



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNS) ON STUDENTS' SOCIAL INTERACTION

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Abstract:

This study explored the impact of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) on students' social interaction at Northeast Normal University in China. The study was guided by three research questions; what are the levels of SNS time use and social connectedness in terms of gender?, what are the differences of university students SNS time use and social connectedness and what is the relationship between SNS time use and social connectedness. It involved a total sample of 79 students from various faculties and majors who were randomly selected. Data was collected by using a questionnaire which had two scales; SNSs time use scale and social connectedness scale. Findings revealed that there are significant differences on number of years one has engaged himself with SNSs, number of friends that one has and amount of hours that one spends using SNSs with SNSs time use scale. There is also significant difference on number of SNSs applications that one has with social connectedness. The study also revealed a positive correlation between SNSs time use and social connectedness. No significant differences were found among gender, age and faculty with social connectedness. It was recommended that further research should be conducted on the same using more variables and a wider dimension.

Keywords: social networking sites, social connectedness

1. Background to the problem

The worldwide advancement of technology in different spheres of life such as communication has led to transformations of different societies into the modernized

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societies. The global systems of networked computers, servers and routers (known as the internet) have transformed many aspects of the modern societies and social interaction (Ellison and Boyd, 2013). This has been enabled by the presence and rapid advancement of the online internet services whose convenience is technology-mediated unlike other social communities which require face to face interaction (Alassiri et al 2014). Hence interpersonal interaction and communication have been replaced by online communication (Kumar and Verma, 2015).

Online communication has been enhanced mostly by social media. Social media allows us to engage with other people and other information in the world and gives us a sense of belonging (Alloway and Alloway, 2012). Scholars have differentiated various types of social media basing on their distinctive characteristics. These include blogs, cooperative projects (such as Wikipedia), content communities (such as YouTube), virtual social world (such as second life) and social networking sites (such as face book and MySpace) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Of all social media platforms, social networking sites appear to be among the most widely adopted (Mahan et al, 2015). SNSs are rapid communication media based on human needs and new information technology such as internet, 3D technologies and web 2.0 (Hou, 2013). Social networking sites have enhanced communication among individuals and groups of people who may share a common interest or may not have something of the same interest but will have a purpose for sharing certain information. Alassiri (2014) observes that social networking sites users consistently log online to communicate and interact with other users. This is also the case with students at the Northeast Normal University.

1.1 History of SNSs

Early social networking sites in the world began with few uses such as e-mailing and news sharing. According to Kumar and Verma (2015), these were established in order that people should communicate about specific topics hence they were seen as belonging to very few knowledgeable people like computer programmers. Therefore, they were not very popular with the mainstream population (Kumar and Verma, 2015). As days went by, SNSs kept to be developed creating more advanced features which have attracted most people to use them. Currently, various social networking sites have sprung up catering for different languages and countries (Neelamalar and Chitra, 2015). SNSs have occupied a central role in the way people communicate and connect with each other and have been used for various reasons such as communication, entertainment, learning, social and emotional (Olufadi, 2016). The rapid growth of online networking sites has transformed interpersonal relationships with a shift to the

digital world (Buffard and Campbell, 2008) which requires individuals to manage multiple digital technologies simultaneously between tasks (Alloway and Alloway, 2012). Therefore, SNSs can change people's life styles and user habits. The increasing popularity of web-based social networking services is a striking feature of modern human society especially among adolescents (Kumari and Verma, 2015).

Research has pointed out that adolescents and young adults are the heaviest users of computers and the internet. Therefore, SNSs has become the latest online communication tool that allows these users to create a public or private profile to interact with people in their networks (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). It has been observed that students are increasingly utilizing these social networks for friends, newsfeeds, personal updates, events and messages (Tham and Ahmed, 2011). Through SNSs people can keep in touch with current friends, old friends or create new friendship with similar interests or groups (Neelamar and Chitra, 2009). Members of SNSs can even form groups and share their ideas and opinions as well as sharing files, videos, news, audios, status and events. The linkage between individuals on SNSs has opened up channels of communication with people one may not have opportunity to meet face to face (Tham and Ahmed, 2011). Despite the fact that SNSs have been advantageous in terms of facilitating communication among people and previous studies on SNSs revealing that SNSs impacts various aspects of life cognitively, academically and socially, little is known of the relationship between SNS and its effects on students' social interaction and their social connectedness. It was the intention of this study therefore to investigate on how SNSs have an effect on students' social interaction in a Chinese context specifically at Northeast Normal University.

1.2 Social networking sites (SNSs)

Social networking sites are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile with a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Several studies have been done on SNSs in different dimensions and contexts leading to different results. It has been discovered that the use of SNSs affects people's lives socially, culturally, politically, psychologically, academically and economically. For example; Tham and Ahmed (2011) did a survey on college students on the usage and implications of SNSs. They found out that SNSs have implications on gender as female college students were found to spend more time on SNSs than did their male counterparts. Moreover, age and gender as well as SNSs usage rate and students networking with friends, family members and professionals. A study by Oh et al (2013) revealed a positive relationship

between supportive interaction and positive effects after SNSs interaction. However, the amount of supportive interaction was not associated with negative effects. Neelamalar and Chitra (2015) did a study to identify and assess issues regarding youth behaviour and networking usage and how these impacted social interactions as well as social behaviour. The study found out that most youth in India are members of one or more SNSs and they use them for various reasons such as maintaining existing contacts, establish personality, and interact with strangers, sharing knowledge, opinions and ideas. Kumar and Verma (2015) investigated on the impact of SNSs on social interaction of college students. They found out that SNSs and its impacts on social relationships was strongly significant ($r=0.85$) and there was no significant relationship between SNS and gender. However, Akram et al (2015) on their study about the impact of SNSs on youth in India revealed that majority of young people have access to SNSs and they spend most of their significant time on them. Yet, the study discovered that usage of SNS negatively influence social norms and values and may sometimes generate health problems such as backache, head ache and laziness.

Bicen (2014) did a survey to examine university students' reasons of using SNS in their daily lives. It was found out that students use SNSs mostly for instant communication with their friends and not for educational purposes, finding new friends and to be members of groups or following famous people. Ellison and Boyd (2013) did an investigation on sociality through SNS. The study outlined some ways in which SNS have changed since its inception and how they have drawn attention in technical and social changes. The study revealed that SNSs have opened up new venues and possibilities for analysing human interaction. A study by Khan (2012) explored the impact of social networking websites on students. The study puts emphasis on factors that have impacts on students such as age, gender, education, social influence and academic performance. The study concluded that students whose ages range from 15-25 years mostly use SNS for entertainment and some use them due to social influence.

Another study was conducted in 2007 by Higher Educational Research and Institute on college freshmen and online social networking sites. The study found out that 94% of first year students spend time on online social networking sites per week. Most of them use SNS as an alternative way to socialize with their peers. Similarly, a study by Asilo et al. (2010) was done to assess the influence of SNSs to the interpersonal relationships of students. It was found out that using SNSs helped students to develop strong interpersonal relationship with family, friends, teachers and others. Most of them use these sites for only one to two hours in a day. The current study however sought to find out if there is a relationship between SNS usage and how it impacts students' social interaction Northeast Normal University in China.

1.3 Social connectedness (SC)

Coleman and Rowo (2007), Montgomery et al. (2004) argue that SNS can facilitate a sense of connectedness community and belonging. It also plays a significant role in the formation of collective identity, creating the sense of belonging to a broader community (Harris, 2004). Similar findings were found by Hansen et al (2010) who explored the effects of SNSs on students' perceptions of social connectedness, adjustment, academic engagement and institutional commitment. It was found out that students' use of SNS has a strong positive effect of their feelings of social connectedness. Students prefer to use SNS to establish connections with friends and family rather than for academic purposes. Moreover, Allen et al. (2014) contend that social media plays a great role in fostering social connectedness although young people may experience both positive and negative psychological outcomes. They further argue that online tools apart from creating a paradox for social connectedness, they also elevate the ease on creating online groups and communities. Nevertheless, although SNS have been used differently in terms of gender, they still provide an important forum for building social connections across groups (Bourgeois et al, 2014). On the other hand, Boogart (2006) as cited by Ryan (2015) examined the level of connectedness of college students on various social networks and found out that students use SNS to stay connected with friends they have made in higher school as well as connect with college peers. He also found out that those students who reported high use of SNS such as face book felt more connected than those who reported low use of face book.

Basing on the above literatures, it can be observed that SNSs are very important in enhancing peoples' communication and their social interaction. Importantly, SNSs help people to be connected and bring a sense of belongingness to the community, groups of people, family and peers. Moreover, people feel more connected when they use SNS compared to those who spend less time in SNS. Using a different dimension, context and sample, this study sought to examine the relationship between SNS time use and social connectedness and how these affect students' social interaction.

2. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design. The context of the study was Northeast Normal University in Changchun city, Jilin province. The targeted sample was 100 university students who were randomly selected using simple random sampling techniques. Due to minimal return rate, the studied sample involved seventy nine students who were randomly selected from various faculties and of different majors. Participants were provided with the consent form prior to the filling of

questionnaires which stated all issues of confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. The following table represents demographic information of the participants.

Table I: Participants' demographic information

Gender		Faculty		
Male	29	Education	47	
Female	50	Social Science	11	
Age		Life Science	16	
lower than 20	2	Business	5	
between 21-25	22	Number of SNS		
between 26-30	28	less than 3 SNS	27	
between 31-35	16	Use 3-5 SNS	51	
more than 36	11	more than 5 SNS	1	
Mostly Used SNS Apps				
Wechat : 61	Facebook : 60	WhatsApp : 39	QQ : 12	Line : 9

Table 1 above presents respondents' demographic information. As the table indicates, there were more female than male respondents. Most respondents aged from 22 years and above, few respondents were lower than 20 years. It is also indicated that most respondents have 3-5 SNS (51), less than 3 SNS (27) and only 1 respondent had more than 5 SNS. As shown on the table, Wechat is the mostly used SNSs followed by Facebook, Whatsapp, Qq and Line. Furthermore, most respondents came from the Faculty of Education, followed by Life Sciences, Social Sciences and Business Management.

The study employed questionnaire as a tool for data collection. The questionnaire was adopted from Olufadi (2016) which was about the SNSs time scale use and Lee and Robins (1995) which was about social connectedness scale. The questionnaire had two sections. Section one had twenty five statements which required participants to rate their use of SNS with the amount of time applied to it. The second

section had twenty items which included positive and negative statements. Ten items dealt with how a student is connected and the other ten items dealt with how he or she is affiliated.

Data analysis was done with the aid of SPSS package where descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations and correlations were used. Statistical tests such as independent sample T-test, one way ANOVA and POST HOC were used to test and analyse data.

3. Findings

This section presents findings from the current study. These will be presented according to the research questions that were intended for the study.

3.1 Levels of SNSs time use and social connectedness in terms of gender

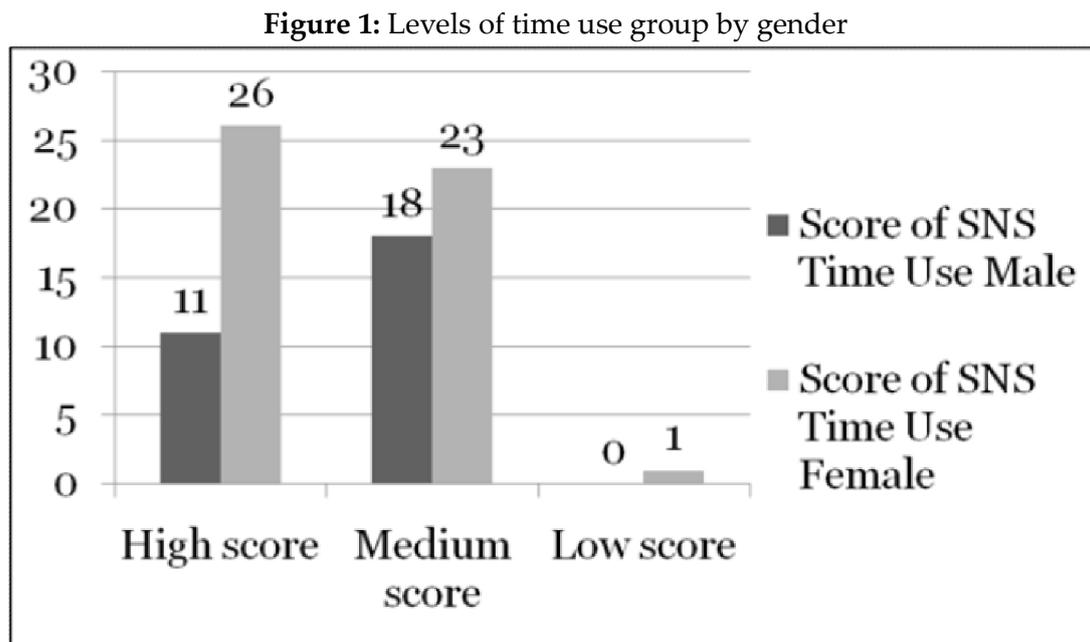


Figure 1 indicates levels of time use in terms of gender where females scored more in both high score and medium scores compared to males

Figure 2: Level of social connectedness group by gender

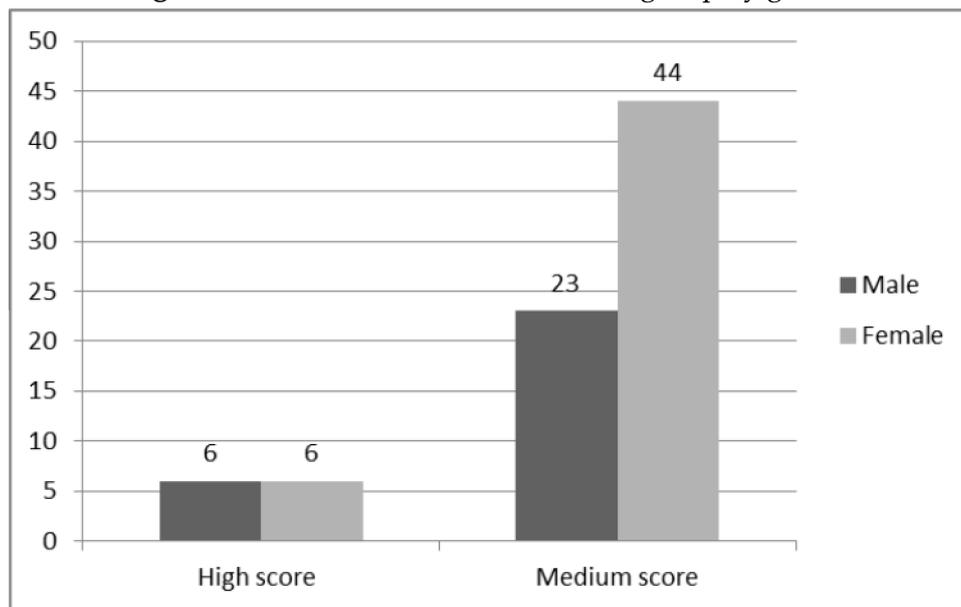


Figure 2 indicates that both males and females have scored equally on high scores and females have scored higher than males in medium scores

3.2 Differences of University students' SNSs time use and social connectedness

Table 2: Differences on number of years start using SNSs and SNS time use scale

Years of using SNSs	N	Mean of social connectedness	S.D
Less than 1 year	3	53.33	7.57
Between 1-2 years	7	75.00	21.54
Between 3-4 years	13	70.92	17.40
More than 5 years	56	83.77	14.14
		F(3,75)= 5.944, p=0.001*	

Table 3 indicates that there are differences in number of years start using SNS and time use scale ($p > 0.001$). Moreover, it is also found out that there is significant difference among periods of hours that one spends per day on SNSs and SNSs time use scale $F(5, 72)$, $p < 0.001$). There is also significant difference on numbers of friends one has on SNSs applications and SNSs time use scale $F(4, 74)$, $p = 0.006$). There is also significant difference between SNSs applications and social connectedness $F(2, 72)$, $p < 0.001$). There is significant difference between different types of SNSs applications and social connectedness. There is significant difference in the area of social connectedness ($t = 2.48$, $p = .015$). However, there is no significance difference in the way students feel affiliated ($t = 1.693$, $p = .095$).

3.3 Relationship between SNSs time use and social connectedness

According to Pearson's correlation (two-tailed test), it was revealed that there is positive correlation between SNSs time use and social connectedness ($r=0.259$, $p=0.021$). The overall SNS time use mean was 79.72 (S.D=16.68) and the overall social connectedness mean score was 60.66 (S.D=6.48).

4. Discussion

This study aimed at investigating the impact that SNSs have on students' social interaction. The findings revealed that females have higher levels of SNSs time use and social connectedness compared to their counterparts. On the other hand, it was found out that there is significant difference on number of years that a student has used SNSs, number of friends that one has on SNSs applications and amount of time (in terms of hours) that one spend per day on SNSs with SNSs time use scale. Therefore H_0 s were rejected which implied that there is no significant difference on number of years that one has started using SNS, no significant difference on number of friends that one has and SNSs time use scale, and that there is also no significant difference on period of hours one spend per day on SNSs and SNS time use scale. The findings imply that the higher the numbers of years, friend and hours the higher the score of SNS time use scale. Moreover, it was found out that there was significant difference on number of SNSs applications one has with social connectedness. This may be possible due to the fact that social climate of information sharing may be promoted by less number of SNSs applications one has hence resulting into more social benefits in connectedness (Alloway and Alloway, 2012) than when one engages in more SNSs applications. Therefore, the hypothesis that there is no significant difference on number of SNSs applications and social connectedness was rejected. However, it was fascinating to find out that there was significant difference on the use of number of SNSs application in the area of connectedness while there was no significant difference in the area of affiliation. This concurs with what Alassiri et al. (2014) suggested that, SNSs users can feel that they are affiliated with others but somehow the feeling of connectedness might be different from face to face interaction. This is due to the fact that the users may or may not reflect their real world identity or portray honest representation of their personality which in one way or another can have an influence on their connectedness.

The findings also revealed that there was a significant positive correlation between SNSs time use and social connectedness, implying that as time in using SNSs increase, the feeling of social connectedness also increase. This study contradicts with Alloway (2012) whose study dealt with individual SNSs applications. However, the study revealed no significant difference among gender, age and faculty with social

connectedness. This may have been affected by the fact that most respondents were staying on campus therefore they have an ample time of interacting face to face. Moreover it implies that SNSs is equally used by both male and females. Therefore the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between gender and SNS use as well as social connectedness was accepted.

5. Limitation and recommendations

The current study was based on a random sampling technique and involved a small sample population. Additionally, the study was conducted in a very small context. Therefore it is difficult to generalize the results to a larger population. Moreover, there was time constraint as the study was conducted for a short period, thus data collection and analysis were done hurriedly which in one way or another might have affected the pace of the study.

Further studies can be done including other variables and in a wider dimension relating SNSs use and how it affects other peoples' lives apart from students.

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