Facebook in Higher Education: Social and Academic Purposes

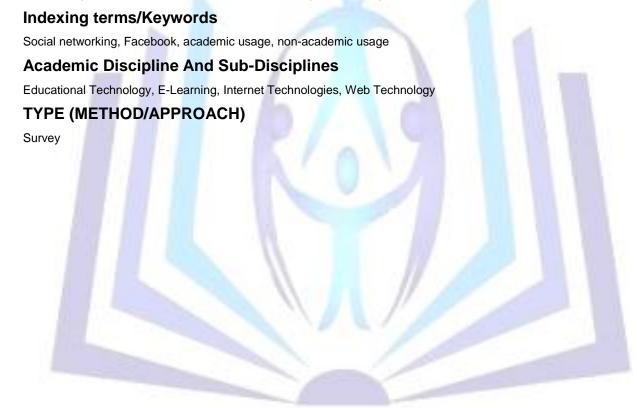Abdulsalam K. Alhazmi[1,2], Azizah Abdul Rahman[1]

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid growth and popularity of Facebook among students in higher education, the aim of this study is to explore the usage purposes among students including their academic and non-academic usage purposes in relation to gender, background, study level, and the length of their experience using Facebook. For this purpose, 105 local and international students were surveyed at a large public technology university in Malaysia. The results revealed that academic usage was limited compared to other usage purposes, such as social interaction, news, and entertainment. In relation to the academic usage, the results revealed that that study level and academic usage of Facebook were significantly related, while no significant relations were found in relation to gender, background or experience.

Indexing terms/Keywords

Social networking, Facebook, academic usage, non-academic usage

Academic Discipline And Sub-Disciplines

Educational Technology, E-Learning, Internet Technologies, Web Technology

TYPE (METHOD/APPROACH)

Survey

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INTRODUCTION

Social networking has made major changes to all aspects of modern life. It is a social phenomenon that relates to many areas including technological, psychological, social areas. The innovative features of these social technologies lead to higher rates of widespread information and adoption based on the type and purpose of use. For example, Facebook is mainly used for communication; personal users use it to stay in touch with friends and family across the world, while teachers may be like to use it as a way to communicate with students [1]. In business, Facebook is used to reach customers on a national and global level and get feedback about products and services.

Social networking sites are used for a variety of purposes, among which are to upload photos and videos, share information about personal daily life, maintain social relationships, and carry out some educational activities. A study by [2] identified four categories of Facebook usage purposes: maintaining existing relationships, making new relationships, academic usage, and following agendas. A review study by [3]summarised the motivations for using Facebook among students into nine motivations, namely, to maintain existing relationships, to meet new people, for fun, to make oneself more popular, to pass time, to express or present oneself, for learning purposes, as a task management tool, and for student activism. The results of an exploratory survey by [4] placed the purposes of using Facebook into four categories: to keep in touch with friends, to follow news, to carry out study-related activities, and a broad category of business and entertainment activities.

It can be concluded from the literature that the common purpose of using Facebook among students in higher education is for social communication, news and entertainment, while the use of Facebook for educational purposes appears to be limited. The limited use of Facebook for academic purposes is might be related to the recentness of Social Networking in educational context and the absence of educational practices on how to deploy it academically and instructively [5]. Another reason is that the content and the activities in these social technologies are varied and related to a number of personal, cultural, and social issues.

Aim of the study

The study investigated the students' academic and non-academic use of Facebook in relation to the demographic variables of gender, background, study level, and length of experience using Facebook. The study posed the following questions:

Q1 – What are the purposes of Facebook use among students in relate to gender, background, study level, and experience?

Q2 – Do male and female students differ in relation to the academic use of Facebook?

Q3 – Do local and international students differ in relation to the academic use of Facebook?

Q4 – Do undergraduate and postgraduate students differ in relation to the academic use of Facebook?

Q5 – Does experience relate to the academic use of Facebook?

Method

The questions this paper aimed to answer were designed as part of a questionnaire developed by [4] to understand different aspects of students' perceptions and use of Facebook for academic purposes in the higher education context. Data was collected from 105 students. SPSS 21.0 was used for data analysis processes. Frequency analysis was performed to describe the characteristics of the sample and the usage purposes. To study the differences in the demographic variables in relation to academic and non-academic purposes, dummy coding was performed and then Pearson chi-square measurements were performed to compare the usage purposes based on gender, student background, study level and experience.

Results

Summary of demographic variable profiles

Based on the frequency analysis summarisedin Table 1, local students (62 students) comprised 59.6% of the sampleand international students (42 students) comprised 40.4%; 58.7% of the sample were undergraduates (61 students) and 41.3% were postgraduates (43 students). The distribution of students across gender was 54.4% (56 students) male and 45.6% (47 students) female.

Table 1: Summary of demographic variable profiles

		Type	Frequency	Percentage
1	**Gender**	Male	56	54.4%
		Female	47	45.6%
		Total	103	100%
2	**Background**	Local	62	59.6%
		International	42	40.4%
		Total	104	100%
3	**StudyLevel**	Undergraduate	61	58.7%
		Postgraduate	43	41.3%
		Total	104	100%

Research Question 1: Summary of Facebook usage purposes

As presented in Table 2, the results showed that the dominant use of Facebook (88.6%) was for communication and social interaction with friends, followed by letting others know what was happening in the student's daily life (48.6%), and reading news (44.8%). Academic usage (38.1%) consisted of communicating with friends about classwork. This result emphasises one of the most important discussions in the literature on Facebook usage in the higher education context. Many studies have reported that despite the rapid growth of Facebook use among students in higher education [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11], the use for education purposes is still limited [4, 6, 7, 3, 2, 12]. Although some reasons for this limitation have been discussed in the literature, the discussion is still general and based on personal reflections of the phenomenon. Thus, there is a need for further studies to investigate the real reasons behind such usage patterns [4].

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of Facebook usage purposes

Purpose	Frequency	Percentage
Keep in touch with my friends	93	88.6%
Let others know what is happening in my life	51	48.6%
Communicate with friends about classwork	40	38.1%
News	47	44.8%
Other (please specify)	15	14.3%

Research Question 1a: Gender and usage purposes

The frequency results, as presented in Table 3, showed that although male students were more active among all purposes, not much difference was found considering the number of respondents in each category. The frequency differences were 2.2% in news, 12.8% in academic usage, 13.8% in letting others know what is happening in the student's daily life, and 6.6% in keeping in touch with friends. In the use of Facebook to communicate with friends about classroom activities, the difference was 12.8%. The results of a study by [13] revealed that male students were more likely than female students to have student-student interactions on Facebook. In the present study, some differences were found indicating that the academic usage of Facebook was more common among male students than female students.

Table 3: Gender and usage purposes

Purpose	Frequency	
	Male	**Female**
	Percentage	**Percentage**
Keep in touch with my friends	53.3	46.7
Let others know what is happening in my life	56.9%	43.1%
Communicate with friends about classwork	56.4%	43.6%
News	51.1%	48.9%
Other (please specify)	80%	20%

Research Question 1b: Background and usage purposes

Not much difference was foundbetween local and international students in terms of using Facebook to follow news and for classwork activities. As seen in the results presented in Table 4, there were differences between these groups intheir use of Facebook to keep in touch with friends and to share personal activities with others. These differences indicate that the local students were more active than the international students in using Facebook for these purposes.

Table 4: Student background and usage purposes

Purpose	Frequency	
	Local	International
	Percentage	Percentage
Keep in touch with my friends	61.3%	38.7%
Let others know what is happening in my life	60%	40%
Communicate withfriends about classwork	59%	41%
News	50%	50%
Other (please specify)	64.3%	35.7%

Research Question 1c: Study level and usage purposes

In relation to study level, as seen in the results presented in Table 5,the undergraduate students were more active in using Facebook for social interaction and sharing personal and daily activities, while the postgraduate students were more active in using Facebook for academic activities.

Table 5: Study level and usage purposes

Purpose	Frequency	
	Undergraduate	**Postgraduate**
	Percentage	**Percentage**
Keep in touch with my friends	62%	38%
Let others know what is happening in my life	64.7%	35.3%
Communicate with friends about classwork	45%	55%
News	61.7%	38.3%
Other (please specify)	46.7%	53.3%

Research Question 1d: Experience and usage purposes

The results, as presented in Table 6, showed that the students with more experience using Facebook were the most active users in most of the categories identified. Students who were new users of Facebook used it more for other activities, such as games and entertainment as reported by most of the respondents.

Table 6: Experience and usage purposes

Purpose	Frequency	
	1-2 years	More than 2 years
	Percentage	Percentage
Keep in touch with my friends	37.7%	62.3%
Let others know what is happening in my life	28.6%	71.4%
Communicate with friends about classwork	33.3%	66.7%
News	33.3%	66.7%
Other (please specify)	55.6%	44.4%

Research Questions 2-5: relationship between gender, background, study level, experience, and academic use of Facebook

The categorical variables were dummycoded for the purposes of analyses, and then the chi-square test was used to study the relationships among gender, study level, and student background in relation to the use of Facebook for academic activities. The results showed that gender (p=.745), background (.918), and experience (.609)were not significantly related with the level of academic use of Facebook. Study level and academic use of Facebook were found to be significantly related (p=.045) at (α=.05).

Table 7: Frequencies, percentages and chi-square comparisons of academic usage of Facebook based on gender, background, study level, and experience

	Group	Frequency	Percentage	x^2
Gender	Male	21	55.3%	.889
	Female	17	44.7%	
Background	Local	23	59%	.918
	International	16	41%	
Study Level	Undergraduate	18	46.2%	.045 *
	Postgraduate	21	53.8%	
Experience	1-2 years	10	33.3%	.609
	More than 2 years	20	66.7%	

Conclusions

The Facebook usage purposes among students at university level were discussed in this paper generally and in relation to the gender, background, study level, and experience of a sample of 105 students. The overall results indicated that the use for non-academic purposes, such as social activities, news, and entertainment use, wasmore common compared to academic usage. Moreover, based on a comparison between these variables and the use of Facebook for classwork activities, the results revealed that the academic usage of Facebook and study level was significantly related. The postgraduate students used Facebook for interacting on classwork activities with their peers more than the undergraduate students. In contrast, no significant relationships were found between the academic usage of Facebook and the variables of gender, background, and experience.

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