Exploring the Level of Utilizing Online Social Networks as Conventional Learning Settings in UAE from College Instructors' Perspectives

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Abstract

This research study aims to measure the level of accepting the Online Social Networking applications as an appropriate environment for learning in both of the social and the academic skills of undergraduate students in the UAE colleges from the instructors' point of view. Moreover, this study investigates the social skills of undergraduate students and their learning attitudes through their use of social applications and webpages. Ten instructors from the City University College of Ajman were the participants of this research study. The paper followed a qualitative method of collecting and analyzing data through assigning a set of semi-structure interview with instructors and a number of observation sessions for their students. The results came up with a positive feedback about using online learning through social networking sites and applications. Both of the social and academic skills of students were improved positively.

Keywords: social networking, distance education, perspectives.

1. Introduction and literature review

Despite the fact of; the capability of social networking sites to promote to educational attempts is emphasized by researchers, experiential indication on the utilization of such sites for conventional online learning is limited. In order to deal with this point and fill in this gab, the researcher tended to conduct a case study research in the importance of using the online social networks as a suitable learning environment from instructors' perspectives in the City University College in Ajman through one course that was presented to students through using the online social network site because of the urgent need to use technology in teaching. The increase of handling the social media sites for instance Facebook and Twitter between university students is extremely authenticated (Sponcil & Gitmo, 2013).

Between sociologists and political scientists attentive in social interaction, a principal anxiety has been documentation of the settings for and forms of interaction that provide rise to the exposure of a variety of social and administrative spectacles(Gaines & Mondak 2009). All educational institutions will be required to evaluate themselves according to their responsibility for education and their students through their network at school (O'Brien et al. 2006). Also, there is rising anxiety on the higher education sector to utilize information and communication technology to free higher education from some of the restrictions of time and place that control its reach and raise its cost (Light, Crook & White 2000). Additionally, the majority of universities used to support their students with formatted resources which could be used on iPad, laptop, and their mobile phone, the implementation of social media at the same time with achieving the academic tasks such as students attendance, planning assessments, and revision for tests and exams that is also achieved faster and more organized (Khan, Kend & Robertson 2016).

As noted from the history and through the last two decades, progresses in computer and technology have extremely improved many features of daily life such as shopping to keep on socializing events can now be done online in a way that was absolutely mysterious in the nowadays memory (Gaines & Mondak 2009).

The concept of OSN (online social network) is produced from the significance of social and communicative values that influence all of personal and academic areas of students. To solve the pedagogic issues of distance learning in the recent day context, programs require specific associations, and teaching techniques that need structure (e.g. combining learning materials, designing criteria for giving feedback etc.) and conversations (e.g. Methodical instructor support, answer and contribution at discussion settings, instructional feedback on assessments etc.) combined with the provision technique (Ingirige & Goulding 2009).

- Students past experience in using social networking sites in education:

In a UK HEI, The learners and teachers attitudes and experiences towards online courses assorted across a range of teaching-related topics. The findings assure that some teachers are confident using online technology for teaching objectives, and that they see profits for their learners learning experiences (Harrison, R, Hutt, I, Thomas-Varcoe, C, Motteram, G, Else, K, Rawlings, B, & Gemmell, I 2017).

As the implementation of the online learning and online social networks were supported by a huge number of researchers and articles, the number of benefits is increased for both learners and educators as well. Network theory successfully affords a framework for deducting the models of connections within a complicated system both at the amount of the individual performer, such as at the pair level, and at wider amounts that may evolve

the inner system (Woolcott et al. 2017). Also the relation between students while they have an online discussion has been advocated as one of the supreme contents in Online Education (Herbert, 2006; Heyman, 2010)

There are many social network pages provide students with a qualified environment for learning, Face book is one of them. Facebook (FB) has entirely introduced tasks that simplify social communications between users (Hou et al. 2013).On the other hand, there is gab in the literature regarding social networking in the sector of higher education (Brady et al., 2010).In general learners' experiences can be mentioned as positive and negative. The majority of students classified their Weblogging skills as remaining positive as they handled that Web logging supported their learning and thinking and provided an outside area of the class where they could "meet," providing a kind of identity (Sharma, P, & Xie, Y 2008). Another importance of having online discussion sessions is to free up the classroom time.One of the most important benefits of the electronic discussion system is how it frees up the time and work provided by a human teacher on the comparatively mechanical and dull duty of marking a big number of assignments while supporting a quality of feedback and results that are alike in standard to a face to face instructing (Patel, A, & Russell, D 1998).

2.2 Theoretical Framework:
- Students approaches toward learning process and distance education:
The previous literature reviewed that approaches to learning process are stated to have an effect on the learning objectives. Otherwise, research between undergraduate psychology and different types of students have determined that a deep approach did not suggest academic achievement; then, a strategic approach is the best predictor in these disciplines (Diseth & Martinsen, 2003; Newble &Hejka, 1991 in Balter, O, Cleveland-Innes, M, Pettersson, K, Scheja, M, & Svedin, M 2013).

Sometimes students enter their universities for the first time with a great stress of different issues, one of them is getting afraid of being failed.While, a nonstop sensation of a panic of failure may lead the student to nonstop overachievement, certainly hurting his/her psychological condition. For overachievers, the largest factors may be the feeling of over excitement and excessive objectives linked to oneself. The fear of failure and the sensation of being compelled to succeed, in grouping with unsuitable studying skills, will affect the student's goal direction (Meriläinen, M, & Kuittinen, M 2014).

On the other hand, in a distance education courses, social networking sites support students with a place for encouraging and organizing a setting of preparation through technological presentations, such as user profiles, aids, equipment, and funds. Given the essential borders of course management methods, the use of social networking sites in education environments introduces an ultimate shift toward social and community-based web applications that promote and maintain discipline-specific social networks (Brady, K, Holcomb, L, & Smith, B 2010) .

2.3 Review of related literature
Based on the review of many articles, it is suggested that the effect of social networks for online courses are considered as a suitable environment.

McAlpine & Gandell (2003) conducted a research study on how the analysis of the improvement through teaching could be a tool to inform about professors positive perspectives towards the use of technology in higher education sector. The findings of this research study emphasized the positive role of technology in teaching.

While harma, Priya; Xie, Ying (2008) wrote an exploratory study about investigating students experiences in using weblogs in education and the main variables in their study were the cultural and social skills of students. In this phenomenological study, the researchers included 8 participants who asserted Weblogs in an advanced course were interviewed. Primary data analysis shows that participants discovered that Weblogs are essential for learning, reproducing, and structuring a term of community. Also, participants stated their interests over the shortage of structure for Weblog maintaining and the general nature of the deep process.

In another study Mansouri & Piki (2015) explored the engagement of postgraduate students with the blogs. The researchers applied the mixed method approach and the findings assured the importance of using blogs and giving feedback after the lectures.

The importance of using online webpages is revealed by many researchers. Hou et al. (2013) conducted a research study on observing both of behavioral and cognitive skills of university students through their discussion on face book. 50 students in Taiwan universities were the participants of this study. The results showed that face book could help in the educational activities if there would be an appropriate guidance of the teachers.

Nicol, Minty & Sinclair(2003) conducted a research study on exploring the social aspects of online learning which refers to the ability of communicating and interacting between learners. The participants of this study received an evaluation at the end of an online course to reveal the deep need of the face to face courses for some changes to be recreated in online contents.

2.   The study problem

In the learning environments, equipment such as online discussion sessions, chatting services and e-mail are usually required to enhance communication in the learning process. The social features of learning in online backgrounds are certainly distinctive from those in face-to-face community (Nicol, Minty & Sinclair 2003). For the reason of the importance of applying technology everywhere in the UAE and the essential role of Social Networking Sties (SNSs) in the educational movement, the researcher tended to investigate the effect of SNSs on both of social and academic sides of college students from their own perspectives. Also there is a public thought about using SNSs as a tool for entertainments, while it has another critical role in the educational process.

3.   The study objectives:

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate the Social Networking Sites (SNSs) as a suitable environment for learning and social interaction from the perspectives of college students in City University College of Ajman (CUCA). As well as there are a limited number of research papers to investigate the effect of SNSs in the sector of high education (Brady et al., 2010). So, the main objectives of the recent research paper would be to:
- Investigate the effect of SNSS in developing the social skills of college students in the city university college of Ajman (CUCA).
- Identify the importance of utilizing SNSS in the educational process form the college students' perspectives.
- Explore the impact of SNSS as a suitable learning environment to improve students' academic achievement.

4.   The importance of the study:

Despite of the great interest of the higher educational sector in the United Arab Emarets (UAE), there is a restricted number of articles those could cover the relation between the cognitive and social sides for students. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of using social networks as appropriate environment from college students' points of view. In order to recognize, determine, and explain the experience of students in using social networks in learning online courses, the researcher forms the following questions:
- Is there a significant effect of the online networks platform in the social and cognitive sides of college students' achievement?
- Is the past experience of college students in employing the social networks platform in learning the college courses effective?
- Are there any acquired skills from using the SNSS in education from CUCA students' perspectives?
- Can the use of SNSS be developed to help college students acquiring both of cognitive and social skills?

5. Method:

5.1 Study design:

Methodologically, the research paper follows the interpretive research paradigm; paradigm is defined as the method of looking at the whole world (Mertens n.d. 1999). A qualitative case study is conducted to explore the Online Social Networks as conventional learning settings from college students' perspectives in the City University College of Ajman. A growing number of graduate learners have stated increasing importance in conducting qualitative research studies. Still, a huge number of university faculties, initiated in quantitative methods, are hard surged to guide research studies in participant observation or in a kind of interviewing. (Wilhelm & Huffman, 2000).

5.2 Research approach:

According to the collaborative approach and despite of the great interest of the higher educational sector in the United Arab Emarets (UAE), there is a restricted number of articles those could cover the relation between the cognitive and social sides for students. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of using social networks as appropriate environment from college students' points of view. Observation sessions were assigned to determine, and explain the experience of students in using social networks in learning online courses. In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative case study approach is conducted. As in the recent days, UAE encourages all educational sectors to apply technology in teaching, the researcher choses OSN (online social networks) to be investigated as an effective learning environment. Usually (but not necessarily), case study approach is correlated with qualitative methods that concede the use of data from various sources (Morag, O, Tal, T, & Rotem-Keren, T 2013). While the case study method came under the interpretive research paradigm (Yin,2003), the use of Face Book as a place of learning is considered as the case under investigation. Through the last five years social networking sites (SNSs) is considered as one of the most important categories of social software (Selwyn 2009).

Siemens 2006 (cited in yumurtaci 2017) that the vital reason behind advocates of Connectivism that seeks to support a learning theory that merges the networked nature of the recent day's society along with the technological movements that permit us to support this networked structures.

According to constructivist, the quality of the given activities is a must when merging both of learning and social networking. It is noticeable that not only the ontological and epistemological perceptions of the learning process but also the characteristics of the instructional performances have distorted with a large extent of focus provided to the constructivist expectations (yakin el al. 2015).

In addition to that, in this study observation and interview those are considered as methods of qualitative research will be applied. Anyone can designate the qualitative research as the way of qualitative data is collected with different methods such as observations, interviews and document analysis are used and it is a research in which a qualitative research method is followed (kasimoglu, 2017).

5.3 participants

Ten of sixteen instructors who used to teach the course of advanced software engineering volunteered to be participants of this study. They were reported as six females and four males; their ages are between 40 and 49 and all of them used to teach undergraduate students. All participants had never taught an online course except two of them had taught two online courses before joining the City University College of Ajman. Also the major of all participant instructors is IT (Information Technology). All participants stated having computer at home plus having a mobile phone and expressed their curiosity to teach through using the internet. A consent form had been designed for instructors to determine if they understand the experiment and they know their responsibilities or not.

5.4 Instruments:

Semi-structure interviews are conducted to determine the main purpose of the experiment and to examine students social skills through their instructors, Semi structured interviews are applied to simplify more focused consideration of a particular topic, using an interview guide (Fossey et al. 2002). The semi-structure interview is proposed to determine particular answers from individuals depending on a certain situation or phenomenon which is acquired by them (McIntosh & Morse 2015). Also, site observation would be used with the participants to compare their responses on a group of questions.

Depending on the research questions, the researcher would use both of observation and semi-structure interview as instruments for the study.

- Semi-structure interview:

Interviews are defined by many researchers through the literature, interviews are considered as one of the most well-known approaches for qualitative data collection, while the distinctive qualitative interviewing approaches in general use mixed from varied disciplinary perspectives developing in an extensive difference between interviewing approaches (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006).

So semi-structured interviews were designed in order to offer the interviewees a quantity of freedom to express their beliefs and to emphasize points of specific interest and proficiency that they assumed they had, over and above to allow specific answers to be asked in greater depth, and particularly to highlight and resolve apparent ambiguities (Humphrey, Lee & Christopher Humphrey. 2004).

Accordingly, the researcher tended to design the interviews questions which match the theoretical frame work to cover the sides of; student's achievement, students' social skills, and students' perspectives.

- Observations:

As the researcher is the instructor for students and the teacher of the online course, it allows her to observe students while they are communicating and discussing together. While the researcher needs sometimes to shift from being a full participant in all situations with her students to the role of the researcher and observer to only observe their interactions and communication.

Marshall & Rossman (2011) defined the term of observation as one of the basis of the qualitative research method, as it summarizes many activities which are produced from recording actions of people in a particular settings. Accordingly, observation could be used in different forms such as, following up the way of students writing and talking even in the classroom or in the chatting rooms. So, a checklist is provided to help researcher and guide her observation to students.

The following areas were the majors of the observation sites:
- Students' satisfaction about using home internet for learning
- Students' communication in the chatting room.
- Students' interaction in the classroom.
- The acquired skills from the experiment.

6. Study findings and their discussion:

This study would last in a period of four weeks (one month: May 2018), by giving students some online topics (table1) and give them the chance with supporting them with a Face Book chat room. After a discussion time between students, the researcher would observe them in the classroom and instruct a set of interviews with them

at the end.

topic	Observation date	Duration	interview date	Duration
AI (artificial intelligence)	Wednesday,2 May	60 minutes	Monday, 28 May	60 minutes
IOT (internet of things)	Wednesday, 9 May	60 minutes	Tuesday, 29 May	60 minutes
SOSs (system of systems)	Wednesday, 16 May	60 minutes	Wednesday 30 May	60 minutes
SE (system engineering)	Wednesday, 23 May	60 minutes	Thursday 31 May	60 minutes

Table1

In order to answer the determined research questions, the researcher designed an observation checklist and an interview checklist. The interview checklist has two parts, the first part has 13 points and the second has 12 points, while the observation checklist has four parts, each part has 5 points.
- *Checklist of the observation:*
- <u>Research question1</u>: *Is there a significant effect of the online networks platform in the social and cognitive sides of college students' achievement?*

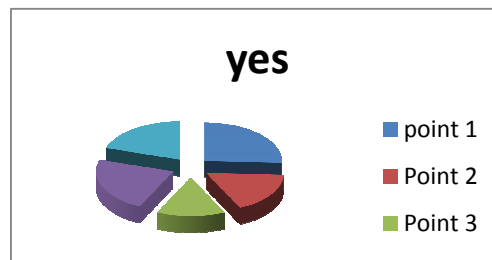|	Y	N
point 1	9	1
Point 2	6	4
Point 3	5	5
Point 4	8	2
Point 5	7	3

Table2

Figure1

Table 2 indicates that majority of instructors agreed on students interact with each other all of the time. Half of the participants said that students keep asking and answering all questions without arguing, while eight instructors assured that students keep reminding each other with their teacher's instructions which reflect their own social skills and deceptions. The most important reflected point was emphasized by seven instructors was that students used to ask about their absent colleagues which mean that they have positive attitudes.
- <u>Research question2</u>: *Is the past experience of college students in employing the social networks platform in learning the college courses effective?*

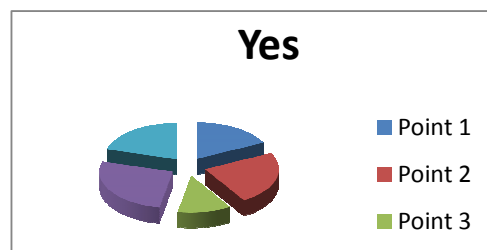|	Yes	No
Point 1	6	4
Point 2	8	2
Point 3	4	6
Point 4	9	1
Point 5	7	3

Table 3

Figure 2

Table 3 covers the research second question. It came clear from the participants answers that the major number of them agreed on some students prefer being silent than sharing ideas with others. Eight participants agreed on students keep answering all of their colleagues in all times. Seven participants argued that students work as a team work to solve any subject problem. While few instructors agreed on having all students attending

all discussion sessions on whatsapp. Also majority of instructors emphasized that students used to greet each other and ask about their general and particular issues which means that they acquired many different and positive social skills.

- Research question3&4: *Are there any acquired skills from using the SNSS in education from CUCA students' perspectives?*
- *Can the use of SNSS be developed to help college students acquiring both of cognitive and social skills?*

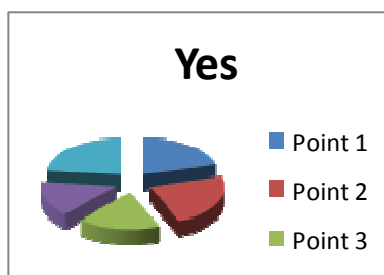|	Yes	No
Point 1	8	2
Point 2	9	1
Point 3	7	3
Point 4	6	4
Point 5	9	1

Table 4

Figure 3.

Table4 and figure3 show that the majority of instructors accept the positive side of using the online social networking sites in education. Nine out of ten participants agreed on student keeps attending all chat discussion sessions from home and home learning is important to support school learning. While eight instructors agreed on it is easy to access the home internet for learning. Six instructors mentioned that no parental issues are found while communicating online with their children. Also seven instructors recommended whatsapp application for chatting as a suitable tool.

- *Interview checklist:*
- Research question1&2: *Is there a significant effect of the online networks platform in the social and cognitive sides of college students' achievement?*
- *Is the past experience of college students in employing the social networks platform in learning the college courses effective?*

1. Introduce yourself.
2. Talk about your responsibilities towards your students through the teaching of this subject.
3. How many students are there in your class?
4. Do you agree or disagree; the number of students in each class affects their ability to acquire new knowledge?
5. Did you teach any online courses in the past?
6. Talk about any past experience you had in applying technology in teaching?
7. Do you think that there is any relation between social and cognitive skills of students?
8. What are the main outcomes of the computer fundamental courses?
9. From your own experience, do you think that communication through SN affects students' academic and social skills?
10. What are the most required skills form new teachers who are supposed to work in the online educational field?
11. As a teacher, do you agree or disagree that students should have their mobile phones in the classrooms?
12. Would you describe the relation between students while they are communicating online?
13. Would you recommend using online social networking sites as a suitable learning environment according to your students' achievement?

Table 5

Table 5 has thirteen questions were given to the participants individually with a group of semi-structure interview. The participants came up with homogeneous answers. Seven out of ten instructors assured that the big numbers in the classes affect their ability of acquiring knowledge negatively, also six instructors out of ten did not teach such online programs before which means that would be a new experience for them. All participants agreed on students should have their phones with them in the classrooms. But what was noticed that only six of

the participants recommended using online courses in the educational institutions and their reason was about having uncontrolled connection with the outside communities. It can be assured that using the social networking sites and applications in the educational process affects students socially and academically in a positive way, while have a past experience in using such programs in education is considered by instructors as an effective teaching method.

- The research questions 3&4:

  Are there any acquired skills from using the SNSS in education from CUCA instructors' perspectives?
  - Can the use of SNSS be developed to help college students acquiring both of cognitive and social skills?

1. Introduce yourself.
2. Tell me about your past experience with the online learning courses.
3. Do you think websites are only used for entertainment and shopping?
4. What will you do if all of your university courses would be online courses?
5. How many friends do have in your classroom?
6. Which application is mostly used in your daily life to chat with your friends?
7. Talk about the relation between you and your students through the class time?
8. Do you agree or disagree; all subjects should be instructed as face to face interaction classes.
9. Do you agree or disagree; all subjects should be instructed as online classes.
10. Can you tell me unforgettable situation in your classroom.
11. What will you do if you have an absent student from your class?
12. Would you recommend using online social networking sites as a suitable learning environment according to your achievement?

Table 6.

Table 6 has twelve questions to answer the third and fourth research questions. This part is assigned to the participants and their answers came varied and emphasized. Nine out of ten of the participants assured the importance of social networking applications for shopping and entertainment purposes which means that they have a lake of knowledge related to social applications in educational purposes. Also all of the participants argued that whatsapp and twitter are considered as the most useful applications in our daily lives and work. Moreover, changing all courses to be online only was a restricted recommendation by around eight participants out of ten. Question ten came up with many different stories about classrooms and sometimes when teachers enter their classes while they are not well-prepared. All of these results and answers assured the importance of using technology and social networking sites in education and online courses.

7.   Conclusion and recommendations :

Social networking is considered by many people and researchers as a tool of improving students and gets them involving in the societies even academically or socially. Through this research paper, the researcher tried to examine the suitability of using the online social networking as a learning community from the point of view of undergraduate students in the UAE.

Additionally, it can be indicated that using online social networking is a successful and appropriate community for students to improve their skills and to gain knowledge. Also the participants of this research themselves assured that the importance of using the social networking pages such as emails and different applications is not only useful for improving their way of learning but it helps them to be involved in their societies.

Moreover, the participants of this study encouraged having all of their college courses online as it became easier to find all sources and information through the websites and application. Also they recommended improving some application such as twitter and instagram to have some educational chatting rooms from all over the world to share their ideas nationally and internationally.

Another recommendation came from one of the participants was having a master application to control a group of applications under the name of each course which make it easier for students from the same course to reach their required knowledge and information.

It can be concluded that the outcomes of this research paper are factors in refining and supporting the eLearning in the higher educational sector in the UAE by forming and instructing some recommendations that enhance the social and academic skills of college students. Consequently, learners could reach their highest level of achievement through their use of social networking application in their educational journey.

Lastly, I motivate all practioners and researchers to apply such a program with their students and participants. This program could be developed to suit different contexts and courses.

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