Chapter 2
Influence of Age Groups and School Types on Informal Learning Through the Use of Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

The use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) as a learning tool is increasingly popular nowadays. This chapter investigates perceptions of 799 secondary-school Malaysian secondary school students of two age-groups, and three school-types (urban, suburban, and rural) towards the use of the SNSs for informal learning purposes. For this chapter, learning that takes place outside the classroom is classified as "informal learning". Data were analysed quantitatively and comparisons across age-groups and school-types were made. The findings revealed that there was a general acceptance of SNSs as an alternative learning mode and that difference in usage between age groups was not significant. However, the findings across school-types were significant. Suburban and rural students appeared to use the SNSs more frequently for informal learning than urban students. This strongly suggested the need for Government to intensify its efforts in improving ICT infrastructure and facilities in rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) has rapidly increased over the past few years in Malaysia. GlobalWebIndex (2015) revealed that Malaysia has the second highest penetration of social networking usage among Internet users in Asia. It was further reported that on average a Malaysian with a social networking account spends 2.8 hours per day on SNSs. Now with the widespread use of smartphones, it

is believed that the time spent on SNSs will continue to rise. SNSs such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and WeChat are the most commonly used Internet-based social spaces in Malaysia, particularly among young individuals.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined a social networking system as a web-based service that allows individuals to do the following: i) build public or semi-public profile in a system, (ii) share a connection, and (iii) view and cross-list their relationship with others in the system. Such systems enable easy and rapid connection with friends, families, classmates, customers and clients. In addition, SNSs are also seen as media that allows people to come together around an idea or topic of interest. In fact, SNSs are increasingly being leveraged as a learning tool, especially for today's tech-savvy students. According to Lai et al. (2013), many students are immersed in out-of-school online activities. When using digital media, students engage in a new learning culture which is very different from what they have been enculturated in traditional schools. Many studies have indicated the potential of using social networking for learning purposes (Selwyn, 2009; Griffith & Liyanage, 2008). However, it is not possible to use it as a tool for learning in Malaysian secondary schools due to the constraint of not allowing students to bring their cell phones to schools. Thus, it would be interesting to find out to what extent students use SNSs for learning purposes outside the classroom which has been defined as "informal learning" in this study. This definition is in line with that of Livingstone (1999) and Marsick and Watkins (2001). Livingstone (1999) described informal learning as any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies. Marsick and Watkins (2001) further described it as intentional but unstructured, contextualized learning.

This study extends on these studies in its attempt to investigate how differences in age and school-types affect students' usage of SNSs for informal learning purposes. Findings of this study will add to the current body of research, conducted on the effects of social networking on Malaysian secondary school students.

The following research questions specifically seek to investigate whether there are differences in usage for the following categories of students: (a) between students of two different age-groups and (b) between students from three school-types (namely urban, suburban and rural):

1. What types of SNSs usage patterns are displayed among the different categories of Malaysian secondary school students?
2. How much time do these different categories of students spend on SNSs?
3. To what extent do these different categories of students use SNSs for learning and what types of learning do they focus on?
4. What are the differences in usage of SNSs for informal learning purposes of the different categories of students?

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