**RESEARCH ARTICLE:**

# Adoption of Facebook as a Communication Tool amongst University Millennials in KwaZulu-Natal

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## Abstract

*This study aimed to understand the critical significance of Facebook as a communication tool in promoting social consciousness amongst South African millennials at various Higher Education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. The study was exploratory and quantitative, with 400 undergraduate students identified using a purposive sampling technique. There were 150 students from the Durban University of Technology, 125 from the Mangosuthu University of Technology, and 125 from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The data were analysed using the most recent version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) application. According to the findings, most millennials spend at least two hours, and up to considerably more than six hours, on social media every day. Furthermore, most participants believed that this forum allows them to express themselves whilst also exchanging information on academic concerns such as ongoing strikes and fee increases. The participants all agreed that accessing this social media platform was effortless for them, thus they perceived it as an effective awareness tool. Furthermore, the interviewees stated that Facebook is an excellent platform because it facilitates texting, voice recordings, and video uploads. As a result, it is suggested that universities use Facebook to raise awareness and communicate with key stakeholders.*

*Keywords: Facebook; promotions; South African millennials; social media*

## Introduction

There has been little, if any, research on South African millennials and how they utilize Facebook as a communication and promotional tool. Furthermore, no study has been undertaken in South Africa recommending the use of Facebook as a tool to promote awareness of the social challenges amongst millennials (Maziriri *et al*., 2022; Sukhdeo, 2020). In line with the forgoing sentiments, the significance of the current study is based on the premise that the study explores the strategies and approaches through which Facebook can be used to create social awareness amongst millennials, whilst still attempting to explore some of the most common challenges faced by this group. Facebook provides numerous benefits, such as marketing, networking, and personalized and interactive services. Furthermore, it has a significant influence on millennials' ideas, viewpoints and ideals. Given that Facebook is a relatively new phenomenon, millennials both consciously and unconsciously shape their lifestyles by what they learn from it (Chin, *et al*., 2020; Benavides, 2022). Empirical research shows that Facebook and other social media sites provide several advantages. However, many millennials do not use the platforms for strategic purposes. Rather, it has been observed that some frequently convey unfavourable views and ideologies on these platforms, which have a negative connotation for certain other users. Unfavourable perceptions and practices being promoted include cybercrime and terrorism, which have become a privacy threat to people all over the world (Eid *et al*., 2020; Younies and Al-Tawil, 2020; Zavattaro and Brainard, 2019). Furthermore, there is also concern over a considerable lack of knowledge of Facebook and social media and its potential (Hussain, *et al*., 2021; Pennycook and Rand, 2021; Al-Adwan and Kokash, 2019).

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There are differences in how millennials are defined based on demographics in the available research. As a result, various researchers use demographics that are slightly different. The millennial generation was born between 1979 and 2000 (Dimock, 2018; Stein, 2013). Millennials constitute an appealing business opportunity because they account for around 31.5% of the worldwide population and have high discretionary incomes (Thusi and Maduku, 2020). This suggests that the majority of millennials are already working, whilst others are still enrolled in higher education institutions. On a territorial basis, South Africa has a sizable millennial population. According to a survey performed by Statistics South Africa (2014), millennials account for 26.5 % of the South African population. This equates to 14,311,930 of South Africa's total population of 54,001,953. Statistics South Africa provides the following breakdown of millennial age groups: 5 267 117 for the 20-24 age group; 4 954 531 for the 25-29 age group; and 4 090 282 for the 30-34 age group.

In South Africa, millennials make up roughly 25% of the entire population. On a provincial level, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) has the highest proportion of South African youth (millennials), accounting for 22.2 % (Human Sciences Research Council, 2012; Ngubelanga, and Duffett, 2021). As with all other millennials worldwide, South African millennials are digital natives. They employ a wide range of communication technologies to stay in touch with their peers and they generally use such resources for personal empowerment and pleasure, but they are not always digitally competent when it comes to using technology to enhance their learning (Warden, *et al.*, 2022). According to the Visa Generation Y Report (2012), 89 % of South African millennials could not live without computers at the time, and 80 % could not live without smartphones. As a result of this over-reliance on technology, millennials' learning attitudes have shifted, with online learning being preferred above expert knowledge and trips to the library. Many elements appear to highlight how millennials behave. Millennials' behaviour is influenced by their early exposure to technology, which has impacted their sense of reality in terms of how they learn, behave and think, distinguishing them from prior generations at the same age. Millennials learn by trial and error. The majority of the time, millennials discover new things by chance; they do not just conform to established standards; and they learn mostly by doing (Dwivedi and Lewis, 2021; Oblinger, 2003). The ability to multitask is another defining feature of the millennial generation. The availability of technology that provides easy access to the internet and social media exacerbates this behavioural characteristic.

The intensity of multitasking has reached a stage where electronics are considered bodily parts, indicating that they are always present where the person is. A further behavioural attribute of millennials is that they have spent their entire lives in a digital environment, with online technology such as computers, mobile devices, the Internet, social media, and a vast array of other digital, ICT platforms in the era of ceaseless connectivity and multimedia-rich social setting. The millennial generational cohort is more technologically advanced and highly sophisticated than all previous generations (Dimock, 2018; Duffett, 2020). Apartheid's demise resulted in major changes in South African institutions of higher learning, including massification and managerialism (Bank and Kruss, 2019; Davids, 2021). These changes facilitated a high reliance on information technology to the point where even students from under-served areas with no internet connection must quickly understand this new kind of learning after enrolling in a university. Furthermore, easy access to the internet at university via free Wi-Fi provides South African millennials with unlimited access to social networks, particularly Facebook. Thus, Bevan-Dye (2019) notes that Facebook outnumbers other social networking platforms in South Africa, with an estimated 16 million local users, or close to a 30% penetration rate of the country's population.

## Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory research approach with a quantitative research method to assess how Facebook may be used as an effective promotional tool to raise social consciousness amongst millennials at chosen tertiary institutions in Kwa-Zulu Natal. As a result, the purposive non-probability sampling technique was utilized. Purposive sampling is frequently utilized by researchers when a certain sample population must be reached and sampling for proportionality is not the primary goal (Florida Institute of Technology, 2002). Students from Kwa-Zulu Natal's tertiary institutions were the study's target audience. Therefore, registered students from the Durban University of Technology, the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, and the Mangosuthu University of Technology constituted the study population. This population was thought to be representative of KwaZulu-Natal as students from the designated institutions including rural residents, White, African, Indian, Coloured and foreign nationals were included in the study. The millennial student population at Kwa-Zulu Natal universities is estimated to be around 100,000. As a result, a sample size of 400 would be adequate to validate research findings.

Questionnaires were distributed to a total of 400 undergraduate students. There were 150 students from the Durban University of Technology, 125 from the Mangosuthu University of Technology, and 125 from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Questionnaires were administered and collected in the cafeterias of each institution. The immediate collection of questionnaires was intended to increase the response rate whilst also allowing the researcher to explain questions posed in instances where participants were confused about the questions. Meadows (2003) contends that the presence of a researcher during questionnaire administration is significant because it allows study participants to ask questions when they are unsure about the questions given, and it also increases the response rate. The study conformed to the ethical standards set by the Ethics Committees of Kwa-Zulu Natal universities, and all study participants provided voluntary and informed consent. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 24.0, was used to analyze the data gathered in this study. Furthermore, the data were classified into themes and depicted using pie charts and tables. The study's shortcomings include the fact that participation was confined to students from institutions of higher learning in KwaZulu-Natal. However, considering the sample size (400) and the population size, this reveals that the results obtained cannot be extended to a wider population as it may not provide a real picture of students' opinions across other South African higher institutions.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1**: Gender of respondents

| Gender | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Male | 176 | 44.0 |
| Female | 224 | 56.0 |
| **Total** | 400 | 100.0 |

The study had 400 participants, as shown in **Table 1**. Male participants constituted 44 % and female participants 56%.

**Table 2:** Age of respondents

| Age group | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 18-20 | 112 | 28.0 |
| 21-24 | 169 | 42.3 |
| 25-28 | 86 | 21.5 |
| 29-34 | 25 | 6.3 |
| 35> | 8 | 2.0 |
| **Total** | 400 | 100 |

According to Table 2 above on the age demographic results, the majority of participants were between the ages of 21 and 24 years old (42.3%). Participants between the ages of 18 and 20 made up the second-largest age group (28.0%). The presumption in this study is that due to their age, these participants are most likely first-year students. There were also several participants between the ages of 25 and 28 years old (21.5%). However, there were very few students aged 29-34 years (6.3%) and 35 years and older (2.0%). This is because by that age, the vast majority of participants would have completed their undergraduate education.

**Table 3:** Gender and age cross-tabulation results

| | | | Gender | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **Male** | **Female** | **Total** |
| | 18-20 | Count | 44 | 68 | 112 |
| | | % within age | 39.0 | 60.7 | 100.0 |
| | | %within gender | 25.0 | 30.4 | 28.0 |
| | | % total | 11.0 | 17.0 | 28.0 |
| | 21-24 | Count | 73 | 96 | 169 |
| | | % within age | 43.2 | 58.8 | 100.0 |
| | | %within gender | 41.5 | 42.9 | 42.3 |
| | | % total | 18.3 | 24.0 | 42.3 |
| **Age** | 25-28 | Count | 45 | 41 | 86 |
| | | % within age | 52.2 | 47.7 | 100.0 |
| | | %within gender | 25.6 | 18.3 | 21.5 |
| | | % total | 11.3 | 10.3 | 21.5 |

| | 29-34 | Count | 10 | 15 | 25 |
| | | % within age | 40.0 | 60.0 | 100.0 |
| | | %within gender | 5.7 | 6.7 | 6.3 |
| | | % total | 2.5 | 3.8 | 6.3 |
| | 35> | Count | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| | | % within age | 50.0 | 50.0 | 100.0 |
| | | % within gender | 2.3 | 1.8 | 2.0 |
| | | % total | 1.0 | 1.0 | 2.0 |
| **Total** | | Count | 176 | 224 | 400 |
| | | % within age | 44.0 | 56.0 | 100.0 |
| | | % within gender | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| | | % total | 44.0 | 56.0 | 100.0 |

The cross-tabulation in Table 3 provides a more in-depth analysis of how participants were divided into several categories based on their age and gender. These findings are particularly important because they shed light on important gender concerns that Table 2 did not make clear. In particular, the findings indicate that there were more female participants in the study overall, but the cross-tabulation table reveals that there were more male participants (n = 45) than female participants (n = 41) in the 25–28 age range. The data also reveals that there were equal numbers of male and female participants in the age group of participants aged 35 years and older (n = 4 and n = 4 respectively).
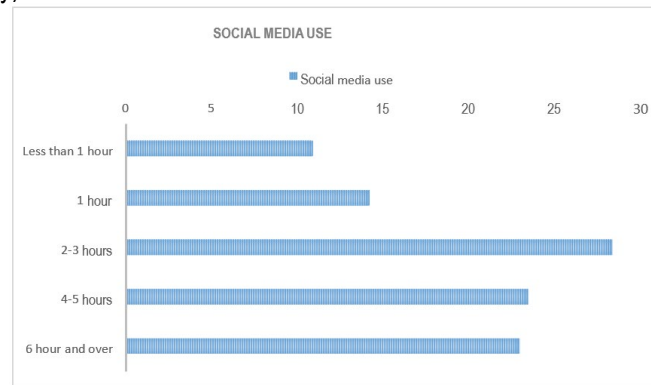


**Figure 1**: Social media usage

According to Figure 1, the majority of participants (28.4%) spend two to three hours on social media. Furthermore, many of the participants indicated that they spend four to five hours on social media (23.5%) and more than six hours (23.0%) daily. A few people indicated that they spent more than an hour (14.2%) and less than an hour on social media (10.9 %). When the data is properly analyzed, it becomes clear that most participants spend more than three hours per day on social media. As a result, these findings contribute to the study's third goal, that Facebook, as a widely used social media platform, can be very effective in promoting social consciousness amongst millennials.
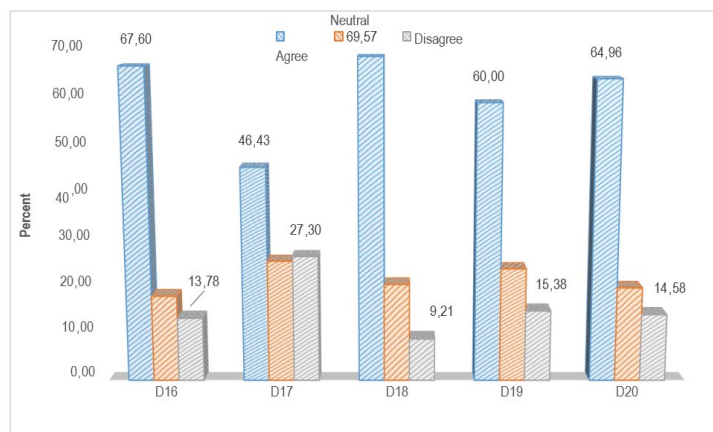


**Figure 2:** Tools used by universities to create awareness

The findings in Figure 2 suggest that universities employ a variety of social awareness methods to assist students in dealing with social difficulties. The student portal (D16=67.60 %), institutional radio (D17=46.43 %), organized special events (D18=69.57 %), university noticeboards (D19=60.00 %) and flyers (D20=64.96 %) are all examples of these techniques. The results are fascinating in that the bulk of the tools identified do not require the usage of the internet, except for one, the student portal, which came in second. Bearing in mind that one of the study's main goals was to determine the efficacy of Facebook as a social awareness tool, this is covered in the next section. These technologies are used by DUT, UKZN and MUT to quickly communicate information and to alert students or personnel to other activities that may be harmful to their well-being. According to the higher institution administration, these technologies are highly valuable when crucial information needs to be conveyed to everyone immediately.
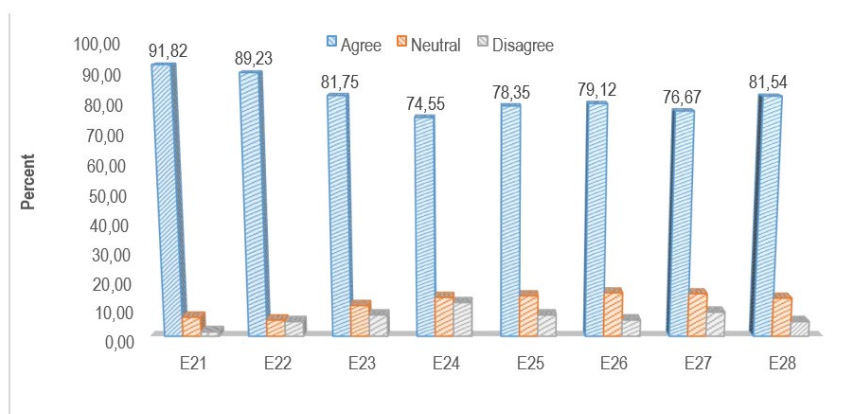


**Figure 3:** Effectiveness of Facebook as an awareness tool

According to the results in Figure 3, most participants believe that institutions of higher learning can use social media, notably Facebook, to raise awareness about social concerns that are not relevant to the curriculum. The researcher expected these results because most participants indicated that they spent an average of two to three hours every day on Facebook. As a result, Facebook is unquestionably effective in spreading awareness amongst millennials.

**Table 4:** Chi-Square test results

| Item | Chi-square | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Due to the popularity of Facebook, it can serve as an effective tool for creating social awareness among students | 603.320[o] | 2 | 0,000 |
| Universities can use Facebook to communicate school-related issues with students | 548.369[p] | 2 | 0,000 |
| Universities can use Facebook to communicate about non-school-related issues | 410.967[q] | 2 | 0,000 |
| Universities can use Facebook as a platform to resolve issues students face with | 297.568[q] | 2 | 0,000 |
| Universities can use Facebook as a platform to help students deal with social issues affecting them | 356.448[r] | 2 | 0,000 |
| Due to the interactivity of Facebook, it is an ideal platform to create social awareness of social issues students face | 371.387[r] | 2 | 0,000 |
| Item | Chi-square | df | Sig. |
| I can easily share my views on social issues students are faced with on Facebook | 331.954[p] | 2 | 0,000 |
| Facebook provides the opportunity for immediate response to a post, which makes it the ideal marketing tool for communication on social issues students are faced with | 411.754[p] | 2 | 0,000 |
| Can Facebook serve as an effective marketing tool to create social awareness of social issues students are faced with? | 249.285[s] | 1 | 0,000 |

The Chi-square results presented in Table 4 above show that a statistically significant number of participants in the study agreed that:

i.  Due to the popularity of Facebook, it can serve as an effective tool for creating social awareness;
ii. Universities can use Facebook to communicate University-related issues with students, and they can also use Facebook to communicate non-University-related issues with students;

iii.   Facebook can be used as a platform to resolve the issues that students are faced with;

iv.   Due to the interactivity of Facebook, it is an ideal platform to create social awareness of the social issues that students face, $x^2(2) = 371.39$, p. < .01;

v.   Students can easily share their views on the social issues they are faced with on Facebook, $x^2(2) = 331.95$, p. < .01;

vi.   Facebook provides the opportunity for immediate response to a post, which makes it the ideal marketing tool for communication on the social issues that students are faced with, $x^2(2) = 411.75$, p. < .01; and

vii.   Facebook can serve as an effective marketing tool to create social awareness of the social issues that students are faced with, $x^2(1) = 249.29$, p. < .01.

Based on the results presented above, the null hypothesis, which stated that Facebook is not an effective tool to use to raise awareness about the social challenges faced by millennials, was rejected. According to a study conducted by Johnston (2013), 572 students from seven South African institutions of higher learning were polled regarding the extent to which they used Facebook. The intensity scale employed in that study had a Cronbach's Alpha of ($\alpha=0.84$), indicating that it was very dependable to use. Furthermore, 298 South African students were asked to provide information about how they utilized their cellphones while on campus. The following are the findings from the study, as well as explanations for each of the categories: Information – news and sports; Socialising – Facebook, instant messaging; Academic – schoolwork; Campus: available resources; and Recreation – playing games, watching videos and listening to music.

Social media sites such as Facebook are amongst the most recent examples of communication platforms that students have widely adopted, also in addition to having the prospects of becoming a significant resource to support their education. With over 1.71 billion prominent users, Facebook is the world's most popular free social networking site. Facebook offers collaboration and networking on an unprecedented scale, allowing users to create and share information whilst also building relationships. Facebook is the most popular social media site for educators, and studies have demonstrated that Facebook may be used as a virtual learning environment and an innovative tool (Arago *et al.*, 2018; Chugh and Ruhi, 2018). It is undeniable that Facebook has rapidly grown to become the most used social network since its inception, and using Facebook provides the need for care and affection, as well as replacing and compensating for the absence of affection from family members. Hence, Facebook usage becomes a form of social recompense (D'Arienzo *et al.*, 2019).

In many regions of the world, the use of social media as a mobilization tool has proven to be important. In Asian countries, Africa, Europe and South America, social media have been used to mobilize individuals and communicate specific messages about plans to both governments and ordinary people. As a result, Facebook is considered a crucial partner in the process of teaching and raising awareness. It also contributes to increased awareness and lateral communication interchange, which results in connective activity (Jabar and Chyad, 2021; Mueller-Herbst *et al.*, 2020). Facebook is also thought to be superior to traditional media since it can provide rapid reactions and ensure that suitable communication is generated (Tanti and Ghozali, 2019). Millennials utilize Facebook more than any other generation as they are presumed to be digital natives (Brailovskaia and Bierhoff, 2020; Velasco, 2020). This viewpoint is reinforced by a survey conducted in well over 90 countries throughout the world, with data revealing that Facebook is, without doubt, the most popular site when it comes to using social media (GWI Audience Report, 2014). The platform is so popular amongst millennials because it allows for unrestricted self-expression, which comes naturally to them. According to Pintos and Mansfield (2012), around 90% of all millennials are on Facebook, but this proportion rises to 96 % amongst university students. The site's popularity amongst university millennials makes it a fertile ground for communicating with this generation.

Facebook offers two critical marketing advantages. To begin with, it permits hyper-targeting or micro-targeting, which implies that message recipients can be selected based on three primary factors: geography, demographics and hobbies (Segado-Boj *et al.,* 2019; Valand and Gaur, 2020). Facebook allows for very direct and tailored advertising. Secondly, Facebook meets advertisers' aim to reach as many people as possible, as frequently as possible, and at the lowest possible cost. This alone is reason enough to incorporate Facebook as one of the primary avenues through which businesses connect with millennials (Klonick, 2020; Thorson, *et al.,* 2021). University students spend an average of 402.17 minutes per day on Facebook (Hong and Chiu, 2016). Facebook is therefore proving to be a popular platform that promotes university learning activities by allowing users to engage and work within a pre-defined virtual community. Since this technology is known and acceptable to their generation,

most university students use Facebook daily to naturally support both their academic and social goals (Feng, *et al.,* 2019). In addition, students use Facebook for educational activities, citing access to certain sites and groups on Facebook, as well as participation in conversations and topics (Putri and Aminatun, 2021). Facebook is now an integral part of almost every university student's daily life, and many students appear to benefit from using the platform by sharing information for educational purposes. This social networking service is extremely beneficial to university students in addition to its academic potential. It encourages greater student cooperation, which is congruent with the Social Constructivism teaching paradigm (Donlan, 2014; Zaremohzzabieh, *et al.*, 2015). Facebook, as a course supplement and teaching tool, can improve the lives of institutions of higher learning students by allowing them to share course-related material with their instructors. The proper use of Facebook can increase learning through contact, interaction, cooperation and resource sharing (Awidi *et al.*, 2019; Frolova *et al.*, 2020).

## Conclusion

Facebook, according to the majority of participants, is an effective platform for interactive purposes. They did say that they use this technology to communicate with both individuals and groups. Furthermore, this application allows millennials to communicate with other subscribers both within and outside of South Africa. The participants mentioned that they can use this platform to debate current concerns with their colleagues. As a result, all of the participants believed that Facebook is an effective interactive medium for millennials. Despite these benefits, participants also mentioned that incorrect, explicit or misleading content/information could be distributed to many individuals, which could have a negative influence. Due to the fast replies facilitated by Facebook, sensitive matters about race and culture can go viral. Furthermore, participants expressed concern that this could lead to social media addiction, which could harm millennials' academic performance. According to the findings, millennials use Facebook extensively and regard it as the most popular and successful communication tool available. As a result, institutions of higher learning should use Facebook to raise awareness and communicate with their stakeholders. Understanding the inherent value of integrating the best of traditional communications with those enhanced by emerging technologies like Facebook can benefit institutions of higher learning.

The adoption of Facebook would make the message transmitted to students and stakeholders more accessible and flexible, potentially boosting communication quality. The institutions of higher learning need to embrace cutting-edge technology and discover ways to increase student participation. Furthermore, similar studies should be carried out in South Africa so that a national perspective on the subject may be established. This would also provide a clearer sense of how far the findings from this study can be applied outside of the three institutions of higher learning that provided participants. This research suggested several areas that should be investigated further in the future. While the popularity of Facebook as a promotional tool amongst University Millennials in Kwa-Zulu Natal was examined in this study, it is proposed that alternative social media platforms be investigated. Other social media platforms should also be investigated because this will present institutions of higher learning with information on how they function, whom they attract, and how they are utilized. This will greatly aid marketers in developing their social media marketing strategies, as well as adapting those strategies to evolving customer perceptions. To recapitulate, the use of Facebook as a marketing tool to generate awareness in the study does not imply a complete disregard for previously employed methodologies. A more holistic approach is required, one that blends the use of Facebook with tactics that have long been used at institutions of higher learning to improve the chances of information being transmitted.

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