EXPLORING STUDENTS' AND LECTURERS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF MIDLAND STATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Technology is advancing at an unprecedented pace, bringing innovations that profoundly impact human lives. In the education sector, digital tools have transformed the way students and educators interact with learning materials, as well as with each other. This study investigates the perceptions and experiences of 55 students and 10 lecturers at Midlands State University regarding the place of digital communication in teaching and learning. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews and questionnaires from participants across various faculties. The findings revealed a limited use of digital tools among conventional students who have sufficient time for face-to-face lectures. Participants expressed a strong preference for in-person learning over digital tools. Factors such as cost, difficulties in navigating the platforms and a strong attachment to traditional teaching methods contribute to this restricted engagement. As a result, digitalisation often serves merely as a supplementary mechanism for face-to-face lectures rather than as a fully integrated component of the teaching and learning experience.

Keywords: *Digitalisation, digital tools, learning, teaching, digital communication, education*

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Introduction

In today's world, digitalisation is no longer an option; it has permeated every aspect of human life, becoming an essential part of everyday life, profoundly influencing how people communicate and interact, consequently reshaping how people live and work. Thus, Orekhov (2020) postulates that digital transformation, and technology use are ingrained in modern lifestyles. Technology is embedded in every aspect of life, from social interactions to business operations. The widespread use of digital tools has transformed the way business is conducted, affecting, supporting, and in some instances replacing traditional methods. Digital communication refers to the use of electronic tools, platforms, and networks to exchange information (Anderson, 2019). These tools range from formal Learning Management Systems (LMSs) such as Moodle, Blackboard and Google Classroom, to informal platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and email.

One of the facets significantly affected by the technological advancements of the 21st century is education. These technologies in question are increasingly viewed as indispensable in enhancing access to learning resources, fostering collaboration, and bridging geographical and temporal barriers in education (Maphosa, 2021; Zawacki-Richter, 2020). As a result, embracing technology is no longer a choice but a necessity. Since the introduction of digitalisation, education has never remained the same. The rise of the internet and digital technologies has revolutionised learning and teaching and has also redefined the interactions between educators and learners. According to Maphosa (2021), the use of technology in education has evoked a paradigm shift from traditional face-to-face teaching and learning to the creation of virtual learning interactions, which have promoted teaching and learning outside the physical boundaries of the four walls.

Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a significant increase in the use of digital technologies within educational settings worldwide. Take the Zimbabwean context, for example, wherein digitalisation is promoted at all levels of learning, from kindergarten to tertiary education. In Zimbabwe, the integration of digital communication into higher education has been shaped by the global shift towards e-learning, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Magocha et al. (2025) note, the crisis accelerated the adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for remote teaching, compelling universities to transition to online modes of delivery. The pandemic compelled institutions to transition to online learning to ensure educational continuity, as schools and university campuses closed as part of the measures to help combat the virus. This marked a significant turning point in education, prompting the emergence of innovative strategies to support and educate students. Magocha et al (2025: 311) recognise that "The shift from conventional face-to-face to online and virtual learning has afforded much educational instruction, which has integrated ICT into the curriculum to switch to remote-based teaching and learning during the outbreak of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-

19) worldwide." With traditional in-person learning disrupted, educators and institutions rapidly adopted digitalisation to ensure that learning continued safely and effectively.

One of the primary strategies implemented in universities was distance learning. This approach leveraged technology to deliver instructional content remotely, allowing students to engage with their studies from home. Online learning platforms and digital resources became essential in this new educational landscape. The move laid a foundation for a more integrated approach to learning that encompasses both traditional and digital methodologies in the future. This is supported by Zieger and Tan (2012) cited in Miguel and Silva (2023:2), who argue that:

> The crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic presented educational establishments with an opportunity to harness the use of communication technologies to explore new methods of communication and improve the parent-teacher relationship by providing easy, efficient, and effective methods of transferring information.

At Midlands State University, the shift to digital learning saw the introduction of Google Classroom and an increased reliance on social media platforms, email, and electronic resources for research and learning at Midlands State University.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, Midlands State University incorporated significant changes in its educational framework, notably adopting a quarter system. The introduction of the quarter system allowed for a more flexible academic calendar, and in turn called for a more intensive and focused learning experience. Rather than reverting entirely to traditional methods of teaching and learning, the university adopted a blended approach to learning. Together with face-to-face lectures, various digital communication platforms like Google Classroom and other online resources have remained integral to university education.

Despite significant advances in digital technology and institutional efforts to integrate communication platforms into teaching and learning, higher education institutions in Zimbabwe, including Midlands State University, continue to face persistent challenges in adopting and effectively utilising these tools. For instance, some sources have complained that, while digital platforms have enhanced flexibility, they have also exposed structural challenges such as limited infrastructure, high connectivity costs, and low digital literacy (Mpofu & Chimhenga, 2016). This study therefore seeks to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of lecturers and students at Midlands State University concerning digital communication in education, with a view to understanding the barriers, opportunities, and implications for teaching and learning. This study aims at discussing the perceptions and experiences of students and lecturers at Midlands State

University regarding the extent to which digital communication tools have been utilised in helping develop effective teaching and learning. The study investigates the degree to which technology influences learning experiences. The study gathers firsthand accounts from students and lecturers regarding the opportunities and challenges associated with the growing use of digital platforms in teaching and learning. To achieve this, the research employs qualitative methods, including interviews and questionnaires, to gather in-depth insights into their experiences and perspectives.

Digital communication in higher education

Digital communication has become a fundamental aspect of modern higher education, reshaping how lecturers and students interact, share knowledge, and participate in academic discussions. In recent years, the increasing digitisation of education has been propelled by the proliferation of digital tools such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), social media, and mobile applications, all of which are reshaping traditional pedagogical practices (Anderson, 2019; Zawacki-Richter, 2020). The global transition towards digital learning environments was particularly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the widespread adoption of online teaching to ensure educational continuity (Alqahtani & Rajkhan, 2020; Magocha et al., 2025).

Digital communication encompasses the use of electronic platforms and media to facilitate academic interaction and information exchange (Anderson, 2019). Common platforms include institutional LMSs such as Google Classroom and Moodle, as well as informal tools like WhatsApp and email, which enable flexible and interactive communication between lecturers and students (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014; Mpungose, 2020). These platforms support collaboration, peer learning, and accessibility to educational resources across geographical boundaries. However, their effectiveness depends on users' digital literacy, access to reliable infrastructure, and institutional support mechanisms (Chitanana et al., 2008; Mpofu & Chimhenga, 2016).

In sub-Saharan Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular, the integration of digital communication into education is both a necessity and a challenge. Studies indicate that limited internet connectivity, inadequate training, and financial constraints have hindered the optimal use of digital technologies in universities (Mtebe & Raisamo, 2014; Maphosa, 2021). Despite policy frameworks promoting ICT integration, the digital divide between students of different socioeconomic backgrounds continues to affect participation and engagement (Ngugi et al., 2020).

The evolution of digital communication in education has led to new pedagogical models such as blended learning, which combines face-to-face instruction with online engagement (Zawacki-Richter, 2020). Research shows that blended learning enhances

flexibility and learner autonomy but also presents challenges in maintaining student motivation and interaction (Al-Maroof and Al-Emran, 2018; Mpungose, 2020). In Zimbabwean universities, blended approaches have become more prominent post-COVID-19, yet many educators and students still exhibit a strong preference for traditional teaching methods (Maphosa, 2021). This aligns with the concept of "passive adoption" (Aung & Khaing, 2016), where technology is introduced but pedagogical practices remain unchanged.

Whilst institutions of higher learning have made significant strides to digitalise learning environments. Findings from studies reveal that many lecturers use these platforms primarily for content delivery rather than as tools for interactive learning (Ngugi et al., 2020). This suggests that institutional tools alone cannot guarantee effective digital engagement unless supported by user training and policy alignment.

The transition to digital communication in higher education presents various challenges. Research in developing countries highlights barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, limited access to devices, and low digital literacy (Mpofu & Chimhenga, 2016; Aung & Khaing, 2016). Moreover, cultural and pedagogical traditions often resist rapid change, reinforcing the preference for conventional face-to-face teaching (Mpungose, 2020). However, digital communication tools also offer opportunities for inclusive and collaborative learning, real-time feedback, and flexible access to materials, which can enhance the quality of higher education if effectively implemented (Zawacki-Richter, 2020).

Theoretical framework

The study utilises the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) Framework. The effective integration of technology into teaching and learning processes has increasingly become a central concern in higher education, particularly in the context of digital transformation. One of the most influential theoretical models addressing this integration is the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, originally conceptualised by Mishra and Koehler (2006). This framework extends Shulman's (1986) earlier notion of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) by incorporating technological knowledge as a critical third domain, thereby emphasising the need for a holistic understanding of the relationships among content, pedagogy, and technology in teaching.

The TPACK framework identifies seven interrelated components of teacher knowledge. These include: Content Knowledge (CK)—the understanding of subject matter; Pedagogical Knowledge (PK)—the understanding of teaching and learning processes; and Technological Knowledge (TK)—the knowledge of digital tools and systems (Mishra

& Koehler, 2006). The intersections of these three core domains form four additional knowledge areas: Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), Technological Content Knowledge (TCK), Technological Pedagogical Knowledge (TPK), and, at the centre, Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK)—the integrated knowledge base required for effective teaching with technology.

Research suggests that the TPACK framework is instrumental in helping educators reflect on and assess their competencies in using technology for instructional purposes (Koehler et al., 2013; Voogt et al., 2013). By highlighting the complex interplay between pedagogy, content, and technology, TPACK provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how teachers can adapt and transform their practices in technologically rich environments.

Moreover, Voogt et al. (2013) emphasise that professional development programs structured around TPACK principles can lead to more meaningful and sustainable use of digital technologies in classrooms. Such initiatives include the Learning Technology by Design model (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), the TPACK-in-Action program (Chai et al., 2013), and regional capacity-building efforts such as the Commonwealth of Learning's Technology-Enabled Learning Initiative and UNESCO's ICT Competency Framework for Teachers. These programs are particularly valuable in resource-constrained contexts, where lecturers may require targeted support to build confidence and competence in technology-enhanced teaching.

Nevertheless, the TPACK framework remains highly relevant in the 21st-century educational landscape. It provides a robust conceptual foundation for examining how lecturers integrate digital tools into their pedagogy, particularly in higher education environments that are increasingly defined by remote learning, e-learning platforms, and digital resource sharing. In contexts such as Zimbabwean public universities, where lecturers often contend with a limited digital infrastructure framework, it serves as both a diagnostic and developmental tool, guiding institutions and educators in identifying gaps and strengths in digital pedagogical practices. In summary, the TPACK framework underscores the need for a balanced and contextualised integration of technology, content expertise, and pedagogical knowledge.

Methodology

This study exploited the qualitative research approach (QRA). Hancock et al (2009:4) recognise that "Researchers interested in studying human behaviour and the social world inhabited by human beings, found increasing difficulty in trying to explain human behaviour in quantifiable and measurable terms." This suggests that the qualitative approach is highly suitable for conducting studies aimed at providing explanations or

interpretations of human behaviour and understanding the world's social aspects and social phenomena. Holloway and Galvin (2017:2) observed that "Qualitative research is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live." Thus, the QRA is used to explore the behaviour, perspectives, feelings, and experiences of people. The methodology centres on how human beings make sense of their subjective reality and attach meaning to it (Bryman, 2001). This approach allows the researcher the chance to explore lecturers' and students' perceptions of the impacts of digital platforms on learning at Midlands State University (MSU). The qualitative approach is descriptive and allows for a comprehensive understanding of participants' views and experiences regarding the use of digital tools. According to Hancock et al. (2009:4), "Qualitative research attempts to broaden and/or deepen our understanding of how things came to be the way they are in our social world." The approach seeks to expand and widen the world's understanding of certain phenomena, thus seeking to add knowledge about a concept or issue. On the same note, the current research hopes to widen the understanding of the use of digital communication in educational settings. Digital communication has become an indispensable part of education, and in the case of MSU, it is a recent development. This serves as a justification for the researcher's decision in choosing a qualitative approach. In other words, the researcher has adopted a qualitative approach because it is investigative in nature.

Arkinson et al. (2001:7) recognise that qualitative research is "an umbrella term and a number of different approaches exist within the wider framework of this type of research." The specific qualitative design adopted for this study is the case study. A case study is a study report about people, groups, or situations. Yin (2009:18) defines a case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident". According to Yin (2003), the case is regarded as the unit of analysis. In the case study of this research, the unit of analysis is Midlands State University. The case study delineates and puts boundaries on what should be studied and what should not be studied. There are many digital tools used for teaching and learning purposes. However, this study focuses on digital communication at Midlands State University. This implies that the research is based on data from Midlands State University.

The case study has the advantage of allowing for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon under investigation, as well as enabling the opportunity to explore the phenomenon in an authentic state under real-life contexts. The advantage of the case study is that it allows for the use of multiple sources of information, including observations, published documents, and interviews. In this study, both interviews and questionnaires were utilised

to gather comprehensive data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students and ten lecturers from various departments to capture diverse perspectives. Additionally, questionnaires were distributed online to 45 students. To achieve a representative sample, a stratified random sampling technique was employed, as described by Rahi (2017:3), which ensures that "each subgroup (or stratum) has an equal chance of being selected, providing proportionate representation." Lecturers were not given questionnaires because the semi-structured interviews provided a more effective means of capturing their insights and experiences in depth. Interviews allow for richer discussions and deeper exploration of specific topics, thereby enhancing the quality of the collected data.

Data for the study were analysed descriptively. This involves a systematic review of the transcribed interviews and questionnaires to extract relevant information. The researchers maintained a fluid narrative throughout the analysis, enabling them to identify insights directly from the data. Ethical considerations, including obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring the confidentiality of responses, were prioritised throughout the study.

Research findings and discussion

Research findings revealed that MSU has made significant progress in developing digital tools and ensuring they are easily accessible for teaching and learning. One of the key tools of this initiative is the university's e-learning platform, which serves as a crucial resource for both students and lecturers. Research findings indicate that it is one of the most frequently used platforms at Midlands State University, with both students and lecturers reporting their usage of the platform. The e-learning platform provides a tool where students can easily access a wealth of teaching and learning materials provided by their instructors. This includes lecture notes, module outlines, and supplementary readings, etc., designed to enrich the educational experience. However, this platform operates as a one-way communication channel. While students benefit from the wealth of resources available, they are unable to contribute directly to discussions or share their insights on the materials provided. A Level 2.1 student from the department of History and International Studies who responded to a questionnaire:

> *The e-learning site is useful for accessing learning materials, but I wish there was a way to interact with lecturers or classmates through it, especially when I'm confused about something.*

This student highlights a significant limitation of the platform, which is its inability to facilitate interaction, which is a crucial aspect of effective teaching and learning. The absence of interactive features restricts students' opportunities to seek clarification or

engage in meaningful discussions about the content. This idea is also supported by a lecturer from the Faculty of Business Sciences who said:

> *From a content delivery perspective, the platform works well – I upload notes, module outlines, and reading lists regularly. But it's not dynamic; students cannot respond or engage with the content unless they reach out through email or other platforms.*

The lecturer emphasises the effectiveness of e-learning in delivering content while reiterating its lack of interactivity. While students can easily access lecture notes, module outlines, and supplementary readings, they are often deprived of opportunities to engage with their instructors and peers. This limitation can lead to feelings of isolation and a lack of support among students, which can negatively impact their learning experience. Although e-learning provides essential resources that significantly enhance students' educational experiences, its current design falls short in fostering a dynamic and collaborative learning environment.

While the e-learning platform was designed to enhance educational access and facilitate learning, research results established that the actual usage of the e-learning platform is significantly lower than anticipated. Notably, 90% of student respondents reported that they use the platform to access their results, check their school fee balances and apply for accommodation rather than to engage with learning materials. The platform is predominantly utilised for administrative purposes.

The platform lacks mechanisms to track user visits, leading students to understand that there are no checks and balances in place. This absence of accountability diminishes their motivation to engage deeply with the e-learning platform as a teaching and learning resource. Additionally, students often share information they gather from the platform among themselves, which further reduces individual motivation to visit it. Consequently, many students find little reason to engage directly with the platform, as they feel they can obtain necessary information through their peers.

Another digital platform that is used at MSU is the university-provided email system. Every student enrolled at Midlands State University is provided with an email address. From the research, it was evident that this platform is largely used by students working on their dissertations. One level 4.2 student in the Faculty of Social Sciences said:

> *I mostly use my MSU email to communicate with my supervisor. That's where we exchange drafts and feedback for my dissertation.*

Interviews with lecturers reveal a clear preference among lecturers for using email for dissertation correspondence. Students appreciate the platform's ability to store information, which is crucial in case of damage to technological tools. Beyond dissertation-related communication, the email platform is extensively utilised for submitting assignments and receiving feedback across various modules. Students reported a preference for using their MSU email for assignment submissions due to its organised nature. However, while many students prefer using email, lecturers often favour Google Classroom for receiving assignments. They cite the challenge of managing submissions from large groups of students through email, where tracking and organisation can become cumbersome. Ultimately, the email at Midlands State University is largely used to support dissertation work.

The most recent platform exclusively designed for teaching and learning at Midlands State University is Google Classroom. This digital tool was developed and adopted by the university during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the continuity of education when physical attendance was impossible. The transition to this platform was crucial in maintaining academic engagement during a challenging time. Google Classroom offers a wide range of features that facilitate effective learning and teaching. Shak et al. (2022) Google Classroom can help facilitate the teaching and learning process because it offers many features which can be used in online learning. It allows instructors to send and receive recorded lectures, enabling students to access course content at their convenience and to engage in real-time teaching and learning online. In addition to sharing recorded information, lecturers can upload a variety of learning materials, including documents, videos, and assignments. Furthermore, Google Classroom supports online lectures and discussions, making it possible for students to engage in real-time learning experiences. Some interactive features of the platform, such as discussion boards, breakaway rooms and assignment submissions, promote active participation and collaboration among students and instructors.

While Google Classroom is recognised as an effective platform for teaching and learning at Midlands State University, research findings revealed that it is one of the least utilised tools by both lecturers and students. Interviews with lecturers reveal that they often post course materials such as module outlines, assignment questions, and lecture notes to register their presence on the platform, rather than to engage with its full potential. They revealed that they use the platform only because the university expects them to do so. One lecturer said:

> *To be honest, I only post the module outline and a few lecture slides just to show that I've activated the classroom. I prefer WhatsApp for communicating with students because it's faster and more responsive.*

This statement reflects a common sentiment among lecturers across various departments who prefer immediate communication tools like WhatsApp over the more formal Google Classroom. It reveals that, to fulfil their obligations and be seen as doing the right thing, many lecturers simply upload materials to activate the platform.

Research findings from both students and lecturers also indicate that those who use Google Classroom do not explore all the features available on the platform. Both students and lecturers express a lack of awareness regarding the various functionalities offered by the platform. Both students and lecturers express a lack of awareness regarding the various functionalities available, resulting in only a limited number of features being regularly utilised. A lecturer from the Faculty of Law said:

> *To be honest, I just know the basics, uploading files and giving announcements. I've never explored the other tools it offers.*

Ultimately, this leads to the platform not being fully leveraged to its full potential. This challenge has been widely highlighted by literature from other African universities, as noted by Ngugi et al. (2020), who, for example, have noted that these tools have often been underutilised, with lecturers using them primarily for content delivery rather than interactive learning. This reflects what Aung and Khaing (2016) describe as the "passive adoption" phase, where technology is integrated superficially without transforming pedagogical practices. At MSU, conventional students and lecturers agree that Google Classroom is of limited use. Most of the students confessed that they do not even visit the platform. They expressed a preference for in-person lectures over online lectures.

Research findings from interviews with both students and lecturers indicated that Google Classroom is widely used among visiting students. Interview results showed that both students and lecturers have fully embraced Google Classroom as a teaching and learning platform, primarily due to the limited time available for in-person lectures. A student from the Faculty of Business Sciences commented:

> *Most of us who are on block release depend on Google Classroom for coursework. It's interactive, because that's where we have our lectures and get course materials and submit assignments.*

A lecturer from the same faculty concurred, stating:

> *I've noticed that my visiting students engage more with Google Classroom as compared to conventional students, mostly for assignment purposes,*

> *discussions or interactive learning, because we have very little time for face-to-face learning. Otherwise, Google Classroom is the way to go.*

The findings suggest that Google Classroom serves as a vital resource for visiting students, enabling them to learn amid time limitations. The platform's interactive features enable collaboration, which is especially important for students who may not have regular access to in-person lectures. Al-Maroof and Al-Emran (2018) assert that Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Google Classroom and Moodle provide structured platforms for delivering instructional content, managing assessments, and facilitating communication between lecturers and students. The positive feedback from both students and lecturers highlights a strong alignment between the platform's functionalities and the needs of visiting students.

Findings from both students and lecturers revealed that during the COVID-19 era, the platform was also extensively used by all students regardless of mode of entry. Interviews conducted with lecturers and Level 4 students revealed a consensus regarding the utility of Google Classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, all lectures were conducted on the platform, leaving both students and lecturers with little alternative for teaching and learning. However, lecturers noted that they encountered challenges related to poor attendance, which they attributed to a lack of resources and connectivity issues faced by students who were away from campus.

Interviews and questionnaires have identified several reasons why Google Classroom is less popularly used. Many students cited navigation problems, reporting that it is not user-friendly. Without any prior training, the platform is difficult to use. Research respondents felt that Google Classroom was imposed on them by university management without providing adequate training or orientation. As a result, respondents complained that they find themselves in a "learn as you go" situation, which can be overwhelming, leading to significant frustration. A first-year student from the faculty of Social Sciences observed, "The University just instructed us to visit Google Classroom without giving us proper orientation. I only learned how to use it by watching other students." Another Level 1.1 student from the Faculty of Education supported this, saying*:*

> *We were not adequately trained on how to use Google Classroom during orientation. It's like they expect us to automatically know how to use it. The platform is not user-friendly, especially if you are not used to learning online; most of us struggle silently.*

The notion that the university does not provide sufficient support to encourage the use of Google Classroom was a common sentiment among respondents. This reported lack of

support appears to be the underlying reason the platform is being underutilised, and in some cases, not used at all. Familoni and Onyebuchi (2024) recognise that without sufficient training, there is a risk that digital tools will be underutilised or misapplied, leading to suboptimal learning experiences. Due to difficulties in navigating the platform, some students become frustrated and ultimately abandon its use.

Additionally, the platform's effectiveness heavily relies on a stable internet connection, which is a significant challenge for students off-campus, where network reliability can be inconsistent. Many students lack the resources to invest in reliable internet services, further aggravating their dissatisfaction with the platform. A level 2.2 student respondent from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities captures the challenge, "*When I'm off-campus, I struggle to open even the smallest files on Google Classroom because of poor network coverage."* Another one from the Faculty of Mining Engineering agrees thus:

> *It's frustrating when you're trying to submit your work and the platform keeps buffering. You feel helpless because the issue is not the platform itself, but your connection.*

The issue of inequitable access to resources explains why the platform is widely used by visiting students who are from a working-class background, as opposed to conventional students. This highlights how the digital divide between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds continues to impact participation and engagement (Ngugi et al., 2020). A combination of connectivity issues and financial constraints can significantly limit the overall experience of both students and lecturers when using Google Classroom.

In addition to the official digital platforms provided by Midlands State University, students and lecturers have increasingly turned to WhatsApp as a pivotal tool for teaching and learning. Research findings from both interviews and questionnaires indicate that WhatsApp is the most widely used platform among both students and lecturers. This phenomenon is the case despite the idea that the WhatsApp platform is not recognised as a formal university communication channel. Students from various academic levels create WhatsApp groups for different modules where matters related to the respective modules are discussed. Interview and questionnaire responses indicated that timetabling, assignment discussions and material sharing are all done on WhatsApp. A student from the Faculty of Agriculture highlighted that:

> *We created a group for each module. It's easier to ask questions there and get quick answers than to wait for replies on Google Classroom.*

Another from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities concurred:

> *Even when I don't understand a lecture, I know someone in the group will post a clearer version or explain it. That support system is only possible because of WhatsApp.*

The platform has the advantage that people can send audio, and they can make audio calls. One of the primary advantages of WhatsApp is its immediacy. Student respondents appreciate the instant communication that WhatsApp facilitates, allowing for real-time discussions that enable them to quickly clarify doubts and enhance their understanding of course materials. This immediacy fosters collaborative learning and encourages peer support.

Additionally, the affordability of WhatsApp contributes to its popularity. The platform requires minimal data usage, making it accessible even in areas with weak network connectivity. In support of this, Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) realised that informal communication platforms, particularly WhatsApp, have gained prominence in higher education due to their affordability, familiarity, and real-time interaction capabilities. Studies indicate that WhatsApp facilitates collaborative learning, quick information exchange, and peer support, especially in resource-constrained environments (Bere, 2013; Mpungose, 2020). This makes it an attractive alternative for students who may encounter challenges with data-intensive platforms. Despite its popularity, it is not considered a legitimate means of educational communication at MSU due to a lack of formal monitoring and the blurred boundaries between personal and academic communication.
While research respondents indicated that learning is increasingly impossible without digitalisation, they simultaneously expressed a strong preference for face-to-face teaching methods. This paradox reveals that, although students appreciate the importance of digital tools for their education, many are trapped in traditional learning methods. A level 4.2 student from the Faculty of Sciences said:

> *We know digital tools are the future, but honestly, nothing beats sitting in class and listening to the lecturer explain things in person.*

Findings suggest that familiarity with conventional teaching methods, such as lectures and in-person discussions, coupled with challenges in adapting to online platforms like Google Classroom, contributes to a notable resistance to technology. This resistance is not limited to students; educators also exhibit comfort with traditional instructional styles, which can hinder the effective integration of digital learning. A lecturer noted:

> *I try using Google Classroom and emails, but I still feel most effective when I'm in the lecture room, engaging directly with students.*

The challenges expressed earlier, such as difficulties navigating online platforms and a lack of adequate training, further exacerbate this situation. Ultimately, this comfort with established teaching methods creates a psychological barrier, preventing both students and educators from fully embracing the benefits of digital learning. The coexistence of traditional teaching methods with digital tools creates a situation where these digital resources are viewed as supplementary rather than transformative.

Student participants recognise that online learning often lacks the engagement typically found in face-to-face classrooms, which significantly impacts their educational experience. They expressed that learning becomes meaningful when it is shared with others, which is what makes the experience memorable. 95% of the research respondents expressed a strong preference for in-person classes, where the dynamic nature of live interactions facilitates the reading of verbal cues and non-verbal communication. One student interviewee said:

> *When I'm in class, I can see the lecturer's expressions and reactions. That helps me understand the message better. Online, it's just words on a screen.*

In traditional classroom settings, students benefit from spontaneous discussions, immediate feedback, and a vibrant exchange of ideas that create a more stimulating learning atmosphere. This lively environment not only enhances understanding but also fosters collaboration and encourages active participation, allowing students to develop their thoughts more freely. To this, another interview respondent says:

> *The best part of learning is when we discuss ideas in class and share different views. You don't get that energy in an online space.*

The limitations of online learning, such as reduced opportunities for real-time dialogue and the absence of physical presence, can lead to a sense of detachment, making it challenging for students to engage deeply with the material and their peers.

Due to the perceived advantages associated with traditional face-to-face classrooms, the adoption of a blended approach to learning appears to be a formidable challenge. Lecturers, in particular, have voiced a strong preference for in-person teaching, citing several key benefits that enhance the educational experience. They argue that face-to-face interactions make it significantly easier to monitor student progress and engagement. In a physical classroom, instructors can observe whether students are following discussions, responding to questions, and actively participating, allowing for real-time adjustments to teaching strategies based on visible cues and feedback. The majority of interviewed

lecturers argue that digital platforms primarily serve as tools for exchanging course materials and cannot facilitate genuine learning experiences. They express concerns that the lack of interaction and immediacy in online settings diminishes the quality of education, making it harder to build rapport and establish a connection with students.

Lecturers also noted that it is challenging to determine who is present in the lecture and who is not. Some students may log in and then disappear, while others may fail to log in due to network issues or power challenges. Additionally, some students may log in but choose not to concentrate or participate. Digital platforms lack the means to effectively monitor classroom engagement. Those conducting online lectures reported problems such as low attendance and participation rates, which further undermine the effectiveness of digital learning. When students are physically absent, the sense of accountability that often drives engagement in traditional classrooms diminishes.

Students have expressed that they see little reason to visit online platforms like Google Classroom and other e-learning systems, primarily because course materials are often shared across multiple channels. As a result, they tend to choose the most accessible options, such as WhatsApp. Consequently, they prefer the easiest and most convenient platforms. Many argue that classmates who do engage with online educational platforms often extract the necessary information and share it through more familiar channels, like WhatsApp. This indicates that convenience plays a crucial role in shaping students' preferences for learning platforms. By sharing materials on these familiar platforms, they create informal networks that facilitate quick discussions and enhance engagement.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that while Midlands State University has made commendable strides in adopting digital communication platforms to enhance teaching and learning, the integration of these tools into everyday academic practice remains uneven and fraught with challenges. Platforms such as the e-learning site, MSU email, and Google Classroom have been instrumental in broadening access to course materials, fostering remote engagement, and supporting alternative modes of learning, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, findings reveal that these tools are often underutilised, with students and lecturers gravitating toward more familiar, accessible, and low-cost platforms such as WhatsApp. The reluctance to fully embrace official digital platforms stems from several interrelated factors: insufficient user training, perceptions of poor user-friendliness, inconsistent internet connectivity, and entrenched preferences for traditional face-to-face instruction. These issues not only limit the platforms' potential but also reinforce a digital divide within the university community, where visiting students and those with better connectivity tend to benefit more than conventional students. Furthermore, the persistence of traditional pedagogical habits

among both students and lecturers has slowed the transition toward blended and fully online learning environments.

The study therefore recommends that the university organise regular training workshops to familiarise participants with the digital platforms available for teaching and learning. These workshops should cover basic navigation, advanced features, and best practices for effective online communication. Additionally, it is crucial to establish channels for students and lecturers to provide feedback on their experiences with digital platforms. This feedback will help identify specific challenges and areas for improvement, ensuring continuous enhancement of the digital learning environment.

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