

Research article

Nurturing the Teaching Soul: An Investigation on How Participation in Online Communities and Social Networks Boosts Academics Well-being, Professional Satisfaction, and Resilience

Afam Uzorka^{1*}, Kagezi Kalabuki²

¹Department of Art and Sciences, College of Education, Open and Distance E-learning, Kampala International University, Kampala, Uganda

²Department of Physical Sciences, School of Natural and Applied Sciences, Kampala International University, Kampala, Uganda
E-mail: afamuzorka@gmail.com

Received: 21 June 2024; **Revised:** 9 August 2024; **Accepted:** 4 September 2024

Abstract: This study explores how online community and social network participation impact academics' well-being, professional satisfaction, and resilience. It aims to provide insights into the role of digital platforms in nurturing the teaching soul, a concept encompassing academics' intrinsic motivation, passion, and emotional commitment to their profession. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research involved interviews with 13 administrators and 43 lecturers from 10 Ugandan universities, totalling 56 participants. The study employed a semi-structured interview guide developed based on social constructivism, focusing on online interactions' collaborative and supportive nature. Data were analyzed using NVivo 12 through thematic coding, with themes developed iteratively to ensure mutual exclusivity and address potential overlaps. The study identified three main themes: Supportive online communities, professional growth and satisfaction, and resilience building. The findings highlight the positive impact of online communities on various aspects of academics' professional lives. The study contributes to understanding how digital platforms can be harnessed to support and enhance academics' well-being, satisfaction, and resilience. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts and the effectiveness of specific online community practices. Practical recommendations include developing targeted university policies to leverage online communities for professional development and well-being initiatives, ensuring that these digital tools are effectively integrated into academics' professional lives.

Keywords: online communities, social networks, academics, well-being, professional development, resilience

1. Introduction

The resilience, job happiness, and general well-being of academics' are critical components of any successful educational system, no matter how quickly the field of education changes (Fernandes et al., 2021; Uy et al., 2024; Yu & Ying, 2024). The "teaching soul" concept refers to the intrinsic motivation, passion, and emotional commitment that academics bring to their profession. Nurturing this teaching soul involves creating conditions that support academics' well-being, professional satisfaction, and resilience, enabling them to thrive personally and professionally. Academics face several difficulties navigating the intricacies of the contemporary classroom, from mounting workloads to the requirement for ongoing professional development (Uzorka et al., 2021). Within this framework, engaging in online communities and

social media platforms has surfaced as a plausible means for academics to seek assistance, exchange materials, and foster adaptability in the face of hardship (Adeoye, 2024; Ghafar, 2024; Kamalpour et al., 2020).

The emergence of Digital Platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Moodle, Google Meet, Canvas, Slack, Flipgrid, Trello, ClassDojo etc., has completely changed the educational environment by providing previously unheard-of chances for professional growth, cooperation, and communication (Akour & Alenezi, 2022; Olaniyan & Fakuade, 2023; Uzorka et al., 2023). Online communities have become important venues for supporting and promoting professional development among academics (Dille & Røkenes, 2021; Kilag & Sasan, 2023). Online communities are defined as virtual spaces where academics can interact, cooperate, and exchange information (Marshalsey & Sclater, 2020; Shal et al., 2024), such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Google Classroom, Facebook, Khan Academy, Coursera, Reddit, Edutopia e.t.c. Academics can improve their skills, learn new things, and create networks of supportive peers by hosting webinars, holding conversations, and exchanging best practices (Tanucan & Uytico, 2024; Zamiri & Esmaceli, 2024).

While Dania and Tannehill (2022) emphasize their function in enhancing the well-being of academics' by providing opportunities for cooperation and emotional support, research by Eden et al. (2024) shows the importance of online communities in generating a sense of belonging and camaraderie among academics'. Furthermore, research by Inkelas et al. (2023) and Kamalpour et al. (2020) emphasizes how online cooperation among academics' can strengthen resilience, emphasizing the value of supportive networks in overcoming obstacles. Even while the advantages of online learning for academics' are becoming more widely acknowledged, issues including digital overload, privacy worries, and the possibility of cyberbullying still exist (Cuesta et al., 2020; Uzorka, 2024). However, research by Hayes et al. (2022) and Pyżalski et al. (2022) suggests mitigating measures, such as the creation of chances for professional development and supportive policies, to enable academics to effectively use online platforms.

Taking these factors into account, this research adds to the body of knowledge by offering detailed insights into the ways academics' involvement in online communities and social networks strengthens their teaching souls, increases their sense of professional fulfilment, and builds their resilience. This study expands on our knowledge of the transformative potential of digital connectedness in influencing the direction of academics by investigating the experiences and viewpoints of academics operating within a vibrant cultural environment.

Research question

How does participation in online communities and social networks impact academics' well-being, professional satisfaction, and resilience in Ugandan universities?

1.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is social constructivism, a paradigm that underscores the significance of social interactions and the co-construction of knowledge in learning environments. Social constructivism, rooted in the works of Vygotsky (1978), posits that learning is inherently a social process, shaped by interactions with others and the cultural context in which these interactions occur (Saleem et al., 2021). This framework is particularly pertinent to understanding how online communities and social networks influence academics' well-being, professional satisfaction, and resilience. Key concepts of social constructivism include Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Scaffolding, and Collaborative Learning (Saleem et al., 2021; Xi & Lantolf, 2021). Vygotsky introduced the concept of the ZPD, which represents the difference between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance and collaboration (Xi & Lantolf, 2021). In the context of online communities, this translates to academics' expanding their professional competencies through interactions with more experienced colleagues and peers. Social constructivism emphasizes the role of scaffolding, where more knowledgeable others provide support to help learners achieve tasks beyond their current capabilities (Xi & Lantolf, 2021). Online communities provide a virtual scaffolding environment where academics can seek advice, share resources, and gain new insights. Learning is seen as a collaborative endeavor, where individuals construct knowledge through social interaction and dialogue (Saleem et al., 2021). Online communities facilitate such collaborative learning by enabling academics' to engage in discussions, share experiences, and develop new pedagogical strategies collectively.

Online communities and social networks embody the principles of social constructivism by offering platforms for continuous interaction, shared learning, and collective problem-solving. These digital environments provide academics with opportunities to build supportive networks, engage in reflective practice, and access diverse perspectives (Shonfeld et al., 2021). By participating in online communities, academics can develop supportive networks that offer emotional

support, professional guidance, and a sense of belonging (Bjorklund et al., 2020). This network-building aligns with the social constructivist idea that learning and development are enhanced through social connections. Online platforms encourage reflective practice by allowing academics to share their experiences, receive feedback, and reflect on their teaching practices (Bragg et al., 2021). Reflective practice is a key component of professional growth and aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on the social nature of cognitive development. The global nature of online communities exposes academics' to a wide range of perspectives and teaching methodologies (Bragg et al., 2021). This diversity enriches their professional knowledge and supports the co-construction of new ideas and practices, a central tenet of social constructivism.

Applying social constructivism as the theoretical framework for this study provides a lens through which the impact of online communities on academics' can be understood. It highlights the importance of social interactions in professional development and the role of collaborative networks in enhancing academics' well-being and resilience. By grounding the study in social constructivism, we can better understand the dynamic and interactive nature of online communities and their potential to transform the professional lives of academics.

2. Literature review

Within the field of educational research, there has been a growing interest in the role that online communities and social networks play in promoting the resilience, professional satisfaction, and well-being of academics'. Academics' well-being encompasses emotional, psychological, and physical health, which significantly affects job satisfaction and performance. Studies indicate that online communities play a crucial role in enhancing academics' well-being by providing social support and reducing feelings of isolation. For example, Ansley et al. (2021) found that online support groups for academics significantly decreased stress and burnout by offering a platform for emotional support and professional advice. A study by Rahmat (2024) highlighted that participation in online academic communities helped academics manage stress and build resilience through peer support and shared coping strategies. Liu et al. (2020), and Martin and Borup (2022)'s research emphasizes the value of online communities in helping academics feel like they belong and support one another. In a similar vein, Dania and Tannehill (2022) emphasize how these networks foster academics' well-being by offering channels for communication and psychological support. Furthermore, Uzorka's (2024) study highlights how online platforms can have a transformative impact on academics' by promoting meaningful contacts and minimizing professional isolation.

Professional satisfaction is closely linked to academics' perceptions of their work environment, opportunities for growth, and recognition. Online communities and social networks offer valuable resources for professional development and recognition, which can enhance job satisfaction. For instance, research by Rafique (2024) revealed that online platforms provide academics with access to a broad array of professional development resources, such as webinars and instructional materials, leading to increased job satisfaction. Moreover, an analysis by Hsieh et al. 2024 demonstrated that online recognition and positive feedback from peers contribute to a sense of accomplishment and validation, thereby boosting professional satisfaction. Research conducted by Voelkel (2020) and Zhang et al. (2023) indicates that academics' professional advancement and happiness are positively impacted by online involvement. Academics can access a multitude of resources, knowledge, and best practices by taking part in online professional learning communities. This improves their teaching techniques and increases their job happiness.

Resilience in education refers to the capacity of academics to adapt to challenges and sustain their commitment to teaching despite difficulties. Online communities contribute to resilience by offering platforms for sharing experiences, problem-solving, and receiving support. A study by Guraya et al. (2021) found that online peer support networks are instrumental in helping academics navigate professional challenges and recover from setbacks. Additionally, research by Luo et al. (2020) highlighted that online communities facilitate resilience by providing academics with diverse perspectives and strategies for overcoming difficulties, thereby fostering a sense of collective responsibility and support. Similarly, the benefits of online collaboration for academics in building resilience have been demonstrated by studies conducted by Mullen et al. (2021) and Yang et al. (2023). Academics can obtain information, support, and ways to efficiently handle obstacles and setbacks by utilizing online networks. Furthermore, the research conducted by Rolandson and Ross-Hekkel (2022) highlights the significance of virtual communities in mitigating academics' isolation and promoting flexible coping mechanisms. In addition, studies conducted by Li (2022) and Thomas (2023) highlight how online networks might help

academics feel less alone in their careers. Online platforms provide meaningful contacts and overcome geographical obstacles, providing chances for peer assistance, networking, and cooperation.

Even with all of the advantages of being online, problems like digital overload, privacy issues, and the possibility of cyberbullying still exist (Huang et al., 2024; Hazime, 2024; Qi & Yang 2024). Digital overload refers to the overwhelming volume of information and the constant connectivity required by digital platforms. Academics often face the challenge of managing numerous online resources, communications, and tasks, which can lead to stress and burnout (Huang et al., 2024). Privacy concerns arise from the collection, storage, and potential misuse of personal information on digital platforms. Academics must navigate the complexities of maintaining professional boundaries while protecting their privacy and that of their students (Hazime, 2024). Cyberbullying involves the use of digital platforms to harass, threaten, or harm individuals. Academics' can be targets of cyberbullying by students, parents, or colleagues, which can negatively impact their well-being and professional satisfaction (Qi & Yang 2024). However, research by Hayes et al. (2022) and Pyżalski et al. (2022) suggests mitigating measures, such as the creation of supporting policies and chances for professional development, to enable academics to use online platforms efficiently.

3. Methodology

Research design: This study uses a qualitative research approach to investigate how academics resilience, well-being, and job satisfaction are affected by their involvement in online communities and social networks. The selection of qualitative approaches is based on their capacity to provide a comprehensive knowledge of the topic being studied by delving deeply into the experiences and views of participants. A total of 56 participants were interviewed for this study, including 13 administrators and 43 lecturers from 10 different universities in Uganda. Participants were chosen based on being active users of online communities and social networks concerning their professional practice.

Demographic: Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants. 56 invitees participated in the study. There were 35 (62.50%) males and 21 (37.50%) females with ages ranging from 20 years and above. The majority of the participants 26 (46.43%) are PhD degree holders. There were 13 (23.21%) Administrators and 43 (76.79%) Lecturers. Participants having working experience of fewer than 5 years were 09 (16.07%), between 5 and 10 years were 21 (37.50%), between 11 and 15 years were 17 (30.36%), and 16 years and above were 09 (16.07%).

Data collection: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on the theoretical framework of social constructivism. The interview guide allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences, views, and insights on their involvement in online communities and social networks and how it affects their resilience, resilience-boosting, and professional satisfaction. The interview guide, which is attached in the appendix, covered key areas such as:

- Experiences with online communities and social networks.
- Perceived impact on professional satisfaction, well-being, and resilience.
- Examples of support and resources obtained from these platforms
- Challenges and mitigation strategies in engaging with online communities.

With the participants' permission, each 45 to 60-minute interview was audio-recorded to guarantee accuracy in data transcription and analysis.

Data analysis: The interviews were transcribed by the researchers themselves to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data. The transcriptions were then imported into NVivo 12 for thematic data analysis. The process involved several key steps:

1. Initial Coding: Researchers began by reading through the transcripts and identifying initial codes that represented significant ideas or themes related to the research questions.

2. Thematic Coding: These initial codes were then organized into broader themes. Thematic coding involves grouping similar codes and identifying patterns within the data.

3. Theme Overlap and Mutual Exclusivity: During the theming process, researchers paid careful attention to potential overlaps between themes. Themes were defined to be mutually exclusive to ensure that each piece of data was categorized into the most appropriate theme without redundancy. This approach helped to maintain clarity and precision in the data analysis.

4. Refinement of Themes: Themes were continually refined and adjusted through iterative discussions among the

research team. This process ensured that the final themes accurately represented the data and were comprehensive in capturing the participants' experiences.

Table 1. Demographic

Variables		Male frequency (%)	Female frequency (%)	Total frequency (%)
Gender		35 (62.50)	21 (37.50)	56 (100)
Age (years)	20-29	05 (41.67)	07 (58.33)	12 (21.43)
	30-39	11 (57.89)	08 (42.11)	19 (33.93)
	40-49	12 (70.59)	05 (29.41)	17 (30.36)
	50-above	07 (87.50)	01 (12.50)	08 (14.28)
Educational qualification	Bachelor	06 (50.00)	06 (50.00)	12 (21.43)
	Master	11 (61.11)	07 (38.89)	18 (32.14)
	PhD	18 (69.23)	08 (30.77)	26 (46.43)
Designation	Administrator	07 (53.85)	06 (46.15)	13 (23.21)
	Lecturer	28 (65.12)	15 (34.88)	43 (76.79)
Work experience (years)	Under 5 years	04 (44.44)	05 (55.56)	09 (16.07)
	5-10 years	14 (66.67)	07 (33.33)	21 (37.50)
	11-15 years	11 (64.71)	06 (35.29)	17 (30.36)
	16 years and above	06 (66.67)	03 (33.33)	09 (16.07)

Trustworthiness and rigor: Multiple procedures were implemented to guarantee the study's credibility and thoroughness, such as member verification, peer debriefing, and researcher reflection. To verify interpretations and guarantee alignment with participants' experiences, member checking entailed sharing significant findings with participants. Colleagues with experience in qualitative research participated in peer debriefing sessions where they critically examined the analytic procedure and interpretations. Additionally, to recognize and reduce any potential biases that can affect the gathering and interpretation of data, researcher reflexivity was used.

Ethical considerations: All participants gave their informed consent, guaranteeing their anonymity and voluntary involvement. The freedom to leave the research at any moment and without consequence was guaranteed to the participants. Additionally, measures were taken to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality by ensuring their anonymity when reporting results.

4. Results

The study investigated how online community and social network participation boosts academics well-being, professional satisfaction, and resilience. To maintain the confidentiality of names each participant in the study was assigned a database number referred to as respondents 1 to 56 (R1 to R56). When the findings reference a participant's comments, the database number (R1 to R56) is recorded in parentheses.

4.1 Building supportive online communities and reducing professional isolation

Respondents emphasized the critical role that building supportive online communities plays in enhancing academic well-being, professional satisfaction, and resilience. The beneficial impacts of online communities and social networks on the resilience and general well-being of academics are largely dependent on the establishment of supportive virtual environments. The design, policies, and moderation procedures of these online forums greatly foster an atmosphere of mutual tolerance, openness, and appreciation for differing points of view. One participant highlighted how careful design and moderation contribute to a polite and inclusive culture by noting, "The online platform's structure and rules greatly enhance respect and appreciation for different viewpoints" (R6).

Academics' emotions of loneliness are lessened and their sense of community is strengthened through inclusion. Academics can engage in conversation, exchange experiences, and foster a sense of community by taking part in online groups. "Academics' can share their struggles, acknowledge their successes, and seek emotional support in online forums," said a different participant (R25). This sense of community and support from one another is essential for easing the isolation that academics, particularly those employed in more difficult or isolated settings, may experience.

One of the most important aspects of building supportive communities is promoting constructive and good discourse. These communities offer instructors useful information and skills in addition to emotional support. For example, peer recognition programs like awards and spotlight features emphasize members' abilities and accomplishments, while mentorship programs enable seasoned academics to mentor their less experienced peers. These friendly virtual communities usually plan and host virtual conferences, webinars, and group projects, among other collaborative activities.

Recognizing the importance of academics' well-being, these communities also include activities related to work-life balance, stress management, and mental health. They provide forums for discussing well-being issues, sharing coping mechanisms, and offering emotional support. One participant mentioned, "Online communities are not just about professional development; they also focus on personal well-being, offering sessions on stress management and mental health" (R13). This holistic approach ensures that academics' are supported both professionally and personally.

4.2 Professional growth, satisfaction, and resilience building through online engagement

Respondents highlighted that online communities and social networks significantly contribute to professional growth, satisfaction, and resilience among academics. Academics may stay up to date on industry advancements, continuously enhance their skills, and find personal gratification in contributing to the larger educational community thanks to the interactive and collaborative characteristics of these platforms. "Online forums provide a wide range of resources to facilitate lifelong learning" (R10). The availability of a wide range of resources enables academics to continuously improve their expertise.

With the help of online networks, academics can promote their accomplishments and contributions and engage in global professional networking. Academics feel their commitment and knowledge are validated in these communities when they receive likes, comments, or official nominations. As stated by one participant, "Having my efforts and expertise validated in online communities through likes or formal recognition truly makes a difference" (R25). Their sense of accomplishment and gratitude for their contributions to the academic community are increased by this acknowledgement.

Online communities frequently offer personalized learning experiences, which let academics customize their professional development to fit their unique interests and objectives. A collaborative environment is fostered by exchanging lesson plans, instructional materials, and research findings, which expedites the development of effective teaching techniques. Active promotion of reflective techniques gives academics a forum to talk about their experiences, consider their instruction, and get input from others.

Additionally, online communities and social networks play a crucial role in building resilience among academics'. These platforms offer abundant resources and support networks to help academics overcome challenges, adapt to changing circumstances, and maintain their well-being. One respondent noted, "Virtual communities transform into support systems during challenging times" (R6). During difficult times, such as changes in educational regulations or personal and professional setbacks, these communities become invaluable sources of support and guidance.

4.3 Cultivating a positive online presence and addressing challenges

Respondents discussed how academics can strategically leverage online communities to cultivate a positive online presence. A positive digital identity is reinforced by members of an online community sharing knowledge, accomplishments, and achievements. In addition to increasing awareness in the community, a professionally designed web presence can lead to possible partnerships and employment opportunities. Active engagement has a tremendous impact on one's professional reputation, as one participant said, "Sharing knowledge and successes in online communities bolsters a positive digital identity" (R1).

Academics can establish themselves as thought leaders in their profession and make a substantial contribution to educational debate by actively participating in online forums. Fostering a collaborative and upbeat digital atmosphere entails extending assistance, giving helpful criticism, and participating constructively in conversations. However, there

are drawbacks to being involved in online groups. Academics' may feel overpowered by technology and knowledge, and the deluge of conversations and content can be intimidating. Information can be streamlined by putting content curation techniques into practice, such as classifying debates and offering carefully chosen resources. One participant clarified "It's easy to feel overwhelmed with so much content. Manage this with a lot of help from curated materials and categorized discussions"(R7).

It can be difficult to strike a balance between personal and professional boundaries in online contexts, which might raise concerns about privacy and professionalism. Upholding professional online conduct necessitates having defined boundaries and moral principles in place. Academics' ought to exercise caution when disclosing information and think about keeping their personal and work accounts separate. One respondent stated "To avoid issues with professionalism and privacy, it is crucial to establish and maintain clear boundaries online" (R10).

Negative interactions can hurt academics' well-being, such as trolling or criticism. It is essential to establish community rules and moderation procedures that encourage civil and productive communication. Negative experiences can be lessened by promoting constructive communication, offering avenues for reporting inappropriate behaviour, and creating a welcoming community environment. A respondent said, "Community norms and moderation practices are essential to maintain a positive and respectful environment" (R19).

Academics' workloads can occasionally increase due to the expectations of online involvement, which can negatively impact their work-life balance. It's critical to establish clear guidelines for online contact and reasonable expectations for involvement. Platforms that encourage well-being and self-care behaviours as well as provide flexible engagement options can help with this. Furthermore, inaccurate information and misunderstandings on digital platforms might have a detrimental effect on the calibre of exchanges. Encouragement of fact-checking, critical thinking, and evidence-based dialogues aids in the containment of misinformation. One participant pointed out "Promoting fact-checking and evidence-based discussions helps prevent misinformation" (R31).

Technical issues and accessibility barriers can also hinder seamless participation in online communities. Prioritizing user-friendly interfaces, ensuring compatibility with assistive technologies, and providing technical support are essential. Overcoming technical obstacles involves providing alternate communication routes and considering the diverse technological access points of community members. One respondent noted, "Ensuring user-friendly interfaces and technical support is crucial for seamless participation" (R35).

By addressing these challenges and strategically leveraging the benefits of online communities, academics can significantly enhance their professional growth, satisfaction, and resilience.

5. Discussion

Building supportive online communities is a theme that emphasizes the value of online communities as places where academics can interact, exchange experiences, and support one another. The study found that online communities significantly reduce professional isolation by fostering a sense of community and providing emotional support. Academics highlighted the importance of virtual environments that promote respect, candour, and appreciation for different viewpoints. These platforms enable academics to share their experiences, seek advice, and build camaraderie, which in turn enhances their well-being and professional satisfaction. Our results are consistent with those of Martin and Borup (2022), who highlighted the contribution of online communities to academics' feelings of community and belonging. Additionally, the rise of supportive networks is consistent with earlier studies by Liu et al. (2020), which show that these communities improve academics' well-being by providing opportunities for emotional support and cooperation. Reducing professional isolation highlights how online networks can have a positive impact on academics' emotions of isolation and loneliness. Our results are consistent with those of Li (2022) and Rolandson and Ross-Hekkel (2022), who discovered that involvement in virtual networks promote a feeling of community and connection, thereby mitigating the feelings of isolation that academics frequently encounter. In a similar vein, Thomas's (2023) study emphasized the function of online platforms in overcoming geographic obstacles and promoting significant contact between instructors.

Online platforms were also found to enhance professional growth through access to resources, collaborative learning, and personalized development opportunities. Academics appreciated the availability of diverse instructional materials, webinars, and networking opportunities that helped them stay current with industry developments. Recognition and feedback received through these networks contributed to increased professional satisfaction. Our results support

the findings of Zhang et al. (2023), who discovered that involvement in virtual professional learning communities results in increased work satisfaction and a stronger sense of dedication to teaching. In a similar vein, Voelkel's (2022) study highlighted how online networks support ongoing professional growth, which in turn increases instructors' self-assurance and job competency. The idea of fostering resilience via online interaction highlights how important it is for virtual communities to provide academics with the tools and encouragement they need to overcome obstacles and disappointments. This result is consistent with the findings of Yang et al. (2023), who emphasized the benefits of online academics' cooperation for resilience building. Furthermore, Mullen et al. (2021) study highlighted the contribution of online networks to the development of adaptive coping techniques and the reinforcement of academics' resilience in the face of adversity.

The study underscored the role of online communities in building resilience among academics'. These platforms offer guidance, problem-solving opportunities, and exposure to diverse perspectives, which help academics navigate challenges and maintain their commitment to teaching. Academics can rely on their online peers for support and encouragement during times of crisis or change. Our results are consistent with the research conducted by Luo et al., (2020), who highlighted the necessity for academics to preserve a professional and positive online presence on social media. Additionally, the study by Guraya et al., (2021) emphasized the significance of setting clear boundaries and guidelines for online engagement as well as the possible risks connected to online interactions.

The issue of obstacles recognizes the difficulties and dangers that academics may encounter when interacting online. Our results are consistent with those of Qi and Yang (2024), who noted several difficulties instructors encounter when navigating virtual communities, including time restraints, information overload, and worries about cyberbullying and privacy. Additionally, Pyżalski et al. (2022) study suggested mitigating measures such as the creation of supportive policies and chances for professional development to enable academics to use online platforms efficiently.

This study's findings align with existing research on the benefits of online communities and social networks in enhancing academics' well-being, professional satisfaction, and resilience. However, this study uniquely contributes to the field by providing a comprehensive analysis that merges the aspects of support, professional growth, and resilience into a cohesive framework. Unlike previous studies that often focused on one aspect, this research underscores the interconnectedness of these elements, showing how a supportive online environment can simultaneously enhance well-being, professional development, and resilience. Additionally, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the practical tools and resources, such as mentorship programs and peer recognition initiatives, that are pivotal in creating a supportive community. By highlighting the supportive and collaborative nature of online platforms, this research reinforces the idea that digital engagement can be a powerful tool for enhancing academics' professional lives.

5.1 Limitations

Sample size and generalizability: The study's sample size was relatively small, comprising 56 participants from 10 Ugandan universities. This limited sample size may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives of all academics' in Uganda or other regions. To address this limitation, the study ensured a diverse representation of participants by including both administrators and lecturers from various disciplines and institutions. This diversity helped in capturing a wide range of insights.

Self-reported data: The study relied on self-reported data, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability bias and recall bias. Participants may have provided responses they believed were expected or may have forgotten pertinent details. To mitigate this limitation, the researchers used semi-structured interviews, allowing for probing questions and clarification. This approach helped in obtaining more detailed and accurate responses. Additionally, member checking was employed, where preliminary findings were shared with a subset of participants to verify accuracy and resonance.

Potential researcher bias limitation: As the researchers transcribed the interviews themselves and were involved in the coding process, there is a potential for researcher bias, where their perspectives and interpretations could influence the analysis. To minimize this bias, the researchers engaged in reflexivity, constantly reflecting on their own biases and how these might affect the research process. Peer review and independent coding by additional researchers were also used to ensure the reliability and validity of the themes and findings.

Technological access and literacy limitation: Participants' access and proficiency with technology could vary, influencing their experiences with online communities and social networks. This variation could affect the study's findings. The study included questions about participants' technological access and literacy to contextualize their experiences. The

findings were analyzed with consideration of these factors. Future studies could explore the impact of technological access and literacy in more depth to understand its influence on engagement with online platforms.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the profound impact that participation in online communities and social networks has on academics' well-being, professional satisfaction, and resilience. By fostering supportive virtual environments, these platforms significantly mitigate feelings of professional isolation and promote a sense of camaraderie among academics'. The integration of mentorship programs, peer recognition initiatives, and professional development resources within these communities enhances academics' professional growth and satisfaction. Furthermore, the study underscores the critical role of structured online engagement in building resilience and helping academics navigate challenges and adapt to changing circumstances.

Future research should explore longitudinal impacts and the effectiveness of specific online community practices. Practical recommendations include developing targeted university policies to leverage online communities for professional development and well-being initiatives, ensuring that these digital tools are effectively integrated into academics' professional lives. Universities are encouraged to implement structured online communities, mentorship programs, and recognition initiatives to support their academics. Providing access to professional development resources, promoting work-life balance, and ensuring clear boundaries and effective moderation within these platforms are essential steps. Additionally, offering flexible engagement options and technical support will facilitate seamless participation and enhance the overall experience for academics'.

By adopting these recommendations, universities can enhance digital connectivity and professional development opportunities for their instructors, leading to improved well-being, satisfaction, and resilience. This study not only reinforces the importance of supportive online communities but also provides actionable strategies for institutions to implement, ultimately contributing to the advancement of educational practices and the well-being of academics.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

References

- Adeoye, M. A. (2024). Education in flux: Nurturing minds for the futuer. In *Proceeding of international conference on education, society and humanity* (pp. 73-82). Adeoye. <https://ejournal.unuja.ac.id/index.php/icesh/article/view/7746>
- Akour, M., & Alenezi, M. (2022). Higher education future in the era of digital transformation. *Education Sciences, 12*(11), 784. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12110784>
- Ansley, B. M., Houchins, D. E., Varjas, K., Roach, A., Patterson, D., & Hendrick, R. (2021). The impact of an online stress intervention on burnout and teacher efficacy. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 98*(2), 103251. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103251>
- Bjorklund Jr, P., Daly, A. J., Ambrose, R., & van Es, E. A. (2020). Connections and capacity: An exploration of preservice teachers' sense of belonging, social networks, and self-efficacy in three teacher education programs. *Aera Open, 6*(1), 2332858420901496. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858420901496>
- Bragg, L. A., Walsh, C., & Heyeres, M. (2021). Successful design and delivery of online professional development for teachers: A systematic review of the literature. *Computers & Education, 166*(6), 104158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2021.104158>
- Cuesta Medina, L., HennigManzuoli, C., Duque, L. A., & Malfasi, S. (2020). Cyberbullying: Tackling the silent enemy. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24*(9), 936-947. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1500648>
- Dania, A., & Tannehill, D. (2022). Moving within learning communities as an act of performing professional wellbeing. *Professional Development in Education, 1-16*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2022.2081250>
- Dille, K. B., & Røkenes, F. M. (2021). Teachers' professional development in formal online communities: A scoping

- review. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 105, 103431. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103431>
- Eden, C. A., Chisom, O. N., & Adeniyi, I. S. (2024). Online learning and community engagement: Strategies for promoting inclusivity and collaboration in education. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 21(3), 232-239. <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.21.3.0693>
- Fernandes, L., Gouveia, M. J., Silva, J. C., & Peixoto, F. (2021). 'Positive Education': A professional learning programme to foster teachers' resilience and well-being. *Cultivating Teacher Resilience*, 103-124. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5963-1_9
- Ghfar, Z. (2024). The positive and negative aspects of social media platforms in many fields, academic and non-academic, all over the world in the digital era: A critical review. *Journal of Digital Learning and Distance Education*, 2(8), 707-721. <https://doi.org/10.56778/jdlde.v2i8.212>
- Guraya, S. S., Guraya, S. Y., & Yusoff, M. S. B. (2021). Preserving professional identities, behaviors, and values in digital professionalism using social networking sites; a systematic review. *BMC Medical Education*, 21(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-021-02802-9>
- Hayes, B., James, A., Barn, R., & Watling, D. (2022). "The world we live in now": A qualitative investigation into parents', teachers', and children's perceptions of social networking site use. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(1), 340-363. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12452>
- Hazime, M. (2024). *The lived experience of middle school counselors with cyberbullying in the virtual learning environment*. Doctoral dissertation, Walden University.
- Hsieh, K. Y., Xiao, P., Contractor, N., & Wang, L. (2024). Online community's recognition and continued participation in idea competitions. *Decision Sciences*, 55(2), 176-190. <https://doi.org/10.1111/deci.12578>
- Huang, Z., Palvia, P., & Mehta, N. (2024). The social media discontinuance model: The trio of dark side, regret, and privacy control. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2024.2326551>
- Inkelas, K. K., Jessup-Anger, J. E., Benjamin, M., & Wawrzynski, M. R. (2023). *Living-learning communities that work: A research-based model for design, delivery, and assessment* (1st ed.). Taylor & Francis.
- Kamalpour, M., Watson, J., & Buys, L. (2020). How can online communities support resilience factors among older adults. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 36(14), 1342-1353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2020.1749817>
- Kilag, O. K. T., & Sasan, J. M. (2023). Unpacking the role of instructional leadership in teacher professional development. *Advanced Qualitative Research*, 1(1), 63-73. <https://doi.org/10.31098/aqr.v1i1.1380>
- Li, Q. T. (2022). Examine the moderating role of teacher's self-efficacy in the relationship between the job satisfaction and professional learning community in china. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 841728. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.841728>
- Liu, W., Fan, X., Ji, R., & Jiang, Y. (2020). Perceived community support, users' interactions, and value co-creation in online health community: The moderating effect of social exclusion. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(1), 204. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17010204>
- Luo, T., Freeman, C., & Stefaniak, J. (2020). "Like, comment, and share"-professional development through social media in higher education: A systematic review. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 68(4), 1659-1683. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-020-09790-5>
- Marshalsey, L., & Sclater, M. (2020). Together but apart: Creating and supporting online learning communities in an era of distributed studio education. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 39(4), 826-840. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jade.12331>
- Martin, F., & Borup, J. (2022). Online learner engagement: Conceptual definitions, research themes, and supportive practices. *Educational Psychologist*, 57(3), 162-177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2022.2089147>
- Mullen, C. A., Shields, L. B., & Tienken, C. H. (2021). Developing teacher resilience and resilient school cultures. *Journal of Scholarship & Practice*, 18(1), 8-24.
- Olaniyan, A. O., & Fakuade, O. V. (2023). Level of ict available and user competency in post-covid era in ugandan universities. *African Multidisciplinary Journal of Development (AMJD)*, 12(2), 146-152. <https://doi.org/10.59568/AMJD-2023-12-2-14>
- Pyżalski, J., Plichta, P., Szuster, A., & Barlińska, J. (2022). Cyberbullying characteristics and prevention-what can we learn from narratives provided by adolescents and their teachers? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(18), 11589. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191811589>
- Qi, C., & Yang, N. (2024). Digital resilience and technological stress in adolescents: A mixed-methods study of factors and interventions. *Education and Information Technologies*, 1-47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-024-12595-1>
- Rafique, R. (2024). Supporting teachers through online professional development: A small-scale qualitative study with teachers in bangladesh. *The Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 39(2), 112-131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02>

680513.2024.2316629

- Rahmat, M. R. (2024). Compassion-based training for cultivating well-being and building resilience in online adjunct faculty. In *Adjunct Faculty in Online Higher Education: Best Practices for Teaching Adult Learners* (pp. 20-48). <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-9855-2.ch002>
- Rolandson, D. M., & Ross-Hekkel, L. E. (2022). Virtual professional learning communities: A case study in rural music teacher professional development. *Journal of Music Teacher Education, 31*(3), 81-94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10570837221077430>
- Saleem, A., Kausar, H., & Deebea, F. (2021). Social constructivism: A new paradigm in teaching and learning environment. *Perennial Journal of History, 2*(2), 403-421. <https://doi.org/10.52700/pjh.v2i2.86>
- Shal, T., Ghamrawi, N., Abu-Tineh, A., Al-Shaboul, Y. M., & Sellami, A. (2024). Teacher leadership and virtual communities: Unpacking teacher agency and distributed leadership. *Education and Information Technologies, 1-18*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-12446-5>
- Shonfeld, M., Cotnam-Kappel, M., Judge, M., Ng, C. Y., Ntebutse, J. G., Williamson-Leadley, S., & Yildiz, M. N. (2021). Learning in digital environments: A model for cross-cultural alignment. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 69*, 2151-2170. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-021-09967-6>
- Tanucan, J. C. M., & Uytico, B. J. (2021). Webinar-based capacity building for teachers: "Lifeblood in facing the new normal of education". *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 29*(2), 1035-1053.
- Thomas, D. D. (2023). *Teacher participation and professional learning communities: A qualitative descriptive study*. Doctoral dissertation, Franklin University.
- Uy, F., Kilag, O. K., Calledo, M. F., Cerna, Y. D., Angtud, N. A., & Villanueva, K. (2024). Quality performance of teachers: Work environment, work attitude, and principal supervision: Qualitative investigation. *International Multidisciplinary Journal of Research for Innovation, Sustainability, and Excellence (IMJRISE), 1*(1), 101-109.
- Uzorka, A. (2024). Perspectives on online education in higher education. *International Journal of Technology in Education and Science, 8*(1), 111-120. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijtes.523>
- Uzorka, A., Ajiji, Y., Osigwe, M. U., & Ben, I. N. (2021). An investigation of the teaching needs of faculty members with regard to technology. *International Journal of Technology in Education and Science, 5*(1), 70-106. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijtes.152>
- Uzorka, A., Namara, S., & Olaniyan, A. O. (2023). Modern technology adoption and professional development of lecturers. *Education and Information Technologies, 28*(11), 14693-14719. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-11790-w>
- Voelkel Jr, R. H. (2022). Causal relationship among transformational leadership, professional learning communities, and teacher collective efficacy. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 25*(3), 345-366. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1690699>
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). Development of higher psychological processes. In M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner & E. Soubberman (Eds.). *Mind in Society*. Harvard University Press.
- Xi, J., & Lantolf, J. P. (2021). Scaffolding and the zone of proximal development: A problematic relationship. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 51*(1), 25-48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12260>
- Yang, M., Oh, Y., Lim, S., & Kim, T. (2023). Teaching with collective resilience during covid-19: Korean teachers and collaborative professionalism. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 126*, 104051. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104051>
- Yu, X., & Ying, T. (2024). Under the surface of teacher occupational wellness and effectiveness in higher education: A look into the mediator roles of work passion and emotion regulation via sem analysis. *BMC Psychology, 12*(1), 166. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-01656-2>
- Zamiri, M., & Esmacili, A. (2024). Methods and technologies for supporting knowledge sharing within learning communities: A systematic Literature review. *Administrative Sciences, 14*(1), 17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14010017>
- Zhang, J., Yin, H., & Wang, T. (2023). Exploring the effects of professional learning communities on teacher's self-efficacy and job satisfaction in Shanghai, China. *Educational Studies, 49*(1), 17-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2020.1834357>

Appendix: Interview guide

Experiences with Online Communities and Social Networks

1. Engagement with Online Platforms

- Which online communities or social networks do you actively participate in related to your professional role?
- How often do you engage with these platforms?

2. Types of Interactions

- Can you describe the types of interactions you have in these online communities?
- What kind of content do you typically share or engage with?

Impact on Professional Satisfaction and Growth

3. Professional Development

- How have these online communities contributed to your professional development?
- Can you provide specific examples of resources or opportunities you have gained through these platforms?

4. Collaboration and Networking

- How do these platforms facilitate collaboration with other academics'?
- Have you formed any significant professional relationships through these online communities?

5. Recognition and Validation

- Have you received any form of recognition or validation for your contributions in these online communities?
- How does this recognition impact your professional satisfaction?

Impact on Well-being and Resilience

6. Emotional Support and Well-being

- In what ways have these online communities supported your emotional well-being?
- Can you share any specific instances where you felt supported by your online peers?

7. Stress Management and Work-life Balance

- Have these platforms provided you with strategies or support for managing stress and maintaining a work-life balance?
 - What activities or resources offered by these communities have you found particularly helpful?

8. Resilience and Coping Mechanisms

- How have these online communities helped you build resilience in your professional life?
- Can you describe any coping mechanisms or strategies you have adopted as a result of your interactions in these communities?

Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

9. Challenges Faced

- What challenges have you encountered while participating in online communities and social networks?
- How do you deal with negative interactions, such as trolling or criticism, in these online spaces?

10. Balancing Online Engagement

- How do you balance your time and energy between online engagement and your other professional responsibilities?
- Have you established any boundaries or strategies to manage this balance effectively?

11. Privacy and Professionalism

- How do you maintain privacy and professionalism in your online interactions?
- Do you have separate accounts for professional and personal use? If so, why?

Closing Questions

12. Future Directions

- In your opinion, what could universities do to better support academics' engagement with online communities and social networks?
 - What future developments or features would you like to see in these digital platforms?

13. Any other comments