Using Facebook Groups as an E-learning Platform: A New Form of Collaborative Learning for Algerian University Students

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Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to online learning in Algerian universities, exposing both the potential and limitations of officially adopted Learning Management Systems (LMS) like Moodle. This study investigates why university students preferred Facebook groups over university LMS platforms as e-learning tools during the pandemic. Employing an online questionnaire administered to 41 students from three Algerian universities, the research reveals that while 82.5% of students were aware of their university's LMS, only 17% actively used it compared to 78% who frequently relied on Facebook groups. Facebook's user-friendly interface, rapid teacher responsiveness (80.48% reported receiving teacher feedback), and facilitation of collaborative learning through shared resources and collective exam preparation (82.92%) made it the preferred platform. In contrast, the university LMS showed low utilization of interactive features such as forums and chatrooms, primarily due to limited accessibility and under-engagement by instructors. The study highlights the urgent need for enhanced training and support to optimize LMS efficacy while recognizing the complementary role of social media in fostering collaborative e-learning.

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Introduction

As in many other fields, the outbreak of Covid-19 blitzed the course of events in human lives. Teaching as well as learning paradigms veered away to online education due to the imposition of home quarantines by the authorities. Online learning on the other hand has always existed and is well established through the literature over the last three decades nevertheless the unprecedented event of total breakdown resulted into the emergency remote learning. The latter has not been planned but rather improvised according to the available resources of e-learning.

E-learning is becoming a salient subject in higher education and the arrival of Covid-19 proved the necessity of distant learning, namely through the universities' advanced electronic platforms called learning management systems. Notwithstanding the existence of Moodle, Algerian university students tend to use other alternatives such as Facebook groups. One must explore and elucidate the reasons.

For maintaining a social life and getting up to date with e-learning tasks during the total lockdown, social networking was students' favoured way out, namely Facebook. Previous research in 2021 has shown Algerian university students to have positive attitudes towards the use of Facebook for educational purposes during the pandemic (Ghounane, 2021). Cooperation and collaboration between students were indispensable for passing the exams during the pandemic.

With the evolution of Facebook since its establishment in 2004, students are able to use Facebook groups as a platform for sharing courses, asking questions, and working together for better comprehension of online courses. Compared to Moodle as the official university platform, Facebook is not represented as a Learning Management Software (LMS) but rather a social networking site (SNS). Accordingly, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) invested more than 700 million Dinars dedicated to the distance learning project and Moodle platform included (Lassassi et al., 2020). Thus, the factors that prevent the efficacy of using this platform are worth of investigation. On the other hand, the use of Facebook groups as an educational platform ought to be explored if fulfilling the standards of cooperative learning.

The present research aim is to elucidate the reasons behind the alternative use of Facebook groups instead of the official university LMS and to examine whether and to what extent the Facebook platform fulfills the standards and exigencies of cooperative learning as an e-learning platform. In intending to attain the aforementioned objectives, the researcher raised the following research questions:

1. Why do University students tend to use Facebook group as an e-learning tool frequently more than their LMS platforms offered by their universities?
2. Does Facebook platform fulfil the exigencies and standards of cooperative learning?

As an answer to the research questions, the researcher hypothesised into the following:

1. University students tend to use Facebook groups more frequently than the official university learning management systems (LMS) because Facebook groups better fulfill their e-learning needs and preferences.
2. The Facebook platform fulfills the standards and exigencies of cooperative learning better than the university LMS platforms, promoting more effective collaborative learning among students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

E-learning and Learning Management Systems

Generally, E-learning refers to the learning systems that use electronic devices such as tape recording, cable TV and computers. However, with the appearance of the World Wide

Web around the 1990's, E-learning has been revolutionized and varied in terms, i.e., distant learning, virtual learning, web-based learning and online learning. In this vein, web-based learning systems were developed for the sake of facilitating E-learning. The main goal of learning management systems is to deliver, track and manage online courses (Collins & O'Brien, 2011). These softwares encompass elements such as chat rooms, e-mail podium, assessment options, discussion lists, and grading scale. Among the well-known and old established LMS according to the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics are Blackboard, WebCT and Moodle (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Using these platforms has become common especially in higher education. Research has shown that their use is beneficial for students' success (Lonn & Teasley, 2009; West et al., 2006).

E-learning Platforms in Algerian Universities

In 2003, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) invested more than 700 hundred million Dinars dedicated to the distance learning project (Tahi & Bouarab Dahmani, 2014). It was only in 2008 that e-learning platforms were tested and ready to be used. Nevertheless in 2012, its use was insignificant according to a survey made on 10 out of 45 Algerian universities (Tahi & Bouarab Dahmani, 2014). According to Boukerma and Abdi (2014), many issues were raised concerning the e-learning platforms established by Algerian universities. These issues were related to the lack of technical assistance and the unfollowing services of the provider to the needs of the universities. Another issue highlighted by Tahi and Bouarab Dahmani (2014) is the conditions of users of LMS platforms, namely the problem of the internet. Fortunately, with the arrival of the Covid pandemic, the ministry of higher education and scientific research has taken seriously the distance learning for the sake of continuing the academic year of 2020 for all Algerian universities. In this respect, MESRS (2020) has structured a framework protocol in which a section was devoted to distance learning.

The section entails the imposition of using the learning management systems available to all universities' websites all in ameliorating the bandwidths of the internet with the cooperation of Algeria telecommunications (MESRS, 2020). The question that pops itself is if the use LMS offered of the Algerian universities during the subsequent pandemic Period has witnessed a success.

Moodle Challenges in Algerian Universities

Research on the utilization of e-learning platforms in Algerian universities reveals significant challenges and varying degrees of user engagement. For instance, studies by Lassassi et al. (2020) and Ghounane and Rabahi (2023) highlight difficulties in the efficient use of Moodle, the main Learning Management System (LMS) adopted by Algerian universities during the pandemic. These studies emphasize technical limitations, lack of teacher preparedness, and internet accessibility problems as major barriers to maximizing LMS potential. Additionally, Abdelaziz and Tahri (2024) stressed that limited resources and insufficient training hinder the effective management of these platforms by instructors, which in turn affects student participation in interactive features such as forums and chatrooms.

Complementary to these findings, scholarly work by Benhadj (2022) and Arihir (2024) reinforces the observation that Moodle's collaborative functions remain underutilized, partly because administrative rights primarily belong to teachers, thereby restricting open student interaction. The limitations in fostering cooperative learning within these platforms appear to compel students to seek alternative means.

Parallel bodies of research draw attention to the growing reliance on social networking platforms, especially Facebook groups, as informal yet highly effective educational tools. Ghounane (2021) and Chen (2014) documented positive attitudes among students towards Facebook for educational collaborations, crediting its user-friendly interface and real-time communication capabilities. Research by Lassassi et al. (2020) explains that familiarity with social media platforms prior to the compulsory adoption of LMS during health crises makes Facebook a preferred tool for academic engagement. This preference is echoed in the findings of the present study, which align with Johnson and Johnson's (2018) principles of cooperative learning—positive interdependence, promotive interaction, and individual accountability—often better realized through Facebook's dynamic environment.

Furthermore, the versatility of Facebook groups in facilitating rapid exchange of information, shared resources, and collective exam preparation was underscored in current research, contrasting starkly with the static and rigid nature of official university platforms. However, studies also caution about the potential distractions and lack of academic focus inherent to social media, as highlighted by participant feedback in multiple surveys (e.g., Benhadj, 2022; Ghounane, 2021).

Collectively, these previous research works situate the current investigation within a broader discourse on the efficacy of learning technologies in Algerian higher education. They reveal a critical gap between platform capabilities and actual pedagogical practice, underscoring the urgent need for capacity-building, technical upgrades, and attitudinal shifts among both students and educators to fully harness the educational value of LMS while acknowledging the complementary role of social media in collaborative learning.

Collaborative Learning and E-learning Platforms

Learning management systems possess endless components for learning, restoring and testing previously acquired knowledge. What is worth mentioning is the LMS components that highlight collaborative activities namely, forums and chat rooms. In the case of e-learning platforms established in Algerian universities, the service provider is Moodle. The Centre for Information and Communication Systems and Networks, Tele-education and Distance Education of all Algerian university platforms shared a user guide of students and teachers for managing the platforms. In this document, the platform clearly fulfils communication needs in general and collaboration learning needs in particular using '*Interactive Activities*' (CRSIC, nd.).

As a matter of fact, the platform is based on distance learning support for learners and the implementation of collaborative work (Benhadj, 2022). However, according to the document, it is the teachers that hold the administrator rights toward chat rooms and forums (CRSIC, nd.). Arihir's research work (2024) highlights the lessons to be not enough interactive and are more static.

Method

The suitable research method for this investigation is a survey. The researcher has opted for the survey as it allows an overall description of students' use of electronic platforms where they can share their preferences, interests and problems in using them. Kothari (2004), in this respect, supported this claim when he assigned the survey method to social and behavioural sciences.

As to sampling, there are probability and non-probability sampling. The research constraints obligated a non-probability sampling according to non-random criteria like the

availability and geographical proximity. CForty-one students participated in the survey, among them twenty from Tlemcen University, thirteen from Sidi Belabbes University, and eight from Oran University. As to data gathering and collection, a mixed-approach study was employed for studying the frequency of using university platforms and Facebook groups, as well as the main problems students face in using the university platform. The employed questionnaire contains close ended and open-ended questions to assure quantitative and qualitative data with a total of eleven questions.

Findings

This section of the report is dedicated to set forth and interpret the findings of the questionnaire. In review of the setting goals of the research, the questionnaire has the purpose to analyze the use of university learning management systems and Facebook groups as well. Additionally, it will reveal the main cripples students face in using their e-learning university platforms. More importantly, students' collaboration in both platforms is investigated.

Section One: Demographic Information

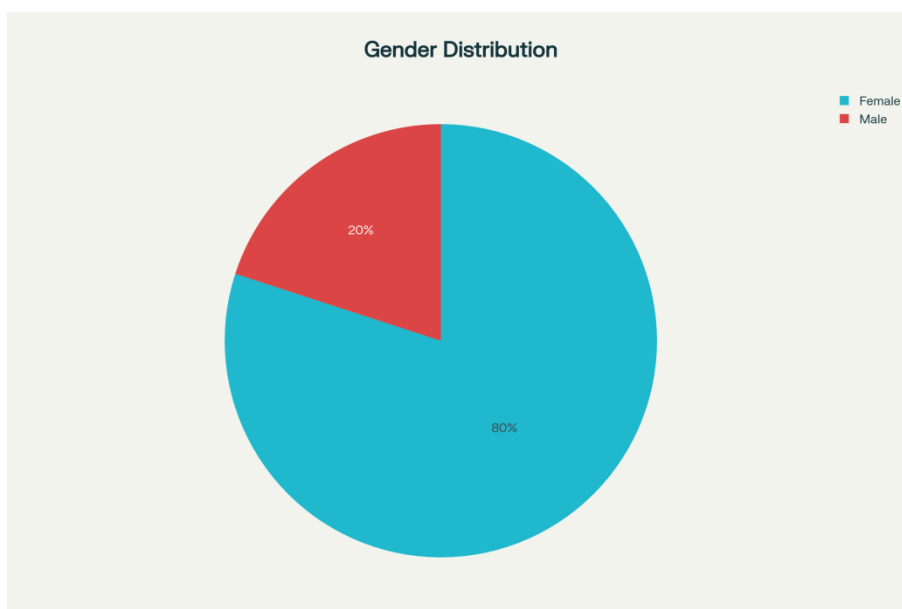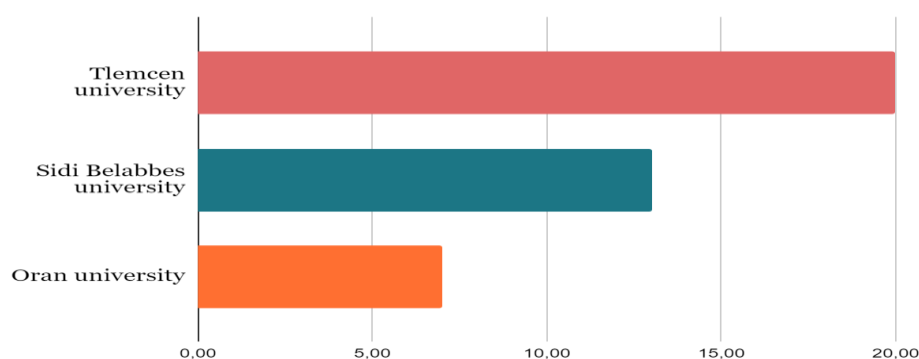Figure 1. *Information about students' gender*

Figure 2. *Information about students' affiliation*

In brief, the research is dominated by female respondents with 80 % as it is shown in figure 1. On the other hand, Figure 2 illustrating university affiliation among respondents reveals a clear distribution pattern with Tlemcen University representing the largest share, accounting for 48.78% of the total respondents. This indicates that nearly half of the sample is affiliated with this institution. Sidi-Bel-Abbes University follows with a substantial portion of 31.70%, suggesting it is also a significant contributor to the respondent pool. Oran University comprises the smallest segment at 19.51%, reflecting a more modest representation in comparison to the other two universities.

Section Two: Questions about the Use of LMS in Universities
Q1: The first question's aim is to know whether students know if their university offers an e-learning platform.

Table 1. *Students' awareness of the existence of university e-learning platform*

	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	33	80.48%
No	8	19.51%
Total	41	100%

In light of students' responses, one deduces that almost all students are aware of the existence of learning management software with a percentage of 82.5%. Only eight out 41 respondents claim that they do not know if they have an e-learning platform offered by their universities.

Q2: To know what kind of e-learning platform is used, the respondents were expected to choose between the e-learning university platform, and or Facebook groups, or other options.

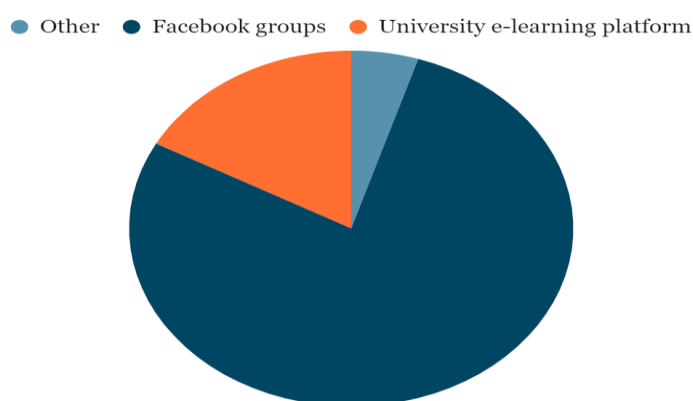Figure 3. *Students' use of the available e-learning platforms*

Figure three shows the high rate of using Facebook groups with a percentage of 78% and only 17% claimed to use the university platform.

Q3: This question targets students' use of the university e-learning platform in terms of the forum activity for communication between teacher-student and student-student.

Table2. *Students' use of the forum activity of university e-learning platform*

	Absolute Frequency	**Relative Frequency**
Yes	6	14.63%
No	35	85.36%
Total	41	100%

The result of this question shows the under-use of one of the elements of E-learning platforms that designates student communication between them and their teachers as well with a rate of 14.63%. This means that the platform is not primarily used for collaboration between students.

Q4: For the sake of knowing the motives behind using the E-learning platforms, students were expected to fulfil a multiple choice question.

Table 3. *Students' motives behind using the university e-learning platform*

	Absolute Frequency	**Relative Frequency**
Getting Access to the Courses	40	59.70%
Asking Questions	3	4.47%
Submitting Assignments	15	22.38%
Participating in the Chatroom	1	1.49%
Participating to the Forum	3	4.47%
Doing Tests	5	7.46%
Total Frequency	67	100%

Almost half of the respondents claimed that they use the university e-learning platform for getting access to the courses of their teachers with the exception of one respondent. However, the other functions that underpin and promote collaborative learning are poorly used such as chatrooms and forums with a rate of only 1.49% and 4.47%, respectively. Two other motives are somehow noticeable, submitting assignments and doing tests with a percentage of 22.38% and 7.49%, respectively.

Q5: In an open-ended question, students were asked to share some suggestions for better use of the learning management system of their universities.

Table 4. *Students' suggestion on improving the quality of university e-learning services*

	Absolute Frequency	**Relative Frequency**
Getting the Accessibility to (Forums, Chatrooms, Quizzes, Tests)	8	20.51%
Facilitating the Accessibility to the Courses	10	25.64%
Better and Frequent Teachers' Managements of the Platform	12	30.77%
Nothing	5	12.82%
I Do not Know	4	10.25%
Total Responses	39	95.12%

In this section, not all the students have responded but 95.12% of whom they gave their recommendations on the matter. The students' responses are two-fold representation of facts. The results show that both students and teachers are less aware of managing the platform. First, students' incapacity of getting access to their courses via their university platforms is noticed with 25.64% requesting easy access to the courses. Then, teachers' low contribution in better managing the platform are implicitly unveiled with 30.77% of the students who claim for better and frequent platform management. Another important suggestion is that eight respondents advocated the accessibility to the extra activities offered by the platform which are authorized only by teachers (see Collaborative Learning and E-learning Platforms).

Section Three: Questions about the use of Facebook Groups

Q6 and Q7: In a close-ended way, students were asked if they are members of a Facebook group created by their class peers or teachers, then if they share and receive their teachers' courses.

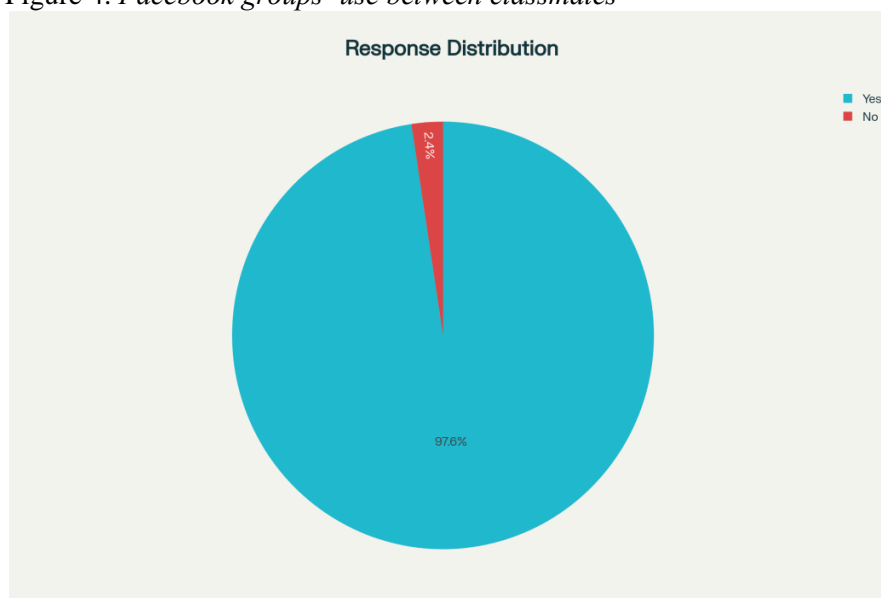Figure 4. *Facebook groups' use between classmates*

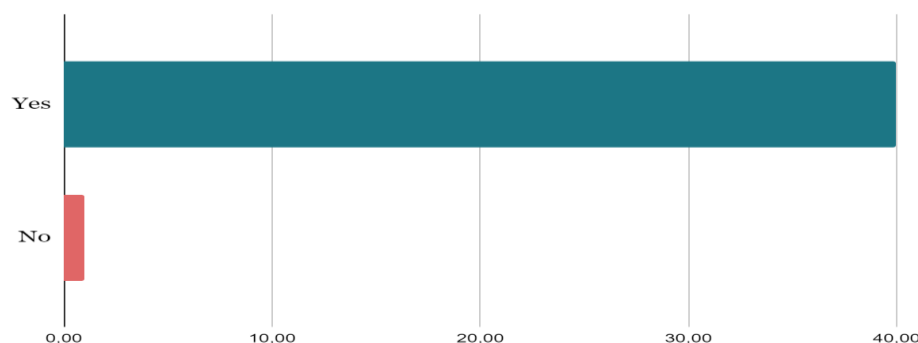Figure 5. *Facebook groups as an e-learning platform*

Figure four shows the high level of cooperation between university students using Facebook groups with only 2.4% of respondents who do not use Facebook groups. According to the students' responses in Figure five, all of them use Facebook groups for e-learning with the exception of one informant.

Q8: The students were asked if they receive responses from their teachers when they send questions through Facebook platform.

Table 5. *Teachers to students' responses via Facebook*

	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	33	80.48%
No	8	19.51%
Total	41	100%

The results prove teachers' availability on the Facebook platform with a rate of 80.48%. Only 19.51% negatively responded to teachers' no response towards students' questions.

Q9: To analyze student's collaborative learning via Facebook groups, the researcher asked whether students prepare for the exams collectively through the use of the Facebook platform.

Table 6. *Facebook groups as a collaborative e-learning platform*

	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Yes	34	82.92%
No	7	17.07%
Total Responses	41	100%

Unlike the use of university platforms, Facebook groups have proved to be an e-learning platform that promotes collaborative learning with a rate of 80.48% according to the students who participated in the survey.

Q10: In an open-ended question, students were asked to cite the main advantages of Facebook groups as an e-learning platform.

Table 7. *The Advantages of Facebook groups as an e-learning platform*

	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Simultaneous and Detailed Responses	10	16.12%
Easy and Useful	20	32.26%
Collaboration between Students	6	9.68%
Rapid and Updated Exchange of the Courses and Responses	18	29.03%
Exchanging Previous Subject Exams	8	12.90%
Total Frequency	62	100%

Similar to electronic forums, Facebook groups encompass posting questions and answers. First, almost half of the sample (43.90%) witnessed high speed of the responses and sharing of the courses. Besides, these responses are simultaneous and detailed explanations as 24.39% of the participants highlighted it. Another advantage that Facebook groups procure is the easiness and usefulness in the matter of manipulation with a rate of 43.90%. Collaboration between students in using Facebook groups is suggested as an aid for facilitating learning (14.63%). Additionally, Facebook groups are also used for exchanging or finding previous subject exams with 19.51%.

Q11: In parallel to the previous questions, students were asked to cite the main shortcoming of Facebook groups as an e-learning platform.

Table 8. *Advantage of Facebook group as an e-learning platform*

	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Easy Distraction	20	48.78%
Topic Deviation of Posts	7	17.07%
Nothing	6	14.63%
I Do not Know	8	19.51%
Total Responses	41	100%

As for any technological means, Facebook groups are a double-edged sword that can be beneficial as well as inconvenient. In fact, more than 48% of the respondents argued that its use is subject to distraction. As a matter of illustration, instant messages, notifications, and friend requests are key components for a dynamic and continuous activity where users can not shut them down. Then, topic deviations of Facebook group posts are highlighted by 17.07% of the respondents which is due to the unlimited number of member groups whom they are not necessarily from the same promotion.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' use of Moodle and Facebook groups as an e-learning platform. Additionally, collaborative learning is studied in both platforms. The results of the survey have provided an answer to the research questions where it portrays the need to improve the services of the university e-learning platform. As for evidence, students tend to use Facebook groups as an additional tool that complements and hides the flows of managing the learning management software of their universities. According to students' responses, the use of Facebook groups is significantly higher than the university platform and results are maintained by other research made by Benhadj (2022) and Arihir (2024). Furthermore, the students' responses implicitly explained their poor use of university LMS when they were invited to propose some suggestions for bettering the services of the e-learning platform. Students, in this respect, proposed easier access to the courses as well as frequent and better management of the platform on the part of teachers. Benhadj (2022) in his studies insisted on the necessity of training both students and teachers in using the learning management systems for the sake of enhancing effective practice.

For what concerns comparative analysis of the use of both platforms, collaborative learning is quasi-inexistent in LMS compared to Facebook groups. The low engagement rate with Moodle forums may suggest barriers to participation, such as lack of awareness, limited digital literacy, or insufficient motivation to engage in online discussions. Considering that Moodle forums can serve as essential interactive platforms for communication, collaboration,

and peer learning, this low usage highlights potential areas for universities to promote better integration of forum activities in course delivery. This is due to the inflexibility of the interactive activities in which teachers are the only holders of the administrator rights (CRSIC, nd). It is explained in previously made research that studied the use of Algerian university platforms during the pandemic. The results have demonstrated that teachers are unprepared in monitoring all the functions of the platform that ensure efficient distance teaching (Lassassi et al., 2020). What is more, Abdelaziz and Tahri (2024) deduced that the use of Moodle reflects challenges such as limited resources, lack of experience, and the need for better tools and training for teachers and technicians.

Consequently, students lean on Facebook groups as the findings revealed their efficacy and rapidity of learning electronically. Unlike rigid university platforms, Facebook groups have proved to be a dynamic platform for communicating and exchanging questions, courses and previous subject exams. Lassassi et al. (2020) in this context, explained teachers and students' preference in using social media and social networking by stating that they were accustomed with these alternatives before the obligation of the ministry of higher education and scientific research in using the universities LMS during the total lockdown. It is worth mentioning that the use of LMS platforms should not be neglected. More effort must be devoted to the training of teachers as managers of distant learning as well as changing students' attitudes in using the platform. Students Also needs to be trained and accustomed with their university platforms.

Finally in regards to the limitation of gathering the above mentioned results, the researcher found difficulties in gathering enough respondents and therefore the survey is said to be unrepresentative. Thus, generalizability is far-reaching due to the limited size of the sample. Circumspection is with the impossibility of triangulation in having more than one research tool as the researcher had time constraints. Fortunately, the researcher's results were supported by previously made inquiries in the topic of LMS platforms.

Conclusion

In review to the purpose of the study, the researcher investigated Algerian university students' preference for using Facebook groups as an e-learning platform over the official university Learning Management Systems (LMS), particularly Moodle, during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research aimed to uncover the underlying reasons for this preference and to assess whether Facebook groups meet the standards of collaborative learning better than the university LMS platforms.

The findings revealed that, despite significant investment in LMS by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education, students predominantly favored Facebook groups for their ease of use, interactive features, and greater responsiveness from teachers. Facebook groups were shown to foster better collaborative learning through rapid communication, sharing of resources, and collective exam preparation, whereas university LMS platforms suffered from limited accessibility, underutilized interactive features, and inadequate platform management by instructors. This divergence underscores a gap between the potential of LMS platforms and their actual implementation and user experience in Algerian universities.

These results highlight the need for enhanced training and support for both students and teachers to fully leverage the capabilities of official LMS platforms. Improving platform accessibility, increasing instructor engagement, and fostering student familiarity with LMS functionalities could help bridge the gap and reduce reliance on informal social media channels for academic purposes.

Future research should explore strategies for integrating the user-friendly and collaborative elements of social media platforms like Facebook into formal LMS environments. Policymakers and educational stakeholders must also consider continuous evaluation and adaptation of distance learning tools to better meet student preferences and educational goals. Ultimately, ensuring effective distance learning requires combining technological infrastructure, capacity-building, and pedagogical innovation to improve both platform usability and learning outcomes.

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