

**Measuring Global Service-learning Alumni Facebook Communication**

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## Measuring Global Service-learning Alumni Facebook Communication

### Introduction/Need for Research

Student participation in high-impact programs like global service-learning (GSL) is a move toward lifelong learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999). As a form of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015), GSL has proved to have the potential of producing global citizens, who can identify and evaluate solutions for global social problems (Ikendi et al., 2022; Nonnecke et al., 2015; 2018). Maintaining communication with student alumni is a valuable asset to both the educational institutions and the host organizations. The alumni are ambassadors of the institutions, they are symbols who form the public-facing persona of their institutions as they spread and maintain the institutions' ethos. Through communications, they can encourage current and prospective students to participate in the programs. The most common loops of communication among alumni are social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). This study focused on Facebook which is the most widely used social media platform in the world (Franz et al., 2019; Gallo & Adler, 2014).

### Conceptual Framework

This study was based on Communities of Practice (CoP) which espouses that a group of people who have a common interest come together and engage in regular interactions (Wenger, 1998). It is premised on three factors including 1) the domain – the group of members, 2) the community – communication and engagement with each other, and 3) the practice – shared practices, working with each other to overcome problems, learning together, and improving specific skills. The members in the CoP go through three processes including engagement, imagination, and alignment. The engagement stage involves coming together for a common activity, conversation, and interaction, this “implies a sustained intensity and elations of mutuality” (Wegner, 1998, p. 184). The imagination stage involves members' thinking of “what could be” and using the “what could be” to envision what can excite the group members. The alignment stage involves having a unified purpose. After engaging members in a conversation, the different perspectives are then brought together to create meaning as members express their forms of membership and identity.

Social media communication involves a post and feedback to the post which shows the level of engagement and interaction. On Facebook, posts are written by the administrator or a member of the group and posted on the timeline (Franz et al., 2019). These posts appear as a newsfeed to all members. Posts are of different forms including “texts”, “photos”, “videos”, “links”, “tags”, etc. Feedbacks are user responses that measure the effect, popularity, and members' engagement with the posted content (Cho et al., 2014; Franz et al., 2019). The feedback takes different forms which include emojis, comments, and shares. Emojis are graphic facial expressions e.g. “like”, “love”, “wow”, “oh” which depict low-level engagement. Comments are written text in response to a post on the timeline or another comment and they depict a high-level engagement (i.e., composing a constructive verbal reply). Sharing of posts depicts a high engagement, a feeling of spreading the message to others (Cho et al., 2014). The purpose of this inquiry was to gain knowledge into the purpose, frequency of communication, and rate of engagement of Iowa State and Makerere universities alumni who participated in a service-learning program in Uganda.

### Methodology

This was a qualitative inquiry into the Uganda service-learning alumni Facebook page (CSRL, n.d.) between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019. This Facebook page was started in 2013 and the years 2015-2019 showcase a robust use of the page. Data were collected between 15–20<sup>th</sup>

October 2020. Our inquiry was based on constructivism, informed by the notion that knowledge is socially constructed and meaning emerges inductively (Crotty, 1998). A case study design was used to conduct a content analysis (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The Facebook posts were the units of analysis. Data were contained in these posts. We collected and analyzed data for each post. During analysis, we began with naïve reading to hone ourselves with the information contained in the posts and further employed an in-depth reading and analysis. We engaged in a dialogue with our data seeking to recognize and classify commonalities across the cases and perspectives that appeared distinct. We wrote analytic memos to reflect on emerging unique ideas which formed our themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldana, 2016). Also, we critically observed the artifacts and pictures captioned in each post and took notes and memos on each intuitive caption that we used to generate new themes as a form of triangulation. We shared drafts among ourselves for peer reviews to help in conclusions.

### **Results/Findings**

We established eight alumni Facebook communication themes including seminars (orientations, presentations); family (marriage engagements, weddings); academics (admissions, graduations); identity (profiles, murals); awards (to faculty, students); fundraising (for programs, sickness); travels (for students, faculty); and anniversaries (ceremonies, celebrations). There were 89 posts, the majority were “Texts only” and “Text+photos” and the rest were “Texts+@+#+is-with” and “links only.” Most posts were on seminars, family, and academics, and least for anniversaries. A total of 191 photos were posted; most related to seminars, academics, identity, and family.

Related to feedback, 980 feedback were provided with more than half categorized as low-level and the rest as high-level engagement feedback. Among the low-level engagement (876), most of them were “likes” and the rest were “love” and “wow” emojis. In the high engagements (104), more than half were “comments” and the other feedbacks were “share” and “interested.” In the low-level engagement feedback, the category had the majority of the “love”, “likes”, and “wow” followed by academics and identity. In the high-level engagement category, the group had the majority of the “comments”, and academics and seminars had more of the “shares” as feedback.

### **Conclusions**

Facebook has been an important platform for alumni to share their achievements in academics and family developments. The platform promoted social identity, centered on belongingness to a large group through painted murals and group photos taken during seminars, tours, school gardening, and bi-national projects. Administrators have used the page as a communication platform for the program events like orientation seminars and presentations to share service-learning program accomplishments with the alumni. The page has mobilized funds for program development and emergencies like sicknesses of different alumni - developing philanthropy among alumni. These engagements show the development of CoP and continued comradeship.

### **Implications**

Engaging alumni with their former institutions and related programs through social media creates alumni ambassadors of a global service-learning program. Facebook as a communication platform engaged former, current, and future students to share experiences, a source of motivation for others. Facebook adds value and transcends physical communication barriers allowing alumni from both universities to maintain relationships and engagement. Additional qualitative inquiry is required to understand why members participate in either low and/or high engagement feedback loops on the posts.

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