Use Of Social Networking Sites And Instant Messaging Applications For University-Related Work And Studying

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Abstract

Social Networking Sites (SNS) and Instant Messaging (IM) applications have become very popular in the last decade. This article aims to investigate to what extent university students make use of SNS and IM in relation with learning and university-related work. In order to do so, a survey was conducted among 115 university students. Results show that answering surveys posted by other students (for their university work), being part of groups created for doing university work or studying and sharing university-related links are some of the education-related activities that students most perform on Facebook. Alongside Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube and LinkedIn are the most popular SNS or IM applications when it comes to studying, doing and organizing university-related work. Some differences among male and female students can be inferred from the data though, although it was not the aim of this study to explore such differences and further research would be needed. The paper concludes that university students make good and ample use of SNS and IM applications for education-related purposes and a recommendation for lecturers to adopt these tools is made.

Keywords: Facebook, Social Networking Sites, Instant Messaging applications, education, university students, WhatsApp

Introduction

Social Networking Sites (SNS) and Instant Messaging (IM) applications are a phenomenon that has attracted lots of attention since they first appeared, especially among young people and teenagers. Thus, for example, 90% of US college students admitted to using Facebook in a survey for which results were published in 2011 (Paul, Baker & Cochran, 2012).

This being the case, the question raises whether universities should adopt these new technologies in their everyday life in order to interact with students. The reasoning goes this way: "If students are on Facebook, why should universities not be on Facebook too?" And more importantly: "Should this kind of technologies be adapted for classroom use and learning support?"

It should be highlighted here that the use of computers and smartphones is usually banned in many universities in those courses for which they are not strictly necessary. This implies the prohibition to use SNS such as Facebook and IM applications such as WhatsApp in the classroom environment.

The aim of this study is to get to know what use do students make of Facebook and other SNS and IM applications that is related to university work and learning. It should be noted that it is that use that students make on their own (without any kind of university or professor encouragement) that is analysed here.

The author considers that it is important to know what use do students make of such platforms (that is in some way related to university) before universities and university professors consider making use of them to approach students.

Literature review

Much of the academic literature reviewed focuses on the effects on student productivity that the use of SNS and IM applications has (e.g. Paul, Baker & Cochran, 2012; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010). Thus, it has been argued that there is a negative relationship between the time students spend on SNS and their academic performance.

Kirschner & Karpinski (2010) show a negative relationship between hours spent on Facebook and average grades. Facebook users also reported spending fewer hours studying than nonusers, although both Facebook users and nonusers spent the same number of hours surfing on the Internet. Interestingly, most students claimed there was no relationship between poor academic performance and the number of hours spent on Facebook.

Authors disagree on whether professors and academic institutions should or should not introduce the use of SNS and IM applications in the classrooms. Thus, Paul, Baker & Cochran (2012) state that even though students consider themselves to be perfectly able to use such platforms for academic purposes, they are not at all willing to do so. Similarly, it is stated that not all students are ready to embrace the use of social networking tools such as Facebook in formal teaching, learning and assessment (Baran, 2010).

Therefore, there would be no scientific reason for academic institutions to adopt SNS and IM applications in their relationship with students. Paul, Baker & Cochran (2012) even goes to the extent of discouraging further academic research on the kind of exercises that would enhance learning, as doing so would have no real applicability.

Other authors have reached exactly the opposite conclusion. For example, Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin (2010) find that students believe Facebook could be used by lecturers to facilitate learning to students. The said study recommends professors and academic institutions to implement these platforms in their classes, but also argues that this should not be done without previously clearly defining learning objectives for the use of such platforms. This study also mentions some studies by other authors in which it is also highlighted students' willingness to adopt this kind of technologies in the learning environment.

A similar conclusion is reached in Roblyer et altri (2010), where student openness to the instructional use of SNS is stated. Túñez López & Sixto García (2012) show from their experimental study that the number of students voluntarily using Facebook to enhance their learning was larger than the number of students attending classes and that a majority of students recommended implementing Facebook among other subjects' pedagogical methods and tools. However, other authors (such as Wang, 2012) make differences between students based on their age. Thus, it seems that younger students (e.g. those in college) are more willing to adopt SNS for learning purposes than older students (e.g. Master students).

But as Roblyer et altri (2010) point out even though students seem to be willing to adopt this kind of technologies in the university and learning environments, academic institutions are not. However, it should be noted that most universities and higher education institutions have their own Facebook pages, by means of which they seek to link with past, current and potential students and communicate events, release marketing campaigns, upload photos and so on. It is only when it comes to introducing such platforms for learning purposes that these institutions are reluctant, although some SNS uses are starting to emerge in higher education classrooms, as faculty start to use them to deliver instructional content (Paul, Baker & Cochran, 2012; Roblyer et altri, 2010).

The relationship between three of the "Big Five" traits (neuroticism, extraversion, and openness), self-esteem, loneliness and narcissism, and Facebook use by undergraduate psychology students from a medium-sized Australian university showed that students with higher openness levels reported spending more time on Facebook and accumulating more friends on Facebook, and students with higher levels of loneliness reported having more Facebook friends (Skues, Williams & Wise, 2012). This study reflected extraversion, neuroticism, self-esteem and narcissism did not have significant associations with Facebook use.

Students' perceptions of using Facebook pages within individual university subject anticipated that a Facebook page would facilitate their learning, increasing interaction with students and instructors, and also notifications for course information. The majority of students recommended using Facebook in future courses (Irwin et altri, 2012).

Different authors have also considered in their studies the advantages and drawbacks SNS such as Facebook may have when applied to classroom activity. Some advantages include the following: students' perception of a professor's use of Facebook as an attempt to foster positive relationship with his or her students (Roblyer et altri, 2010); professor credibility enhancement by showing an understanding of contemporary student culture and habits (Roblyer et altri, 2010); easiness of access and information availability; allows for publication and distribution of both video and audio content; promotes student-professor and student-student communication; promotes collaborative work in the learning environment; knowledge diffusion becomes a collective process (López Aguirre & Mata Sánchez, 2012); learning becomes active (as opposed to passive) (Wang et altri, 2012); and so on.

On the other hand, drawbacks would include the following: potential damage to professor credibility derived from an inappropriate use of SNS when approaching students (Roblyer et altri (2010); impossibility to upload files in other formats, such as ppt or pdf (Túñez López & Sixto García, 2012; Wang et altri, 2012); difficulty of conducting a personalized monitoring of the activity (Túñez López & Sixto García, 2012); students may not feel safe in terms of privacy concerns (Wang et altri, 2012); and so on.

Thus, according to López Aguirre and Mata Sánchez (2012), introducing SNS in the learning context poses various challenges: preventing learning from diluting, therefore becoming mere interaction; keeping in mind that it is the learning that should be socialized, not the professor; transforming information into knowledge; and so on.

When dealing with implementing SNS in the learning context, professors should take into account the following (Túñez López & Sixto García, 2012):

-SNS are mainly social and they are dedicated to building personal relationships.

-SNS were not born as pedagogical platforms.

-Facebook is not a classroom, it is just a help.

-SNS sites cannot be used for evaluation or monitoring, as only active participation can be tracked.

-Accessing SNS requires a proactive behaviour from students.

-SNS are for conversation, not a one-direction speech.

-Using SNS in the learning environment requires some extra work from both professors and students.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to get to know to what extent students use SNS and IM applications for university-related work and learning without lecturers or academic institutions asking them to do so. The author of the current study found that there was no academic literature on this issue. As has been seen above, previous research has focused on SNS implementation in the classroom context by professors and how students perceive it. There is also research on what use do young people do of SNS (e.g. Cheung, Chiu & Lee, 2011), but no articles have been found that approach the issue the way it is done here. Unsurprisingly, given that SNS were born as social sites for finding friends, the latter group of academic articles conclude that most people use SNS such as Facebook so as to keep in constant and immediate touch with their friends (e.g. Cheung, Chiu & Lee, 2011).

As it is pointed out in [10], students can now have access to content uploaded on the Internet by professors and researchers all around the world. Blogs, wikis, videos, podcasts and many other educational resources are all readily available online (Gómez Nieto & Tapia Frade, 2011).

The question here is: do students also make use of SNS and IM applications for university-work and learning purposes without professor implication?

In order to answer this question, a self-administered survey was conducted among 115 college students. The survey just included six questions, five of which had dichotomous answer options (Yes or No). The survey was kept simple in order to get the maximum possible number of valid answers. All answers were collected in November 2014.

Five out of the six questions of the survey focused on the popular SNS Facebook, which was the main research topic. The last question (the only one that was not dichotomous in the answer) asked about other SNS and IM applications. Specifically, that last question asked about the following platforms:

-Tuenti: a Spanish SNS similar to Facebook.

-Twitter: a microblogging platform.

-WhatsApp: an IM application.

-LinkedIn: a SNS for professionals.

-Google+: a SNS.

-Line: an IM application.

-Instagram: a photograph-sharing platform.

-YouTube: a video-sharing platform.

People answering the survey also had the possibility of choosing the "Other" option.

The sample is formed by college students from the School of Economics of a Spanish university. As it is college students we are talking about, ages range from 18 to 25 years old. 42% of the students in the sample were females; 51%, males; the remaining 7% decided not to disclose their gender. Given the simple nature of the study being conducted, no more demographic data was required from the sample.

It should be highlighted that 100% of the students surveyed had an active Facebook account.

Results

Results show students have integrated Facebook and other SNS and IM applications in their lives, not only in their lives in general but also in their lives as students. In fact, more than half of the students surveyed (53%) stated they used Facebook for learning purposes.

Of those who said they used Facebook for learning purposes, a stunning 85% said they were part of at least one group on Facebook created for the purposes of learning, sharing information related with classroom work and doing university work.

Moreover, of those who said they used Facebook for learning purposes: 80% said they used this SNS for sharing university- or learning-related links with their contacts; 79% had answered at least once to a survey posted on Facebook by a friend for that friend's university work; and 56% had posted a survey (for university work) on Facebook for their contacts to answer it online at least once.

However, it should be highlighted that not only students who answered on the affirmative to the question of whether they used Facebook for learning purposes answered positively to the following questions. This might be a consequence of the said question being the first one and students not been consciously aware of the fact that they actually use Facebook for something more than socializing, and specifically, studying or doing university-related work.

Thus, even though only 53% of the sample said they used Facebook for learning purposes:

-70% of the total sample was part of at least one Facebook group for learning or working on university stuff.

-70% of the total sample had answered at least once to a survey posted on Facebook for someone else's university work.

-66% of the total sample used to share university- or learning-related links on Facebook.

-41% of the total sample had shared a link to a survey related to university work at least once.

As for SNS and IM applications other than Facebook, students also used them for learning purposes, although in very different degrees. Fig. 1 below shows the percentage of the total sample that said they used them for such purposes: WhatsApp is, with no possible doubt, the most popular platform in this context. YouTube and LinkedIn occupy second and third places in the ranking.

Figure 1: Percentage of the total sample that use each of the SNS or IM applications listed for learning purposes.
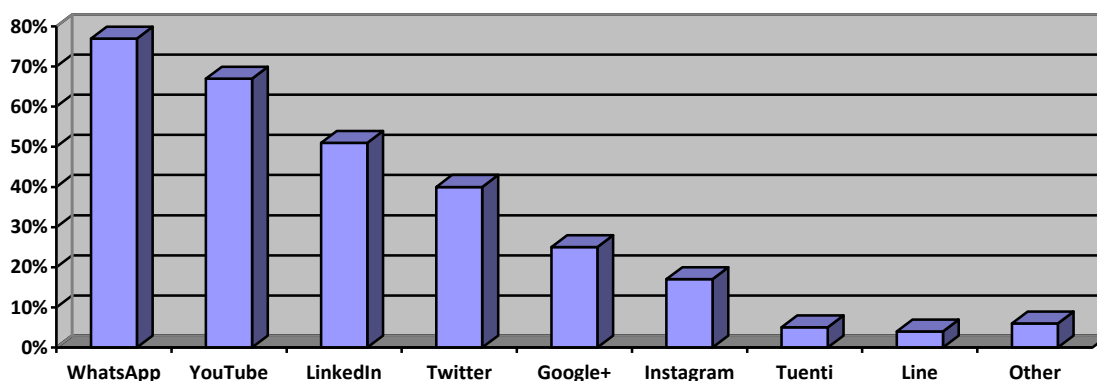
With regard to this last point, some differences can be inferred between males and females, as shown in Fig. 2. In general, it looks like females make use of this kind of platforms for educational purposes more than males. Nevertheless, the order from most to least used does not change if compared with data shown in Fig.1: WhatsApp and YouTube are the most popular platforms when it comes to learning, studying and doing university work. However, it is not the aim of the current article to study differences between genders with regard to this issue.

Figure 2: Percentage of males and females in the sample that use each of the SNS and IM applications listed for learning purposes.
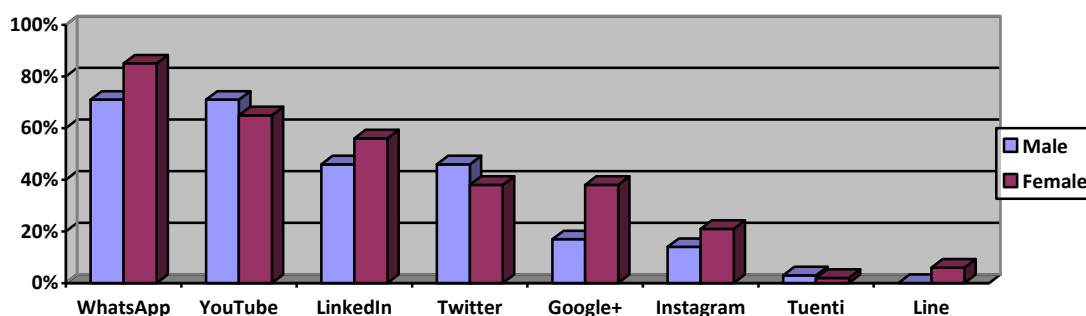
Discussion and conclusions

SNS and IM applications have become fundamental to most young people's lives. They use these platforms in all kinds of different contexts and situations. One such context is that of university-related work and learning.

In fact, students seem to have assimilated the use of such platforms in their lives so well that they are not aware to what extent they actually use it, as becomes clear from the fact that even though only 53% said they used Facebook for learning purposes, 70% were part of at least one Facebook group created for doing university work and 66% had posted at least once a university-work-related-survey on Facebook for their contacts to answer.

In any case, it looks like students are used to using SNS in relation with studying and doing homework, even if lecturers have not asked them to do so. That is, students use SNS not only for socializing but also for doing university work, organizing studying groups, sharing links to online content related to their studies and so on.

An interesting result of the survey conducted is that students use WhatsApp for academic or learning purposes even more than Facebook (77% as opposed to Facebook's 70%). A close follower is YouTube, which was used by 67% of the total sample for academic or learning purposes.

LinkedIn (51%), Twitter (41%), Google+ (25%) and Instagram (17%) follow next; while Tuenti (5%) and Line (4%) are only used by a negligible minority. However, it should be noted that these are total figures and that they are not adjusted for the number of people who use each platform or has a profile on it. Moreover, further research on the specific uses students make of each platform is needed.

Therefore, it can be safely concluded from the study that students are already using SNS and IM applications for university-related work and studying, facilitating their learning and interaction with students and instructors, like concluded Irwin et altri (2012).

SNS and IM applications have many advantages in terms of immediacy, easiness of communication and accessibility, characteristics that make them highly recommendable for lecturers and professors to enhance communication with students and motivate learning by using contemporary formats and ways of doing.

SNS and IM applications, although they may pose some risk, they also offer many advantages and opportunities for lecturers and professors. They is no reason to demonize them in the way universities and higher education institutions have been doing, banning students from using them in their premises. Instead, and taking into account that such platforms gain new users every day, academic institutions should try to integrate them in their everyday life as a means of communication and try to capitalize on their potential benefits, which are not few.

Limitations and future research

The current study is just a preliminary study. The author aims to increase its depth and width in future research.

One of the limitations of the study comes from the fact that only students are surveyed. It would be interesting to record not only students' but also professors' uses and attitudes towards SNS and IM applications in the university context.

It could also be interesting to conduct a real-life experiment in which some SNS or IM application were applied for the delivery of classroom content and then survey both students and the professors involved on it.

The current study could also be enhanced by extending it in order to be able to look for differences among different student segments (e.g. male vs female, freshmen vs last-year students, European vs non-European, and so on). It could also be enhanced by distinguishing among the different uses students make of different platforms in the context under study.

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