

THE ROLE OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN THE VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

Steve I. Embang¹; Krestonie B. Molina²

Northwestern Mindanao State College of Science and Technology, Labuyo, Tangub City

Correspondence: ¹steve.embang@nmsc.edu.ph; ²krestonie.molina@nmsc.edu.ph

ABSTRACT: *The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic had a tremendous impact on the global educational system. The commencement of the pandemic in the Philippines paved the ground for a move to online education and the formation of online organizations among schools and universities. This paper aims to identify the different forms of online groups at Mindanao State University Iligan Institute of Technology. It investigates the function of these groups in online education and student E-learning challenges. This research is based on the Usage and Gratification Theory. The participants in the study are MSU IIT students. To obtain data, the researchers employ random sampling to identify individuals and conduct online interviews using messenger. The researchers used the Qualitative Research Method, specifically Thematic Content Analysis, to analyze the data. Based on the respondents' responses, the study discovered ten online groups. Members joined these groups because they shared common interests, interpersonal relationships, and a common aim. With all the variables taken, the roles of online groups in online education are as follows: avenues for collaboration, informing students about class announcements, exchanging class resources and materials, expressing one's talents and passion, and amusement purposes.*

Keywords: COVID-19, Online Groups, Online Education, E-learning Challenges, CMC

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the most disruption of educational systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries. The shutdown of colleges, institutions, and other learning spaces has impacted over 94% of the world's student population [1] The onset of the pandemic paved the way for the shift of online learning from the standard face-to-face class to the new mode of education. It has led to an inevitable surge in the use of digital technologies because of the social distancing norms and nationwide lockdown.

Digital tools and platforms are pivotal in the new learning system and student interaction. These enable individuals to create online groups and connect online [2] It gives students the avenue to unify, interact, and collaborate with regard to their shared interests, goal, or necessity. Many studies in the past have looked into the influence of digital platforms and media within the educational system, workplace, etc. Even recent researchers, during the onset of the pandemic, have studied the role of CMC tools within an online class. However, there are no relevant studies on the role of social groups within the online education system in the midst of the pandemic. Hence, this topic needs to be studied to determine the importance of social groups in online education during COVID-19.

In late December 2019, a worldwide pandemic named Covid-19 emerged and wreaked havoc on the entire world. It was reported to originate in Wuhan, China, and spread around the globe rapidly within months. The pandemic had an enormous impact on all aspects of life, including work, the economy, travel, health security, and even in education. As the worldwide pandemic heightened, it resulted in the establishment of national lockdowns and the shutdown of establishments, workplaces, and academic institutions. According to [3], closing faculties, universities, and institutions created a problematic situation for teachers and administrators, who were left with only a few choices.

In the Philippines, the educational system shifted from traditional face-to-face classes to online classes before the pandemic. The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) proposed this to address students' dilemmas, particularly the 3.5 million tertiary-level students enrolled in nearly 2,400. The HEIs across the country established proactive strategies to ensure that education continues despite the shutdown of universities. Modified types of online learning are included in these rules to facilitate student learning activities. Asynchronous, delayed-time activities, like pre-recorded video lectures and time-independent evaluations, are examples of online learning [4]. In connection to online classes, students use digital tools to learn and communicate with their classmates, professors, and college heads. They use phones, tablets, laptops, or computers as a medium to attend classes and participate in classroom activities. Moreover, online sites like Google Classroom, Google Meet, Zoom, Moodle, Edmodo, Gmail, Facebook, and Messenger are used to conduct meetings, conferences, or webinars and interact with each other online.

Through the usage of digital tools and social media platforms, several online groups are established depending on the interest and intrapersonal connections of the scholars. These groups allow them to share lessons and resources in school, discuss their classroom activities and tasks, collaborate in making those tasks, and talk about their experiences at school, psychological state problems, and even the most recent issues within the school or the community.

This paper aims to determine the types of online groups of MSU IIT. It seeks to identify those groups' categories and determine the members' social media platforms. Moreover, it looks into the role of online groups in online education.

Research Questions

1. What are the online groups established at MSU-IIT?
2. How are these groups categorized based on Carr's (2021) Model of Online Groups?
3. What are the roles of online groups in online education at MSU IIT?

Conceptual Framework

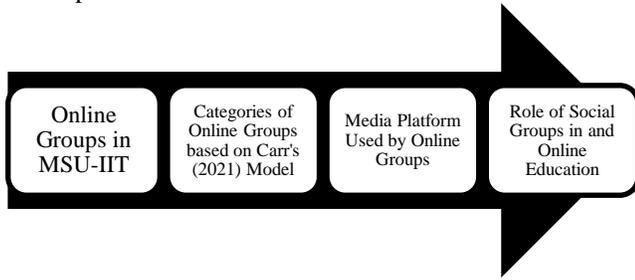


Figure 01. Schematic diagram of the study

The figure above shows the theories and variables in this study.

2.0 MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1 Design

This study employed a qualitative research method to identify the types of online groups at MSU IIT and their role in online education amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Cresswell (1994) defined qualitative research as an analysis process of understanding a societal or human problem based on constructing a complex, holistic image shaped with language, presenting detailed views of respondents, and undertaken in a naturalistic way.

2.2 Participants

The study's participants are male and female enrolled students of Mindanao State University Iligan Institute of Technology. The researchers used purposive sampling to identify the participants. In this study, 35 participants were chosen from seven (7) different departments, colleges, and year levels at MSU IIT represented, respectively.

2.3 Instruments

The study utilized the researchers' formulated set of open-ended questions. The interview questions are composed of 5 main queries about the types of online groups in MSU IIT, the factors that made them join those online groups, the platforms used in interacting with one another, and role of online groups in online classes, and how these groups help in addressing online education challenges.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers employed online interviews as the data collection technique. Facebook Messenger is used in interviewing the participants.

2.5 Data Analysis

The researchers used Thematic Content Analysis in examining the data. This method is defined by [6] as "a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a specific body of materials for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases. The method is intended to extract specific characteristics from human communications content. In this analysis, the researcher looks for patterns, themes, or biases in verbal, visual, or behavioral data.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Online Groups within MSU-IIT

This study revealed ten (10) prevailing online groups within MSU-IIT based on the respondents' answers. These groups differ in their functions, purpose of creation, the relationship among members, shared interests, and goals.

Online Groups within Mindanao State University- Iligan Institute Technology	(1) Online Classroom
	(2) Class Group Chat
	(3) Group Chat for Specific Activities in Class
	(4) Octava Chorale Society
	(5) Silahis
	(6) Linguazette
	(7) MSU IIT Mobile Legends Bang Bang Community (MLBBC)
	(8) Dakilang Pamantasanposting
	(9) Junior Philippine Institute of Account (JPIA)
	(10) Kalilas

3.2 Categorizations of Groups based on Carr (2021)

Common-Bond Group	Common-Identity Group	Ad Hoc Group	Persistent Group
Online Classroom	Octava Chorale Society	Online Classroom	Dakilang Pamantasanposting
JPIA- MSU IIT Chapter	MSU IIT MLBB Community	Class Group Chat	
	Silahis		
	Linguazette		
	Kalilas		

Common-Bond Group

[5] describes the Common Bond group as an online group with members linked to the group because of the interpersonal relationships or bonds among participants. The online groups of MSU IIT, particularly Online Classroom and JPIA- MSU IIT CHAPTER, are categorized as common-bond groups. This is primarily because of the interpersonal connection of the members. In an online classroom, there is a relationship between the professor and the students. Meanwhile, in the case of JPIA- MSU IIT CHAPTER, members are affiliated with one another as they belong to one department, as are all accountancy students in MSU IIT.

Common-Identity Group

A Common-identity group is another type of online group whose members are drawn to the group mainly because they have a common interest or social category [5]. The Common-Identity groups in MSU IIT based on the sample's response are OCTAVA, MSU IIT MLBB Community, SILAHIS, Linguazette, and Kalilas. These groups are categorized as Common-Identity groups because the members joined because of their shared interest with the members in the group. For instance, members in Silahis and Linguazette became part of the group because of their shared interest in writing and journalism; Octava members have the same likes in singing and performing; MSU IIT MLBB Community members play Mobile Legends Bang Bang; and members in Kalilas showed a shared passion in filming, cinematography and visual storytelling.

Ad Hoc Group

[5] describes an Ad Hoc group as a community wherein the group itself may even form for a short period and then disband as members leave or a catalyzing event (e.g., a political rally) occurs. Among the online groups in MSU IIT, class group chats and group chats for specific activities in class are categorized as Ad Hoc Group. This is because these group chats are only made for a specific purpose and these groups eventually dissolve after completing the task or if the class ends. For instance, class group chats are made to have an avenue

to share materials in class and to notify with several announcements in class (e.g. meeting schedule, suspension of class, etc.). Likewise, specified group chats for class activity are established to have an online space to plan and deliberate ideas and thoughts for the task. However, as the members completed the activity given and as the semester ended, members eventually dispersed and cut ties among the others.

Persistent Groups

These online groups may still be fairly easy to enter or leave, but they frequently become less permeable as they become more specialized. Access to the group requires

an invitation or authorization, knowledge of an existing member, or a passcode [5]. Dakilang Pamantasanposting is the best example of a Persistent Group in MSU IIT. This is primarily because a member can only be part of the group unless he/she is an IITian and was given authorization by the group's admin. Also, it is easy to leave this group as it is not a compulsory group that every student of MSU IIT must join. Members of the group are not compelled to stay if they lose their interest in the group.

3.3 Role of Online Groups in Online Education

Notify Students of Class Announcements

Online groups are the fundamental role of virtual communities as the platform to be notified of the announcements in class. Class group chats, online classrooms, and group chats intended for specific class activities are the best examples of online groups that were established to keep track of the announcements by the teachers or the school administrators. Through media outlets such as Facebook pages and messenger, the professors can inform the students in advance of the class meeting, webinars, or forums that the students must attend. Likewise, these also allow the professors to notify the learners in case of class suspension, moving deadlines, or lacking activities in their class..

Avenue to Collaborate

The respondents identified online groups, especially group chats, as an avenue to collaborate in doing task-based activities in class. They elicited that through online groups, they could interact, communicate and discuss the plans, objectives, and the entirety of their activities. Online groups give them the advantage of being holistically prepared regarding group reports, creating excellent outputs, and forming a greater bond among their fellow members. The online groups allow them to carefully deliberate what they should do and not do in their projects, assign members to do a specific part of the task, and set a time frame for their overall task. In such ways, the teamwork, unity, and solidarity that emerged in the group paved the way for making the task easier and a well-constructed result of an activity.

Exchange of Class Sources and Materials

As elaborated in the narratives of the samples, the Exchange of Class Sources and Materials was revealed to be one of the roles of online groups in E-learning. This means that online groups enable members to disseminate the references and sources they found on the internet through group chats and Gdrive. These virtual groups become an outlet for exchanging class materials, allowing everyone to access the files or sources they need in their class reports, assignments, and activities.

One of the respondents attested that exchanging references and sources in class gives benefits, especially to those C1 students who have limited access to technology and internet connection.

Express One's Talents, Skills, and Passion

Online groups in MSU IIT don't revolve only within the classroom. It also encompasses the school organizations that shifted into online communities because of the pandemic. Online groups are great for students to express their talents, skills, and passion. Many online organizations in MSU IIT are formed because they aim to unite individuals with the same interest and dedication towards a specific field. For instance, the SILAHIS and Linguazette are online groups that cater to one's talent in writing. According to the participants of

this group, they joined this school organization because they could showcase their skills in journalism.

Platform for Entertainment

Online groups can also be a platform for entertainment. As members of the groups share memes, crack jokes, and initiate funny discussions, members of the group become delighted and enthralled by these forms of amusement. Because of these entertainments, the pressure and the difficulty in this new mode of learning seemed to lessen as the negative energy brought by the online class was countered by the witty entries of some group members. One of the respondents explained that online groups in IIT are not just about academics, it is also a place to talk about specific issues and trends in social media and an avenue to share funny content related to MSU IIT context or not at all. For instance, the DakilangPamantasanposting is an online community that allows members to share their funny experiences in face-to-face and online classes. Some of the entertaining topics that the respondents enumerated include the strict lady guard, the stereotyping and misconceptions of one's courses, and the distinct features of every college building of MSU IIT (e.g. CCS' structure labeled as MSU IIT's Gaisano, CASS building as the Puregold of MSU IIT). In addition, the members' humorous experiences during the events at IIT are also part of the amusing topics in the group. These include the narratives of wardrobe malfunctions of members during their performance in PALAKASAN activities, the secrets of the CASS 3rd floor, enjoyable moments during GAAP, and many more. Regarding the online class situations, the interviewees delineated that most members shared memes about the shared background noise in online education, such as the dogs barking, rooster cooing, neighbors fighting, and kids playing in the neighborhood. In addition, in the group, one can see the funny narratives of their fellow members during the online class, especially the "lutang moments" of an individual wherein one forgot to turn off his mic or video, and the whole class sees and hear the awkward moments that happened throughout one's screen.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This study significantly contributes to MSU-IIT students, especially in their online education and e-learning experience, as the whole university changed to online classes during the COVID'19 pandemic. The researchers have identified ten prevailing online groups within MSU-IIT: Online Classroom, Class Group Chat, Group Chat for specific Activities in Class, OCTAVA, SILAHIS, LINGUAZETTE, MSU-IIT MLBB Community, Dakilang Pamantasanposting, JPIA-MSU-IIT Chapter, and Kalilas. These were then grouped Based on Carr's models of Online Groups. The different roles of online groups in online education at MSU-IIT bring students closer together despite living in other areas.

As the students are far from each other physically, the different online groups keep them updated on their school activities and personal relationships and share common interests. An avenue to share funny content that is either related to the MSU IIT context or not at all. While Online learning offers several benefits for students who seek flexibility while attending college, some students face multiple challenges during their online classes. These include poor Internet service, limited access to technology, heavy workload of activities, and insufficient sources of information, which are aggravated when students are marginalized and from remote areas. However, the researchers suggest that to overcome these problems, students may be provided access to support devices that can help them solve technical problems via call or live chat. Another solution for better learning outcomes is time management; time and effort are the most critical factors in online learning [7].

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