Navigating the Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media on Hospitality and Tourism Education in the Digital Age

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Abstract
In the fast-evolving landscape of the 21st century, the incorporation of technology into Hospitality and Tourism education is reshaping traditional ideas and creating new opportunities for learners, educators, and industry stakeholders alike. This paper examines how technology influences social interactions in educational environments, analyzing whether digital tools help bridge or widen gaps among diverse student groups. Social media is pivotal in tourism and hospitality education, offering real-time industry insights, networking possibilities, and hands-on learning for students. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn enable students to connect with professionals, track trends, showcase their work, and stay informed about the latest industry developments. This interactive method not only deepens students' understanding but also fosters important connections for future career prospects. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this research gathers perspectives from students, educators, and key industry stakeholders through interviews, supplemented by secondary literature. The findings indicate that while technology improves access to information and supports innovative teaching methods, it also highlights challenges such as disparities in digital literacy and infrastructural limitations. Social media plays a crucial role in disseminating information to a broad audience, granting students access to a wealth of global knowledge and resources. It encourages interactive learning through discussions, networking, idea sharing, and collaboration between students and educators, providing practical insights into the Tourism and Hospitality sectors. However, significant challenges such as distractions, misinformation, dependency, privacy and security concerns remain. The paper concludes that an interactive approach can enhance students' knowledge while simultaneously helping them forge valuable connections for their future careers.
Keywords: Social Media, Networking, Misinformation, Dependency, Digital Literacy

Introduction

Technology integration in Hospitality and Tourism education is redefining traditional ideas and creating new opportunities for students, teachers, and important industry players alike in the quickly evolving 21st century. The use of social media in higher education is growing more and more significant for both evaluation and course delivery (Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019). Social media is crucial to the tourism and hospitality industries because it offers students access to real-time business data, networking opportunities, and hands-on learning experiences (Pandey et al., 2023; Hossain et al., 2024). Platforms like MS Teams, Google Meet, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram, to name a few, are known to have changed and improved the way students studying tourism and hospitality connect with educators and professionals in the field by allowing them to showcase their work, keep up with the latest developments in the field, and follow trends.

In addition to improving their knowledge, this participatory method helps them make important connections that will open up job prospects in the future. Due to the fact that social media is so widely used, material can be shared with a large audience, giving students access to a wealth of global information and resources (Nur et al., 2024). Furthermore, social media has drawn a great deal of interest from academic and professional communities as well as from the management area. Social media has completely changed the corporate environment (Van Den Bulte & Wuyts, 2007; Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019). Social media also promotes interactive learning experiences by way of debates, networking possibilities, idea exchange, and teamwork between teachers and students. In addition to preparing students for possibilities and problems in the real world, this dynamic interaction gives undergraduates practical insights into the tourism and hospitality business. However, there are certain difficulties with incorporating social media into schooling.

To maximise the advantages of new digital technologies, issues including distraction, disinformation, reliance, privacy, and security concerns must be properly controlled (Hossain et al., 2024). Many academics and practitioners are in favour of using social media as a technique to successfully connect academic learning to practical skills, in response to the need to close the gap between managerial practice and education (Jefferson, 2013). Through interviews with educators, important industry players, and students studying tourism and hospitality, this research uses a qualitative methodology to collect insights that are then supplemented by secondary literature. The results show that although technology improves information availability and allows for creative teaching approaches, it also raises difficulties that need to be addressed, such as infrastructure constraints and differences in digital literacy.

Problem Statement

Traditional pedagogical techniques are being transformed by the use of social media in Hospitality and Tourism education, opening up new possibilities for students, instructors, and industry partners. However, there are a lot of difficulties associated with this change as well. In addition to improving networking opportunities, hands-on learning opportunities, and real-time industry insights, social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MS Teams also bring about problems like digital literacy gaps, infrastructure constraints, and worries about distraction, false information, dependency, privacy, and security. This study aimed to answer the important question of how well can social media benefits be connected to

Hospitality and Tourism education while reducing the drawbacks that come with it to improve student outcomes and get them ready for the constantly changing demands of the industry (Jefferson, 2013; Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019).

Limitations

The study is based on data from 12 interviews, which does not represent all Namibians involved in the tourism and hospitality industries. Owing to the subjective nature of qualitative research, it is plausible that the findings cannot be appropriately generalised to a larger setting. It's possible that the study's qualitative research technique, which mostly relied on key informant interviews and produced illuminating information, kept quantitative data from being properly captured or precluded statistical generalisation. The study's focus on Namibian higher education in the Hospitality and Tourism sectors may have limited the applicability of its findings to other regions with different economic, environmental, and social contexts. Furthermore, because the digital ecosystem (Schallmo & Boardman, 2018a, 2018b) is dynamic and results are subject to change, the study may not consider the fast-evolving technology trends and achievements in the field of Hospitality and Tourism education.

Purpose

This study examines how technology affects social dynamics in tourism and hospitality classrooms and how different student demographics can benefit from or be worse served by digital tools. Additionally, the article attempts to traverse the chances and problems that social media presents in the field of Hospitality and Tourism education, offering tactics to maximise its benefits and minimise its downsides (Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019). The next part examines relevant research on social media use in education and applies pedagogical theories to highlight the potential advantages of using these platforms for course delivery and evaluation.

Literature Review

Social media gives students access to current industry information, networking opportunities, and hands-on learning experiences, all of which are crucial to the study of Hospitality and Tourism. Students may interact with experts in the Hospitality and Tourism industries, monitor trends, exhibit their work, and remain up to speed on the most recent advancements in the area by using platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn, to name a few. This hands-on method not only broadens their understanding but also facilitates the development of important professional networks. Many academics and practitioners are in favour of using social media as a technique to successfully connect academic learning to practical skills, in response to the need to close the gap between managerial practice and education (Jefferson, 2013). Research indicates that students make substantial use of digital resources, such as social media, to supplement their reading. Meanwhile, Europe has made it a top priority to promote experiential learning and collaborative skills (Voorn, 2013). However, as social media platforms are used to promote and facilitate learning, they require specific consideration when used in an educational setting (Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019). People in the Hospitality and Tourism industries now communicate differently, gather and share information differently, and use Web 3.0 technologies and social networks due to the rapidly evolving nature of technology (Kezar, 2014).

There is a limited amount of data that shows how professors and students are using social media more often, and that data is limited to certain platforms like Facebook and YouTube (e.g., Sharma et al., 2016; Al-Bahrani, Patel, & Sheridan, 2017). Faculty members appear to be using social media more despite feeling anxious and at risk (Bennet, 2017). This is because students are becoming less interested in traditional virtual learning environments (VLEs) and their platforms (Kearny, 2016), which use Moodle, Blackboard, or E-Bridge. Similarly, social media provides students with a setting that is more dynamic, familiar, and participatory than that of VLEs alone, enabling them to study more successfully. Higher education institutions are known to be using social media more often these days, both as a marketing tool to sway students' decisions about which universities and programs to enrol in as well as as an instructional component. Teachers appear to recognise the advantages of social media use and push past any negative emotions to be "good educators," even despite the higher perceived dangers associated with using social media in their instruction (Bennet, 2017). With the help of this patchy data, it is clear that educators' opinions are just as significant as students', and that an integrated strategy that considers the opinions of both educators and students is necessary (Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019).

Travellers' decisions are recognised to be influenced by social media, which is seen as a significant information source. Nevertheless, there aren't many qualitative researches that use an inductive methodology to examine how social media influences people's decisions about where to have vacation. In terms of the six travel components, destination, transportation, lodging, food and dining activities, attractions, as well as shopping and leisure activities, social media was found to have an impact on tourists' decisions (Xuerui et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2022). These components are crucial for Hospitality and Tourism education. Furthermore, through different types of publishing, texting, and media sharing, social media have become popular tools that consumers use to memorialise travel experiences, search for information, and participate in collaborative planning (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014; Dolan, Seo, and Kemper, 2019). The ability of social media platforms to enable dynamic, public interactions between customers and businesses (such as travel agencies) as well as between customers themselves is a key aspect. Through the creation of knowledge and attitudes that impact decisions about travel consumption, these exchanges promote social and cultural capital. Research has recently shown (Sedera et al., 2017) how social media comments influence customers' expectations for travel before they go on a vacation and their pleasure once they return. These results align with the larger body of Web 2.0 research, which maintains that social media influences Hospitality and Tourism education by enabling users to participate actively in an interactive value formation process (Dolan et al., 2019; Islam et al., 2024).

Additionally, social media use has been linked to improved student learning and faculty members' capacity to engage with students and provide support in a setting that they feel comfortable in. Interestingly, though, no research has sought to consider the viewpoints of students, professors, and industry despite the advantages for both parties having been demonstrated. These technological developments encourage self-directed learning, as students grow increasingly self-sufficient and time- and space-independent from their instructors (Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019). Furthermore, e-learning has been on the Higher Education agenda in circumstances and other bodies that are continuously looking for ways to enhance student learning. Based on current research, learning technology's advantages and requirements are thoroughly examined, and a framework for improving instruction is suggested. Universities and other post-secondary educational establishments also spend

money on VLEs as learning management systems. These educational establishments utilise Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) to integrate Hospitality and Tourism courses (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

Social media can help students who have a variety of learning styles by promoting and facilitating knowledge about these types. Empirical studies demonstrate how learners may become more independent, self-directed, and cooperative. According to this feature, distinct learning styles may be connected to certain students (Thompson et al. 2014; Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019). Furthermore, social media can help promote experiential learning by acting as facilitators of conversational learning, which offers the chance for experience reflection and learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019; Hossain et al., 2024). This is because social media places a strong emphasis on dialogue and interactivity. It is acknowledged that social media promotes social connection and, consequently, embraces learning in Hospitality and Tourism (Islam et al., 2021). This understanding builds upon the fundamental ideas of Vygotsky's social development theory, which are positioned at the core of cognitive development and social interaction. Additionally, the culture of spreadable social media influences post-tourism and, by extension, the borders of tourism and hospitality education, making it difficult to navigate the potential and problems of reimagining post-tourism in the digital era (Jansson, 2018).

Research Questions

The research question of the study was as follows:

1. What is the impact of social media on the learning experiences of students in Hospitality and Tourism education in Windhoek, Namibia?
2. What are the perceived benefits of using social media for educational purposes among students, lecturers/facilitators and key industry stakeholders?
3. How do digital tools influence the social dynamics and interactions within Tourism and Hospitality educational settings?
4. What are the primary challenges faced by students and lecturers in integrating social media into their educational practices?
5. What is the impact of digital literacy disparities and infrastructural limitations to optimize the use of social media in education?

Research Objectives

The research objectives were as follows:

1. To analyse the impact of social media on the learning experiences of Tourism and Hospitality students in Windhoek, Namibia.
2. To identify the benefits of social media for educational purposes amongst students, lecturers/facilitators, and key industry stakeholders.
3. To examine the influence of digital tools on social dynamics and interactions within the Tourism and Hospitality educational settings.
4. To highlight the primary challenges faced by students and lecturers in integrating social media into educational practices.
5. To develop strategies for addressing digital literacy disparities and infrastructural limitations to optimize the use of social media in education.

Research Methodology

Utilising a key informant strategy, interviews with educators, students, and key industry stakeholders were conducted to gain insights on social media. An important aspect of the strategy was conversational and open-ended communication. The goal of qualitative research methodologies is to reveal the attitudes and behaviours of a target audience towards a certain subject. To invite possible participants, hotel and industry managers, instructors, and hospitality and tourism students to participate, the researcher personally conducted the interviews. Even though they mentioned how successful their organisation was, a few of the prospective participants requested that the interview guide be provided to them in advance. Some of the interviewees had to leave the interview room two or three times to handle an urgent situation due to the nature of the hotel company. When they returned, the interview guide questions had to be completed and emailed to the researcher. Throughout the interview process, active listening, probing, and follow-up questions were utilised to encourage participants to freely voice their opinions. One of the advantages of this approach is its exceptional capacity to obtain detailed information on people's views and motives. By using in-depth interviews, the researcher was better able to interpret respondents' nonverbal cues and correlate their answers.

Qualitative data collecting allowed the researchers to learn in-depth information and examine how judgements are formed. The researcher obtained secondary data from academic papers, industry annual reports, and case studies about the integration of social media in Hospitality & Tourism education to supplement the qualitative data acquired through interviews. The literature in quest offers a thorough grasp of the contemporary situation, emphasising the interactions and ideals related to digital tools in Hospitality and Tourism education contexts. Academic publications on digital literacy were considered important sources, and they were also utilised to examine how social media affects learning outcomes and student engagement. From best practices for social media integration to possible traps that educators and institutions must avoid, these sites provided insightful information about the real-world uses of social media.

Data Analysis Plan
Qualitative research methods enabled researchers to unlock the hidden potential of the study's data and interpret the words and actions. The results were analysed using themes and categories that arose from the data. To locate recurrent themes, patterns, and discoveries, unstructured data was converted into structured data using thematic analysis.

Data Analysis
The extensive, wide-ranging, and pertinent data that was gathered was utilised to conclude. The data were recorded via transcriptions, handwritten notes, and recordings. Once the number of interviews in the capital city of Windhoek peaked at 12 and reached saturation, the data were processed and classified using textual analysis. Text analysis sets itself apart from all other qualitative research methodologies when it comes to data analysis since it allows researchers to decipher the words and actions and explore the study's information hidden potential. To find fresh information as well as reoccurring themes and patterns in the unstructured data, thematic analysis was utilised to transform the data into a structured manner. By considering the findings in light of the whole study, the researchers were able to comprehend the phenomena under investigation on a deeper level.

Findings

The results show that although technology improves information availability and allows for creative instructional approaches, it also raises difficulties that need to be addressed, including infrastructure constraints and differences in digital literacy. Social media makes it possible to share knowledge with a large audience, giving students access to a wealth of global information and resources. Through debates, networking possibilities, idea sharing, and partnerships between students and instructors, social media fosters interactive learning experiences that provide students with real-world insights into the Hospitality and Tourism industry. Distraction, false information, reliance, privacy, and security issues are the main obstacles.

The Influence of Social Media on the Learning Experiences of Students in Hospitality and Tourism Education in Windhoek

Social media can be a helpful tool (Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019), but it's also recognised that social media can change the way that Hospitality and Tourism education is taught by bridging the knowledge gap between classroom instruction and real-world industry practices, beginning with experiential learning. One of the respondents being a GM revealed on this question that, "…social media plays a crucial role in learning experiences such as access to the global industry trends when they follow pages of international chefs. This helps broaden their perspectives and allows them to advance in their skills to also give them global competitive advantage…" (Respondent 1). Another respondent uttered that, "…

The impact of social media in the learning environment has both negative and positive influences where the positives in a way can share their knowledge and experience with their peers, whilst with the negatives some students may feel left out and being scared of critics…" (Respondent 2). Social media sites like Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Microsoft Teams give students access to current business trends, networking possibilities, and hands-on training. Respondent four (4) from the industry mentioned, "… that it allows for global exposure within a short period…" (Respondent 4). In addition, one of the third years mentioned that "… Impacts include enhanced communication and collaboration…" (Respondents 6). Through these tools, students studying Hospitality and Tourism may network with experts in the field, keep up with current market trends, and exhibit their work, all of which contribute to their academic growth and the development of valuable professional networks that may be leveraged in the future.

The Hospitality and Tourism School in Windhoek uses interactive social media to create dynamic learning settings that encourage partnerships, idea sharing, and conversations between students and teachers. Providing real-world knowledge about the tourism and hospitality industry enhances the teaching process. A response from a lecturer at the Namibia University of Science and Technology's Hotel and Tourism School mentioned that "… A tool to improve collaboration and communication learning efforts between students and facilitators. In addition to communicating important information to students such as notifications in the industry such as conference and workshop dates to attend…" (Respondent 11). However, social media also carries with it problems including digital literacy gaps, infrastructure constraints, and worries about distraction, false information, reliance, privacy, and security, in addition to improving access to information and novel teaching approaches. To maximise the advantages of social media in Hospitality and Tourism education, it is imperative to consider these concerns.

Perceptions of Students, Lecturers and Key Industry Stakeholders on Utilizing Social Media For Educational Purposes

Social media presents numerous opportunities for Hospitality and Tourism education by enhancing the learning experience through real-time industry insights, networking opportunities, and practical applications. One of the participants responded that "…Perceived benefits include improved communication between students and facilitators, creativity amongst students in terms of product knowledge development which promotes critical thinking…" (Respondent 11). Students appreciate the vast array of information and perspectives available on social media, which can enrich their understanding of subjects and provide insights beyond traditional textbooks. Another respondent very interestingly replied "… Social media gives lecturers and students networking opportunities because they can connect with other industry professionals and form collaborations, study groups, exchange programmes etc. Social media can make learning more engaging and interactive, as students often feel more connected and motivated when using platforms, they enjoy for educational activities. Additionally, it gives them access to information because students and lecturers can learn much from platforms such as YouTube, and Facebook to learn and teach work beyond textbooks…" (Respondent 1). Students may monitor current trends, promote their work, and network with industry professionals using platforms like Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MS Teams. These relationships can help pave the way for future employment opportunities and significant industry contacts.

With the use of these digital technologies, instructors and students studying tourism and hospitality may collaborate, share ideas, and have conversations in dynamic and interactive learning settings. In addition, another respondent mentioned that, "…The immediate benefits are reducing costs e.g. Travelling Costs, …provide easy and readily available information, and reaching more people at the same time…." Respondent 4). Many students see social media as a valuable tool for collaboration, allowing them to easily communicate, share resources, and work together on projects regardless of location. On this question, another respondent uttered, "It gives us access to a variety of information that happens in today's world. Social media also helps one to be updated with the latest advancements and trends in the Hospitality and Tourism Sector, which ensures conversations outside the classroom…" (Respondent 10). With the use of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), Work Integrated Learnings, Training, and Teaching Mobilities, among other resources, this enhanced educational environment aids students in gaining practical insights into the business and equips them for real-world possibilities and problems either locally or worldwide. Furthermore, social media's worldwide reach gives users access to a wealth of information and resources, expanding the breadth of learning outside of the conventional four-wall classroom environment.

Digital Tools in the Hospitality and Tourism Context, Social Dynamics and Interactions

Addressing the challenges associated with social media integration in Hospitality and Tourism education requires a multifaceted approach. First, enhancing digital literacy is essential to ensure that all Hospitality and Tourism students can effectively use social media tools. One of the participants a lecturer responded, "…Students learn in different ways e.g. YouTube, or online interactive games like, KAHOOT. Also learn to work with each other through collaborations…" (Respondent5). Another respondent added, "Although the personal face-to-face experience is lost, students can exchange cultural ideas across the globe, reshaping the travel experience from physical travel to virtual travel…" (Respondent 11). This can be

accomplished through specialized training programs and integrating digital skills into the curriculum from the outset. Infrastructural challenges need to be resolved by investing in reliable broadband internet access and modern technology for educational institutions. To reduce distractions and dependency, educators should set clear guidelines for social media usage in academic environments and encourage balanced digital habits. In addition, one of the respondents mentioned that "…It has also brought limitations and isolation as communication is at our fingertips by way of the different platforms we use, such as What's App, Instagram, Facebook…" (Respondent 2).

Addressing misinformation requires fostering students' critical thinking and fact-checking abilities, allowing them to identify credible sources and concentrate on academic writing. Additionally, strong privacy and security measures must be established to safeguard the personal information of Hospitality and Tourism students. One of the respondents revealed that "…digital tools such as MS Teams help manage interactions between students and lecturers allowing for virtual learning opportunities and as Covid -19 has shown us the importance of the digital age and its relevance. Digital platforms give people free access to information so people in Hospitality and Tourism can learn from others through Zoom calls and Seminars which helps to broaden their perspectives…" (Respondent 1). By actively tackling these challenges, educators can fully leverage social media to enrich learning experiences and equip students to innovate, adapt, and rebuild the ever-evolving Hospitality and Tourism industry in the digital era.

Digital Literacy Disparities and Infrastructure Limitations on the Effective Utilization of Social Media in Education

The integration of social media into Hospitality and Tourism education presents substantial consequences for lecturers and Higher Educational Institutions. One of the respondents mentioned that "…Majority of the impoverished community members will not benefit from social media in education due to limited infrastructure and learning disparities. Thus, the majority of the population will remain uneducated with only a small percentage of individuals benefitting from social media…" (Respondent 11). Students may have different levels of proficiency with social media tools. Those with lower digital literacy might struggle to engage effectively, limiting their ability to participate in discussions or projects. Lecturers must adapt their teaching methodologies to incorporate social media effectively, leveraging the available platforms in social media to provide real-time industry insights, networking opportunities, and practical learning experiences. Another respondent explained, "…Students who are not digitally literate may find it difficult to use social media platforms for learning, which might hinder their engagement with online resources and peer collaboration" (Respondents 3).

Inconsistent access to devices and reliable internet can create barriers for students in remote or underserved areas. This limits their ability to utilize social media platforms for educational resources and collaboration. Infrastructure limitations like slow internet connectivity or antique equipment hinder access to online educational information and the smooth integration of social media tools. To improve these limitations and disparities, digital skills training programmes and infrastructural improvements should be implemented to guarantee that every student has an equal chance to capitalize on social media platforms' education potential…" (Respondents 3). Instructors may not be adequately trained to integrate social media into their teaching strategies. Without proper guidance, both lecturers and students may miss out on maximizing the educational potential of these platforms.

This requires continuous professional development to stay current with digital trends and tools. Institutions, on the other hand, need to invest in the necessary infrastructure to support digital learning, address disparities in access and ensure all students in Hospitality and Tourism benefit equally. Respondent Seven (7) replied that "…lower digital literacy can increase the risk of misusing social media, such as falling for misinformation, cyberbullying, or sharing inappropriate content…" (Respondent 7). In addition, another respondent mentioned that "…Students with lower digital literacy may struggle to effectively engage with social media tools, which hinders their ability to learn…" (Respondent 6). Furthermore, developing policies and guidelines for responsible social media use is crucial to mitigate risks such as distraction, misinformation, and privacy concerns. Furthermore, another respondent mentioned that "…Inadequate digital literacy can lead to unequal learning opportunities preventing some students from taking full advantage of social media…" (Respondent 8).

Moreover, disparities in digital literacy can create inequalities in access to educational opportunities. Limited access to high–speed internet and digital devices can hinder the effective use of social media in education. Differences in digital skills amongst students and educators can affect the learning experience and outcomes…" (Respondent 9). Respondent four (4) expressed the aspect of the distributional shortfalls which is a limitation as not all corners of the country are covered…" (Respondent 4). By embracing these changes, lecturers and institutions can enhance educational outcomes, and better prepare students for the evolving demands of the Hospitality and Tourism education and industry for the digital era.

Implementing Strategies to Counteract the Negative Impacts of Social Media
In response to the need to connect management practice with education, numerous scholars and practitioners advocate for using social media as a means to effectively integrate academic learning with vocational skills (Jefferson, 2013). One of the respondents mentioned, "…Not to believe everything from social media unless there is proof, Eyewitness…" (Respondent 12). Another respondent mentioned that "… when it comes to misinformation it is important that students are taught how to source fact-checked information and which sources not to use when sourcing information. Using platforms that can help students manage their time better can reduce dependency and distractions. Using timers and screentime help limit social media usage…" (Respondent 1). Different cultural attitudes toward technology and varying socioeconomic backgrounds can influence how students perceive and use social media for educational purposes.

This disparity can affect engagement and participation in tourism-related discussions online. In addition, one participant mentioned, "…Implement training programmes to enhance students' digital literacy. Establish clear guidelines and policies for social media in educational settings…" (Respondent 6). Nonetheless, the integration of social media in education requires careful consideration, as these platforms are utilized to enhance learning and assist students in their educational journeys (Anastacia Stathopoulou, 2019). Another respondent replied, "…Use another device for your schoolwork to avoid distraction during studying etc. You also need to get your information from reliable resources like the official company websites…" (Respondent 9).

Respondents thought that there is no strategy to mitigate the negative impacts, centered around fact-checking and personal discipline. However, the increasing reliance on and fascination with the information presented by social media has made it difficult and even tempting to become complacent when it comes to seeking out accurate information. Respondent seven (7) replied, "Develop and communicate clear policies on the appropriate

use of social media for educational purposes…" (Respondent 7). Furthermore, social media have become popular tools that consumers use to search for information, engage in collaborative planning, and memorialize travel experiences through various forms of posting, messaging, and media sharing (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

In addition, another respondent reacted, "Introduce digital literacy programmes, set clear rules, about how to use it incorporate information literacy and critical thinking into the curriculum and encourage a balance between online and offline activities…" (Respondent 8). It is crucial to implement security measures to safeguard university-generated content and research. For instance, universities can utilize encryption and access controls to ensure that sensitive data remains protected. Additionally, employing digital rights management (DRM) can help prevent unauthorized distribution of academic materials, ensuring that faculty and student work is secure and properly credited.

Students' Utilization of Social Media to Build Professional Networks and Enhance Career Opportunities

The rapid evolution of technology, along with the emergence of Web 3.0 and social networks, has transformed how individuals in the Hospitality and Tourism sectors connect and how they gather and share information (Kezar, 2014). One of the respondents replied, "…Construction of their CVs and the distribution thereof across the globe through collaboration efforts with fellow network users…" (Respondent 4). They make connections via social media or in person which expands their network which in turn may have career opportunities. Leveraging social networking platforms like LinkedIn allows individuals to broaden their connections globally, enabling them to engage with professionals in their industry. Moreover, another respondent added," …through networking and interacting with their peers and professionals who are in the Tourism industry…" (Respondent 2). Thus, through digital media, social networks, conferences and workshops can be conducted. There is occasional evidence indicating a growing use of social media among faculty and students, though this data pertains mainly to specific platforms like YouTube (e.g., Al-Bahrani, Patel, & Sheridan, 2017) and Facebook (e.g., Sharma et al., 2016).

The use of platforms such as LinkedIn can be used to communicate with like-minded individuals who are in the same industry such as Hospitality and Tourism. They can easily contact famous people in the industry or people who want someone to work for them. Small start-up businesses are a rage, especially among younger people and through social media Collaborating to start their businesses. Although faculty members recognize the heightened perceived risks associated with using social media in their teaching, they appear to value its benefits and are willing to set aside any negative feelings to be effective educators (Bennet, 2017). They can share their experiences and seek mentorship opportunities which can lead to internships and job offers. Another respondent indicated that there is a need to, set boundaries for social media use during their study hours. Teach critical thinking skills for online information evaluation. Encourage balanced social media use for education, and recreation. Provide support for Hospitality and Tourism students struggling with social media dependency or distraction…" (Respondent 9). To effectively market Namibia as a top destination on a global scale through digital marketing, promotional strategies, and sales tactics, it is essential to incorporate optimization of Global Distribution Systems (GDS) within the Hospitality and Tourism sectors in today's digital landscape.

Prospects for Using Social Media to enhance Hospitality and Tourism students learning

To ensure that students are competent in utilising social media aspects, computers, the internet, and common software programmes inclusive of MS Teams, Google Meet and Zoom to mention a few start-ups will be facilitated, teaching foundational courses in key digital literacy skills. One of the respondents mentioned that "…To network with people in similar industries by communicating and participating in LinkedIn conversations, Webinars etc…" (Respondent 1). Social media can be effectively integrated into the learning environment if it is carefully planned and backed by comprehensive research. This approach aims to address potential vulnerabilities and implement robust security measures to protect both students and lecturers from cyber-attacks. In addition, e-learning has been on the agenda of Higher Education in situations and other bodies, that constantly investigate methods to improve student learning.

For instance, "student can access a wealth of Information and educational content through social media and enhance their learning of their industry. Social media platforms allow students to share resources, discuss ideas and work together on group projects…" (Respondent 6). The suggestions here in particular included the setup and provision of an innovation hub for students and experts in the sector providing training on social media aspects and platforms like Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and MS -Teams to allow students to connect with industry professionals. This "allows students to communicate with other students. Create platforms for learning groups. It is the right platform to network and collaborate with fellow students …" (Respondent 4). It also "allows tools to enable students to collaborate on projects, share ideas, and coordinate tasks effectively through group chats…." (Respondent 7). Social media enables learners to explore various learning styles and fosters knowledge sharing among students with diverse preferences.

Research shows that this platform supports more autonomous, self-directed, and collaborative learning experiences. "Social media can improve learning technologies for all learners. Social media can be used to reach out to all students even those with learning disabilities. Social media can pave the way for collaboration between universities across the globe…" (Respondent 11). Students can follow trends, showcase their work, and stay updated on the newest expansions in the field including technology to improve social dynamics within educational settings, exploring how digital tools can either bridge or widen gaps between diverse student demographics. "Use interactive content like video infographics, and interactive posts to enhance learning. Peer learning platforms facilitate peer-to-peer learning through discussion forums…" (Respondent 9). Furthermore, with regards to promoting experiential learning, social media, with their emphasis on dialogue and interactivity, can operate as facilitators of conversational learning, which provides the opportunity for reflection on experiences and experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). "Communicates with lecturers in real-time, and get feedback. One also has access to articles, video and online courses which ensures that education can improve the overall learning experiences…" (Respondent 10). Social media plays a significant role in Hospitality and Tourism education providing real-time industry insights, networking opportunities, and practical learning experiences for students.

Challenges Faced by Students and Lecturers in Integrating Social Media into their Educational Practices

Several obstacles must be overcome to fully benefit from the integration of social media into tourism and hospitality education. Digital literacy gaps among students in this profession are

a major worry because they can widen the gap between those who can utilise these technologies successfully and others who find it difficult. On this question, one respondent mentioned "… Access to technology, as not all students have access to proper internet and Smartphones which limits their interaction in social media based educational activities…" Additionally, the digital divide plays a huge role as the majority of people are still not well-versed in using Social Media and Smart Applications (Respondent 1). While there are benefits, some students worry that social media can be distracting, leading to decreased focus on academic tasks and a potential decline in productivity. Another respondent mentioned that "…Lack of knowledge on the use of these technologies cause fear. Also, poor connectivity…" (Respondent 5). Infrastructural challenges, such as insufficient access to reliable internet and technology, further deepen this divide.

Additionally, social media can serve as a distraction, resulting in reduced focus and productivity, particularly for students engaged in academic tasks and experiential learning activities. In addition, "… Social media can reduce personal experience in student learning. It can also reduce the need for applying technical skills which is required in the Real-world…" (Respondent 11). "…Challenges that one may face is lack of privacy and professionalism. Lecturers may have challenges in monitoring proper behaviour and students may find it challenging to only use social media for instructional/educational purposes…" (Respondent 10). The proliferation of misinformation on these platforms threatens the reliability of the information students depend on for their education. Furthermore, an over-reliance on social media can hinder students' capacity to engage effectively with traditional learning methods. Another respondent uttered, "…The fine line between what is considered disrespectful and funny or irrelevant or common knowledge to some. Also, maybe the disinterest both lecturers and students might find in the course…" (Respondent 3). Privacy and security issues are critical, as the personal information shared on these platforms can be at risk of misuse. Tackling these challenges is essential to fully leverage the advantages of social media in education while protecting students' well-being and academic integrity.

Conclusion
The paper concludes that an interactive approach can enhance students' knowledge and also help in building valuable connections for future career opportunities. Social media presents both challenges and opportunities for Hospitality and Tourism education in the digital age. With so much content available, students can struggle to discern credible sources from unreliable ones which can lead to information overload. Distinguishing between a reputable travel blog and one filled with misinformation can be daunting (Islam et al., 2019). Engaging students who are accustomed to quick content on platforms like TikTok or Instagram can be challenging since the traditional teaching methods may not capture their interest leading to short attention spans. Due to digital divide, not all students have equal access to technology or internet connectivity, which can lead to disparities in learning experiences and outcomes. However, social media provides a treasure trove of real-time examples for teaching. Educators can analyze a viral marketing campaign from a hotel chain or a crisis management situation that unfolded on social media. Social media can lead to networking and collaboration with industry professionals through platforms like LinkedIn or Twitter. This networking can lead to internships or job opportunities. Utilizing platforms like Instagram for visual assignments or class discussions can make learning more interactive. Students might create a social media campaign for a fictitious hotel, allowing them to apply theoretical knowledge creatively. Social media can help students learn about diverse cultures and global

trends in Tourism. Through travel blogs, they can explore different destinations and gain insights into local hospitality practices. By navigating these challenges while leveraging the opportunities, educators can create a more dynamic and effective learning environment in Hospitality and Tourism.

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