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Computers & Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/compedu

Social networking, knowledge sharing, and student learning: The case of university students



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 May 2015

Received in revised form 8 April 2016

Accepted 12 April 2016

Available online 20 April 2016

Keywords:

Cooperative/collaborative learning

Computer-mediated communication

Media in education

Postsecondary education

Teaching/learning strategies

ABSTRACT

The recent development of social networking brought new opportunities not only for socializing and marketing but also for knowledge sharing and learning. As the social computing technology is relatively new, a review of literature revealed lack of research on the impact of ways of using social networking sites (SNS) on knowledge sharing and learning among tertiary students. This paper aims to empirically examine the various categories of SNS use including: chatting and online discussion, creating knowledge and information content, file sharing, and enjoyment and entertainment by tertiary students at a University in Saudi Arabia. It will investigate the impact of these categories of SNS use on knowledge sharing and learning performance. We adopted a cross sectional survey questionnaire for data collection, and received 308 valid responses from a sample of students that include graduates and undergraduates. The results show that there are significant positive relationships between both chatting and online discussion and file sharing and knowledge sharing, and entertainment and enjoyment with student learning. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations and implications of this study, along with directions for further research.

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1. Introduction

Recent technological advances in telecommunications, the Internet and World Wide Web (WWW) brought to light more opportunities for online applications. A major development of Web applications during the last decade, termed as Web 2, is the emergence and intensive use of social networking sites (SNS). Examples of such SNS are Myspace, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, and WhatsApp. SNS promote interactions and allow users to communicate information and personal experiences. They allow individuals to create their profiles and connect, interact, and collaborate with others (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). In the beginning, people used SNS for social interaction and communications. Subsequently, because of the excessively large number of users joining and visiting these SNS, commercial organizations started to exploit them for marketing, recruitment, and ideas and/or knowledge generation and information sharing. A natural dimension of human interactive behaviour is the discussion of topics, issues, and ideas. Thus, consequently SNS use evolved into knowledge sharing and learning at both individual and organizational levels.

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Traditionally, most internal and distance learning higher education institutions adopt learning management systems to deliver online learning to learners. Nowadays, however, many students use SNS to share information, discuss topics or concepts, and collaborate to complete homework assignments or term projects. SNS provide convenient and speedy ways of peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge and collaboration, which seems to be a preferred method of learning. This new learners' behaviour encourages self-learning and represents a significant driving factor for a shift from the traditional teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning. Patel, Darji, and Mujapara (2013) conducted a survey to show how an intelligent community and SNS are useful for students and professionals. Their study generated some descriptive statistics describing how the use of SNS among a sample of learners and professionals enhances learning. They found that approximately 163 participants out of 226 use social networking for learning purposes. Moreover, recent research has investigated how SNS benefit learners and professionals (Redmond & Lillis, 2010). They found that some top-ranked MBA schools are actively using SNS to provide a learning environment for an extensive network of students and faculty members. Stokic, Correia, and Reimer (2013) conducted a study to explore supportive social computing based technologies for cross-organizational collaborative learning and knowledge building activities. The results of their study confirmed the relationships between collaboration supported by SNS and motivation to learn, and between the willingness to share knowledge and the self-efficacy for learning and knowledge building. Most previous research (Carter & Nugent, 2011; Jadin, Gnams, & Batinic, 2013) focused on investigating the effect of particular SNS tools (for example, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, blogs, and wikis) on knowledge sharing or student learning, but not the way SNS uses influence knowledge sharing and learning.

Based on the way SNS are used, this paper proposes four categories of SNS use. These categories are (1) chatting and discussion through blogging (for example, Twitter), (2) content creation (for example, wikis), (3) files sharing through virtual data storage drives (for example, SkyDrive and Dropbox), and (4) enjoyment and entertainment (for example, Facebook and Instagram). A search of literature revealed a lack of research exists on investigating the effects of these four categories of SNS use on knowledge sharing and learning at the tertiary level of education, both locally and internationally. Therefore, this study aims to achieve the following three objectives:

1. Measuring the extent of the four categories of SNS use: (1) chatting and discussion, (2) content creation, (3) files sharing, and (4) enjoyment and entertainment.
2. Measuring the impact of the four categories of SNS use on both knowledge sharing and student learning.
3. Measuring the impact of knowledge sharing on student learning performance.

The findings of this study will have value for academia as well as practical implications for the Saudi education sector in general and higher education institutions in particular. This research is valuable as it will be amongst the first empirical research of its kind in Saudi Arabia and probably in the Middle East. The study will spur future research into the educational values of using social media. In section 2, we will provide a background of the study from the relevant previous research. Next, in section 3 will present the research model. Then, we will outline the research method and materials, including the used measures, data collection, and data analysis in Section 4. Section 5 will discuss the analysis results, and section 6 will conclude the paper.

2. Background

2.1. Social networking

Social networking is significant and global phenomena recently emerged because of the major development of Web applications during the last decade, termed as Web 2. Because Web 2 supports social networking activities, the literature characterized it as "collaborative" and Web 1 as "distributive" (Oreilly, 2007). SNS provide opportunities for forming virtual communities. Innovators design SNS to promote interactions and to communicate information and personal experiences. Since their emergence, SNS have become very popular and pervasive, for both public and private organizations. The most recent published statistics by the Economist (2014), show that about 8 million of the Saudi Arabia's 31 million people use Facebook, more than 5 million use Twitter, and that Saudis watch an average of seven YouTube videos a day. According to The Economist (2014), Saudi Arabia has the world's highest penetration of the microblog. The number of users rose by 45% between 2012 and 2013, and the largest number of social media users are aged between 26 and 34 years. Boyd and Ellison (2008) defined social network sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). Examples include Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

Nowadays, many students use SNS to share information and knowledge, collaborate to complete homework assignments or term projects, and discuss concepts and ideas. For example, students have used Facebook Groups as a learning management system and they are satisfied with it (Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, & Liu, 2012). The use of SNS is becoming popular among students (Chu & Meulemans, 2008). They found the majority (90%) of Myspace and Facebook used it to communicate with others about school, professors, or courses.

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