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Online Social Presence: An Exploratory Study on the Extent to Which It Is Experienced in a Facebook Community for Open and Distance Learners

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Web 2.0 technologies are wonderful online tools that open a whole new arena for all types of information dissemination, interaction and collaboration. Coupled with the fact that it is free and freely available to virtually anyone and everyone who has Internet access, it is a shame not to mine its potential in enlarging the learning space and improving the learning experience of learners. One such tool is Facebook, the renowned and popular social networking site which currently registers a cool 300 million accounts. While educational institutions explore various options that Facebook offers with regards to communicating and interacting with learners, an important aspect of its value in developing and maintaining social presence ought to be looked into. This paper describes how Facebook was used to support learning in an open and distance learning programme. It also presents findings from an online survey examining the perception of Facebook fans regarding their Facebook experience, in particular the extent to which they perceived social presence. Discussions are made with reference to the extent of success in coming across as 'real' in the virtual community, in connecting to learners and in meeting learners' learning expectations. Implications on how to further use it more effectively and suggestions for further research are also presented.

Keywords: Social presence, Online community, Facebook, Open and distance learning

Introduction

Facebook has become a popular social networking website and is also considered one of the main online communication tools today. People are fast adopting Facebook not only for socializing activities but also for political, religious and educational purposes. Despite being in existence for only five years, there are currently 300 million people with Facebook accounts (Murrell, 2009). More and more groups are being established to keep up with members and to disseminate ideas and opinions..

Benefits of using Facebook in education

Realizing that there is great potential in the use of Facebook in education, several higher education providers in the United Kingdom such as Warwickshire College and Gloucestershire College and Murdoch University in Australia have implemented the use of Facebook in their educational system and have found it to be effective (Klingensmith, 2009). Both colleges reported an increase in their retention rates. Further, Klingensmith noted that students at Gloucestershire College maintained their performance when a Facebook group was implemented in their individual course. The curriculum manager of the college reported that besides keeping up with friends and staff of the college frequently using Facebook, instructors and students also use it for academic discussions.

In his article *Facebook + Education =?*, Wong (2009) stated "the interesting difference with using Facebook is that often students will take pieces of information and then repeat it back to their own constituents groups... students (are) mentoring and advising other students on affairs that matter to them and also matter to us." Using Facebook in education seems advantageous for the learning community. According to Munoz and



Towner (2009), "Facebook helps instructors connect with their students about assignments, upcoming events, useful links, and samples of work outside of the classroom". They strongly believed that "Facebook's networking and social communication capabilities can benefit both the instructor and the student by tapping into a greater number of learning styles, providing an alternative to the traditional lecture format, creating an online classroom community and increasing teacher-student and student-student interaction." Another beneficial effect of Facebook is that it affected students' enthusiasm optimistically (Coughlan, 2009).

Online social presence

Social presence can be defined as the extent to which people are being sensed as being real in an online environment (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Gunawardena, 1995) or the degree of salience or connection between communicators in computer-mediated communication (Tu & McIsaac, 2002).

So why is social presence important? Social presence is said to have a possible effect on the sense of belonging and acceptance in a group (Rovai, 2002), to motivate and stimulate students to learn (Weaver & Albion, 2005) and also to influence participants' perceived learning and satisfaction in learning. (Swan, 2003; Ubon & Kimble, 2004). Additionally, literature indicates that research has established a relationship between student learning satisfaction and instructor presence as well as between student satisfaction and peer presence (Richardson & Swan, 2003 and Russo & Benson, 2005 as cited in Lowenthal (2009). In their research exploring social presence in asynchronous text-based online learning communities, Ubon and Kimble (2004) found that participants in different online discussion forums need different duration of time to "click" or to develop a sense of group cohesion. They also found that "online students seemed to make an inquiry quite regularly to seek an clarification, information or advice from other participants in OCLs, while online tutors tended to provide learning support and attempt to elicit active participation from students in this environment" (p.5).

The context

Open University Malaysia (OUM) initiated its Mobile Learning via SMS project in May 2009 to enhance the blended learning approach of self-managed learning using modules, online learning using its learning management system (LMS) and face-to-face tutorials. The pilot project was for the Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learner, course code OUMH1103. The initiative was well-received by the learners involved and was then continued for the September 2009 semester, again for OUMH1103 and two other courses namely Renal Nursing and Company Law.

For OUMH1103 September 2009 semester, 25 SMSes were sent out to a total of 1173 learners over a duration of 11 weeks. Of the 25 SMSes, nine were on Course management, 12 on Facebook discussions, three on content, one was a tip for learning and another one SMS was a motivation quote. To support SMS tutoring, Facebook was used as a platform for discussions on SMS topics for OUMH1103 instead of the LMS. The moderator for the OUMH1103 Facebook was a full time staff with OUM who also tutored that particular course. Announcements on the mobile learning project and guidelines on how to join Facebook as well as how to become a fan were uploaded to the course learning management system. At the final count, a total of 697 fans joined the OUMH1103 Facebook community. The total number of postings were 3562, of which 1184 (33.2%) were from the moderator and 2378 (66.8%) were from fans.

Research question

The research question for the study was: To what extent was social presence experienced by learners who participated in the OUMH1103 Facebook?

Methodology

Instrumentation and data analysis

The survey was conducted online using a free online survey service. The online survey was uploaded after the last tutorial for the semester and just before the final examination (a duration of two weeks). Announcement requesting learners to respond to the survey items was made via the Facebook page as well as in the course learning management system.

There were a total of 23 items in the survey; four were on demographic in nature while 12 were on social presence and six were on the learners' overall perception of their Facebook experience and one was an open-

ended item asking learners to give comments on their Facebook experience. The social presence items were adapted from items in the Social Presence Questionnaire of Online Collaborative Learning developed by Lin (2004) to suit the context in this study. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) that was reported by Lin was .84. Response format for the items in the survey was a 6-point agreement scale where 1 was for 'Strongly disagree', 2 for 'Disagree', 3 for 'Somewhat disagree', 4 for 'Somewhat agree', 5 for 'Agree' and 6 for 'Strongly Agree'. Percentage agreement was calculated by adding up percentage obtained for 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree'.

Sample

Of the 697 fans of OUMH1103 Facebook, only 67 learners responded to the survey. Generally, response rates to online surveys are low and a ten percent response rate in this study is most probably due to the fact that the online survey was posted near examination time where most learners were preparing for their examination and did not log in to check the OUMH1103 Facebook page. If this response rate is taken, it is actually considered below average and presents a major limitation of the study. However, computing response rate using number of respondents divided by the total number of unique page views (the number of individual fans who have visited the site) during the duration the online survey was activated, that is 181, the response rate of 37.0 percent may be considered above average for an online survey.

Findings

Of the 67 respondents, 35 or 52.2 percent were females and 32 or 47.8 percent were males. The respondents' ages ranged from 21 to 60 years old, with a median of 29. The box and whisker plot in Figure 1 shows that the 50 percent of the respondents appear to be between 24 and 34 years old. This is not surprising as it is a well known fact that the people who take to online social networking are generally those from the younger generation.

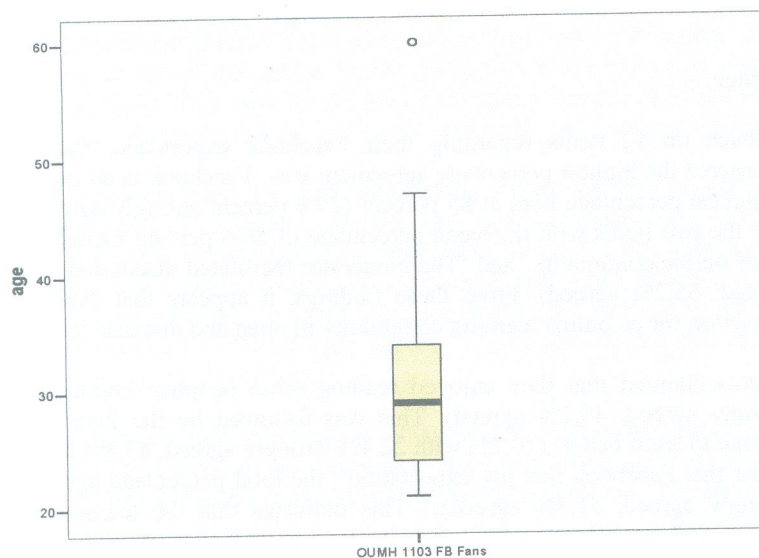


Figure 1: Box and whisker plot of respondents' age

47 of the respondents claimed to have previous experience interacting using Facebook while 20 of them had never used Facebook before the OUMH1103 mobile learning project was implemented. When asked to rate their frequency of using Facebook, the majority of the learners (30) claimed that they logged in to the OUMH1103 Facebook everyday while 20 of them said that they logged in two to three times a week, 13 of the respondents viewed it once a week and another four respondents said that they viewed Facebook once a month. From this it may be said that the OUMH1103 Facebook managed to draw most of the respondents to the site rather frequently.

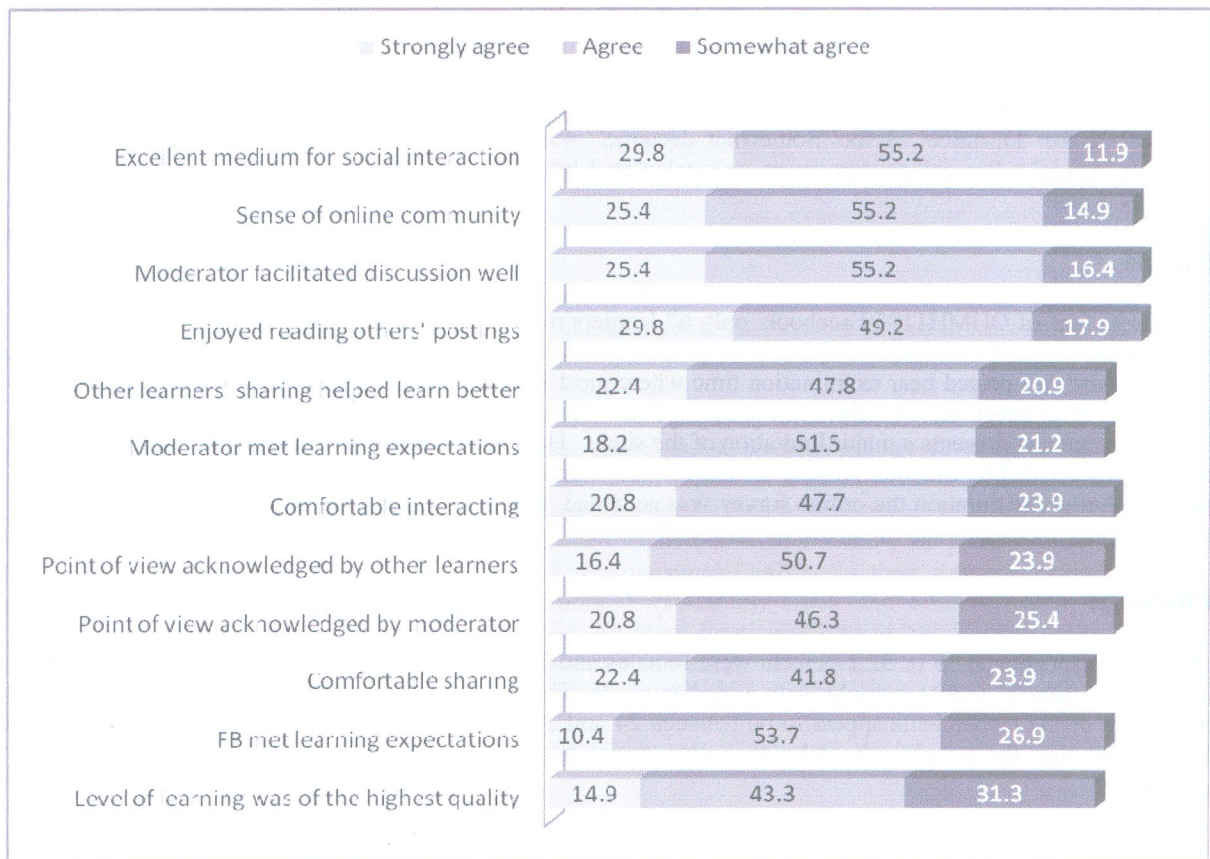


Figure 2: Perception of Facebook experience

Respondents were asked to give feedback on 12 items regarding their Facebook experience. Based on percentage agreement, the item which garnered the highest percentage agreement was 'Facebook is an excellent medium for social interaction' was the highest percentage item at 85 percent (29.8 percent strongly agreed and 55.2 percent agreed). It was followed by the two items with the same percentage of 80.6 percent namely 'The interactions enabled me to form a sense of online community' and 'The moderator facilitated discussions in the course' (Both with 25.4% strongly agreed, 55.2% agreed). From these findings, it appears that the use of Facebook does allow room for good interaction for an online learning community in open and distance learning.

Meanwhile, 79 percent of the respondents claimed that they enjoyed reading other peoples' comments or questions in the Facebook (29.8% strongly agreed, 49.2% agreed). This was followed by the item 'Other learners' sharing in this Facebook helped me to learn better' (70.2% with 22.4% strongly agreed, 47.8% agreed). As for the item 'Overall the moderator for this Facebook met my expectation', the total percentage agreement obtained was 69.7 percent (18.2% strongly agreed, 51.5% agreed). This indicates that the learners were generally satisfied with the contribution of significant others (peers and moderator) in their learning.

While 68.5 percent of the learners felt comfortable interacting with other fans of Facebook (20.8% strongly agree and 47.7% agree), a lesser percentage (64.2%) felt comfortable sharing opinions related to content through Facebook (22.4 strongly agree and 41.8% agree). Meanwhile, 67.1 percent of them felt that their point of view was acknowledged by other learners in Facebook (16.4% strongly agree, 50.7% agree). As to whether their point of view was acknowledged by the moderator 20.8 percent strongly agreed and 46.3 percent agreed. 64.1 percent of the learners thought that the use of Facebook for OUMH1103 met their learning expectation (10.4% strongly agree, 53.7% agree). The respondents rated the item for 'My level of learning that took place in this Facebook was of the highest quality' as the lowest percentage at 58.2 percent (14.9% strongly agree, 43.2% agree). So, it does seem that while students felt that bond with their peers, they were not too sure if the Facebook interactions actually contributed to their learning.

If one were to take into consideration the percentage of respondents who chose 'Somewhat agree' into the total percentage agreement, it would then seem that across all items, a great majority of the respondents appeared to



perceive their OUMH1103 Facebook experience positively as the percentages calculated are between 88.1 to 96.9 percent.

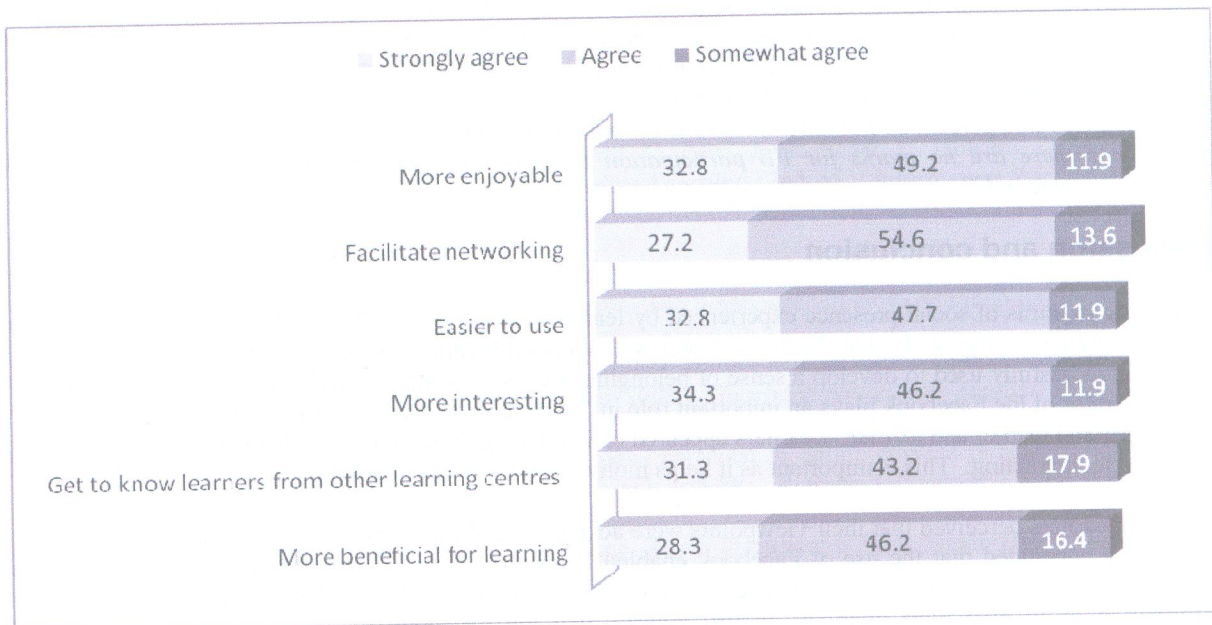


Figure 3: Overall perception of Facebook experience as compared to LMS forum

Figure 3 shows findings obtained for overall perception of Facebook experience by learners as compared to their experience using the LMS forum discussions. The respondents were given six items to compare the use of forum discussion in LMS and discussions in Facebook. 82 percent of the respondents in this study agreed that engaging in forum discussion in Facebook was more enjoyable compared to LMS (32.8% strongly agreed, 49.2% agreed). This was the highest percentage agreement obtained. This is could be due to the level of interactions that occurred, as well as the immediate and frequent feedback/response from the moderator.

The respondents rated 'Facilitate networking among learners' second highest with a total percentage agreement at 81.8 percent (27.2 strongly agreed, 54.6 agreed). Meanwhile, Next, 80.5 percent of the respondents thought that Facebook's forum discussion was easier to use (32.8% strongly agree, 47.7% agree) and also that using Facebook was more interesting in comparison with LMS forum (34.3% strongly agreed, 46.2% agreed). 74.5 percent of the respondents agreed that discussions in Facebook enabled them to get to know learners from other learning centres (31.3% strongly agreed, 43.2% agreed) and that it was more beneficial for learning (28.3% strongly agree, 46.2% agree).

Taking into account percentages obtained for 'Somewhat agree' as well, it is observed that for overall perception of Facebook as compared to the LMS forum, over 90 percent of the respondents appeared positive about the use of Facebook as an online discussion platform. The apparent advantages Facebook has are:

- (1) It enables students to connect with a wider community of learners;
- (2) The interface is more user-friendly; and
- (3) The interactions were more enjoyable and interesting.

From the comments obtained for the open-ended item, there were several positive viewpoints as well as some reservations. Positive comments given by the respondents were:

- *More interesting and enjoyable with sharing graphic, document, video*
- *Easier to use*
- *Interaction is good*
- *Easier to access n gain faster information*
- *I enjoyed reading the feedback and answers provided by the other learners...a good learning tool*
- *Can interact with our friends from all states*



Meanwhile, reservations raised by respondents include:

- *There are so many replies until 100+ response in one topic. So it's kind of hard to view all replies*
- *LMS forum discussions is safer compared to Facebook because not everyone can read our sharing and discussions about study except OUM students*
- *LMS forum is still relevant for OUM students*
- *As a working person, do not have much time to really read all the comments on Facebook*
- *Since there are no marks for FB participation there is no compulsion for the learner to actively participate in FB*

Discussion and conclusion

Discussing in terms of social presence experienced by learners using the OUMH1103 Facebook, one may infer from the findings of this study that the use of Facebook is a good medium for academic interactions and that it could be successfully used to develop a sense of belonging and create relatively well-forged online community. The moderator of the Facebook plays an important role in 'knitting' that sense of connection between moderator and learner and learner and learner. Learners appeared claimed to enjoy reading other learners' postings and felt comfortable interacting. This is important as it helps motivate and stimulate learning.

Since the learners perceived that their viewpoints were acknowledged by both the moderator and other learners, it could be concluded that the use of Facebook enabled learners to have a sense of acceptance in the online community. This is a crucial factor in encouraging learners to freely ask questions, seek clarifications and information or to give their opinions. It also appears that the Facebook moderator and the OUMH1103 Facebook community have met the expectations of the learners. This indicates that there is much potential in using the social networking site as a tool to support learning, particularly for open and distance education.

In comparing Facebook discussions with LMS discussions, majority of the respondents appeared to find Facebook more enjoyable and interesting. Also, where a certain course is run simultaneously across a wide geographical area, for instance across all states in Malaysia, learners appear to like getting to know, interact and learn together with their peers throughout the nation. The discussions could be possibly richer and more varied since learners from different learning centres actually have different tutors for their face-to-face tutorials and whatever knowledge and experience fans bring along with them into the Facebook community would surely add to the depth and breadth of discussions.

A point to note when using Facebook for academic discussions is that the discussions ought to be better organized so that it facilitates the learners' reading the numerous responses to any one posting. The discussion tab should be used to post topics of discussion so that it is easier to access and retrieve postings and follow the train of conversation. Security features could also be enhanced particularly since just about anybody can register to be a fan (not just legitimate students of the course). Perhaps for educational institutions that have their own e-mail accounts, one way would be to get the learners to register for Facebook accounts using only their university e-mail accounts so that the space between students' personal social interactions and their academic interactions for may be separated.

The online social networking era appears here to stay. While many people seem to find benefit and enjoyment logging on for various reasons such as for leisurely pursuits, for business and for political vantage, educationists too ought to be creative and innovative in tapping on to the features and benefits of Facebook to enlarge the learning space of learners and to enhance their learning experience. Further research ought to be conducted on how social networking sites may actual benefit learners with regard to achieving learning outcomes. The actual frequency of individual postings and viewing could also be easily tabulated using the 'Insights' available to administrators so as to examine the extent to which the site is efficient in disseminating information and in engaging learners. Additionally, a causal comparative study could be conducted to compare the effectiveness and efficiency of using LSM and Facebook for learning purposes.

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