The Usage of Social Networking Sites for Informal Learning: A Comparative Study Between Malaysia Students of Different Gender and Age Group

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, social networking sites (SNSs) on the Internet are increasingly being utilised as a learning tool for study and school-related issues. In Malaysia, most public schools do not allow students to bring their cell phones to school. Hence, learning activities involving SNSs can only be carried out after school hours. This article will refer to learning that takes place outside the school environment as “informal learning” as these activities are unstructured and are not undertaken in a formal educational setting. Through a questionnaire, the present study investigated the perceptions of 799 secondary-school Malaysian secondary school students towards the using of the SNSs for informal learning purposes. Data was analysed quantitatively and comparisons across gender and age were made. The findings revealed that Malaysian students have generally accepted the SNSs as an alternative learning environment with evidence showing that the difference in usage between gender is significant to a certain extent and less so for age.

KEYWORDS

Age-Groups, Gender, Informal Learning, Secondary Schools, Social Networking Sites

INTRODUCTION

The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) has rapidly increased over the past few years in Malaysia. The Global Web Index (2015) revealed that Malaysia has the second highest penetration of social networking usage among Internet users in Asia. It was further reported that on average a Malaysian with a social networking account spends 2.8 hours per day on SNSs. Now with the widespread use of smartphones, it is believed that the time spent on SNSs will continue to rise. SNSs such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and WeChat are the most commonly used Internet-based social spaces in Malaysia, particularly among young individuals.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined a social networking system as a web-based service that allows individuals to do the following: i) build public or semi-public profile in a system, (ii) share a connection,
and (iii) view and cross-list their relationship with others in the system. Such systems enable easy and rapid connection with friends, families, classmates, customers and clients. In addition, SNSs are also seen as media that allows people to come together around an idea or topic of interest. In fact, SNSs are increasingly being leveraged as a learning tool, especially for today’s tech-savvy students. According to Lai et al. (2013), many students are immersed in out-of-school online activities. When using digital media, students engage in a new learning culture which is very different from what they have been enculturated in traditional schools. Many studies have revealed the potential of using social networking for learning purposes (Selwyn, 2009; Griffith & Liyanage, 2008). However, it is not possible to use it as a tool for learning in Malaysian secondary schools due to the constraint of not allowing students to bring their cell phones to schools. Thus, it would be interesting to find out to what extent students use SNSs for learning purposes outside the classroom which has been defined as “informal learning” in this study. This definition is in line with that of Livingstone (1999) and Marsick and Watkins (2001). Livingstone (1999) described informal learning as any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies. Marsick and Watkins (2001) further described it as intentional but unstructured, contextualized learning.

It has long been documented that gender differences exist and influence how individuals engage in everyday activities. Some research findings also show that there are significant gender differences between how men and women adopt and use technology (Chun, 2013). Some studies undertaken in the Malaysian context which explored users’ purposes in using SNSs found gender difference to be an influencing factor. According to Misra et al. (2015), attraction towards SNSs varied between male and female students. Mazman and Usluel (2011) earlier reported that significant gender differences were also found when young adults used SNSs to maintain existing relationships, make new relationships, pursue academic purposes and follow specific agendas. This study extends on these studies in its attempt to investigate how differences in gender and age affect students’ usage of SNSs for informal learning purposes. Findings of this study will add to the current body of research, conducted on the effects of social networking on Malaysian secondary school students.

The following research questions specifically seek to investigate whether there are differences in usage for the following categories of students: (a) between male and female students, (b) between students of two different age-groups:

1. What types of SNSs usage patterns are displayed among the different categories of Malaysian secondary school students?
2. How much time do these different categories of students spend on SNSs?
3. To what extent do these different categories of students use SNSs for learning and what types of learning do they focus on?
4. What are the differences in usage of SNSs for informal learning purposes of the different categories of students?

RELATED LITERATURE

Social Networking Sites

Social networking was introduced 15 to 20 years ago. Since then it has grown from a niche to a mass online activity, in which millions of Internet users (from different ages, cultures and education levels) are engaged in during their leisure time and at their workplace (Misra et al., 2015; Mazman & Usluel, 2011). Its impact cannot be overstated. Social networking is the most popular online activity worldwide accounting for nearly 1 in every 5 minutes spent online in October 2011, and reaches 82 percent of the world’s Internet population, representing 1.2 billion users around the globe (ComScore, 2011). According to Lenhart et al. (2010), young people are much more likely than older adults to
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