SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The spark of using social networking technologies in education becomes a flame while numbers and figures demonstrate a remarkable growth of social networking users. Regarding to the mass numbers of users who are registered in social networking sites, it indicates the changing of life, hobbies and interests. While several studies have used social networking directly in education, this study aims to examine the students' perception of using social networking sites. Moreover, it considers how and to what extent social networking helps students. BarterTerms! as a social networking website which focuses on peer learning, was chosen for this study. Purposive sampling was selected as the research sampling. Semi-structured interviews and students' feedback on the website are the research instrument for this qualitative study. The main process of examination and analysis of study was divided into 15 weeks. The first week was allocated for meeting participants and introducing the website. During week 2 to 14 the online users' views and comments were considered. Interviews were conducted in week 15. Findings of this study show that learners use the Barrterterms! website to find new information. Meanwhile the most important factor which has attracted the attention of learners is the sharing of information. Moreover, through discussion, they are able to express their ideas and also influence other peers' thoughts. They also can improve their knowledge by correcting their misunderstandings. Finally, they really enjoy having discussions with their peers.

KEYWORDS

Qualitative approach, Social networking, Higher education, Discussion, Interactivity, Constructivism

INTRODUCTION

The term of 'social network' was first expressed by Barnes (1954) which he defined as a map of relationships between individuals or organizations which shows the ways they are connected to each other. Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, LinkedIn are some examples of online social networking sites. The spark of using social networking technologies in education becomes a flame while numbers and figures demonstrate a remarkable growth of social networking users. As Facebook© (2010) claims, it has more than 400 million active users while 50% of them log on to Facebook every day. Meanwhile, several studies have used social networking directly in education. A social content system was used by Abbitt (2007) to allow students to share resources and facilitate students' achievement. Facebook is used by English and Duncan-Howell (2008) to support the education of students in teaching practicum. Flicker is used by Lockyer and Patterson (2008) to examine the positive learning outcomes in a formal educational environment. Edalatifard and Tasir (2009) have considered which factors attract university students to use social networking while 'relationship' and 'user-based' were the result, Hamid et al. (2009) have examined the potential of online social networking sites in education and have found out that "content generating", "sharing", "interacting" and "collaboratively socializing" are well facilitated by social networking sites.

Regarding the mass numbers of users who registered in social networking sites, it indicates the changing of life, hobbies and interests. Meanwhile, the challenge is what are the students' views of using social networking sites? While social networking is favourable for students, how and to what extent can help them in learning? In this case, BarterTerms! is chosen as a social networking website which focuses on peer learning (Edalatifard & Tasir, 2010). While, most social networking websites have general purposes, the chosen website has focused on distributing ICT terms. Figure 1 shows the homepage of the website.
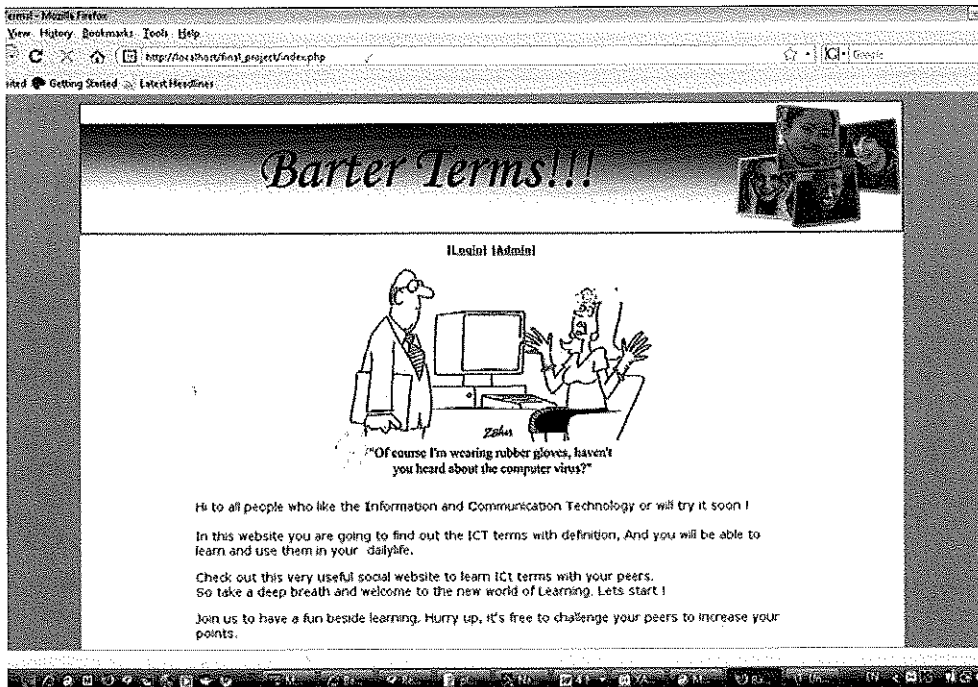

Figure 1. Main page of website.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study tries to apply a qualitative approach while it allows participants to speak their minds, disclose latent issues and therefore generate rich, detailed data. Semi-structured interview was used as the research instrument to collect data to find out students' perceptions and also to examine how the website helps learners. Users' comments are analysed to indicate to what extent the website can help learners to understand ICT terms.

The chosen method for selecting the sample is purposive sampling. A class of 20 university students was selected as the sample. They were degree level final year students who took a subject related to the ICT field. They comprised male and female students. This study introduced BarterTerms! as a social networking website to university students. The process of examination and analysis of study was divided into 15 weeks. The first week was allocated for meeting participants and introducing the website. As the website played a part to get direct feedback, during week 2 to 14 users' views and comments were considered. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at week 15.

FINDINGS AND DISSCUSSION

Demographic Data

One undergraduate class was chosen as the sample of study, where 40% were male and 60% were female. The age range was between 21 and 24, with 21.65 being average. The most frequent age in this sample was 21. Meanwhile, 15% of participants use the Internet once a day, whereas 70% use the internet more than one time per day. All of the participants had experience using social networking sites such as Facebook, Friendster, Hi5, etc. More than 90% of participants were a member of more than one social networking website, whereas 35% had been using 3 and 30% had been using at least four or more. 20% of participants spend 30 to 59 minutes in social networking websites, and more than half of them had been using at least one hour per day.

Such behaviour in regards to the use of the Internet and social networking is similar to the report of National School Boards Association (NSBA, 2007). This report shows that 96% of students use any social networking technologies whereas 71% say they use social networking tools at least weekly.

Student's Perception

To obtain the student's perception, all the participants of the study were asked to answer the questions in a friendly meeting. They were allowed to discuss and were told to feel free to explain their ideas. By considering the response for each question, some particular themes are chosen to simplify the analysis. Then, the qualitative data were transformed to quantitative data by considering the frequencies of responses based on each theme. The following are the given responses where a minimum manipulation of grammatical structures was done to help comprehend the meaning of phrases.

Table 1 demonstrates the examples of responses to the question 'What is the purpose of this website? Inform/Share/Entertain/Learning…' responses were divided into 3 themes.

Table 1. Examples of responses to purpose of website.

No.	Themes	Examples of Responses
1.	Sharing information	S13: *"we can share some information with other peers. The others way, besides use the Facebook or Friendster that I used before"* S17: *"this website enables us to share knowledge about ICT that I didn't ever know before"*
2.	Learning	S6: "share information and learning" S15: "learning and sharing knowledge"
3.	Entertainment	S8: "to get information, sharing ideas, entertain and learning" S11: "entertainment besides learning"

By analysing the data obtained from the semi-structured interview, the majority of participants (75%) believed that sharing information is the main purpose for using this website. Learning at 60% is the next highest rank. Meanwhile, 15% of participants believed that entertainment besides learning is an important factor in using the website.

Table 2 shows the examples of responses to question 'What particular aspect of website did you like?' Responses were divided into 4 themes.

Table 2. Examples of aspects which users liked.

No.	Themes	Examples of Responses
1.	Share views	S7: *"share view part, because we can see our friends"* S18: *"hot discussion and share views"*
2.	Friendship	S6: *"share view because I can see friends"* S10: *"making friendship and the links, because very interactive and user friendly"*
3.	Discussion	S11: *"discussion and share"* S13: *"enjoy hot discussion when I see my friends' name here..."* S18: *"hot discussion and share views"*
4.	Getting Information	S2: *"it can give more information and something new"* S3: *"can run the information when we read at the time"*

There were different ranges of responses for this part, but 35% liked the 'share views' part. 30% of participants liked the way that they could communicate with their friends. 'Hot discussion' is next with 25%. Around 25% of participants liked the kind of information that they could get from the website.

Table 3 demonstrates the examples of answers to question 'What particular aspect of website did you dislike?' Interface design and interactivity are considered as a total theme for this question.

Table 3. Examples of aspects which users did not like.

No.	Themes	Examples of Responses
1.	Design	S14: *"Too crowded ..."* S16: *"I did prefer some more decoration or some more application such as online chatting box. Because this website looks little empty and lack of interesting"* S18: *"Maybe it can be improved by background colour"*
2.	Interactivity	S8: *"Website has more text but has no any interactivity such as simple games"*

In considering what the participants did not like, 40% did not answer this question. 30% of participants were not satisfied with the design. And 20% stated the lack of interactivity.

Table 4 demonstrates the examples of responses to question 'Why do you actually use the website?' Responses were divided into 3 themes.

Table 4. Examples of reasons that students use website.

No.	Themes	Examples of Responses
1.	Getting Information and Learning	S2: *"get more information to finish the assignment, chatting if in bored."* S11: *"get many information, learning ..."* S14: *"to get information and new knowledge in networking"*
2.	Entertainment	S5: *"to get more friends, have fun ..."* S8: *"to make more friends, get entertain ..."*
3.	Sharing Information	S8: *"... share experience"* S12: *"to share knowledge and learning"*

The majority of participants (around 75%) were unanimous that getting knowledge and information is the main reason. They believe that by using the website they can learn ICT terms. Entertainment is the next factor that comprised a quarter of the participants. Meanwhile, around 15% voted for sharing information. They mentioned that sharing information is the principle factor that they used the website.

As a conclusion, sharing information and taking part in discussions attracts the attention of students. While such findings can influence the students' attraction, these factors also can play a main role to construct knowledge. To illustrate more, each individual student has his/her own knowledge about ICT terms. By referring to the website and reviewing the website's information they can improve their knowledge. Moreover by using the website, they can take part in discussions with other peers. In other words, in order to understand the meaning of ICT terms, students can discuss together. Meanwhile they can put their views as a comment in the website.

Such a function points out the Vygotskyan belief. As Vygotsky believed social interaction is a basic function in development of cognition (Learning-Theories, 2009). He believed that two steps construct knowledge: interpsychological and intrapsychological (Morss, 1996). Learners who want to know about ICT terms would refer to the website. First they get some information by considering the website information. Then they can discuss with their peers in the website. They can stress their views and also consider their peers knowledge. At this point learners are in the social level. Then learners try to improve their knowledge, either by discussion or by review on the website. Now they are in the individual level.

How the Website Helps Students

The qualitative data was then transformed into the quantitative data like the previous procedure. Some examples of responses to the question 'What do you gain from using this website?' are shown in Table 5. As can be seen the whole responses are divided into 3 themes.

Table 5. Examples of responses to gain from the website.

No.	Themes	Examples of Responses
1.	New Information and knowledge	S2: *"get information and gain new knowledge"* S9: *"new kind of information about ICT terms"*
2.	Sharing information	S11: *"sharing knowledge can help me to learn better"* S19: *"I can share information with my friends about ICT"* S20: *"to share knowledge and learning"*
3.	Making friendship	S1: *"making friendship"* S7: *"getting friendship"*

By using the website, getting knowledge and information related to Information and Communication Technology obtained 70% votes. About 35% stressed that by using the website they can make friends 15% of participants also believed that by using the website, they are able to share knowledge and information.

Table 6 indicates the examples of responses to question 'How does the website help in learning ICT terms?'

Table 6. Examples of ways which website helps.

No.	Themes	Examples of Responses
1.	Discussion	S2: *"the website help me to discuss with other friends and learn better"* S5: *"the link of 'Terms' helps me find about ICT terms and also 'Hot discussion'"* S6: *"there are many terms that I can learn and understanding by discussion"*

Some of the participants pointed to the content of the website, but around 30% of students stressed on discussion. They believed they can learn better by discussing with other friends. Discussion among peers is the most important factor which attracted the students' attention in order to know and understand ICT terms. By discussion, learners are able to share comments and opinions to make a decision or enhance understanding (Authenticity Consulting, 2003).

Based on Vygotskyan peer learning which is known as collaborative learning, peers have similar levels of understanding (Amor, 2008). Because of such similar levels of understanding, learners have enough motivation to share knowledge. So, they are able to construct new meaning from learning experiences. This point refers to Vygotsky beliefs that focus on the role of social interaction. He believes that social interaction allows learners to influence each others' ideas. In simple words, it refers to the social constructivism.

To What Extent can the Website Help the Students

To analyze the learners' feedback, specific themes were selected based on the most repetition, however, the ranges of comments were so wide. The qualitative data was transformed to quantitative data by considering the frequencies of responses based on each theme. Table 7 shows the examples of learners' comments divided into 3 themes. The responses are manipulated slightly to help comprehend the meaning of phrases.

Table 7. Examples of learners' comments.

No.	Themes	Examples of Responses
1.	Better Understanding	S5: "Oh, I didn't know what is typeface...Now I know I used font in wrong way" S6: "by use this website we can learn more about ICT terms. If we have problem to use an ICT terms, we can refer to this website. By share the information with others, we can get information faster and change our knowledge."
2.	Correcting Misconception	S1: "Oh no..I'm wrong ...font and typeface are different" S2: "Now I understand about it...font only one but typeface has more than one." S4: "Yeah... now I get it the different between font and typeface"
3.	Enjoying Discussion	S1: "Very good discussion that helped me to understand better" S3: "I found the discussion very interesting"

From the given responses, it is indeed obvious that after discussion and considering the content of the website, learners (30%) understood better the meaning of terms. Moreover, learners (25%) improved their knowledge by correcting their misunderstanding. The participants (15%) were also satisfied as discussion gave them enough to make them pleased.

Considering the ways which the website helped the students to learn ICT terms, this shows peer interaction. Generally, as peers are in the same age range and the same levels of understanding, they have enough motivation to share knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In regard to the users' perception, findings of this study show that learners use the Barrterterms! website to find new information. Meanwhile the most important factor which has attracted the attention of learners is sharing information. Moreover, through discussion, they are able to express their ideas and also influence other peers' thoughts.

The next objective is about how the website helped and also to what extent it helped learners know about ICT terms. They are able to share their knowledge through discussion. It helped them to understand the meaning of terms better than before. They also can improve their knowledge by correcting their misunderstanding. And, another result, they really enjoyed having discussions with their peers.

Such findings can be supported by the philosophy of constructivism. Learners construct their own understanding and knowledge by applying new experiences. Whenever learners face to a new concept, they try to match it with their previous knowledge and experience. They try to improve their thoughts by changing some previous belief or discarding old ideas and replacing them with new ones. So, learning can be defined as an adjusting intellectual model in order to support new experiences.

25

McMahon (1997) believes constructivism does not discuss the storing and retrieving of information in the brain. In constructivism, instead of transferring knowledge from the external world into memories, learners try to interpret the world based on previous experiences. In simple words, there is a real world, but there is no absolute meaning. Rather, meaning has been assumed by people and environment.

In addition, the role of educators in such a website points out the role of a teacher in constructive environments. Basically, constructivists focus more on the learners. Learners, by interacting with environment can obtain meaning and understanding. They get new information and construct their own conceptualization based on their previous thoughts. The role of educators is to create discussions with learners to help them to knowledge construction.

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