descriptive results of content analysis with tables and figures if need be. Consequently, Tables 3-6 were used to present the results of the content analysis. Verbatim transcriptions of the responses were used to explain

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key sub-categories. The transcripts were identified by numbers in brackets such as [R1] and [R685]. Finally, some grammatical and spelling errors were corrected to enhance clarity.

## 8. Results

### 8.1 Background of Respondents

Overall, 1061 first-year students from six classes (representing six different academic departments) of the selected university participated in the study. Out of this figure, 680 (64%) responded to and returned validly completed questionnaires. The 680 participants consisted of 466 (68.5%) males and 214 (31.5%) females indicating a male dominant sample size. Generally, the study showed overwhelming usage of social media applications among the respondents (n=666, 97.9%).

RQ1: What social media applications do first-year student groups use for group communication?

Among others, the study assessed the dominant social media application used by first-year undergraduate students at a public university in Ghana. The results indicated that from the 666 respondents who use social media applications, the most dominant social media application was WhatsApp (m=12.87). Table 1 presents the results regarding social media application usage among the respondents. Next to WhatsApp was Facebook (m=10.19) and then Instagram (m=7.69). The social media applications less used among the respondents were Facetime (m=6.61), HI (6.61) and Telegram (m=6.61). The ranking shows the level of unanimity of agreement among the respondents relative to social media applications. The Kendal Wa coefficient of 0.86 (N=685,  $\chi^2=130.383$ , df=18, Sig=.001) showed a statistically significant unanimity among the respondents their use of social media applications.

**Table 1.** Dominant social media applications used

Social media application	Mean	Rank
WhatsApp	12.87	1st
Facebook	10.19	2nd
Instagram	7.69	3rd
Twitter	7.28	4th
Snapchat	7.11	5th
LinkedIn	6.75	7th
IMO	6.62	8th
KiK	6.62	8th
Skype	6.62	8th
Tango	6.62	8th

Facetime	6.61	12th
HI	6.61	12th
Telegram	6.61	12th

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Kendall's  $W_a=0.86$ ,  $N=84$ ,  $\chi^2=130.383$ ,  $df=18$ ,  $Sig=.001$

Source: Field data (2019)

RQ2: To what extent are first-year students participants in social media groups?

Social media groups make up a significant portion of social media life. This study also shows that the majority (96%) of the respondents are members of social media groups.

RQ3: What is the description of social media groups of the first-year students?

This question was to identify the groups by their description since the study involved several social media group platforms. **Table 2** presents the description of the social media groups of the participants. Participants were at liberty to indicate more than one type of group they belonged to. The results show that the majority ( $n=548$ ) representing 47.2% of the respondents belonged to social media groups which comprise of Class members; 249 (21.5%) were part of Campus Church/Mosque members; 220 (19%) were members of Old school associations; whereas 95 (8.2%) were with Hometown groups. However, it is not surprising that Class groups formed the dominant social media group because the participants of the study were all students.

**Table 2.** Description of social media groups

Description of social media groups	Responses	
	N	%
Class members	548	47.2%
Campus church/Mosque members	249	21.5%
Old school members	220	19.0%
Hometown members	95	8.2%
Vocabulary group (VOCOB)	4	0.3%
Evangelisocial media team	24	2.1%
NBA/Sport	8	0.7%
Family members	4	0.3%
Music	3	0.3%
Nat	2	0.2%
Assemble members	1	0.1%
No answer	1	0.1%

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Health members	1	0.1%
Total	1160	100.0%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1

Source: Field data (2018)

RQ4: What motivates first-year student students to join social media groups?

Responses to the question of what motivates first-year students to join social media groups led to three fundamental categories emerging from the content analysis: information-seeking (64.4%), peer tutoring (11.6%), and socialising (6.8%). Information-seeking needs were clearly of paramount importance to first-year students in the survey. Some participants expressed this need, pointing out how information access can influence their successful stay on campus:

“I joined the group because, I want to get information, ideas and also to learn and contribute my ideas as well”. [R7]

“To get vital information that takes place on campus” [42]

“I joined it because every information concerning my stay on campus here depends on the group. They pass assignments and other vital information through the group”. [74]

The responses also revealed first-year students’ need for peer tutoring in their various activities. Some of their responses reflect these motivations:

“Purposely to do assignments and also have group discussion. And also assist each other in the various subjects”. [R4]

“To discuss assignments, solve problems and questions to compare answers whether work we have done is correct or wrong. We also join the group to prompt ourselves in case there is information given to the class”. [37]

“Academic purposes: I am joining my class group so that certain information can be communicated to me. For instance an unannounced quiz and when there is any new development on the time table”. [R11]

Others were also motivated by the prospects of socialising and keeping up with current friends, as in old school groups.

“I joined the group because it allows me to meet my old friends again and also to know how far we all gone in life so far and we discuss among our self what we can do to support the school and also meet once in a while to have fun”. [R6]

“To gain many friends and become more social with others” [R24]

**Table 3.** Motivations for joining social media groups

Reason	Responses	Percent of Cases	
		N	Percent
To get access to information	531	64.4%	78.2%

To save credit calling for information	1	.1%	.1%
To socialize and make friends	56	6.8%	8.2%
To help in studies	28	3.4%	4.1%
Learn to communicate well	15	1.8%	2.2%
To share ideas/information	96	11.6%	14.1%
Need satisfaction	14	1.7%	2.1%
For fun	22	2.7%	3.2%
Improve good morals	19	2.3%	2.8%
Created for us to join	6	.7%	.9%
to sing	3	.4%	.4%
proud of hometown	2	.2%	.3%
None	32	3.9%	4.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>825</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>121.5%</b>

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1

Source: Field data (2018)

RQ5: What activities do first-year students undertake while on social media groups?

The analysis also revealed that most of the activities on social media groups of first-year students were centred on group discussions. However, the top three categories of activities that were coded include “commenting and contributing to the discussion” (40.1%), “sharing relevant information” (27.3%), and “reading what others share” (27.3%). For this study, these activities could be categorised as reactive, proactive, and facilitating activities, respectively.

**Table 4.** Activities on social media groups

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
What is normally done <sup>a</sup> Comment and contribute to discussion	318	40.1%	50.2%
Share relevant information	217	27.3%	34.2%
Teach	30	3.8%	4.7%
Read to gain knowledge/information	142	17.9%	22.4%
Chat about ourselves	59	7.4%	9.3%
Give advice	28	3.5%	4.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>794</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>125.2%</b>

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1

Source: Field data (2018)

## 8.2 Reactive Activities

As revealed by the analysis that almost a half of all participants (n=318, 40.1%) and were engaged in “group discussion” on their social media groups, it was essential to find out what they discussed. A few responses show that most of them were discussing their academic work, as shown in these selected statements:

“Discussion about an important topic like what is early childhood about” [R180]

“On the group, we discuss importance and effective topic that we don’t understand during the lecture hour”. [R258]

“Sometimes we discuss a particular assignment given to us and also group works are also discuss(ed) over there”. [R196]

These students engaged reactively on these groups for group discussions after attending to particular assignments or pending academic tasks. These reactive members constitute social network users described as “lurkers” (Gazit & Aharony, 2018; van Mierlo, 2014). Lurkers make up the majority (90%) of members on social networks and even though our findings of reactive members on first-year student social networks were not as high as described in the literature, 40.1% of first-year students only playing a marginal role on the social media groups they belong may not contribute positively to the network’s growth or sustainability.

## 8.3 Proactive Activities

Despite the reactive use of social media groups by some first-year students, others also proactively use social media (Share relevant information n=217; Teach n=30). Some students expressed why they would rather not wait to engage:

“I always send questions that are a little bit confused, so that we share ideas for each one to get clear understanding in case such sort of a question drops in an exam”. [R145]

“I ask questions and also make some contributions to some other people’s questions”. [R128]

These group members appreciate that other colleagues may understand lessons better than themselves, and so they engage in peer-tutoring where they offer to explain concepts or learn from others. A participant also used the platform to engage in reminiscence:

“We talk about old stuff way back SHS [Senior High School] and JHS [Junior High School] and on the political group we normally discuss politics in Ghana”. [R5]

Knowing how lonely first-year university can be (Thomas et al., 2020), some members ensure that their rather introverted colleagues may feel at home through fun and laughter-invoking activities. This is important, as mental illness is reported among all university students (Lovell et al., 2015; Sheaves et al., 2016).

## 8.4 Facilitating Activities

Some group members also take it upon themselves to facilitate information-sharing. Facilitators are happy to be the first to “break the news”. They are on the look-out for new information to

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share. Their primary interest is to keep members up-to-date, but not, always, necessarily with relevant information. Some members who could be described as “facilitators” described their role:

“I normally ask the group administrators whether there is an upcoming event and also to inform group members”. [R135]

“Normally... I always visit the group and give responses to some of the questions been asked in the group most especially time for lectures and other information”. [R610]

These may constitute social network administrators or initiators. Other times they may be the official real-world leaders of these groups, such as class representatives. They are described as super users and account for just 1% of social media groups (van Mierlo, 2014). Despite the knack for facilitators to update members, they are also likely to be facilitators of what has become known as “fake news”. They sometimes may take advantage of their skills and trusted role to deliberately spread misinformation, disinformation, or malicious information (Bovet & Makse, 2019).

RQ6: What benefits do first-year students obtain from joining social media groups?

As in previous U & G research, this study distinguishes between what constitutes intents (motivations) and realistic benefits (uses/ benefits) for being on a group social media. The content analysis revealed that the top three benefits of social media groups for first-year students are receiving of information (n=410, 49.3%), improving studies (n=99, 11.9%), and broadening knowledge and understanding of issues (n=83, 10%).

**Table 5.** Benefits of social media group membership

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Benefits	Receive information	410	49.3%	65.2%
	Improve public speaking	25	3.0%	4.0%
	Make me punctual at lecture/church etc	38	4.6%	6.0%
	Broaden my knowledge and understanding of issues	83	10.0%	13.2%
	Improve my studies	99	11.9%	15.7%
	Acquire leadership skills	1	.1%	.2%
	Build relationship and socialized	75	9.0%	11.9%
	Get praise for wonderful contribution	6	.7%	1.0%
	Improve moral values	40	4.8%	6.4%
	Save me time	15	1.8%	2.4%
	Get entertained	29	3.5%	4.6%
	Financial support	10	1.2%	1.6%
Total		831	100.0%	132.1%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1

Source: Field data (2018)

### 8.5 Receiving Information

Being a member of a group on social media provides real benefits to the members. Most of the students (n=330) maintained that they benefit from the social media groups through the information they obtain from other group members. As echoed in previous studies (Dadzie, 2019), these kinds of information involved lecture cancellations, postponements or delays, upcoming events, class decisions, among others. One participant expressed this information benefit:

“I get information from my friends, my group members. If there is any information like the lectures has been postponed or they have shifted the time of the lectures. We get all this information and it helps me a lot”. [R8]

“The benefits I get from the group is that, some of the groups make me current others also help me to get more information about my religion. Groups like the political group make me get there knowledge about my party and Ghana at large”. [R15]

Social media groups were also beneficial to first-year students who resided outside campus in regards to updating them on campus or class issues:

“I stay outside campus, so when there is new information, I take the advantage to quickly react to it.” [R13]

Members in groups that are unrelated to academic issues such as political, religious-based groups also believed in the information potential of social media groups:

“...some of the groups make me current others also help me to get more information about my religion. Groups like the political group make me get there knowledge about my party and Ghana at large”. [R15]

#### Improving studies

As they indicated in their motivation for joining social media groups, some of the respondents expected that some of their peers might explain complicated topics, questions or concepts related to their studies. Unsurprisingly, many participants felt they were getting this kind of support:

“The benefit that I get from my group is that I get answers from my members I mean questions that I find it difficult to answer”. [R5]

“Group helps to solve questions which are at the time(s) very complicated through the sharing of ideas through the group”. [R7]

Some others benefited through the boosting of their confidence. As peer-tutoring involved the peer leader who transmitted vicarious experiences to other students, the peer leader was also forced to improve on their skills to continue maintaining the confidence and trust of the student colleagues who looked up to them in the group. Some students explained how peer-tutoring had improved comparatively enjoyed by members who participate in one fortheir confidence:

“By leading...I can sing among a thousand people and I can lead when am called to.” [R20]

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“It improved upon one’s learning that is because by sharing of ideas together, you will be forced to know that.” [R17]

It is essential to point out that the benefit of peer-tutoring may be m of creative activity or the other.

Broadening knowledge and understanding

Some participants were also of the view that the social media groups they belonged to help them maintain their sanity and thus avoid triggers of mental stress and illness in their studies. One student recounted this experience:

“It has helps me to become more intelligent about many things like how to socialise, how to become more sensible about many things on this earth”. [R24]

“Well-informed about what is going on in the class/department”. [R27]

RQ7: To what extent do first-year students intend to leave or stay in their social media groups?

The study also explored respondents’ opinions on their intentions to leave or stay in their group platforms in the long term. On intentions to leave their groups, the analysis revealed that a moderate number of first-year students had intentions to leave because they found little or no gratification on the social media group platforms. Some key reasons assigned for this intention included receiving “...unwanted images” (40%), “function[ing] below expectation” (20.6%), and “ineffective and irrelevant communication” (13.7%). Two students with intentions to leave expressed these comments:

“Yes, because I thought the group was for academic purpose but no, some of us had turned it into a market place where they will be advertising and all sorts of things.” [R16]

Yes, I will leave the group if some of the members of the group still persist sending fake or irrelevant messages in the group in order to avoid any tension or panic. [R41]

Interestingly, a few others (5.3%) embraced some of the “irrelevant” posts on the social media group platforms as entertainment. One of the few students in this category of students opined as follows:

“...I have an interest in the unnecessary comment, some of the time I do entertain myself in those unnecessary things.” [R61]

The fact that only 5.3% of the respondents perceived “irrelevant” posts on the group platforms as entertaining is consistent with a few students’ motivations for joining the platform which were “socialising” (6.8%). However, it is insightful to point out that most respondents were on the group platforms for information-seeking and not socialisation or entertainment. Notwithstanding, based on the analysis, it may be concluded that a few students in the study had intentions to leave their social media groups in the long term.

On the other hand, on whether they had considered maintaining their membership of the group

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platforms despite noted challenges, the majority of the first-year students (55.8%) reported that they would not leave because they “will miss [important] information”; whereas others reasoned that there were more benefits than challenges on the platforms (16.8%). A few respondents expressed their resolve in these words:

“No. Because through the group I receive information and messages which concerns my education excellence.” [R11]

No, because the advantages of being in that group exceeds the disadvantages. [45]

No because it is useful for knowledge acquisition in terms of social media. Also, makes me become aware of new things around the globe. [R51]

This finding gives credence to the need for relevant content on the group platforms as this was the single most important motivation for first-year students’ continued patronage of the social media group platforms. Based on the data, it can be concluded that whether first-year students desired to stay or leave their social media group platforms, the answer is that most of them were on their groups for the long-term with no intentions to leave.

**Table 5.** Benefits of social media group membership

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Reasons to stay	Will miss information	232	55.8%	61.5%
	It improves my studies	51	12.3%	13.5%
	Gives advises	18	4.3%	4.8%
	A form of security	8	1.9%	2.1%
	Benefits more than challenges	70	16.8%	18.6%
	Entertained through jokes	22	5.3%	5.8%
	Means of socialization	15	3.6%	4.0%
Total		416	100.0%	110.3%
Reasons for leaving	Ineffective and irrelevant communication	24	13.7%	14.7%
	Sending unwanted images	70	40.0%	42.9%
	Refusal to change	10	5.7%	6.1%
	Talk too much	15	8.6%	9.2%
	Misunderstanding	13	7.4%	8.0%
	Function below expectation	36	20.6%	22.1%
	Advertisement	3	1.7%	1.8%
	Not serious	4	2.3%	2.5%
Total		175	100.0%	107.4%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1

Source: Field data (2018)

## 9. Discussion

This study explores the experiences of social media among first-year student groups. The discussion of the results is as follows:

### *9.1 Dominant Social Media Applications used by First-year Student Groups*

Previous research has focused on understanding the popularity of different social media applications (Gazit et al., 2019; Reeves, Alkhalaf, & Amasha, 2019). The results indicated that for first-year university students, WhatsApp and Facebook ranked first and second with 12.87 and 10.19 as the dominant social media applications exploited for social media groups. This finding is consistent with previous results on WhatsApp and Facebook's predominance in the educational space (Reeves, Alkhalaf, & Amasha, 2019). The utility of WhatsApp among online group members was confirmed in Gazit et. al., (2019), who reported WhatsApp's popularity in Israel compared to Facebook. The finding was also confirmed by Reeves, Alkhalaf, and Amasha (2019), who also reported WhatsApp as the most popular social media tool in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Asiedu and Badu (2018) also confirmed WhatsApp as the most popular social media application among two universities in Ghana.

### *9.2 Participation in Social Media Groups*

The study also revealed that an overwhelming majority (96%) of first-year students participates in social media groups. Again, that the appropriation of WhatsApp is highest in this study among first-year students explains that a majority (96%) of all those who reported using one form or another social media was also a member of a group on one or more social media applications. This relationship can be explained by the fact that WhatsApp is built around the concept of broadcasting multi-media messages to an extensive network (Seufert et al., 2016). This finding also supports the notion that social media group applications are patronised by most first-year students in universities for the adjustment process into college (Gray et al., 2013).

### *9.3 Description of social Media Groups*

The findings also revealed that most (47.2%) of the respondents in the first-year in the university had joined a social media group purposely for academic-related interests as most of their groups could be described as a "class group". This was not surprising since the physical context of the study was a university campus. However, some researchers argue that the role of social media in the academic context remains inconclusive (Šerić, 2019). Another notable characteristic of the groups was that about a fifth (21.5%) of all first-year students had joined a religious-affiliated group. This finding is significant because first-year students would be expected to be primarily preoccupied with adjusting to their new academic environment. However, students' relatively high membership in religious-based social media groups suggests the premium they place in religion as they adjust to a new academic and social environment. Park and Bowman (2015) argue that

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universities and colleges have an essential role in promoting cross-racial interaction. The presence of religious bodies on campus can foster student interaction independent of their cultural or ethnic dynamic and be promoted (Park & Bowman, 2015). Notwithstanding, on whether first-year students' affiliation with religious bodies on social media has a positive correlation to their adjustment and or persistence during the first-year of university is the subject of another study. The findings also shed more light on the broad interest of first-year students and the variety of real-world applications they are making of social media groups to these interests including using these group platforms to learn new words/ vocabulary.

### *9.5 The Motivation for Joining Social Media Groups*

The qualitative investigation indicated that the first-year students' greatest motivation for joining a social media group was the need for regular validated information, peer-to-peer mentoring, learning support, and finding and keeping friends. Information-sharing motivations are driven by the need to have a formal communication system for information provided in first-year students' new academic environment. With first-year students' "cultural" shock of the informal, haphazard nature of information flow in the university, they join social media groups expecting that they will not miss any information worthy of knowing. This result suggests the participant first-year students' "fear of missing out", described by Alt (2015), quoting previous researchers, as a "pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, and a "...desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing". Furthermore, the participants in this study expressed a need for peer-to-peer learning support, which indicated their strong desire to persist and adjust to the new academic environment. In addition to providing psychosocial support and communication skills, peer tutoring can be useful in the adjustment process of first-year students as it offers tutees understanding of difficult academic subjects (Campbell, 2019). Given the popularity of peer tutoring as a motivation for using social media groups among first-year students, Campbell (2019) suggests social media tutoring groups' institutionalisation in conformity with sound design principles.

### *9.6 Activities on Social Media Groups*

This study conceptualised these activities as the reactive, creative or facilitating activities undertaken while on these social media groups. The findings revealed that most students were engaged at a passive level, engaging when a few other members initiated some form of activity or shared some information. Most importantly, most members engaged when they had an academic task, such as an assignment. Since a social media group is purposely for group-based activities, it is understandable that some students engage in group discussion. However, these group discussions occur after they were given group assignments suggests reactivity in students' learning. There is a need for first-year social media-based student groups to develop the habit of constructing their learning apart from their teacher (Rahimi et al., 2015). It was also found that others engaged proactively while in the groups. Proactive activities include any activity, academic or non-academic, initiated by individual participants or members of a social media group. These proactive activities help to

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imbibe in members the need for personal creativity, ingenuity and innovation. The results conform to previous findings where gratifications of WhatsApp groups could be one of entertainment and socialisation infused into serious communication activities (Supeno et al., 2019).

Finally, facilitating activities was featured as one of the most notable activities on first-year students' social media groups. Facilitators initiate facilitating activities. Facilitators are the newsmakers, enablers of communication and often-times originators of new information for discussion in the social media groups. Whiting and Williams (2013) described social media's "communicatory utility", pointing out that this role facilitates conversation on social media. This finding is congruent with Whiting and Williams (2013) who also found that more than half (52%) of participants in their study reported how social media enables them to discover common interests for discussion.

### *9.7 Benefits of a Social Media Group Membership*

The findings revealed that social media groups help first-year students obtain new information, peer-tutoring, improving their studies, and broadening their knowledge and understanding. These findings were confirmed in previous studies. Whiting and Williams (2013) pointed out ten social media uses and gratifications themes, including the need for information-seeking and information-sharing, knowing what others are doing and how they do it, and convenience. Koomson (2019) observed, among others, that mobile learning was useful for distribution, communication, and interaction. First-year students are likely to be confronted with several adjustment challenges, including loneliness, self-esteem issues, and poor academic performance while transitioning to university life (Lei et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2017; McNallie et al., 2019). The use of social media groups can ameliorate these challenges through opportunities to access information "on-the-go" (ubiquity), learn from others (peer learning), and spend less time, energy, and money on communication.

### *9.8 Intention to stay in or exit Social Media Groups*

The study also found that most first-year students recognised the necessity to continue their social media groups' participation despite considerable challenges. Some of these students were aware of the groups' educational utility and their direct relevance to their academic success. This is a commendable viewpoint expressed by the participants as this is a quality required to survive the transition to university. Reflecting the findings by Ahad and Lim (2014), most undergraduates in this study were willing for a trade-off between the difficulties they encounter on their social media group for the long-term benefits they obtain on the social media application. Similarly, this finding is congruent to Çetinkaya and Sütçü (2017) who found that students in their study were undaunted by the challenges they faced while in their WhatsApp and Facebook Groups; instead they desired further integration of social media groups in other courses as this could facilitate unplanned learning.

On the other hand, a few group members across various platforms expressed a desire to leave the groups. Re-echoing the results of previous researchers (Ahad & Lim, 2014; Sobaih et al., 2016; Yeboah & Ewur, 2014), participants in this study, among others, point to the high cost of data, time-wasting and addiction, and the disruptive potential of the use of social media applications

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as challenges to their continued appropriation. Similarly, students were concerned about unnecessary messages as they used up their data and, therefore, impacted their finances. Such group members expected relevant content to meet their gratification needs and not potentially illegal, dangerous information that may carve a negative digital footprint for them and the posters (Azucar et al., 2018). Drouin and Miller (2015) attribute the illegal posting of materials to excessive cyber-connected culture and mental disorder. Drouin and Miller (2015) call for both home and school-based education for social media use among young people to curb this phenomenon. Regardless, there is a need for first-year students to embrace positive survival strategies on social media. Hynes and Richardson (2009) enact that re-negotiations of use are common in technology use, and the adoption of technology is not a linear or closed one.

The results also draw further attention to reasons some social media group members harbour exit intentions as soon as they joined a group and the need to address their concerns. The study reveals that many of the respondents on social media groups were prepared to leave the groups due to their intolerance of the identified challenges inherent on the social media group platforms. This result is concurrent with Xu et. al. (2019), who found that college students in China possessed average social media competencies. Despite the validity of their concerns, first-year students must focus on the many positive benefits of social media groups, including their communicatory and convenience utility (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Gray et. al. (2013) found a positive relationship between social adjustment and persistence at the university. But in all this, there is a need for education in social media competencies to deepen and consolidate digital citizenship among first-year students in universities (Xu et al., 2019). Finally, to improve first-year students' endurance on social media groups, there is a particular need for group work and collaborative skills.

## 10. Conclusions

This study provides empirical data on social media appropriations for group engagement and sheds meaningful first-year student groups' meaningful lived experiences on social media towards adjusting to university life. The study also provides further knowledge of the “staying power” and negotiating skills possessed by first-year students in the face of inevitable challenges while on social media groups. The study found overwhelming participation in social media groups by first-year students on particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, and also that majority of these groups were composed of classmates. It was also found that most of them were motivated to join these groups by the need for information-sharing, peer-tutoring, learning, and finding and keeping friends. The study also found that most of the activities of first-year students on the social media groups are mainly reactive activities, which comprise solving class assignments, as most of them engaged on the platform only when there was an assignment or a problem to solve among the group members. It was also found that the participants' motivations were aligned with their gratifications in terms of their expectations of the groups and their actual use.

Notwithstanding, they encounter significant problems regarding the posting of unwanted images, below-par expectation and ineffective and irrelevant communication. When explored profoundly,

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the respondents were concerned with using abusive language and posting unnecessary messages. Nevertheless, most of them were prepared to go the long haul in the group due to its long term educational value.

## 11. Practical Implications

This study has two practical implications for universities and other educational institutions:

First, as new media technologies proliferate in developing countries including Ghana, and with it the explosion in the use of social media, school and university managers must be interested in knowing just more than what students do on these groups, they must also be interested in knowing what motivates students to join these groups and the potential factors of exclusion for some members. Finding that peer tutoring remains an important motivational factor for joining social media groups, universities may consider institutionalising formal peer tutoring groups among first-year students to facilitate their integration into the academic culture.

Second, there is a need for social media education among first-year students, even as they transition to the university environment. This need may be expressed as a responsibility for academic counsellors, librarians, and offices of student affairs in this and other African universities who are expected to provide on-going education on (social) media literacy to first-year students to enhance the adjustment process (Bridges, 2012; Livingstone, 2017). For instance, as this study uncovers that many first-year students on social media groups experience information overload, librarians must address information evaluation skills in information literacy programming to improve first-year students media literacy (Xu et al., 2019). Also, to forestall social media exit intentions among first-year students, academic counsellors and student affairs officers may need to integrate social media literacy in their consultation with first-year students. This action may be helpful as they expose first-year students to how social media messages affect an individual's self-image and that of others, thus shaping their attitudes on "how they consume and respond to the messages" (McNallie et al., 2019). These efforts hold the promise to equip first-year students with social media competence to enhance their successful transition to the university and eventually result in retention and successful graduation (Almahaireh, Aldalaeen, & Takhaineh, 2018; Vincent, 2016).

## 12. Limitation of the Study

The study was limited by some factors, including the research design and the scope of social media participation. First, even though the study surveyed a large number of first-year students, the results were primarily based on a non-random treatment of one college of a large multi-campus university in Ghana. Consequently, the results may not be generalised beyond this defined context except the results provide a starting point for an extensive survey to be conducted in multiple institutions with similar characteristics as studies on this subject is rare (Masserini & Bini, 2020).

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Furthermore, the non-random design employed for the study did not enable contextualising the scope of students' participation in social media groups, in respect to those who participated and those who did not, a limitation noted in Masserini and Bini (2020).

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