

## Research Article

### The Effectiveness of Using Social Network Sites as Learning Tool for Students

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**Abstract:** In the current technological environment with huge innovation taking place, a new comprehensive learning method is essential for students to support the rapid development phase and improvise the existing method. Social Network Sites (SNSs). Primarily Facebook, is widely known for its socializing aspects. However, its ability as a learning tool in an innovative and modernized approach is not widely known. This study reviews the possibilities of SNSs taking up the role of an educational tool and concurrently evaluates this approach to promote students' citizenship via 3 different aspects, namely improving collaborative environment among students', enhanced learning approach and active peer engagement and effective socializing among students'. On the other hand, the disadvantage that is packaged with this method had also been discussed. However, by critically reviewing the literature, the advantages of SNSs based learning prevail its disadvantages with carefully implementing a set of solutions as proposed in this study. Ultimately, with the right approach, SNSs will be a solid educational tool when integrated into the academic world.

**Keywords:** Educational technology, social learning, social media, social network sites

## INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, Social Networking Sites (SNSs) been attributed as the most important genres within social software (Selwyn, 2009). The most popular definition for SNS was by Boyd and Ellison (2008), who define it as "web-based services that allow individuals to:

- Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system
- Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection
- View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p.211)

As an example, Facebook is a type of SNS that can be considered a widely famous website for online social networking among students in universities (Kabilan *et al.*, 2010). As reported by Griffith and Liyanage (2008), Facebook was founded on February 4, 2004 as an online communication tool exclusively for Harvard University students. Thereafter, the founders expanded its operation to other institutions, including colleges, universities and other relative organizations (Yadav, 2006). Facebook went public on September 2006.

However, there are always opinions on whether Facebook and other SNSs are useful and if it should be used as an educational tool for students. Selwyn (2009)

reported that some educators appreciate the ability of SNSs to re-engage students with their studies. However, there are worries that these applications may prevent or disrupt students from engaging in the traditional method of receiving education. On the other hand, some educators considered SNSs as an smart education system in the classroom, while others believe it to be an invasion towards students' privacy (Mendez *et al.*, 2009). According to Hosny and Fatima (2012), SNSs are popular among youths that drive the educators to apply it for enhanced learning.

Some of the benefits of using SNSs as learning tool for students are to support collaboration and communication between students, enhance learning (especially that of language), increase students' motivation and provide psychosocial benefits. However, SNSs also introduces several problems for classroom application, namely overuse, privacy issues and the lack of protection for intellectual property. In this study, a complete review will be provided to discuss both the benefits of using SNSs (Facebook as the reference) as a learning tool for students and as well as discussing the associated problems of using the SNSs.

## METHODOLOGY

The research work in this study was carried out by means of critical review. A framework of investigation

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over the existing literature on SNSs as the potential candidate for enhancing students' learning is carried out. The critical review of SNSs for integration with the academic world is performed, which covers the area of collaborative benefits via SNSs, learning enhancement and peer engagements and social skills improvement of students' and the associated disadvantages. Through the structured analyses of benefits and disadvantages, it is possible to establish a plan on proposing the steps required for successfully adopting SNSs as the modern method of teaching for students'. The study provides the body of knowledge for the overall concept of SNSs as learning tool. Additionally, the methodology caters new prospective for researchers with interest on the social impact of SNSs and its multidimensional goal in developing and supporting towards the growth of student knowledge.

**Collaborative benefit of SNSs:** Among students, collaboration and communication is important and SNSs can directly contribute to that aspect. Some of famous SNSs are Facebook and Wiki, which encourage collaboration and foster the creativity of energy to produce shared knowledge that benefits every student (Matthew *et al.*, 2012). Henderson *et al.* (2010) stated that SNSs are increasingly accepted by educators due to its ability of offering strong communication and collaboration areas for the activities in classes. One of the important features in Facebook is the virtual wall that allows users to easily share ideas and knowledge. Hence, collaborative learning environment can be established that benefits the user and as well as other students who have access to the posts. According to Hamid *et al.* (2010), Facebook develops collaborative skills because it encourages collaboration activities among students. Additionally, they also unveiled that students sharing their work in Facebook will provide the opportunity for the rest of the students to appreciate the new ideas and perhaps lead to new innovation from them as well. Hosny and Fatima (2012) agreed with Hamid *et al.* (2010), where the authors further suggested that interworking among students from various backgrounds improves the student's problem solving skills. Healthy relationships between students are also essential in any learning environment. Therefore, SNSs promote solid relationship among students via active communications, which highly unlikely would occur during offline mode (Sturgeon and Walker, 2009).

**SNSs for Learning enhancement and peer engagement:** Active usage of SNSs will evolve into a learning tool for students that may speed up the learning cycle, especially in the case of language learning. Matthew *et al.* (2012) conducted a study on 37 students, where the in-class learning tool was SNSs and

the purpose of the study was to discover the reaction towards learning via SNSs. The direct response from the students that were involved is that despite some technology hurdles, online classes lead to deeper understanding of the materials. Additionally, Hosny and Fatima (2012) revealed that learning through Facebook can help students to engage actively in the learning process, while eliminating the traditional lessons taught through presentation materials. Wang (2012) reported that Facebook usage in education introduces comprehensive learning that benefits both the students and teachers. It was also found that students are more serious toward online materials as opposed to conventional materials. Facebook used for student's learning provides a personalized experience, however students expect the websites to be more dynamic (Griffith and Liyanage, 2008). In the case of enhancing language skills, Kabilan *et al.* (2010) conducted a study on 300 undergraduate students from University Sains Malaysia (USM), as a result it was found that Facebook in fact facilitates language learning and that the online environment is actually beneficial. Online group discussions and chat sessions contribute toward the learning of new English words. Additionally, Kabilan *et al.* (2010) revealed Facebook provides various applications that support interactions between students, for example, Courses, an application that allow teachers and students to create links to university courses.

Apart from learning enhancement, SNSs are also useful in increasing students' motivation and engagement. Hoffman (2009) stated that adapting SNSs as a learning tool provides a supportive environment and contributes positively on students engagement, motivation and interaction. According to Griffith and Liyanage (2008), the motivation for students is proportional to the amount of information presented on SNSs by their teachers. Hamid *et al.* (2010) and Griffith and Liyanage (2008) theory, where the authors stated that SNSs improve students' engagement via increasing the eagerness of attending classes among students. Additionally, this method of teaching enhances students' motivation by encouraging them to focus on the finer details of the task and ultimately improve the quality of their work. The motivation of students in sharing their learning materials proportionally increase the personalization and gratification of the SNS experience (Mazer *et al.*, 2007; Hoffman, 2009). Furthermore, for smooth learning, students' interaction with their teachers and peers are important, where the usage of SNS, namely Facebook provide an excellent virtual space for increased interaction (Wang, 2012).

**Students social skills improvement with SNSs:** There are some psychological benefits for students who use SNSs as a learning tool. Tynes (2007) and Griffith and Liyanage (2008), the two psychological benefits are facilitation of identity exploration and improvement in

social cognitive skills. According to Ellison *et al.* (2007), Facebook utilization as students' learning tool leads to psychological well-being psychological and provide benefits for students with low self-esteem and low levels of self-satisfaction. Hosny and Fatima (2012), agreed with Ellison *et al.* (2007) that using Facebook for learning provides students, who are shy, an alternative way to participate actively in classes. Beyond that, it also gives the opportunity to express students' ideas through writing on the wall of Facebook. The authors also pointed out that praises and positive feedbacks from the teachers or colleagues on Facebook can improve self-confidence and self-esteem of students.

The SNSs are also beneficial in building healthy relationships between students and teachers, which is necessary in any learning environment. According to Sturgeon and Walker (2009), the connectivity between students and teachers through Facebook leads to better communication, resulting in increased engagement between them and better learning environment. Furthermore, Facebook allows the students to get to know their teachers on a personal level outside of the classroom. Hewitt and Forte (2006) and Mendez *et al.* (2009) stated that students' perceptions toward teachers improved due to the active interaction in Facebook. Consequently, the positive perception allowed the students to communicate with their teachers or lecturers both in and out of classes, resulting in creating a better relationship (Hosny and Fatima, 2012).

In the case of distance learning, SNSs became a popular medium for attaining higher education. As a result of the advancement in communication technology, students can learn without actually attending tutorials or lectures in universities and colleges. Furthermore, the shortcomings of distance learning are the associated isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, distance learning increases the complexity for students to access their relatively anonymous teachers or fellow students. Hence, SNSs may bridge the gap and provide an excellent solution to this loneliness. Using SNS for students' learning enhances mutual support through the process of learning, while the learner also able to control his own schedule (Minocha, 2009a).

One of the other benefits of SNSs is "learners' centrality" when used as a learning tool for students. In the cyber space, SNSs allow individuals to interact with others that have similar interests within a subject area. Since SNSs is an online tool, interaction may occur within and beyond students' own institute (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Apart from individual learning, learning groups, irrespective of online or offline, have proven to be useful. The SNS on the web provides students with the infrastructures as well as the environment to create "informal and borderless learning" groups. Students expressed concern over learning in institutions and

some relevant government departments only consider formal learning. As a result, formal learning still receives overemphasis, most notably in funding. Hence, institutions still largely ignore informal learning. This perception towards informal learning can be solved adopting SNS as the learning tool due to its ability in promoting informal learning (Minocha, 2009a).

#### **Disadvantages of SNSs for academic purposes:**

Despite the many advantages associated with using SNS as a learning mechanism for students, naturally there are always drawbacks in a method. Firstly, the major problem is the abuse of SNSs, where it will be used for social reasons rather than educational ones by students. According to the study conducted by Grosbeck *et al.* (2011), majority of students spend long hours in SNSs, Facebook in particular, for social reasons, namely contacting friends and families and sharing photos and videos. However, very little time is spent for learning and academic purposes within SNSs. Junco (2011) conducted a study on a sample of 1,893 college students to investigate the relationship between their uses of Facebook, the time spent preparing for classes and the GPA's earned. The author found that the components are all inverse proportional, where the more time the students spent on the site, the less time will be spent studying and equivalently grades deterioration can be observed. For many students, the time spent maintaining SNSs (updating statuses, chatting, etc.) is enormous and it often detracts from the amount of time they have to devote to school work. One of the examples is, the first thing many students do after arriving home is possibly logging into their favourite sites. The time spent in socializing via these sites may lead to neglecting their homework, ultimately resulting in poor performance (Mislove *et al.*, 2007).

The second concern would be the threat towards students' privacy by using SNSs as a learning tool. According to Griffith and Liyanage (2008), trust, safety and privacy are the major issues related to the usage of SNSs for students' learning and teaching. The information shared between students through SNSs is not secured, hence can be collected and used for illegal purposes. The major illegality could be that young people can be victimized through "cyber bullying" and "sexual harassments". Henderson *et al.* (2010) stated that the popularity of SNSs among students lead to two types of threats toward their privacy, namely disclosing personal information by the student themselves and personal information sharing by third party. On the other hand, SNSs allow users to post personal information that are related to others, which include videos, texts and pictures, hence there are possibilities that a teenager may post unwanted images of their friends. Lewis *et al.* (2008) stated that teenagers and college students upload personal information in SNSs, which are usually viewable by many people, however,

most of whom they do not know personally. Those viewers are then able to use that information in harmful and unwanted ways. There are also features in SNSs that provide users with options to control the privacy of personal profiles. According to Lewis *et al.* (2008) students are more likely to have private profiles if their friends intend to have them. The authors also revealed that the choice of being private is the result of both personal effort and social impact. It all boils down to whether students require sufficient education and training in using SNSs before even deciding on using it as an educational tool. Such training would be essential in educating the students on the functionality of SNSs that enables the control of disclosing personal information and that who could actually view the information.

The issue of protecting intellectual property is also a concern when it comes to using SNSs as a learning tool. Minocha (2009b) notes that highly likely that there will be intellectual property issues at college or university level when SNSs are integrated into teaching methodology. For instance, the issue of intellectual property may arise from copyright infringement for new technology. According to Henderson *et al.* (2010), SNS users sometimes mistakenly assume that permission would not be required during the online usage of third party music or images. However, such assumption has no legal foundation. Moreover, another issue will take place when students produce and publish their own copyright contents without proper knowledge related to intellectual protection, namely photos, stories and artwork. It is important to acknowledge the fact that institutes have to control these risks before benefiting from SNS (Minocha, 2009b).

The level of online participation among students and their teachers through Facebook also can cause a potential misunderstanding. Many SNSs do not control over information posting on other user's "wall" or on public discussion boards. Anonymous posters can disturb the learning process by posting defamatory messages or discrediting information about educators or students. As a result, such actions can deteriorate the mutual trust between students and their teachers. On the other hand, owing to the online nature of communications in SNSs, teachers and educators may experience difficulty in maintaining their credibility and authority. As a solution, teachers must impose certain limitation and closely monitor students during the utilization of SNSs. This prevents the relationship from becoming too informal (Mazer *et al.*, 2007; Griffith and Liyanage, 2008).

Apart from intellectual properties or power struggle issues, advertisement displayed on the SNSs can induce negative impact towards the learning process. According to Griffith and Liyanage (2008), the advertisements that appear in SNS pages may affect the learning experience of students via continuous

distraction and some advertisements may even be inappropriate. Unfortunately, the academic community do not have control over this particular element, simply because it is a part of the terms of service each user agrees to upon signup and it is also the core business of SNSs.

The negative impact of SNSs may impact youths at personal level as well, where the increased use of SNSs may lead to various psychological and social problems. Some studies have suggested that the heavy usage of SNSs may result in personality changes and mental disorders, namely attention deficient hyperactivity disorders, difficulties with face-to-face communication and inflated egos. Furthermore, since youths spend enormous amount of time with online activities, conventional forms of communication and socializing significantly decrease, resulting in increased physical isolation. Hence, there are researchers suggesting that SNSs are actually not suitable as a learning tool. However, the fact of SNSs contributing to learning environment cannot be argued, but the potential negative impact could be disastrous. As mentioned earlier, teachers will begin to teach online and without the conventional face-to-face interaction, there will be problems in identifying students with special needs. Ultimately, in the long run, SNSs in the classroom could threaten the relationships between teachers and students (Mislove *et al.*, 2007).

Jones *et al.* (2010) completed an empirical study on the use of SNSs at four different Universities in the United Kingdom. The investigation resulted in 76 questionnaire and 14 interviews, where the results revealed five challenges related to SNSs usage as an educational tool:

- Separating studies from personal life
- Issues related to intellectual properties
- Vast amount of information and the ability to synthesize the information
- Time constraints
- Lecturers' lack of SNS knowledge

The implementation of SNSs as an education tool would be significantly challenging with the aforementioned barriers. The stakeholders, namely university administrators, lecturers, students, technical support and solution providers, should introduce solutions to address all the barriers meticulously for a successful implementation of SNSs as an education tool.

On the other hand, as reported by Boon and Sinclair (2009), Facebook and other SNSs were not developed for academic purposes, hence the barriers. The original purpose of SNSs is to provide friends and families a way to communicate online. However, information technology applications and virtual realities, various adaptive utilizations are made

possible. Although the structure of SNSs can be modified to accommodate educational needs, the experiences that learners may find is significantly different, which presents another problem. The virtual reality of SNSs disconnects an individual from physical world, resulting in presenting enormous limitations in its assistance of real world knowledge. The artificial identities as well as the concomitant challenges likely to affect negatively on students who are already feeling isolated or disconnected without the essence of face-to-face communications. Additionally, Boon and Sinclair (2009) stated that the outcome of taking learning experiences out of the physical world have to be carefully monitored and designed before adopting SNSs as an educational tool.

## DISCUSSION

**Outcome of the analyses and solutions provided:** As discussed on the benefits and problems associated with SNSs in the earlier sections, it is only natural that every aspect of life possesses its own affordances and problems. The progress in technology has led to an integrated society, defying geographical, ethnical, racial and gender boundaries. With the evolution that is taking place, the learning process can definitely make use of the enormous capacity that SNSs offer (ASTD, 2012). Adopting a more social approach to learning is not a new phenomenon, while the aspect of using SNSs singularly does not make the learning process “social”. It is also important to note that a social learning process and social media is not the same thing. Additionally, it is a fact that social learning has no association with social media during the inception (McGreal and Elliott, 2004).

The definition of social learning is learning from and with others in the context of one’s workplace, culture and world. However, mostly it is unintentional and unconscious and working together to solve a problem does not establish a theory for social context. It is just a straightforward collaboration in a workplace. However, on a large scale, social media will be the tools that will enable social learning to take place. Therefore, it is vital that a process to designed for social learning through the social media. To implement such a process; it would be necessary to include collaborative activities offered by social media. But also a shift is required in the method of instruction is perceived to specifically provide in the form of discrete courses and modules (ASTD, 2012).

It is essential to identify the goals of instruction to avoid loss of focus on the objectives, which occurs due to the enthusiasm of using new products and tools. One of the prime examples to support the previous statement is that simply surfing Facebook is absolutely not a goal. In the perspective of a learning tool, goals should be the following, exploring, listening, sharing, reflecting and interacting with the tutor, getting new methods for extending classroom discussions and carrying out

summative or conductive assessment activities. These are the goals that will determine the suitable kind of SNSs to be used as learning tool.

In order to avoid any misuse of the SNS, it is important that learners are made aware regarding the purpose of SNSs intended to be used and how those tools should be used. During the utilization of SNSs as a learning tool, a trainer should be appointed as the central controller of the interaction platform. Having a leader in place, learners participations will be more effective due to the sense of ownership among students. In a strategic approach, this trainer would assign to learners on the kind of updates that are allowed, which directly contributes toward the establishment of goals set for social media as a leaning tool (Australian Flexible Learning Framework, 2013). In other word, the SNS platform will be class, the learners are the students and the trainer will be the teacher, however in a more technological approach.

The conventional SNSs always have many types of tools, it is very useful to select the tools that will be required to address the set of goals in the long run.

Finally, to achieve the overall success while carrying out all the solutions, it is vital to consider the actual reason for using SNSs as learning tool in the first place (Mazer *et al.*, 2007). It should produce an extended or enhanced learning experience or make the learning process more accessible to learners. The usage of SNSs as a learning tool simply because it is an emerging or trendy technology will not serve the learning process. The application of SNSs should be integrated with the goals, objectives and implementing strategies to assure that using SNSs as learning tool actually delivers the knowledge to students that it suppose to Australian Flexible Learning Framework (2013). Approaching SNS in this method will ensure that the disadvantages of SNSs on the learning process are curbed and the affordances carefully optimized.

## CONCLUSION

This study has discussed the multiple benefits and problems that are associated with the usage of SNSs as learning tool for students. The advantages or benefits of SNSs for academic purposes were categorized into 3 different segments. The benefits are potential to establish a collaborative environment, enhancing learning environment and peer engagements and improving every aspect of the social life of a student. Majority of the research works that cover SNSs supports the above segments, which reveals the advantages of using SNSs effectively in aiding students toward an improved learning approach. However, with any approach, there will be disadvantages and this study had revealed the disadvantages thoroughly. Several solutions had been proposed, namely introducing a method of instruction in the form of discrete courses and modules, setting specific goals and objectives for effective adoption of SNSs as a learning tool, appointing a trainer to control SNS learning

platform with complete authority and finally selecting the appropriate applications within the SNSs for effective teaching process. By implementing all the four solutions as proposed in this study, SNSs can be effectively integrated into academic world for enhanced learning.

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