

Effects of Social Networking on Malaysian Secondary School Students: Attitudes, Behaviours and Awareness of Risks

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ABSTRACT

There is a plethora of social networking systems that allow individuals to meet and chat online with each other nowadays. This paper describes a preliminary study that investigates the effects of Social Networking (SN) on a group of Malaysian Secondary school students from an elite school. It explores their attitudes and behaviour towards SN: how it affects their social lives, and to what extent they are aware of the risks involved. A focus group interview was conducted on these students. The students were shown nine scenarios (one at a time) depicting various situations that portrayed the negative consequences of SN such as cyberbullying, texting and online predation. The students were asked to give their opinions regarding each scene as well as opinions regarding social networking in general. The findings revealed that the students generally have a favourable opinion of social networking and are aware of the benefits and the risks involved in using SN sites. On top of that, they are anxious about the negative effects of the SN sites due to their bad experiences but they still use the sites actively and habitually.

Keywords: Attitudes, behaviours, cyberbullying, online predation, risks, social networking, texting

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INTRODUCTION

Boyd and Ellison, in 2007, defined an SN system as a web-based service that allows individuals to do the following: (i) build public or semi-public profiles in a system, (ii) share a connection, and (iii) view and cross-list their relationship with others in the system. Previously, such social connection was only possible through the Internet but

with the advent of mobile applications, it is now possible to connect to others through mobile phones such as the iPhone and Blackberry or an Android or Windows phone.

SN has become part of the daily life of teenagers today. They represent a pervasive technology that can result in unintended consequences such as threats to privacy and changes in the relationship between the public and private sphere. Boyd and Ellison (2007) listed some of the privacy concerns with regards to online SN, which include inadvertent disclosure of personal information, damaged reputation due to rumours and gossip, unwanted contact and harassment or stalking, surveillance-like structures due to backtracking functions, use of personal data by third parties and hacking and identity theft. These concerns have led to a call for increased understanding of attitudes and behaviours towards 'privacy-affecting systems' (Iachello & Hong, 2007:100). This study investigates Malaysian teenagers' attitudes and behaviours towards SN, and the extent to which they are aware of the risks involved and how they handle these risks. The research questions of the study were as follows:

- (1) What are Malaysian Secondary school students' attitude and behaviours towards SN?
- (2) What role does SN play in their social life?
- (3) To what extent are they aware of the risks involved and how do they handle these risks?

The next section will present the conceptual framework of this study and then describe literature relevant to the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this paper combines two media theories, the 'Uses and Gratifications' Theory and the Theory of 'Ritualised Media Use.' These two media theories are not tested in this study but are instead used as the analytical background and framework to explain and contextualise the findings.

The Uses and Gratifications theory explores how people use media to fulfil their various needs. The three key dimensions of this theory are (1) the need for diversion and entertainment, (2) the need for (para-social) relationships, and (3) the need for identity construction (Blumler & Katz, 1974; LaRose et al., 2001; Rosengren et al., 1985). The issue of concern examined in this paper is whether SN sites offer sufficient promise of gratification in all three dimensions to override privacy and personal concerns of teenagers.

According to the Theory of Ritualised Media Use, "the media are not just consumed for informational or entertainment purposes, they are also habitually used as part of people's everyday life routines, as diversions and pastimes" (Debatin et al., 2009). The second issue of concern investigated in this study is whether SN is such an important ritual in the life of Malaysian teenagers that they do not pay attention to privacy and personal issues.

Risks of SN

There are a number of risks associated with SN that can have adverse effects on the mental health of young people. The risks explored in this study are described below:

Cyberbullying. It is described as intentionally using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing or hostile information about another person (O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). It includes receiving threatening, harassing or humiliating communication from another person. It is the most common online risk among young people and is a peer-to-peer risk.

Texting/Sexting. It can also be used to bully or humiliate people. An embarrassing or upsetting video can quickly be transmitted or uploaded to an online video sharing site like YouTube via cell phones. It is found that although in general young people use messaging responsibly there are many instances of misuse, too. This, to a large extent, is due to the fact that senders cannot see the reactions of the receivers of the messages, so the consequences are not immediately felt by them, leading to some of them sending messages that they may regret later. Sexting can be defined as “sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital devices through cell phones or the Internet” (Berkshire District Attorney, 2010).

Online sexual solicitation and predation. It is defined as “the act of encouraging someone to talk about sex, to do something sexual, or to share personal

sexual information even when that person does not want to” (Ybarra et al., 2007). Interestingly, Collins et al. (2011) found that sexual solicitation between same-age youth is more likely to happen than sexual predation and most of these solicitations come from peers who are known offline.

Exposure to illegal/indecent content and privacy violation. Most studies show that young people are concerned about their own privacy and to avoid risk, they will engage in privacy protecting behaviours, such as adjusting their profiles to ‘private’ from ‘public’ access, refusing to provide identifying information or giving false information and avoiding certain websites (Youn, 2009). However, Cox (2007) discovered that most youth do not read websites’ privacy policies or may be unaware that their information is at risk of disclosure to third parties like advertisers. They are concerned about talking to people they do not know online but less worried about posting information including photos online to a public profile.

The Malaysian Scene

There are few studies that have explored the risks that come with using SN among Malaysian teenagers, which makes this study very pertinent and crucial. Most of the studies on SN in Malaysia have been undertaken on university students. For example, Norsaremah Salleh et al. (2012) undertook a study using a questionnaire survey on 486 undergraduates from five selected public and private universities in Malaysia. They discovered that the majority

of the students had several SN accounts and they were generally aware of information privacy on SN. Most of the respondents had a Facebook account as well as Twitter and MySpace accounts. They generally spent approximately 1 to 3 hours a day accessing the SN through their own laptop or smart phones. Using correlation analysis, it was further revealed that the students were aware that disclosure of information on the Internet may invite some negative consequences as their personal information may be misused or be made available to unknown individuals or companies. They also realised that their personal information could be used in a manner they may not approve of. These findings were consistent with those reported in existing studies (Dinev & Hart, 2004; Youn, 2009; Banks *et al.*, 2010). No investigation has been undertaken to explore the risks posed in using SN among Malaysian secondary school students. Thus, the findings of this project will be pioneering work.

This project involved conducting focus group interviews and questionnaire surveys on students from four types of secondary school in the Klang Valley and Selangor, Malaysia. The four types of secondary school were an urban school, a sub-urban school, a rural school and lastly, an elite school. The students comprised boys and girls from Secondary Two and Secondary Four. The convenient sampling approach was used. This paper is a preliminary case study that looked into the SN practices of only Form Four female students from an elite school. It offers a glimpse into patterns of

social networking attitudes and behaviours of students from this particular context. An elite school comprises students who are selected based on excellent academic performance in the Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) (Primary School Achievement Test). Subsequent papers on the other contexts will be written at a later stage.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Instrument

The research instruments were developed by the research team. Ideas for the interview scenarios were drawn from various resources derived from other research studies as well as materials on social networking available online. The instruments were as follows:

- a) Background information form (BIF) that elicit students' personal background information and information regarding their use of SN sites such as frequency and duration of use, types of SN site they frequented and the types of SN devices they possessed.
- b) A focus group interview template that comprised three sections:
 - Section A comprised open-ended questions that elicit information regarding students' experiences with SN sites
 - Section B comprised seven scenarios depicting situations involving the negative consequences of using SN apps. The first scenario showed a girl posting a sexy selfie of herself

on her Facebook (Exposure to online predation). The second showed a girl receiving a pop-up message asking for her password while talking to a friend online (Exposure to privacy invasion). The third showed a boy expressing delight because he could enter the account of a person (who was a nuisance to him) illegally to take revenge (Privacy invasion/hacking). The fourth showed a girl in a state of excitement because a boy she had been corresponding with online had asked her out on a date (Exposure to online predation). The fifth showed a girl being very upset because someone had posted pictures of her in a costume she had worn at a friend's birthday party and made fun of her by calling her stupid, silly, ugly etc. (Texting/Sexting). The sixth showed a rabbit (representing an innocent student) finding pornographic materials and violent images in his/her computer (Exposure to indecent contents). The final picture showed a boy who was very upset because materials regarding his being a homosexual were circulating in SN sites when in actuality he was not a homosexual (Cyberbullying). (See Appendix

A for a sample scenario.)

- Section C comprised an open-ended question asking students to describe other negative situations that they or their friends had experienced.

Research Procedure

The students were randomly chosen and requested to share their experiences using SN sites at a focus group interview session. Prior to the interview, each student had to fill a form that was designed to elicit their personal background information and SN habits. For the focus group interview, the students were required to give their views and reactions towards each scenario. This was followed by a discussion among the students. They were also required to answer and discuss the open-ended questions. The focus group interview took 55 minutes. The interview was conducted in English by one of the researchers and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant.

Data Analysis

The students' responses to the open-ended questions and each scenario were analysed for patterns and themes in line with the research questions and the conceptual framework.

RESULTS

Background Information of Students

The information for this was derived from the BIF the students were required to fill. The students in this study were four

Secondary 4 Malay, female students from an elite, residential school in the Klang Valley (labelled as School A). All students in this school were selected for admission based on their excellent results in the Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) (Primary School Achievement Test). The medium of instruction of all subjects in this school except for English Language is Malay. All four had obtained a minimum of six distinctions in the PT3. All had obtained a clear distinction in English in the PT3 and spoke English at home. They came from upper middle class families and had parents who were either professional or business personnel. They came from various parts of Malaysia, primarily from urban areas. Three of them possessed a smart phone while the other made up for it by having a mobile tablet instead. Only one of them had a data plan. This was not necessary as the school had continuous Wi-Fi access. All four were active users of the Internet as well as SN sites, which included Friendster, Myspace, Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp, Ask fm, Wechat and Instagram.

Preliminary Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed that generally, all four students from School A were very aware of the danger and risks involved in using the SN sites and they took steps to eradicate or minimise the danger/risks whenever possible.

They were aware of the danger of online predation and did not upload selfies to the SN sites, and if they felt like sharing

photographs they would only upload group photos. S2 said:

It's not wrong to post picture but If you like to post things about yourself some people might target you as ... such as ... it might be dangerous. Know your limit to post pictures.

They protect their own privacy by not responding to messages asking for their IDs and passwords. S3 advised the girl in the scenario not to open the website when she gets the message and to check the status of her antivirus. They were also aware of the danger of meeting friends that they met online no matter how good-looking the person appeared in the photograph given. Only one said she would but she would tell her parents first and if her parents allowed her, she would go with some friends. S3 said:

As for me I would prefer I don't know how he actually looks like. He might be pretending ... maybe he is 50-year-old man behind the picture or he could be very good-looking 17 years old then he might not like me. He could be dangerous.

S4 directly refused to meet him:

When I get invitation, I think I would not meet him because when we meet in Facebook I think that's the only relationship... see face to face maybe if it is a coincidence.

They are also aware of unethical practices regarding the use of SN sites such as hacking, texting and cyberbullying. All of them condemned the boy who hacked into the website to take revenge. S3 explained it quite maturely:

For me I think what he is doing really fighting fire with fire, very immature. And he just needs to solve his issues...see him personally or he just let it go and forgive and forget because human do make mistakes... shouldn't hack into some account just because of that.

They also avoided pornographic websites and websites showing violence. One of them had even installed advertisement blocking programmes such as AdBlock to block such materials. In spite of their precautions, three had encountered bad experiences related to the use of SN sites. They were also very angry with regards to the case of Ahmad being bullied online. However, their suggestions on how to help him seemed to be unrealistic and appeared to be drawn from films. For instance, the suggestion by one of them i.e. "pretending to be his girlfriend so that they knew that he was not gay" showed that they had no real experience with such situations.

S3 had experienced being called names by her friends on Twitter, with others joining in and making the situation worse. In the case of S1, a boy had posted a nasty comment to a picture she had uploaded in an SN site after she had tried to defend a

friend. The situation became worse when others joined the conversation, adding more negative remarks although there were some who had supported her stand on her friend. S2 also lost her confidence for a while because someone had backstabbed her; she described herself as having a phobia after the incident. She said:

Friends are sometimes immature people who are sometimes enemies. Sometimes backstabbers. In front they are angels and at the back they are worst people.

Although the bad experiences did not deter them from continuing to use the SN sites, they were more wary now and seemed to display maturity and wisdom beyond their age regarding the use of this medium of communication. Regarding Scenario 5, in which a girl was called stupid over a costume she had worn to a party, S4 advised:

I think as a friend to her I would tell her to just ignore them. They are acting as a child as these things won't happen if they don't post them. So if they post them they really are immature. I would say to my friend to just ignore them and leave them alone and do things that are more important and if she is not into it, leave the social network social life.

On the positive side, they were aware of the advantages of SN sites. S1 gave the example of Facebook enabling her

grandmother, who was not mobile, to communicate with her uncle and to keep frequent tabs on family members, which made her very happy. S3 said that she had a bigger network of friends because of SN sites.

Overall Discussion

The overall discussion will be undertaken in accordance to the research questions. The two key issues of the conceptual framework of the study will also be taken into consideration. The first issue was whether SN sites offered sufficient promise of gratification in all three dimensions to override privacy and personal concerns of teenagers and the second issue was whether SN was such an important ritual in the life of these students that they did not pay attention to privacy and personal issues.

1) What are the students' attitudes and behaviour towards the SN sites?

The students from School A were all active users of SN sites. On the whole, they believed that SN enriched their lives and helped them to be in touch with their friends and family members all the time. Despite some stressful and emotional experiences with SN, they were not willing to give up using SN and were prepared to face negative consequences involved in the use of SN, similar to the students in Norsaremah Salleh *et al.*'s study (2012). SN satisfied their needs according to the Gratifications Theory. It offered them diversion and entertainment, enabled them to make online friends and also helped them to learn more

about themselves. Thus, it can be said that they were more exposed, more mature and wiser because of the experience of using SN, which would help them to handle the real world better when they leave school. This is important to these students as they live in residential colleges where life is very sheltered.

(2) What role does it play in their social life?

As discussed earlier, the students in School A were very aware of the risks involved in using SN and although SN can be described as a ritual in their lives they did take every step to protect themselves against the risks posed by the use of SN as well as to safeguard themselves against personal hurt that can arise from active participation.

(3) To what extent are they aware of the risks involved and how do they handle them?

Like teenagers in Western countries, the students were aware of most of the risks involved in using SN. They were also aware of the dangers of being hit by viruses and identity theft and other security issues related to the use of SNS. These findings are in line with the findings of previous studies (Lampe *et al.*, 2008; Lipford *et al.*, 2008; Strater & Lipford, 2008, LaRose *et al.*, 2006; Youn, 2009; Norsaremah Salleh *et al.*, 2012). Students in School A also experienced the negative consequences of texting, which had caused them a great deal of anxiety and stress. This made them more cautious about what they write in SN sites, which has educated them on the negative effects of texting as otherwise, they may

not be aware of the negative consequences of some of their own text messages (Lenhart *et al.*, 2010). Thus, the issue of SN being so important that attention to privacy and personal issues is neglected does not arise in the case of these students.

CONCLUSION

This is just a small case study and the findings cannot be generalised to all Malaysian secondary school students but it does offer a glimpse into the patterns of behaviour of students from a specific context i.e. an elite school in Malaysia. These four students displayed awareness of the benefits and the risks and danger involved in using SN sites. They were wary of SN sites and at times, cynical regarding the negative effects of the SN sites due to their bad experiences but they still used the sites actively as to them, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. They believed that SN enriched their lives but they also realised that they must use it with care and maturity in order to benefit from them. Thus, it seems that SN has actually contributed to help these girls (who lead very sheltered lives) to develop in maturity and wisdom. Further studies of this project will enable the research team to have a more holistic view of the SN patterns of behaviours of Malaysian secondary school students in Malaysia.

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APPENDIX A

Scenario 1



Lily posts a cool/pretty/sexy selfie on her facebook and she watches eagerly to see how many 'likes' the photo gets and how many complimentary comments she receives, such as, "You're so gorgeous" or "Why are you so perfect?" What do you think of Lily's action?

