

The Impact Of Social Networking: A Study Of The Influence Of Smartphones On College Students

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ABSTRACT


The use of social networking by college students has become increasingly relevant to their academic lives. Smartphones have added great potential by enabling an increase in the use of social networking and in the number of hours spent on such sites. Being online for a long time and being able to access different information from different sources at the same time could cause information overload. Students could face problems in filtering the information they receive and they might find it difficult to decide which sources they can trust and, therefore, which to select.

The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of social networking on college students. To achieve this aim, the research employs various methodologies which include descriptive/interpretive studies of the literature and previous studies carried out by academics and industrial institutions. It also utilizes surveys taken among university students. A questionnaire was distributed among 179 students at different universities and higher education institutes in the Sultanate of Oman in order to explore the influence on college students of social networking using their smartphones.

There are three main findings: 1) college students spend a long time on social networking sites, 2) college students are facing problems in trusting, filtering, and selecting all the different information accessed from social networking sites, and 3) social networks affect students in both positive and negative ways.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites; Social Media; Trust; Choice; Information Filtering; Information Overload

1. INTRODUCTION

 ne of the most significant subjects for debate currently taking place is the explosion in the use of social networking by college students. Using social networking sites has become a basic practice in students' daily routines. They use different social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Academia, and MySpace, spending a long time on such sites.

In recent years, there has been an ever-increasing interest in using smartphones to access these and other social networking sites. Through the existence of smartphones, students have become more attracted to using social networking 24/7. A survey conducted by Indian students at Ball State University found that the number of students who own a smartphone has more than doubled in three years - from 27% in 2009 to 69% in 2012 (Hingorani & Woodard, 2012). This number is expected to keep on growing in the coming years.

However, these rapid changes in the use of social networking via smartphones are having serious effects on college students. Some of them are positive, such as the improvement of important communication skills, making students more sociable online. In addition, social networking extends students' knowledge and helps them to be active in creating and sharing information. Nevertheless, social networks have been found to have negative effects,

such as the lowering of students' grades, which could be due to the increased distraction for students, leading to the misuse of their time (Wang et al., 2011).

Many studies have been carried out to investigate the impact of social networking sites on college students. Although the literature covers a wide variety of such studies, this study will focus on five major themes: 1) the purpose of using social networking sites for college students, 2) the use of smartphones as a tool to access these sites, 3) the 'trust' and 'choice' issues that are associated with the use of online social networking sites in higher education in the Sultanate of Oman, 4) the filtering techniques that are used by college students when using social networking sites, and 5) the influence of online social networking on college students. Although the literature presents these themes in a variety of contexts, this paper will focus on their application to college students' sites.

Section 2 provides a literature review on social media and the impact on different aspects of life. Section 3 describes the research methodology and design. Section 4 presents the data analysis and findings. Section 5 offers a discussion around the research findings. Section 6 provides a conclusion and suggestions for future work.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several definitions of social networking. Wang, Chen, and Liang (2011) define it as "the relationship that exists between a network of people." Similarly, Barkhuus and Tashiro (2010) state that online social networks give people the ability to communicate and share their interests with others over long distances. Online social networking has become a new trend that breaks boundaries and allows people to become members of collaborative online networks. Although most people refer to social media and social networking sites as being just one phenomenon, there are some differences between them as stated by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), such as "Social media represents a revolutionary new trend that should be of interest to companies operating in online space - or any space, for that matter" in comparison to "social networking sites are applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other"; that is, social media is used to provide information for broad audiences, which means that everyone has the opportunity to access the information. However, social networking sites provide information for a group of people who share common interests. Overall, the term 'social media' is broader than 'social networking sites.'

By their very nature, social networks enable college students to participate online for many purposes, for example, to help strengthen communication and maintain relationships (Dwyer et al., 2007). Furthermore, one can share knowledge and experiences, collaborate on relevant topics, and ask for advice or assistance (Liccardi et al., 2007). Accordingly, it may be argued that students use social networking for learning purposes. On the other hand, Wang et al. (2011) found that "ninety percent of students spent their time on entertainment; there were not too many college students who did not prefer using social media to do their homework." This percentage may indicate the general purpose of using such sites but, in fact, students are trying to benefit from the overall services provided by social networking sites.

Nowadays smartphones have several features that are comparable to an average computer. They can also engage students in far more dynamic ways than a laptop or a tablet computer (Hingorani & Woodard, 2012). In a study done by Cochrane and Bateman (2010), they declare that there are more than four billion mobile phone users worldwide, but only about 800 million computer owners (Cochrane & Bateman, 2010). Conversely, another study found that 68% of students reported that they primarily use a laptop to check their accounts on social networking sites, while 20% use their smartphones and only 12% prefer to use a desktop computer (Wang et al., 2011). According to Stollak et al. (2011), nine out of ten college students with smartphones access the internet from the device, which increases their ability to obtain applications for social networking. Generally, the use of smartphones by college students is leading to a new concern in the academic world when it comes to accessing social networking sites.

In using social networking sites, students face many challenges such as whether or not to trust the information they find, and how to choose from the different sources of information that are provided by these sites. Dwyer et al. (2007) define trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based

on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the user, irrespective of their ability to monitor or control that other party.” The studies of Liccardi et al. (2007) and Dwyer et al. (2007) highlight that people usually build a social network based on the strength of relationships and trust between members. Therefore, trust is an important factor in having successful online interactions and it is a precondition for self-disclosure.

Dwyer et al. (2007) develop a theoretical model that contains three independent variables - internet privacy concern, trust in the social networking sites, and trust in other members of the social networking sites. They relate these independent variables to two outcomes - information sharing and the development of new relationships. It is widely held that when college students find an online site that cares about the privacy of their information, they will trust this site and will interact with other members comfortably. Under these circumstances, students will share their information with others, which will encourage the development of new relationships. As a rule, trusting a particular source of information will result in facilitating the ‘choice’ issues. Thus, students will search for a trustworthy site so that they can decide with confidence which information they select.

Receiving too much information may lead to what is called the ‘information overload’ problem. Students need to cultivate particular techniques to filter all this information. There is not enough literature that covers the filtering techniques. Liccardi et al. (2007) state that online social networks can be a filtering tool in themselves if students use the word-of-mouth method to filter the large number of information sources they receive. However, this study highlights that 64% of college students are selecting the first source in their search list, 35% use authentic/well-known sites, and only 1% use other techniques to filter the information they receive.

As indicated earlier, using smartphones to access social networking sites has both positive and negative effects on college students. Wang et al. (2011) argue that social networking can yield both benefits and problems with similar individuals, and it highlights both negative and positive effects on students. The positive effects are that it helps students to improve their knowledge and social skills by: 1) increasing student activity in creating and sharing information, 2) asking for academic assistance and support, and 3) providing a good way to release student pressure. In the same way, “the social networking sites are virtual study halls for a wired generation” (Dyer & Columbia, 2010). However, the first negative effect is that social networking use is negatively associated with college student grades. Also, social networking sites create opportunities for students to procrastinate when trying to complete their homework. Two-thirds of the students reported that they use social networking in class, for studying, and doing homework. This multitasking may lead to increased distraction for students. A survey conducted by Wang et al. (2011) indicates that 57% of 102 students stated that the use of social networking sites decreases their productivity. Furthermore, students might disclose homework questions and interchange course materials, both of which are considered to be potential academic misconduct (Dyer & Columbia, 2010).

In brief, college students use social networking sites for a variety of purposes in order to fulfill their daily needs. The access to online networks using smartphones has become increasingly popular among college students, although there are many problems associated with this trend, such as trust, selection, and filtering issues. Students are influenced, of course, by social networking sites in both positive and negative ways. This study describes all these themes in more detail.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a questionnaire to explore the influence of social networking sites on college students. Formally, the research aims to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What is the main purpose of using online social networking while at college/university?
2. Does the use of social networking using smartphones cause information overload in such a way that it becomes nearly impossible to process it?
3. Which social networking is considered more trustworthy by college students? Why?
4. How do students filter the information they find on social networking sites?
5. What is the impact (both negative and positive) of social networking via smartphones while at college/university?

To answer the above questions and to fulfill the research objectives, a web-based survey was employed for college students in different universities and higher education institutes in Oman. The survey was distributed by an email message using the ‘snowballing’ method. The sample questioned in the survey consisted of 179 students (60 male and 119 female). The respondents were a combination of both junior and senior students from different majors. There were 14 questions included in the survey that focused on the main research questions as well as other aspects concerning the use of social networking sites by college students. For example, “How much time per day do you spend social networking on your smartphone?” and “With whom do you communicate the most when using social networking on your smartphone?”

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After collecting the data through the online survey, it was analysed to investigate the trends of the college students with regard to the use of social media on their smartphones while they are at college. Table 1 shows general information and demographics of the participants.

Table 1: Respondents Demographic Data

Category	%
Gender	
Male	35
Female	65
Age	
18-25	99
26-35	1
Computer and Internet Skills	
Novice	2
Low	5
Medium	56
High	33
Expert	5

It was our aim to have an equal number of male and female respondents; however, the age should indicate the target audience which is ‘college students.’ Many of the surveyed students (94%) rated themselves as ‘medium’ to ‘expert’ in their computer and internet skills. This was expected because students nowadays are good at using technology.

Regarding student involvement in the social networks, it was found that 70% of the respondents were members of an online social network related to their colleges or universities. Only 20% of respondents were not interested in participating in such groups, whereas 10% of them replied that they did not know whether or not their colleges or universities had online network accounts.

According to Liccardi et al. (2007), to explore the impact of social networks on the learning experience of students, there is a need to know how the university groups students on social networking sites and how students go about grouping themselves. The study shows that some universities tend to group their students together in order to improve their educational performance. Furthermore, it proves the fact that online groups allow students to become members of collaborative online networks and study groups.

When asked about whether they were using social networking via their smartphones, the majority of students (96%) replied that they were using their smartphones to access the social networking sites, thereby just 4% did not, and thus demonstrating that the majority of students tend to access the internet from their own smartphones, making it much easier for them to use social networking sites. The 4% of students who answered “No” to the question maybe do not have smartphones or they may have felt uncomfortable accessing these sites from their smartphones.

Regarding the main purpose of using social networking sites, it was apparent that 23% of students used these sites for research, 22% indicated that their main purpose was for entertainment, and 15% indicated they were

using social networking for news and media. An equal number of people (12%) indicated that they used social networking sites to chat and communicate with their families and friends. However, none of the students used the sites for financial purposes. This could indicate that when it comes to financial transactions, they do not trust these sites. What is surprising is that this study shows that the majority of students use social networking sites for research purposes, but relevant literature discussed in the literature review concluded that most students use them for entertainment purposes.

When students were asked about the amount of time per day they spent on social networking sites using their smartphones, the results were 25% spent less than 1 hour per day, 39% spent 1-3 hours, 20% spent 3-5 hours, and 16% spent longer than 5 hours, which indicates that 75% of the students surveyed spent quite a considerable amount of time on social networking sites.

When asked which social networks they trusted the most, Facebook was the most trustworthy site in the opinion of college students (35%), which may be due to a large percentage of the population being on Facebook. In contrast, the percentage of students who trust Twitter was 20%. Surprisingly, although the increase in the number of college students who use social networking sites appears to be unstoppable, there are still 28% who do not trust any of these sites.

The survey also shows that the majority of students (71%) use social networks to communicate with their friends more than with anyone else. This result might be explained by the fact that students spend a long time on these sites searching for new friends so that they can enlarge their online networks. Conversely, they may feel more comfortable spending a long time talking with their friends through social networking sites rather than talking with their professors or work colleagues. This is, of course, in addition to the time spent on looking for course material and illustrations.

When asked whether they thought that using social networking sites on Smartphones could cause information overload in a way that makes it nearly impossible to process, it was found that 39% of students agreed, and only 15% of them disagreed. On the other hand, 47% of students were not sure whether or not they had faced information overload while using their smartphones to interact with social networking sites. The high percentage of “not sure” responses might be because these students did not realize as yet the consequences of spending huge amounts of time on social networking sites. As mentioned in the literature, receiving too much information all at once may cause information overload. Since students are carrying their smartphones wherever they go, the probability of facing information overload problems is likely.

The fourth question in this research was, “How do students filter the information they find on social networking sites?” The survey shows that 57% of the students surveyed admitted that they selected the first choice in their search list, whereas 42% said that they used well-known and authenticated sites to avoid unreliable sources of information.

When asked about the positive impact of social networking sites, the students surveyed highlighted the following issues:

- It enables easy access to a vast quantity of materials related to the curriculum (85%).
- It makes students more sociable (88%).
- It improves the academic experience in general (73%).
- It is useful for clarification of homework assignments (92%).
- It is useful to keep in touch with professors (72%).
- It is useful for sharing video tutorials (83%).
- It is useful for finding information and sharing feedback with other students (92%).

On the other hand, when asked about the negative impact of social networking sites, the students surveyed highlighted the following issues:

- It distracts users' attention (69%).
- It presents privacy issues for individuals (69%).
- It can be very time-consuming, and such time could be better utilized (85%).
- Sometimes students neglect their responsibility for studying because of social networking (81%).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the influence on college students of using smartphones to access social networking sites. One of the more significant findings that emerged from this study was that the majority of students are members of some sort of social networking site. Most of them are using social networks for research, entertainment, and obtaining other explanatory materials related to their courses. However, when asked with whom they communicate the most when using social networking sites, 71% said that it was with friends. This might be due to the fact that social networking sites are known for being useful communication tools, but students also mentioned that they occasionally used them to communicate with other students and faculty members as well as subject-matter experts.

Many of the students surveyed believed that using social networking can cause information overload and become disruptive rather than useful. They did not appear to have any clear mechanisms for filtering data, except by relying on search engines and going on trusted websites. Finally, the respondents endorsed a list of positive impacts of social networks, together with a smaller list of negative impacts.

Due to time constraints, the outcome of this research had some limitations that could constitute a future research project. Firstly, it was carried out in only one country (Oman) using a relatively small sample size. Hence, the researchers believe it would be a good idea to conduct the study on a larger scale i.e. including other countries, and explore the difference between them regarding this phenomenon. Secondly, the process of filtering the information received from social networking was not the main focus of this study. It would be very beneficial if another study focuses on this issue and finds a solution for it that is practical to implement.

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