

Online Social Support to University Students: Does Lecturer's Popularity Matter?

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Abstract

Rapid growth and innovation of the technologies is having a very large and burgeoning impact on people's lives – from the way they share as well as the way they learn. Launched in 2004, Facebook is one of the social networking sites (SNS) that has become a centre of social interaction that involves various dynamics inside its communities including higher education institutions. With its daily active user are reported to be 1.038 billion and available in more than 70 languages, these are the clear evidence that indicates Facebook popularity and among the predictors for Facebook user to use it as they find it cool and fun. University students are driven to Facebook not only to maintain existing social relationships but also for learning purposes. As most of the research has been carried out looking at the motives for Facebook usage, what are the factors that help them to determine to whom they should seek for social support are remain unclear. However, some researchers suggest that social support can gained from the closest and the most credible. Credibility has been revealed to closely related with individual social status and perceived to be one of the factors contributing to popularity. Does lecturer's popularity making them a credible option for the students to seek for social support? Is number of friends and with whom the lecturers befriended with are among one of the criteria that the students would look for while seeking for social support? Using questionnaire survey distributed among students in University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), we hope that this research will be useful to educational practitioners in understanding of what, who, when, where, why and how their students use of Facebook and effectively help them to adjust themselves in parallel with the need to increase the learning opportunities.

Keywords: Facebook, social status, friendship nominations, motives and usage

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1. Introduction

Rapid growth and innovation of technologies that we use are the fact of our lives today. In a world that becoming more connected, this advancement has a profound impact in our daily lives from the way we share and the way we learn. Facebook is no longer a trend, it is now pre-eminent social networking sites (SNS) after it introduced to the public in 2004 [1]. With its active user reported to be 1.038 billion and more than 50% of whom actively logged into the sites daily, Facebook is no doubt to be very popular. Search for social information, entertain ourselves, and interact with others as well as a platform for self-expression is some of the predictors of why people use Facebook. Parent are said to be join Facebook to monitor what their kids do online [2]. Compared to MySpace and Friendster that also design to connect people, Facebook can consider a leading social networking site for the university students [1] as some study reveals that student used it to contact

their classmates regarding the assignments as well as group discussions. This proves that Facebook does have a positive impact in student lives as it provides social support especially in term of academic matter [1]. Social support traditionally considered as an exchange of verbal and non-verbal of messages related to information or emotion transmitted with the purpose to reduce stress and anxiety. Although reportedly exist via face to face interaction, with the rise of Internet the exchange of computer mediated support or online social support are also common nowadays. As it also a communication with someone that cared and valued by others, social support also exist among close friends. However, in university environment, close friends or classmates is not the only group that student will refer to when there is a need to reduce uncertainty. When it is something that related to coursework or academic, lecturer should be the best person for the student to seek support due to their credibility. However, it what circumstances that the lecturer seen to be high in credibility thus induce the students to seek their support, via online. Credibility is earned and relate to social status as it relate to

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resource control which also mean power. Popularity is one of the factors contributing to the high social support received by an individual [3]. The purpose of this research is to study about when there is a need for the student to look for online social support, what are the predictors that will influence their choices regarding to whom should they referring to..

2. Literature Review

2.1. Background of Facebook

Individuals who wish to use Facebook must register and create their own profile by using a valid email address [1,4]. Facebook is said to be divided into four elements consists of control, referents, preference and contact [5]. Controls elements will include the information of user gender as well as institutional status whereas referents are related to common point of referent related to the user included hometown and education. Preference element will include in information such as user personal information and more toward self-descriptive type of information. For example what is user favourite music and favourite book? The last element which is contact will contained information such as email address and user birthday. Facebook user can send in messages to other individuals to ask if he or she agree to be his or her Facebook friends. Once the request has been accepted, the user can now communicate with their friend [6]. There are several ways for the user to communicate with their friends via Facebook. User can send them a private message that almost similar to the concept of emailing [7]. Other than that, they can use the Wall function where the user can post message, music or even a picture to share information. This concept is more like a notice board function. There is also chat function that allows the user to communicate in a real time with the friends. User can also join in their favourite groups via Facebook as it allows them who share a similar interest to get together and support their favourite group or the organizations [6]. Facebook is also a source of entertainment as it also includes games like Candy Crush and application such as Photo Perfect.

2.2. Social Support

House [8] social support is an interpersonal transaction in which one can rely on others for information, help, and advice. Social support is also an exchange of verbal or non-verbal messages related to information or emotion transmitted with the purpose to reduce stress and uncertainty [9,10]. Social support is also considered to be a communication with someone who is very close for example close friends. Several categories of social support including informational support, motivational support, emotional support and esteem support. With the rise of Internet, computer mediated support or online support is also common nowadays [11]. Online social supports are

categorized into multiple dimensions: *tangible support* which referred to material aid or assistance behaviour that could help others who are in need. *Informational support* was the giving advice or sharing information to help others to solve their problems while *emotional support* is an expression of the positive affection or understanding an actions or feeling that could help to enhanced people to value their own worth. The last dimension which is *companionship support* referred to an availability of other people who felt joyful and fun when doing things together [12].

2.3. Popularity

Likeability is often seen as an indicator for status and popularity. However, study also reveals that adolescents who are seen as popular are by the definition of being liked [13]. Being a popular person does not mean that he or she is need to be liked. Popularity is a combination of pro-social as well as antisocial antecedents which include aggression [14,15,16,17,18]. Status and dominance from evolutionary perspectives is said to be gained using coercive and aggressive strategies. Therefore, popularity has been related to resource control [18], dominance [15,16,17], prominence [19,20,21], visibility [16] and admiration and leadership [16]. Popularity is also an idea that popular adolescents is so attractive to someone or many to hang out with, associate or affiliate with [19,20].

Popularity is a manifestation of status. Status involves ranking people as status system is hierarchical in nature based on inferiority and superiority. As it differentiated based on ranking, therefore it provides comparison between the individual with the others in the same system [13,18,21, 22]. Another central aspect of status is it is based on cognitive attributions of others. Individual position is based on social consensus of that individual reputation among the other member in the system. La Fontana and Cillessen [15] showed that the valence and stability of early adolescents' attributions about a peer are influenced by the peer's popularity.

Cohen and Prinstein [23] found that high school students were more likely to change their opinions to conform to those of popular peers than their unpopular peers. Marks and Crick [23] demonstrated that undergraduates were more likely to attribute hostile intent to popular than non-popular peers in some situations. Thus, popularity fulfils several requirements for being classified as a type of status. It (1) is a hierarchical ranking of people (2) based on group consensus, which (3) determines social perceptions and actions of individuals [24].

2.4. Theory of Uses and Gratifications

Uses and gratifications theory explained when the audiences have an active role in seeking out and making choices among media and other competing information sources in order to gratify their own need [9]. The need is a motivation for people to choose or make their own choices. Hence, people will make their own decision on what type

of media that deems to be fit in fulfilling their need such as interpersonal communication, companionship, entertainment and social identity. In the case of Facebook, it is a social media that able to provide social support of tangible support, informational, emotional and companionship support, demonstrates gratifications which personal and social need they obtained from using Facebook.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

A total of 50 students who were undergraduate from different faculty located in University Tunku Abdul Rahman Perak campus were invited as participants for this study. Convenience sampling were used in the study and involved in the distribution of questionnaire in campus so as to select students that were conveniently available. Questionnaire has been chosen as an instrument for this study to ensure satisfactory return rate and it is divided into three sections. Section A is mainly for demographic profile and consists of questions like gender, age, faculty and semester where students are currently in. Section B has been using to investigate the effects of two measurement for popularity which is the number of friendship that the lecturer had and with who the lecturer affiliate with on his or her credibility that will influence students to seek for social support.

4. Results

This study will look at two dimensions of popularity that help to predict individual status compared to others. The first dimension is the number of friendship that the individual have and the second dimension is who he or she affiliate with [1].

For the first dimension, the number of friendship influence the social status of an individual will be seen to have power. As status reflects resource control, therefore those lecturer who seen and known to have more friend will be seen as an ideal option for the student to seek after social support. This is because the lecturer has more people that can turn into a channel if in the case student need their advice. The second dimension which is whom they are associate with is also important as the student will find that not only the lecturer has a number of friends that he or she can referring to but those friend is not just an ordinary friends. They are friends with experts or skill and this will make them high and status. Lecturer who known to be affiliate with high status friends will not only benefit themselves but also benefit the students who sought after their social support via online.

4.1. Effects of number of friends in Facebook on lecturer credibility for social support

Previous researches indicate that students have about 150 to 200 of friends in their Facebook friend list [1]. This study indicates that 64 % agree that they have more than 100 friends in their Facebook friends list. While the term friend could be establishing with someone with whom they are familiar with in offline environment, it is also common that some people build up a relationship with someone who they barely acquainted with [24]. Extroversion was said to be predictors to a number of friend in Facebook. This research suggest that lecturer who has more willingness to initiate friendship will have more friend compared to those who preferred to only have a friends from a similar categories such as gender or affiliations. Not surprisingly, shyness is also influence and limits the number of Facebook friends of lecturer. 54% students agree that they willing to befriend with lecturer who are less shy and more willingness to initiate friendship for example by sending an invitation to them. The assumptions to this are maybe it is due to the anxiousness that the lecturer could have toward face to face interaction especially when it is involved their students. He or she may be thought that any discussion done involving students should be done via face to face interaction and more in formal way. In this case social media like Facebook might be seen as to fulfil the lecturer gratification of entertainment and that definitely not include a conversation with the students.

4.2. Effects of with who the lecturer is affiliate with in Facebook on lecturer credibility for social support

Social reputations can influence how to act in social actions [23]. People who aware about their reputation would act more aggressively in order to maintain their social status compared to others. This can be done by attach to a friends who already high in their status, well known and seen by other people as someone who have power. Gain social power require someone to be visible and dominance by using aggressive tactics. Lecturer who seen by student befriend with an individual who are well known for their achievement and recognized for their contributions is credible to seek after social support. Students' perception pertaining lecturer social status and behavioural reputations can shape their decisions of how to act in social situations. More than 58% students agree that lecturer who known to befriend with someone or their colleague is high in social status and behavioural reputations will attract students to look for him or her for social support. Therefore, associate with someone who is high in status and behavioural reputation will be seen as credible and easily lead the students to sought for the lecturer social support.

5. Conclusions

The current study investigated if the lecturer's popularity is among the predictors for the university students to seek after their social support via online, particularly social media like Facebook. In this study, popularity has been measured with a number of friendships that the lecturer had as well as with who he or she are associated with. Overall, it was found that lecturer who are less shy and willing to initiate more friendship both with male or female record a high number of friendship nominations. And, the unique characteristics and feature of the Facebook itself did play an important role as those students who less active in offline will find it encourage if the lecturer are willing to initiate friendship with them, thus add into the number of friendship nomination that the lecturer had. Other than that, quality of friendship that the lecturer had also help the students in determine or decide should they seek or should not they seek after the lecturer support. Is he or she can help me to sort out the solutions to cater to my problem? Therefore, with who the lecturer is affiliate and associate with does contribute to the student decisions. High social status and behavioural reputation will somehow help to increase people surrounded them as well. In the case of the lecturer, hang out with someone who possess the above criteria could lead to his or her being seen as high in social status as well.

Future studies should also examine other context of student as most of the previous research look into undergraduate students such as post graduate students. Post graduate students is more independent in their approach toward learning, therefore the need for social support is more crucial compared to undergraduate students. Other than that, future research should also been conducted among students from a different countries as different socio cultural and geographical context could influence how and what type of social support that can be seek from Facebook.

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