The Social Networking Sites (SNS) Facebook and OpenStudy as Student Learning Forum

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Abstract— Even though the popularity of Social Networking Sites has proliferated over the years, however, its educational affiliation has gone largely unexplored. Therefore, this paper primarily examined how information was communicated on the Social Networking Sites (SNS), Facebook and OpenStudy, as part of Liverpool John Moores University Summer Semester 2012 Mass Communication students' learning experience. It studied the effect of students' educational usage of Social Networking Sites, the way in which students' learning resources were shared and exchanged online in a Facebook closed group named "LJMU Mass Comm Union'12". The appeal and motivational strategies adopted by Social Networking Sites through elements of edutainment which 'repackaged' online learning as a fun and leisure activity was also considered.

Keywords- Social Networking Sites; SNS; University students; Communication Strategies; Edutainment; Educational usage of SNS; Facebook; OpenStudy

I. INTRODUCTION

As a rising trend, Social Networking Sites (SNS) have been studied in various ways inclusive of its usage and impact on users by academics [1][2]. While Social Networking Sites' usage is widespread, given the functionalities offered by SNS through its multi features, not restricting to only social networking, there is vast potential yet to be tapped. One of which, is SNS's ability to complement formal learning [3]. It is recognised that the usage of Social Networking Sites like Facebook, hosted exclusively at http://www.facebook.com, and OpenStudy, hosted exclusively at http://www.openstudy.com, have also been utilised in the field of education. However, this convergence between the usage of Social Networking Site and its educational affiliation had gone largely unexplored [4][5][6].

II. PURPOSE

The study primarily examined how information was communicated on the Social Networking Sites (SNS), Facebook and OpenStudy, as part of Liverpool John Moores University Summer Semester 2012 Mass Communications students' learning experience. It also studied the effect of students' educational usage of SNS, the way in which students' learning resources were shared and exchanged online and also considered the appeal and motivational strategies adopted by SNS through elements of edutainment which 'repackaged' online learning as a fun and leisure activity.

III. METHODOLOGY

In order to study the effect of how SNS were utilised in an educational way and how students shared and exchanged their academic materials on the platform, textual analysis was conducted on the wall posts in the Facebook closed group "LJMU Mass Comm Union'12". The closed group was used by 106 students with varying degree of participation.

To further study, nine students with diverse internet consumption rate were identified from the Facebook closed group and introduced to another educational SNS, OpenStudy. They were given a period of time to fully explore and use the SNS before semi-structured interviews were conducted individually.

IV. EDUCATIONAL USAGE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNS)

As one of the best known Social Networking Sites, Facebook has more than 500 million users in terms of worldwide internet traffic, and has emerged as the most widely used form of social networking. Beside its global popularity, Facebook was also the most popular Social Networking Site amongst youth, aged 16 to 23, with its membership still predominantly composed of college students [7]. Therefore, Facebook came as a natural choice as a SNS for understudy since the study focused on university students' usage of SNS for educational purpose. The advantages of Social Networking Sites' educational usage could be attributed to the familiarity of environment by students. It could enhance the learning experience as there could be mass sharing on an already familiar platform to students, and simultaneously broke down the 'divide' between teachers and students. Thus, promoted beneficial educational interactions online.

The usefulness of educational usage of Social Networking Site was not only restricted to its advantage as

a familiar platform to students, however, it could be also attributed to the fact that it was a computer mediated environment. Bosch [7] had raised an example in which a lecturer felt that students were more comfortable in asking questions through Facebook, as there was a degree of anonymity due to absence of face-to-face interaction. Vice versus, students had also found lecturers to be more approachable as the computer mediated environment broke down the power hierarchy between teachers and students [7: 195]. Moreover, the efficiency brought about by technology was also part of the experience. There had been instances whereby students used Facebook as a media to specifically contact their classmates and teachers about assignments, and some students stated that they preferred the online interactions as it provided more immediate response [7: 190]. He cited an example, in which one female lecturer in the University of Cape Town, found it easier and quicker to communicate something important to her students whom she saw daily on Facebook, rather than to look for them in classroom setting [7: 194]. In addition, he also noted that there were improved interactions in the online environment as students showed lesser reservations on the materials they posted online. Being part of the same academic community had also aid the process of breaking down barriers between teachers and students [7: 191], as well as being more keen in asking questions since there was perceived credibility in answers. Thus, it was of importance to examine the communication strategies adopted by university students on Facebook for educational purpose, as it highlights the way in which the outcome of students' learning experience was impacted.

V. FACEBOOK WALL: LJMU MASS COMM UNION'12

The Facebook closed group "LJMU Mass Comm Union'12" comprised 106 members, of which there was a maximum of 101 active members as indicated by the number of views on every individual posts in the group. Members of this closed group were matriculated into the Summer Semester programme, studying for a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communications offered by Liverpool John Moores University for the year of 2012. They had different ethnicities and nationalities. Membership to the group was strictly by invitation by the founders of the group. The founders of the group were student leaders of the degree programme.

Thus, looking at the effect of students' educational usage of Social Networking Sites, the way in which students' learning resource was shared and exchanged online, textual analysis was conducted on the group's postings.

Textual analysis was especially apt in this diverse background setting as through the study of semiotics in the selected posts such as emoticons and alternative texts like internet lingo used, as well as the evidence a text provided of social practices are equally important [8]. The findings were thus enhanced as it reduced the emotions and meanings lost in translation, in the computer mediated setting.

However, due to the large amount of wall posts and activities in the closed group since its inception in February 2012, it was neither practical nor necessary to analyse every single post and activity as not all posts were relevant to which how information was exchanged for academic purpose.

There were also exchanges of practical information that happened in the students' locality, such as information on the upcoming events and activities in the Liverpool city centre. This could be attributed to the students' background, in which all of the 106 students had arrived in Liverpool only for the summer of 2012, effectively from May 2012. Therefore, they were perceived to have little or less social updates on the happenings in their locality. The group had thus provided a good platform for them to exchange such practical information on their physical environment which was lacking in familiarity to them. There was a sense of community and identity in the group which facilitated the communications and dialogues amongst the students, knowing that they shared a common background as overseas students.

It was also noticed that there were evident exchanges of academic information, including updates on assignment deadlines and relevant materials. There were frequent postings by the founders of the group with regards to academic information as the founders were the student leaders of the course. Thus, the media acted as an avenue for them to relay information from the higher authorities to all the students. The closed group was the choice of communication for the students due to the efficiency provided by Facebook as a media. Students were seen replying to the leaders' original posts with their queries, and were satisfied with the possibility of efficient responses. In several posts, students were seen to have replied "thank you for your quick reply" to the leaders' responses.

Also noticed from the postings on the exchanges of academic information, was the improved communications due to perceived lack of sense of authority through the immediate removal of face-to-face interaction [9]. As a result, there was increased communications in an informal tone which positively led to higher willingness from students to share information and be engaged in the group's discussions. In one of the postings, one student had posted a question to the leaders on the format of assignment submission, which was noted that she was "too scared" to ask her lecturers in classroom setting.

However, it was also observed that the academic discussions in the group were mainly logistical, with lack of depth in academic content, due to fear of leak of

individual's assignment content. Majority of the postings were on the format of assignment submissions, information on deadlines, and sharing of resources, like the internet link to certain films which were shown in class.

Also due to the perceived lack of sense of authority as compared to traditional classroom settings, while there was higher engagement of students in the group, however, it also was observed that there was a lack of responsibility in some of the students' postings, and displayed acts of supplication and disengagement. It was noted that few students had brought their suppressed emotions from classrooms into the group by posting irresponsible comments that was aimed at discrediting their lecturers. Although these ranting had taken place, most of the students had practised self-responsibility and refrained from carrying the negative conversations further, or in several occasions it was observed that some students even attempted to soothe the poster's negative emotions by replying "chill". Overall, this behaviour of supplication and disengagement had not shown significant negative impact on the students' learning experience.

There was also bantering taking place in the group which rendered the importance of textual analysis which understood the ways in which members of a chosen culture communicated and fitted into a certain community [10]. It was noticed that there were usage of particular words and phrases that must draw inference from student's cultural background in order for one to understand the postings.

One of the students had used the numbers "38" to describe another student as annoying. Without the cultural application, "38" might not make any sense in the interpretation. However, drawing back to the student's Chinese roots, "38" could be interpreted as annoying due to the translation of a Chinese phrase that had the same pronunciation as the numbers "38" in mandarin. It was especially so, important to apply the cultural context while analysing the students' posts, as without the application, there might be meanings lost in translation or being overlooked, thus losing much of the flavour of the study.

VI. INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO OPENSTUDY

With the benefits and vast potential of SNS usage recognised, OpenStudy.com launched in March 2011 [11], was a groundbreaker in SNS for education. The American website was a social learning network that allowed users to post and answer questions in their selected academic forum; offering a similar experience to that of Facebook. Users could also log in using their Facebook accounts, and simultaneously take part in the discussions both through the website hosted at OpenStudy.com, or the OpenStudy application on Facebook.

OpenStudy incorporated edutainment through implementation of 'SmartScore', which encouraged students' participation by giving points for every answer posted. OpenStudy was marketed as "an educational collaboration utility that connects you with the people around you" [11] for students above 13 years old who were enrolled in high school or college as stated in its clause for eligibility.

With its interactive features, it was aimed at young adults who were enrolled high school and college students. As OpenStudy was an American website, the word "college" was used. However, it essentially had the same meaning as "university" in the United Kingdom.

Thus taking these factors into consideration, nine students with diverse internet consumption rate were selected from the Facebook closed group and were introduced to the SNS, OpenStudy. They were given a period of time to explore and participate in the activities in OpenStudy. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to consider the appeal and motivational strategies adopted by Social Networking Sites through elements of edutainment which 'repackaged' online learning as a fun and leisure activity.

VII. EDUCATIONAL USAGE OF FACEBOOK & OPENSTUDY

Recognising youth's behaviour and character that prefers a community instead of being alone [12], OpenStudy capitalised heavily on its social networking feature, which could be again seen from its tagline, "OpenStudy: Study Together". It was also revealed in the semi-structured interview that the virtual companionship online motivated users to be more active in engaging in academic discussions

Another motivation factor which encouraged the users to continue exploring OpenStudy's website by going into the features and getting engaged in discussions was the vibrant colour combination and neat user interface. The visuals of the website were appealing due to the ease of navigation provided by the neat user interface and vibrant colours used. The different shades of green with contrasting shades of orange, and the choice of a cartoonised owl as logo, was a key attribution for the users' involvement on OpenStudy as part of the study.

Apart from targeting high school and college students, OpenStudy's users were not only limited to American education institutions as the SNS aimed to be a global website. This could be seen through its description found on the front page, "ask questions, give help, and connect with over 100,000 students from 170 countries and 1,600 schools". The site had also published positive reviews by users coming from different countries, inclusive of America and Ghana.

It was found that the efficiency of communications facilitated by Social Networking Site was very important in drawing young adult users to continue using SNS for academic purpose. Both Facebook and OpenStudy had recognised the appeal of efficient communications to young adults as both SNS provided instant messaging services and live uploading of materials. Students in the study had acknowledged the efficiency of communications made possible by Social Networking Sites, Facebook and OpenStudy.

Apart from marketing itself as an educational Social Networking Site, OpenStudy had also capitalised on its elements of edutainment as a pull factor. Right at the front page of the website, it was written in bold its appeal to users to "become a hero: help students when they need it most and achieve legendary status among learners worldwide". The introduction of SmartScore acted as a reward system to motivate and encourage users to engage in the site's activities and discussions [13]. Thus, the usage of OpenStudy was not only rewarding in terms of academic gains, but also, the motivation to study which was quintessential to all students. Studentss found that the edutainment factors indeed motivates them to participate and in fact encouraged them to go onto the website frequently to keep with the progress of their SmartScore.

Therefore, the usage of SmartScore system as an element of edutainment had shown to have a positive impact on the users' learning experience as it motivated them to engage in new or existing discussions on the website itself, and to study not only in their interest topics, but also on a wider scope of subjects and topics. Therefore at the same time, due to increased usage of OpenStudy, students tend to gain extra information posted by other users as well instead of only limiting to their interested content.

Moreover, to make OpenStudy more attractive to high school and college students, the website's interaction with Facebook was notable. With Facebook being the most popular Social Networking Site predominantly composed of college students aged 16 to 23 [7], OpenStudy had ventured into an apt partnership with Facebook to provide more convenience for OpenStudy in terms of log-in process and user interface.

Firstly, OpenStudy users could choose to skip the traditional three steps registration process by choosing to log in with their existing Facebook account. Therefore, with just one click, existing Facebook users could easily maintain a simultaneous account at OpenStudy.

Then, was the interchangeable user interface on Facebook that provided ease and convenience of engaging in OpenStudy discussions. Users could either choose to post on OpenStudy's website, if not, they had the option to make use of the OpenStudy application in Facebook to take part in the discussions. The convenience was also noted as a pull factor to continue using Social Networking Sites, OpenStudy and Facebook, for educational purpose.

The study also revealed that students favoured the segmentation of different fields of study in OpenStudy. Being in a subject or field-specified forum made students had more trust in the answers gotten on OpenStudy as they knew that the users were from the same field of study having same expertise, therefore had higher perceived credibility in the answers gotten. Being in the same forum as other users from the same field of study had also facilitated communications due to the sense of identity through common background and ultimately had a positive impact on the user's learning experience.

While the educational usage of Social Networking Sites like OpenStudy and Facebook could have positive impact on students' learning experience, however, it was also found that such informal learning environment was still unable to replace traditional classroom learning environment. It could at best, only be complementary to formal learning. In the study, one student found edutainment Social Networking Sites to be a good leisure activity, however with little relevance to its educational value, while others revealed that it was only a good complement to school.

VIII. CONCLUSION: SNS ONLY COMPLEMENTARY TO FORMAL LEARNING

In conclusion, the study explored communication strategies adopted by LJMU Summer Semester 2012 Mass Communication students as part of their learning experience, which found that there were improved communications in the online environment where they interact with a familiar media and familiar community. It was also found that to a large extent, the motivational strategies consisting of interactive and 'fun' features adopted by Social Networking Sites played a part in achieving better student learning experience as it motivated students to participate actively. It was evident that students in the study had found educational usage of Social Networking Sites to have positive impacts on their learning experience.

However, while it was useful, it could only be complementary to formal learning, and could not replace traditional classroom settings.

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