

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PERSONAL USE OF FACEBOOK AND HOSPITALITY STUDENTS' GROUP ENGAGEMENT IN MALAYSIA.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Millions of young contemporary adolescents and adults use social networking sites. However, little has been revealed about how much, why, and how the personal use of such sites relate to social media use for purposes besides belonging to Internet communities (Pempek et al., 2009). This research aims to explore whether a relationship exists between the personal use of Facebook and hospitality students' group engagement, thus shedding light to what retains connectedness and engagement for hospitality students working in groups in the more prominent educational area of Malaysia. 300 hospitality undergraduates completed a three-section questionnaire. The results indicated that Facebook is dominantly perceived by students as a social network that is solely utilized for personal reasons albeit the fact students were found to utilize Facebook as a tool for collaborative group work purposes. Implications for further research have also been discussed in this research to stress on more in-depth exploration that is necessary to provide a more substantial scope with regards to the use of social media and the group engagement of hospitality students undertaking a broad range of university courses in hospitality field.*

**Keywords:** *Facebook, personal use, group engagement, hospitality students, social media, social network, student engagement, Malaysia.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Social skills, both offline and online, are growing in importance for hospitality students. As the customer base for the hospitality industry grows more tech-savvy and increasingly becomes inseparable from mobile devices, the generation of Facebook users is undying. Universities in many countries are now encouraging the use of social network platforms for familiarization purposes.

In recent years, Malaysian universities (particularly those of which are located in Klang Valley) which offer the up-and-coming course of hospitality and tourism have made student engagement a prime focus as a differentiator in the quality of graduates produced. Aiedah and Lee (2014) provided a stance to the fact that there are limited in-depth studies pertaining to student engagement in Malaysia, particularly in project-based learning for some subjects. Furthermore, on an international scale, there has been an urge to move academics to become more sustainable and innovative to address student engagement with more clarity and substance where concepts of blended learning are concerned (Rushton, 2015).

In addition to the lack of course-specific research on student engagement, researchers focusing on Malaysian educational facilities have not yet bridged the gap of how today's largest social network platform, Facebook, relates to student engagement although the general use and issues of privacy, social information sharing, and accessibility amongst Malaysian users have been covered (Haque, Sarwar and Yasmin, 2013).

This research aims to explore whether a relationship exists between the personal use of Facebook and hospitality students' group engagement in Klang Valley, thus shedding light to what retains connectedness and engagement for hospitality students working in groups in the more prominent educational area of Malaysia. Hospitality students are selected as the focal population for this study (from which a sample are tested) with the intention of shaping a study that is specific to higher education in hospitality in order to frame future research in this subject area.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many researchers have introduced the topic of student engagement as one that is pushing the traditional boundaries of areas of interest in conducted research having to do with the education line. Quaye and Harper (2015)'s collated novel of findings from a number of respectable researchers found that student engagement varies for the broad categories of high school students and adolescent students attending college.

Young and Bruce (2011) defined student engagement as the level of which students feel connected and psychologically close to learning processes and educational interactions. Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, Parkin and Thorpe (2011) also supported this definition as their study on using technology to increase student engagement using controlled feedback suggested that improved student engagement directly appealed to higher degrees of attention and optimism that students show as a result of easier, seamless connectivity to their social and academic environments.

McCormick and McClenney (2012) highlighted the relevance of the current research in student engagement is arguable not sufficiently valid when put to practice, thus instigating frustration for many researchers who have strived to generalize the concept of student engagement only to reach conclusions lacking in validity. Lee and Chao (2013) pointed out that relatively little has been explored in the area of hospitality students' group engagement, let alone the significance of today's social networking giant, Facebook, that plays an important role in encouraging group engagement amongst those undertaking courses in hospitality.

Facebook has been used for group purposes in order to receive information regarding group assignments where team work is concerned (Lantz-Andersson, 2016). According to Huffaker (2011), scholars have been able to increasingly test existing social science theories in order to determine that groups do interact on large-scale online networks to purposefully receive relevant information from one another, often for educational reasons. Matic and Agusaj (2012)'s study found that the hospitality education in Croatia that led to increased marketing knowledge and outside-of-the-classroom student engagement was a result of the use of social networks such as Facebook. As examined by Junco (2012), Facebook use and student engagement has been a construct related to positive outcomes for college students.

Facebook is increasingly being used as a communicative tool for interpersonal relationships with colleagues, parents, and lecturers for students attending university (Liu, Yin and Huang, 2013). Yan and Cheung (2013)'s focus on student engagement and quality of educators concluded that experiential learning methods, which are typical of delivery of education in relation to the hospitality industry, impacted student engagement in accordance to students' perceptions of how well or how poorly classes were conducted. One of the key experiential learning methods mentioned in their study concerned social networking, a category of which Facebook is no stranger too.

### **Facebook's Contribution to a Blended Learning Experience**

Where student engagement is concerned, teaching and learning methods are essential elements. Hospitality educators have continued to push conventional teacher-directed approaches to make teaching and learning methods used more student-oriented (Kim and Davies, 2014). Roorda, Koomen, Spilt and Oort (2011)'s meta-analytic research approach in student engagement found that the teaching and learning methods used in classrooms were affected by the teacher-student relationships built as a result of social networks such as Facebook being selected for use in educating and learning.

Hospitality students' engagement was further explored by Fortune, Spielman and Pangelinan (2011). Their study of which found that practical-oriented students were more engaged when blended learning and active, participatory learning exercises were used. Berrett (2012)'s study drawn similar conclusions and findings – blended learning does indeed improve hospitality students' engagement.

Based on the area of interest established and literature review above, the research objectives that this study seeks to answer and hypothesis are generated as follows:

## **Research Objectives**

- 1) To establish whether a relationship exists between the personal use of Facebook and Malaysia hospitality students' group engagement.
- 2) To establish whether a relationship exists between the frequency of Facebook Messenger use and Malaysia hospitality students' group engagement.
- 3) To measure the highest and lowest frequencies associated with personal Facebook use and Malaysia hospitality students' group engagement.

## **Hypothesis**

- H1 The personal use of Facebook has an established relationship with hospitality students' group engagement.
- H2 The frequency of Facebook Messenger has an established relationship with hospitality students' group engagement.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study used both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was collected through survey distribution whilst secondary data is as detailed in the literature review. As this is a causal study with the primary objective to establish the existence of a relationship between the personal use of Facebook and hospitality students' group engagement in universities in Malaysia, correlation tests and frequency computation was run to determine the existence of a relationship between the variables and to answer prior introduced research questions. Tests associated to reliability and normality were also ran to ensure satisfactory accuracy and distribution of the data collection process.

### **Data collection**

Four universities in Klang Valley area are chosen that are well-established for their programmes in hospitality – BERJAYA University College of Hospitality, Sunway University, Taylor's University and KDU University College. Questionnaires were distributed to students who currently undertaking either Diploma in Hotel Management or Bachelor Degree in Hospitality Management. Total target sample size of 300 was determined.

Hospitality students were selected as the specific population for the sample to be drawn for the purpose of ensuring this study is course-specific and can be applied to the hospitality industry and the use of Facebook relevant to higher education for this particular field. Future research may look into populations that allow for broader, more generalized data to be collated with regards to group engagement.

The questionnaire structure of which was designed for Suwannatthachote and Tantrarungroj (2012)'s study was adopted. The questionnaire consisted of three parts:

- 1) Student demographics;
- 2) Activities performed on Facebook for personal purposes (in representation of the independent variable – personal Facebook use);
- 3) Activities performed on Facebook for collaborative (i.e. group-related) purposes (in representation of the dependent variable – hospitality students' group engagement).

## **RESULTS**

Hypothesis 1 is accepted as the Pearson correlation test results indicated an acceptable value of 0.433 to establish a form of a relationship between the personal use of Facebook and hospitality students' group engagement based on data collected and analysed for this purpose. Nevertheless, as the Pearson correlation figure did not reflect the nonexistence of a relationship between the two variables, this hypothesis is deemed acceptable.

### **Correlation between Facebook Messenger Use and Hospitality Students' Group Engagement**

The 0.584 Pearson correlation value, which leans towards rounding to a 0.6 value, establishes that there is a moderately strong relationship between the use of Facebook Messenger and hospitality students' group engagement. The correlation value of 0.584 accepts the second hypothesis introduced in this study as an established relationship indeed exists between Facebook Messenger use and hospitality students' group engagement.

### **Discussion on Research Objectives and Research Questions**

The first research objective was to establish whether a relationship exists between the personal use of Facebook and hospitality students' group engagement. The relationship between the personal use of Facebook and hospitality students' group engagement was established by running a correlation test between the two variables. An acceptable Pearson correlation value of 0.433 reflected that there is a relationship of fair strength between the two variables. Therefore, this objective was met. The fulfilment of this research objective addressed the first research objective (i.e. Does relationship exist between the personal use of Facebook and Malaysia hospitality students' group engagement?).

The second research objective was to establish whether a relationship exists between the frequency of Facebook Messenger use and Malaysia hospitality students' group engagement. The relationship between the frequency of Facebook Messenger use and hospitality students' group engagement was established by running a correlation test between the two variables. An acceptable Pearson correlation value of 0.584 reflected that there is a relationship of moderate strength between the two variables. Therefore, this objective was met.

The third research objective was to measure the highest and lowest frequencies associated with personal Facebook use and Malaysia hospitality students' group engagement. The frequencies for items representative of independent and dependent variables were computed in order to meet this research objective. Descriptive analysis revealed that the highest frequencies associated to personal use and group use of Facebook were for the occasional uses (i.e. 'Sometimes') to view others' statuses and to inquire about details of project assignments respectively, with frequency values of 46.3% and 38.0%.

On the other hand, the lowest frequencies associated to personal use and group use of Facebook were for looking at photos (lowest frequency of 'Never' responses), sharing knowledge/technical computer tips and coming to group consensus (lowest frequency of 'Very Frequently' responses) respectively, with frequency values of 0.3% for the former item and 8.7% for the latter items.

## CONCLUSION

This study looked at the relationship between the personal use of Facebook and Malaysia hospitality students' group engagement with the primary objectives of establishing relationships involving these two variables. The data collected and analysed for the purpose of this study concerned approaching four reputable universities offering hospitality courses within the stipulated area. Major findings discussed in this study outlined the establishment of a relationship between the personal use of Facebook and hospitality students' group engagement on Facebook. Additionally, a relationship between Facebook Messenger use and hospitality students' group engagement was also established.

Based on responses received for the purpose of this study, it can be concluded that hospitality students somewhat perceive Facebook as a tool that can be utilized for educational purposes and collaborative group work. However, the ultimate revelation lies in the fact that 84% of students responded that they primarily use Facebook for personal use, which indicates that although Facebook is not necessarily dismissed as a tool to gauge group engagement, the use of the social network for this purpose has not significantly been put into practice.

For the education industry, engagement strategies and effective integration of the use of Facebook could be emphasized on, particularly for activities with high frequencies to gauge student engagement on personal and group levels. For instance, methods to integrate activities of status updates and project assignment inquiries for personal and group engagement respectively is to be highlighted for academic advancements in teaching and learning due to the reflected high frequencies of 46.3% and 38.0%. In addition, as the act of looking at photos for personal use showed the lowest frequency of responses for students who had 'Never' used Facebook for this purpose (i.e. 0.3%), the education industry should be reassured that visual presentation of learning materials remain relevant to student engagement.

As for low frequency items that indicate poor student receptiveness such as sharing of knowledge/technical computer tips and coming to group consensus using Facebook (both with computed frequencies values of 8.7% in respondents who agreed that they use Facebook for these purposes 'Very Frequently'), the education industry could vest less

interest in these activities or look into methods to encourage increased group activity in these areas.

The use of Facebook is one that is not a dead end street for educators as interestingly, albeit the lack of frequent use of Facebook for group engagement in terms of frequencies analysed, respondents did not disagree to the statements that Facebook is a unique tool for education and that personal use of Facebook enabled them to learn how to use the social network for group work purposes as computed frequencies reflected that 37.67% and 41% of respondents 'Somewhat Agree' with these statements.

As for further research, a more diverse approach in obtaining respondents by means of electronical survey distribution should be employed. As this study employed only physical questionnaire distribution, more advanced systems and processes could be used to extend survey reach to appropriate respondents. Should collaboration with universities be possible, future research for this study will prosper as making the questionnaire available online with the support of various universities will most likely increase the likelihood of respondent participation.

The survey could also be slightly tweaked in future research to minimize respondent bias and habituation. Considering this study on a larger scale, more moderators should be employed with the ability to keep respondent participation conversational. Future research should also take into consideration the additional features that Facebook may introduce for group work and/or personal use purposes as advancements are constantly being made to the social network according to user preference. Alternatively, researchers may opt to establishment relationships between other social networks (e.g. WeChat, Twitter, Blogger, etc.) and group engagement, thus adding to this subject area by way of exploring other web vehicles that retain student engagement.

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