Nurturing M-Learning for Professional Development Through Online Digital Communicational Channels During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. Development of the technology has its impact on every aspect of human life. 21st century being called the “Information Era” underlines the importance of the technology and online communicational channels.

As stated by Trique et al. (2018) after emerging the smartphones a lot of other technological things have moved to the shade of the history [1]. Mobile devices being easily accessible and usable makes learning process more interesting and desirable. Besides, internet marketing and online communicational channels being developed continuously have been supporting and motivating people interested in professional development.

The world now is digital. Digital transformation created monumental opportunities for all businesses globally. Digital world, becoming faster and easier, gives society numerous possibilities to benefit from it. Using digital online communicational channels increase brand’s online visibility. Social media marketing channels such as: Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn assist companies to reach their potential customers. Being active on social media increases customer engagement, build and maintain strong relationship toward customers. There are various organic and paid online channels that stimulate customer involvement in the offered campaigns.

Demand on M-learning has been dramatically increased under conditions of the world lockdown caused by the novel coronavirus. Furthermore, so-called “network society” and organizations have identified the significance of M-learning, that was less demanding previously.

The current article tried to investigate, how have the online communicational channels stimulated M-learning during world pandemic COVID-19.

Keywords: M-learning · Digital marketing · Professional development · Online communicational channels · Covid-19 · Marketing channels
1 Introduction

When using the term “Mobile Learning”, different people evoke different definitions. The official definition of m-learning is as follows: “learning across multiple contexts, through social and content interactions, using personal electronic devices” [2].

Despite the official definition different authors consider that the term “Mobile Learning” is nothing else than fashion, since learning has always been mobile. Laouris et al. (2005) state, that the fact, that humans carry supercomputers in their heads, called brain, which is mobile itself, learning process cannot be static. “Do not we really learn at all times, wherever we are, whatever we do, simply because the learning machine is always “on” [3]?”.

If not replacing the traditional way of teaching m-learning has potential to take its special niche and be a significantly encouraging for particular type of learners, such as people interested in professional development. There exist number of platforms offering such kind of learners an opportunity to take short or long-time courses, which can be certificate or non-certificate ones, but oriented particularly to the persons interested in professional advancements.

M-learning is in fact the revolution of e-learning. Usage of mobile phones and other mobile devices more frequently than computers, has caused changing the term itself [2]. It is defined that mobile devices are different, but the fact that mobile phones are the most popular ones among them cannot be suspicious [4], it has especially become convenient in the period of world pandemic COVID-19. During this difficult time, when the whole world was under lockdown, learning online has turned into one of the main options for the people interested in personal development.

The main objective of the paper is to find out the influence of digital communicational channels on M-Learning during the world pandemic:

Objective 1: To determine if COVID-19 has in fact enforced M-Learning.

Objective 2: To determine whether online digital communicational channels have influenced on choosing certificate courses.

Questions for Objective 1:
1. What was the reason that made you take a certificate course during pandemic?
2. Have you passed the certificate course using mobile devices?
3. Do you consider that M-Learning (Mobile Learning) is more comfortable and effective in contrast with the traditional learning methods?
4. Have you passed the certificate course before pandemic? If “YES” what kind of difference can you see between those courses? If “NO”, what made you choose the course?
5. Do you think that online certificate courses help you in professional development?

Questions for Objective 2:
1. Do you consider that Ads running in different online digital communicational channels (Social media) regarding online certificate courses help you in decision making process?
2. Have you registered on the online certificate course after seeing its Ads in the online digital communicational channels?
2 M-Learning and Its Potentials in Professional Development

Distance learning has been the topic of discussion during recent years, considering its great potential in globalization process. As the world develops and becomes more interactive and cosmopolite, people reveal more interest towards simplifying their lives with comfortable inventions.

The improvement of technology simultaneously increases demand to changes in teaching and learning methods. In case of e-learning the learner has the environment more convenient for him, since he is able to join the class from any place and even get the resources remotely [5]. The same idea is developed in their study Abas et al. (2009), who believe that m-learning is the alternative of on-campus lectures and even convenient way for accessing information. The fact that mobile phone is always with a person makes engagement process more convenient. The use of mobile technologies in learning process is proof that Mobile Learning is “a fertile ground of innovation” [6]. To a little contrast to the ideas spread above Sadeghi (2019) believes, that online learning might not be the future of the higher education, since it is far more than learning through the materials, but also the opportunity for social interaction as well, but still, distance learning has its advantages, such as: saving time, money, choosing the convenient environment and gadget for learning, etc.

In a number of countries all over the world there exist universities offering online learning options to the learners interested from different countries for several years already. As for the Mobile Learning or so called M-Learning can be considered as a new wave in the education, since along with developing mobile devises there increases demand on using them in variety of deeds [7].

Using computer technology in teaching processes has divided the learners into two camps: those who support and appreciate involvement of ICTs in teaching and learning processes and those, who believe that traditional teaching methods are the best. Despite several lacks of online learning there exist positive aspects worth mentioning: cost effectiveness, personalized learning environment, accessible from almost any place, etc. In terms of e-learning mobile learning could be the best option considering its less limitations: computers are not always accessible, but almost every, if not literally every young learner possesses mobile phone [8]. The fact that someone can study anywhere and anytime can be motivational in learning process. M-learning can exactly be discussed as flexible process of learning. Up-to-date mobile devises show potential of being encouraging for life-long education [9]. According to the fact that learning takes place anywhere the learner is for a certain moment, can be one of the main advantages of M-learning. The process is not tied to a space the learner has to be present in a traditional model of teaching. One of the issues that might be discussed as the negative aspect of Mobile Learning is the possibility of distraction [10].

The world pandemic and the lockdown has caused total shift to a new reality and the educational sector also had to have quick response towards the challenge. Almost every social activity was transferred online [11]. Prompt and effective reaction of the educational institutions was one of the reasons a lot of people all over the world became interested in using those difficult times for self-development.
3 The Importance of Online Communication Channels in Digital Era

Digitalization has changed the world. As digital transformation continues, the world needs to stay relevant and adaptable for all the changes that is caused by digitalization. Nowadays, society spend more time in the internet, as a result of this, organizations need to transform their offline services into online, to reach their potential customers.

Using online digital communicational channels such as: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn increases brand’s visibility and engagement toward customers.

Nowadays society spend more time on internet than they did in the past. According to statista.com [12] unique mobile users in April 2020 were 4.2 billion and active mobile social media users were 3.76 billion worldwide. In the annual data of 2019, 132 min were indicated as the daily time spent average via mobile [13].

Covid-19 pandemic has forced companies and society to become digitalized. “The global pandemic has no favorites and everybody and everything has been impacted in some way. The lockdown has had an equalizing effect on many business, big and small, and has been a death knell for those struggling prior to the pandemic. One major observation is that COVID has made digital transformation obligatory for all businesses and for all sectors. Digital is no longer an option or an add-on, it is a necessity in looking forward meeting a certain level of digital maturity will be on many agendas” [14]. According to Santos (2019), online digital communicational channels are tools, that are used by organizations to establish and maintain relationship with their customers. “They enhance the experience between the customer and the brand, boosting relationship marketing, generating recognition for the company and impacting sales” [15]. There exist different types of online communicational channels where organizations can communicate with their audience.

In nowadays world E-learning and especially M-learning gains more popularity in the young generation. “Children of today have been surrounded by digital technology since their birth; ever since, their everyday life and practices have been entwined with social media, smart phone, tablet, and Internet use” [16]. The world has dramatically changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have to better realize the new digitalized opportunities of the world and accept them. “We should approach digital transformation of education as one of our core concerns and consider how we could empower children to manage and master in their digital futures during their basic education” [16].

4 Findings of the Research

To investigate how online digital communicational channels have nurtured M-Learning during the world pandemic COVID-19 in terms of professional development, mixed method of research was used. The results to be suitable and satisfactory, qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. Thematic analysis according to the interviews with two respondents were conducted for more specific outcomes. One of the respondents was the specialist of higher education, the field significantly affected by the pandemic and the second one was the specialist of tourism sector, which was under total
lockdown because of understandable reasons. The certification course the first respondent had taken was “Interpersonal Skills”, as for the another respondent “Inbound Sales” was the course chosen by her.

On the question “What was the reason that made you take a certificate course during pandemic?” the first respondent responded, that those courses were motivational for personal development, while the another one said, that learning more in the profession and enriching resume was encouraging.

In response to the question, have they used mobile devises to take certificate courses or not, the first respondent says that both of them were used, but computer was more comfortable, since it was less distracting. Another one also considers, that mobile phones are more flexible, but when it comes to certificate courses sitting in front of the computer is more comfortable.

Q.: Do you consider that M-Learning (Mobile Learning) is more comfortable and effective in contrast with the traditional learning methods?

Respondent 1: In normal situations, when you are not limited in attending classroom sessions, I would not use online sources for learning, since face-to-face interaction is more interesting and fruitful for me.

Respondent 2: If we discuss generally, I do not consider M-Learning to be more effective, but in terms of comfort, yes, I could agree to some extent that when the location is not limited attending sessions is more convenient.

Q.: Have you passed the certificate course before pandemic? If “YES” what kind of difference can you see between those courses? If “NO”, what made you choose the course?

Respondent 1: Before pandemic I did know that there exist several platforms for online certifications, but I have never been interested in taking them, because I considered traditional courses to be more effective to me. Courses taken online are interesting and informative, but in some cases you do not have opportunity to ask questions and have an interaction.

Respondent 2: I have passed online certificate courses before pandemic on the same platform I used this time. There could not be significant difference between them, but the situation was different, since I had more time and motivation for concentration.

Q.: Do you think that online certificate courses help you in professional development? The response of the first participant was, that any right course is beneficial for professional development. The second respondent also thinks, that the courses help you, since they deepen your understanding.

Q.: Do you consider that Ads running in different online digital communicational channels (Social media) regarding online certificate courses help you in decision making process?

Respondent 1: If we discuss the period of pandemic, then yes, because during those difficult times I was more concentrated to find something new and their advertisements attracted my attention more than before.

Respondent 2: I can say that certificates uploaded by my contacts in different social media channels were more encouraging than the Ads running.

Q.: Have you registered on the online certificate course after seeing its Ads in the online digital communicational channels?
Respondent 1: Yes, after seeing the Ad on Facebook, that one of the platforms had added new courses interesting for me to its list, I have decided to take it.

Respondent 2: A number of my LinkedIn contacts had uploaded their certificates on their accounts, that enforced me register at least one of them immediately.

Beside qualitative research quantitative one was also conducted to better analyze and generalize the outcome. The participants were randomly selected through online sources. The questionnaire was spread through the social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn during the beginning of April 2020 till the middle of June.

Questionnaires with 11 multiple-choice and checkbox questions, as part of quantitative method was created and fulfilled by 60 persons through online sources.

Participants were divided into four groups according to their age (Group 1: 18–22 years; Group 2: 23–28 years; Group 3: 29–35 years; Group 4: 36-above).

The age group with the highest participation, in both male and female categories, was 29–35 years. 77.8% of the participants were female. 66.7% registered and accomplished online certificate course during the Covid-19 pandemic. “Professional Development” and “Get to know a new field” were the reasons why they have decided to register on the online course, in contrast with “the course was free during this time” and “other reasons” both with 0% (Fig. 1).

33.3% found out about the course from the running Ad in social media, 33.3% heard about the course from the people’s shared certificates in their social media contacts, and 33.3% from another sources. Mobile with 50% and notebook with 66.7% were the devices used while the learning process. 83.3% agrees that it was quite motivating to accomplish online certificate courses for professional development during COVID-19 pandemic. 57.1% prefers M-learning and thinks that it is more comfortable than the old traditional learning method. 57.1% expresses opinion that online courses’ running Ads in the different online digital communicational channels (social media) did not influence
them in decision making process. In response to the question “which of the social media channels motivated you to pass the online certificate course?” the largest amount came to LinkedIn with 50%, the second one was Facebook with 33.3%, Instagram with 0% and other sources with 16.7% (Fig. 2).

![Fig. 2. “Which of the social media channels motivated you to pass the online certificate course?”](image)

5 Conclusion

Living in a cutting edge of digital transformation has changed the whole world significantly. Nowadays, being digitally literate is a core concern for the society, since almost everything can be done virtually. Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated digitization and shifted the world dramatically.

One of the initial steps almost every country of the world took after terrifying notifications regarding new world pandemic was shutting down the educational organizations, such as schools, colleges, universities. After realizing that the situation was not supposed to change quickly and more than that, the lockdown was on the way, the educational organizations became proactive in transferring their activities online. After the total lockdown of the world, a lot of people stayed unemployed and absolutely frustrated. Educational organizations working on short certificate courses ceased the moment, offering a number of courses with low or no prices at all. Eye-catching advertisements in different social media sources, as well as number of motivated persons sharing their positive experience, along with the certificates got during this period has worked great and starting from the end of March 2020 online social communicational channels were full of certificates.

The research conducted for the present paper shows that the reason why the participants have decided to take online certificate courses was especially the motivation for self-development, learning more about the profession, along with getting to know a new field, which means that taking courses was nurtured by the idea of professional development. The outcome regarding comfortability and effectiveness of M-Learning was as follows: in both, qualitative and quantitative methods participants agreed that in
terms of comfortability Mobile Learning can be discussed as advantageous. But when it comes to effectiveness, traditional methods are considered to be more significant, because of the added packs. The majority of participants has heard and decided to take certificate courses using online digital communicational channels either from ads running or the certificates already taken by friends.

To conclude, online learning has gained more significance in the period of world pandemic and one of the varieties of this kind of learning was online certificate courses. Online digital communicational channels have been motivational in this process. As the limitation of the research was the concrete period and a specific type of academic direction, such as certificate courses, future research can be conducted more deeply in other directions as well.

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