

The Usage and Online Behavior of Social Networking Sites among International Students in New Zealand

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Abstract

This study examines SNS use by international students located in Auckland, New Zealand. The frequency of SNS usage and behaviour of international students, who are away from their home countries, is different from the general youth of the host country. The study used a questionnaire that revealed the most popular SNS were Facebook, Google+, Twitter, MySpace, and LinkedIn. The new addition to this commonly cited list is QQ, a Chinese SNS, which is extremely popular among students from China. The results also show support for reasons for SNS usage namely personal, entertainment, commercial, and academic. Unlike in other studies, female students are found to be quite proactive in sharing personal information. Finally, the study discusses implications of these results for managers and students, and offers a set of recommendations for further research.

In the last few years, social networking sites (SNS) have emerged as the Web 2.0-based Internet platform for people to interact with each other, such as friends, family, or solely online friends (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Participants primarily communicate with people who are part of their extended social network (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, the defining feature of SNS is their ability to reshape communication patterns by enabling online communication and lowering barriers to face-to-face interaction by their users (DeAndrea,

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Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield & Fiore, 2011). For instance, Coyle and Vaughn define social network as “a configuration of people connected to one another through inter personal means such as friendship, common interests or ideas” (2008, p.13). Moreover, SNS allow users to post personal information and to communicate with others in an innovative ways such as sending public or private online messages or sharing photos online (Pempek, Yemolayeva & Calvert, 2009). In addition, SNS provide users a profile space, upload photos, and connect with friends, family and society (Joinson, 2008; Ezumah, 2013). Some popular examples of SNS are Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Because of the interactivity features of Web 2.0 technology, social networking has extended globally, where users can interact with friends and meet new people in cyberspace (Kwon, Daihwan, Geringer, & Lim, 2013). Since the users of these sites form a virtual community to share interests, social networking is growing and is one of the web’s top activities (Kiser & Porter, 2011).

Recognizing the importance of SNS, several scholars have examined its use in educational institutions (e.g., Pempek et al., 2009; Shen & Khalife, 2010; DeAndrea et al., 2011; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Kwon et al., 2013). For instance, a recent study (Duncan, & Barczyk, 2012) revealed that Facebook is transforming educational institutions, and could enhance a “sense of social learning and connectedness” (p. 1). Facebook.com data of 2011 revealed that over 500 million active users engaged in using Facebook (Kwon et al., 2013). In their study Kwon, et al., (2013) found that Facebook is the most popular among students followed by Twitter.

However, all of these studies were conducted in other countries and examine only their domestic students. Further, very few studies have examined international students’ behaviour on SNS (Lee, Lee & Jang, 2011). International students in New Zealand are a major source of export revenue. In 2011, export education contributed over \$2.3 billion to the gross domestic product of New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2012). Many of these students, being away from home, are likely to rely on SNS communication.

The main purpose of this research is to investigate how the international student community in New Zealand uses SNS. In particular, it seeks to identify the popular SNS used by international students, and the amount of time spent on these sites.

Literature Review

As the SNS phenomenon is of relatively recent origin, academic research on SNS is also at its preliminary stage. Scholarly research has evolved only recently in this field. The literature is focused on the demography of young people, especially tertiary students, followed by their usage of social network sites.

Like users in the case of the Internet, young people are found to be major users of SNS (Akar & Topcu, 2011; Jabr, 2011, Tuten & Marks, 2012; Ezumah, 2013). According to Akar and Topcu (2011) people between the ages of 18 and 24 are more prominent users of SNS compared to other groups. Additionally, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) also suggest that young adults engage more in social networking, and that frequency of usage is higher than in other age groups. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project Surveys (2013), 72% of online adults use social networking sites, and most of these adults range in age from 18-29 years. A similar pattern was also found in other studies (Ezumah, 2013; Duncan & Barczyk, 2012). Among the SNS, some are more popular than others. In a recent study (Ezumah, 2013), the popularity of the top four SNS are Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn. This finding is similar to the findings of previous studies (Jabr, 2011; Tham & Ahmed, 2011; Kiser & Porter, 2011; Benson, Filippaios, & Morgan 2010). However, SNS are also very popular in non-English speaking countries. For instance, Park and Kim (2013) investigated the use of SNS among young Chinese users. The results from their study reveal that young Chinese are also using alternative versions of Facebook and Twitter. They are QQ, Renren and Sina Space (Park & Kim, 2013).

Benson et al. (2010) have examined the use of SNS among business students in the United Kingdom. In their study they find key differences among undergraduate and postgraduate students in terms of gender, program and age. Undergraduate students use Facebook mainly to keep in touch with friends. Postgraduate students use Facebook for general socializing and LinkedIn for finding jobs or new business connections. However, both groups feel that making contact with people from university is an important factor.

Although SNS such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn were all invented in the English-speaking countries, they are also used in non-English speaking countries. For instance, Shen and Khalifa (2010)

examine the usage of SNS, particularly the importance of Facebook by the Arabic college students and find that participants had more than five years experience with the Internet and that Facebook is very popular among the younger generation. The results also revealed that female students are more active in information seeking and contributing to social networking than their male counterparts. This finding is consistent with findings from other countries (Benson et al., 2010; Kiser & Porter, 2011; Mansumittrchai, Park, & Chiu, 2012). For instance, a study in South Korea revealed that females are more involved in using Facebook than male (Mansumittrchai et al., 2012). However, Peluchette and Karl (2008) find that male students are more likely to place self-promoting comments on their profile than female students. Both male and female students were comfortable with their friends, classmates, and family having access to their profiles but were neutral regarding access by employers and strangers.

Recent studies have examined how SNS can affect the academic performance of students (Jabr, 2011; Stanciu, Mihai, & Aleca, 2012). The study by Kiser and Porter (2011) reveals a mixed view. While many students suggest that SNS should be used for providing information on assignments, course information, and group study, a few of them felt that the SNS are not effective for educational purposes. Nevertheless, some studies find strong support for the use of SNS in education. For instance, Jabr (2011) revealed that SNS are found to be useful for "better academic learning and communication." Ajagbe, Eluwa, Duncan, Mkomange and Lasisi (2011) also find that a majority of students agreed that social networking sites have a positive impact on their academic performance. This was endorsed by Stanciu et al. (2012) who find that SNS have become very popular among students, and considering them as valuable tools for education.

The main reasons why the SNS are used by students have also been investigated by several authors (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Benson et al., 2010; Kujath, 2011). For instance, the Raacke & Bonds-Raacke (2008) study of college students finds that students use SNSs to keep in touch with current and past friends as well as for sharing information about events. Similarly, Kalpidou, Costin, and Morris (2011) find that the main reason why undergraduate students use Facebook is to keep in touch with old friends and make new ones. This finding endorses similar findings in a previous study by Ellison,

Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007). Coyle and Vaughn (2008) also find the main reasons why students on American college campuses engage in social networking is “keeping in touch with friends.” Moreover, Kujath (2011) examines the use of Facebook and MySpace with college students and finds that many students rely on Facebook and MySpace for interpersonal communication, more than face-to-face interaction. Their study also reveals that students tend to use these sites to keep in touch with people they already knew as well as with people they have never met before. Ajagbe et al. (2011) finds that SNS allow students to express themselves, communicate, and collect profiles that highlight their talents and experiences. Additionally, Pew Internet and American Life Project Surveys (2013) indicate that social networking sites are most popular among young adults. Ajagbe et al. (2011) also finds that their common reasons are staying connected with friends and family, making new friends and sharing common interests.

The main purpose of this study is to examine the usage and behavioural pattern of social networking sites by international students located in Auckland, New Zealand. The research questions are the following:

R1: How popular are social networking sites among international students?

R2: What are the reasons for using social networking sites by international students?

Methodology

The study used quantitative methods adopted from previous studies (Benson et al., 2010; Kiser & Porter, 2011; Shen & Khalifa, 2010; Jabr, 2011) to examine the usage and behavioural patterns of SNS by international students. For the purpose of data collection, researchers used a survey questionnaire. This was designed by reviewing the literature, and also acquiring feedback from students in preparation of the survey questionnaire.

Authors identified the top social networking sites (such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and My Space) from the literature. During the discussion with students researchers found other SNS used by international students along with the popular ones (these were QQ, RenRen, Qzone, Orkut, Bobo, and Tango). In addition, students revealed that Google+ is important to international students, even

though it was not found in the literature Accordingly, Google+ was included in the final questionnaire.

The research identified 31 reasons for using SNS from the literature and the student consultations. Students were asked to indicate one of three options for each reason, such as, "Never," "Sometimes," and "Always." Each column provided a number of responses along with the percentage for each criterion. For a meaningful analysis, the reasons were further divided into 31 reasons into four distinct groups: personal, entertainment, commercial and academic (see Table 3). Personal reasons are those related to communicating and connecting with friends and family (Shen & Khalife; 2010, Jabr, 2011; Coyle & Vaughn, 2008). Entertainment groups are mainly based on listening, sharing and uploading music with friends (Jabr, 2011). Commercial groups are based on what participants find on the SNS and how well they communicate, for instance, finding information on employments and news (Agarwal & Mital, 2009). Academic matters are listed based on participants sharing information on their respective academic matters (Jabr, 2011). Each group with the three highest scores is elaborated upon in Table 3.

The draft questionnaire was pretested and adequate adjustments were made (Ezumah, 2013) after showing to a few academics and international students. Based on the feedback, the questionnaire was then finalized. The final questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section consisted of questions relating to demographic details. The second section consisted of a selection of SNS, and the frequency of usage. The last section was based on reasons for using social networking sites.

The sample was drawn from two private tertiary institutions in Auckland, New Zealand. International students were selected because they have unique needs that are different from regular domestic students. It was posited that their unique needs would be reflected in their SNS usage. The survey was distributed to undergraduate, postgraduate, diploma as well as English-language students in August 2012 in two private institutions located in Auckland. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed and a usable sample of 316 collected. Data were analysed using SPSS 20 software.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic information

Table 1 presents the sample characteristics in terms of respondents' age, country, working status and education.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Demographics	Male (n=173)	Female (n=143)	Total (N=316)	% of Respon- dents
Age				
20 yrs <	21	21	42	13
21-25yrs	107	86	193	61
26-30yrs	34	26	60	19
31yrs >	11	10	21	7
Country				
China	79	84	163	52
India	54	16	70	22
South Korea	17	14	31	10
Russia	3	6	9	3
Pacific Islands	0	10	10	3
Other	20	12	33	10
Working Status				
Full-time	10	10	20	6
Part-time	101	68	169	53
Seeking work	37	39	76	24
Don't want to work	25	26	51	16
Education				
Diploma	81	57	138	44
Undergraduate	36	46	82	26
Postgrad/Masters	35	23	58	18
Other	21	17	38	12

Out of 316 respondents, male respondents were 55 % and females were 45 %. In terms of age, nearly three-quarters were in the age

group of 25 years or below. This is similar to samples in other studies (Kiser & Porter, 2011; Akar & Topcu, 2011). Regarding their country of origin, the majority of them were from China (52%) followed by India (22%), South Korea (10%), Russia (3%), and the Pacific Islands (3%). Further, students were enrolled mainly in diploma programs (44%), followed by undergraduates (26%). Very few were enrolled in postgraduate/master's level programs (18%). In terms of working status most of these students have part-time jobs.

Popular usage of SNS

Figure 1 shows the most popular SNS being used by international students. Facebook was ranked first (82%) followed by Google+ (56%), Twitter (42%), QQ (35%), MySpace (28%), LinkedIn (26%). A number of researchers have indicated that Facebook is the most popular and top-rated SNS world-wide (Ezumah, 2013; Kiser & Porter, 2011; Jabr, 2011; Benson et al., 2010; Peluchette & Karl, 2008). However, Google+, which was launched only in 2011, has quickly gained popularity among young people, and was found to be the second most popular SNS for respondents. While Twitter was found to be third most popular SNS in this study, in Ezumah's study (2013), Google + was not included.

The QQ site is ranked fourth among respondents. However, usage of QQ is limited only to Chinese students who use the site to communicate with friends and family in their home country. It implies that the use of SNS is sometimes decided by the preferences of those with whom students communicate. In this case, the popularity of the QQ site in China makes it necessary for Chinese international students to use this site even when they are abroad. The other SNS that were also found to be actively used by smaller proportions of the respondents are RenRen, Qzone, Orkut, Bebo, and Tango. Collectively, these sites constitute 38% of usage by the international students.

In the analysis, researchers used the top five SNS along with QQ site, which is exclusively used by Chinese students to keep in touch with family and friends (Park & Kim, 2013), and is not used by other international students. Previous research (Kiser & Porter, 2011; Jabr, 2011, Ezumah, 2013) have identified Facebook as the most popular SNS among students. This was followed by Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn. Google+ was launched in 2011 and hence was not con-

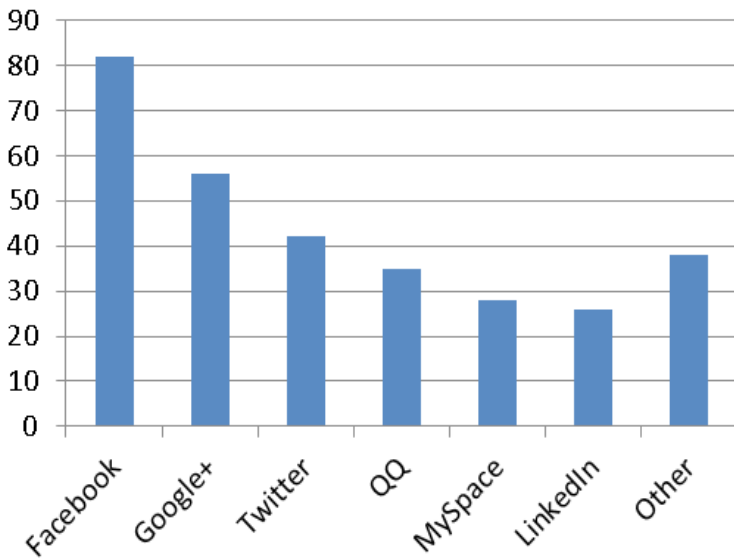


Figure 1. Popular social networking sites' percentage of users
 Note: Total percentage is more than 100 as the respondents were asked to indicate multiple sites, if appropriate.

sidered by previous studies. In this study, Google+ has gained wide popularity (56%) and is only behind Facebook (82%). This is not surprising given that Google+ has now more than 400,000 users worldwide (www.Viralblog.com).

Cross-tabulation between the usage of SNS and demography

The popularity of the SNS was also examined in terms of country, age, gender, time spent and level of education. The results are shown in Tables 2 and 3. The respondents were asked to indicate the use of multiple sites. Based on their nationality, the highest SNS users are from China, followed by India, South Korea, Pacific Islands, and Russia as shown in Table 2. In a way, this is not surprising as it is consistent with the sample characteristics, as most of the respondents are from China and India.

In terms of age, collectively, social networking sites are more popular among young adults. Similar results have been reported in the literature. In terms of gender difference (Table 2), more males are

using SNS as compared to females, with the exceptional case of the Google + site where females tend to outnumber their male counterparts.

Table 2

Popular Social Networking Sites by Country, Age and Gender

	Facebook	Google+	Twitter	QQ	MySpace	LinkedIn
Country						
China	127(49%)	89(51%)	81(62%)	109(97%)	67(77%)	53(65%)
India	63(24%)	38(22%)	24(18%)	0(0%)	9(10%)	16(20%)
South Korea	22(8%)	15(9%)	10(8%)	0(0%)	4(5%)	3(4%)
Pacific Islands	10(4%)	8(5%)	2(1%)	0(0%)	1(1%)	0(0%)
Russia	7(3%)	6(3%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
Others	30(12%)	20(10%)	14(11%)	3(3%)	6(7%)	9(11%)
Age						
20 yrs <	31(12%)	20(11%)	11(8%)	17(15%)	7(8%)	7(9%)
21-25yrs	169(65%)	110(63%)	91(70%)	76(68%)	63(72%)	54(67%)
26-30yrs	44(17%)	35(20%)	20(15%)	17(15%)	13(15%)	15(18%)
31yrs >	15(6%)	11(6%)	9(7%)	2(2%)	4(5%)	5(6%)
Gender						
Male	141(54%)	82(47%)	68(52%)	58(52%)	45(52%)	44(54%)
Female	118(46%)	94(53%)	63(48%)	54(48%)	42(48%)	37(46%)
Users	259(82%)	176(56%)	131(41%)	112(35%)	87(28%)	81(26%)
Non-users	57(18%)	140(44%)	185(59%)	204(65%)	229(72%)	235(74%)

Respondents were also asked to provide how many hours weekly they spent on SNS (Table 3). The results show that on average students spent up to 6hrs weekly using Facebook, Google+, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn and QQ. A similar pattern was also found by Kiser and Porter (2011), except in their study, Google+ was not included.

Table 3

Popular Social Networking Sites by Time Spent and Course

Time Spent	Facebook	Google+	Twitter	QQ	MySpace	LinkedIn
1-6hrs	194(75%)	124(70%)	120(92%)	50(45%)	85(98%)	76(94%)
>6hrs	65(25%)	52(30%)	11(8%)	62(55%)	2(2%)	5(6%)
Course						
Diploma	118(35%)	77(23%)	58(17%)	12(4%)	41(12%)	33(10%)
Under-graduate	67(29%)	44(19%)	32(14%)	50(21%)	22(9%)	18(8%)
Postgrad-uate	49(26%)	35(18%)	27(14%)	41(22%)	16(8%)	22(12%)
Others	25(28%)	25(28%)	14(16%)	9(10%)	8(9%)	8(9%)
Users	259(82%)	176(56%)	131(41%)	112(35%)	87(28%)	81(26%)
Non-users	57(18%)	140(44%)	185(59%)	204(65%)	229(72%)	235(74%)

Lastly, the majority of students who use these SNS tend to use Facebook. This is followed by Google+ for diploma and other students, and QQ for undergraduate and postgraduate students, which is of course dominated by Chinese students. Further tests (not reported here) show that respondents who are pursuing postgraduate level studies spend less time on SNS compared to students enrolled in lower level programs.

Reasons for using social network sites

Table 4 shows the 12 most important reasons for using social networking sites as reported by the international students. The reasons are divided into four categories. Under the personal category, the highest score recorded was “connect with friends” (94%), followed by “connect with family” (92%) and “find old friends” (90%). Overall, the most important reasons for using SNS were to “connect with friends” and “connect with family.” This shows how important the SNS are for international students for keeping in touch with family and friends at home. These top rated categories were reported highest by all levels of students. Under the entertainment category, the highest score recorded was “enjoy chatting with friends” (90%), followed by “watch videos” (86%) and “listen to music” (86%). It can be con-

cluded that students find SNS as a preferred platform for entertainment, especially “chatting with friends.”

Table 4
Four Categories with Top Five Reasons

Reasons	Percentage of Respondents
Personal	
Connect with friends	94%
Connect with family	92%
Find old friends	90%
Entertainment	
Enjoy chatting with friends	90%
Watch videos	86%
Listen to music	86%
Commercial	
Daily news updates on social networks	85%
Watch and share world news with friends	81%
Find information on employment	74%
Academic	
Communicate assignment matters with my class mates	80%
Communicate with my class mates on course topics	78%
Communicate with my class mates on tutorials/research	71%

Under the commercial category, 85% of the respondents are keen to see “news updates on social networks” whereas 74% voted for “finding information on employment.” It can be concluded that using social networking sites for commercial uses is common among international students.

Under the academic category, the highest score recorded was “communicate assignment matters with my classmates” (80%), fol-

lowed by “communicate with my classmates on course topics” (78%) and “share useful links with my classmates” (71%). It is interesting to note that academic reasons are less important than other traditional reasons such as personal and entertainment. This is most likely because the respondents are students. This finding is consistent with Kiser and Porter (2011) where the use of SNS for teaching and learning was the least important factor for students. On the whole, academic matters seem to be the least important of all the four categories for which SNS were used.

General views on social networking sites based on gender

This study also sought the personal views of respondents on their use of SNS. Their responses are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
General Views by Gender

General views on social networking sites	Male	Female
Social networking is not a waste of time	125	122
Good skills to use social networking sites	130	115
Do not prefer to post personal information on social network site	99	91
Feel comfortable using social network for security reason	84	61
Feel comfortable with people they don't know	88	48

- 78% (247) believed “social networking is not a waste of time” (125 males and 122 females).
- 77.5% (245) had “skills to use social networking sites” (130 males

and 115 females).

- 60% (190) preferred “not to post personal information on social network sites” (99 males and 91 females)
- 46% (145) did not “feel comfortable using social network for security reason” (84 males and 61 females)
- 43% (136) were “comfortable to social network with people they don’t know” (88 males and 48 females).

The statistics reveal that female students are more comfortable with posting personal information on SNS than males. In addition to that, female students also had more acquaintances with others via SNS who they did not know. The literature shows an increasing number of female students are posting information on SNS. For instance, in their study, Peluchette and Karl (2008) found that male students are more likely than female students to place self-promoting and comments on their profile. However, the later literature (Benson et al., 2010; Kiser & Porter, 2011) shows that female students dominate the usage of SNS, especially in the area of revealing personal information.

Conclusions and Future Research

As the number of international students grows, there is a great potential for the use of SNS. This study suggests two important patterns of international students. Because they are away from home, they use SNS to communicate with family and friends in their country. However, as they are also students, they are using SNS even for educational purposes. This has implications for university authorities to not only allow but to actively encourage integration of SNS in academic programs, and to also use them as part of the university media.

On the whole, results suggest that SNS are very popular with international students in New Zealand. This study also found that the top SNS for international students are Facebook, followed by Google+, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn. In the case of Chinese students, the QQ site is the main channel of communication with both family and friends. In the context of gender differences, female respondents use SNS more than their male counterparts in order to communicate with their friends and family. The emergence of Google+ as the second most popular site in the last year should also be considered in the formulation of new strategies for this purpose.

A limitation of this research is only international students based

in two private educational institutions were surveyed. A more diversified sample can be used in future studies to confirm these results. Other important factors to consider are providing correlations between different social networking sites and the reasons for using them, and using descriptive and regression analysis to validate the outcomes. Currently, this area is in progress. Furthermore, future research could also look at the relationship between motivational aspects and privacy issues of SNS usage for business purposes. Universities and marketers could also reach out to student-customers using the medium that is popular with them, namely SNS.

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