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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF LECTURERS PERCEPTIONS ON STUDENTS USAGE OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THEIR IDENTITY FORMATION AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Studies suggest that students are increasingly turning to information and communication technologies as learning tools in which they present multiple identities quite explicitly tied to context, knowledge and understanding within online social networks (OSNs). The search for and research on the use of OSNs in a learning environment is a powerful technological change in the history of the globalised world. Hence it is imperative for educational institutions to understand how the 21st century learners use OSNs for identity formation and learning experiences. To address the lack of insight into this, a systematic review of existing theories and models was conducted to identify constructs and elements which can be used to develop and test a new measuring instrument in future. This paper reports on the qualitative research methods used only, namely a literature review and semi-structured interviews which were used to obtain lecturers perspectives on student's learning experience and identity formation in OSNs. The results confirmed that a perceived link between the usage of the Internet for learning purposes and identity formation exists, and lecturers confirmed that students realised the importance of interactivity and intensity in OSNs to enhance their learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

Farquhar and Rowley (2006:162) argue that organisations with power over OSNs - which they see as an extension of the relationship-marketing paradigm - are in a better position to dominate interactions on the Internet. This network society offers the opportunity to knowledge-based institutions to enhance communication relationships with individuals, not only on a one-to-one and one-to-many, but on a *many-to-many* basis. OSNs, like real social networks, help individuals to construct identities through social interaction and participation. In spite of this realisation, Boyd and Ellison (2007) emphasised that a lack of studies exist to explore the link between OSNs and education. This is echoed by Walker and Gleaves (2014) who posit that a lack of rich qualitative studies to better theorise the learning experience, students perception of learning-value and the status of knowledge created by others is evident in existing literature. This was also reiterated in the opening speech of Will Swann (President of EADTU) who accentuated the tremendous experience possible in OSNs for learning activities for students in terms of practical knowledge and discovering skills where they are able to learn from the many virtual learning environments in which students and staff interact through the application of online teaching and learning methods without physical presence (Sancho & De Vries 2014).This paper addresses these gaps and needs by focusing on a communicative perspective to determine lecturers perspectives on students usage of OSNs for their identity formation and the learning experience that take place.

Various criticisms have been made against OSNs and whether identity formation is in fact artificial and/or real and/or whether it influences the learning experience. This is mainly due to the fact that OSNs create the opportunity for people to present an identity which might be totally different and/or what they want others to perceive them to be 'accepted' by the group.

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Individuals therefore create identities which are in line with the values, norms, expectations and so forth of the other members of the group they want to belong to. In spite of these criticisms, it is argued that identity formation in OSNs is a future reality which will become more and more important in organisations, especially educational institutions who should take cognisance of the fact that it will impact on its functioning and ultimately the learning experience of students. Furthermore, it is posited that the usage of OSNs in virtual learning environments (VLEs) could potentially eliminate the barriers to the learning experience by providing increased convenience, flexibility, currency in material or tutorials, student retention, individualised learning and feedback from lecturers and other students. Although some authors (Brown 2011; Hara & Kling 2000) argue that drawbacks like feelings of isolation, frustration, anxiety and confusion might reduce students learning experiences, a study conducted by Chou and Liu (2005) indicated that a relationship does exist between learner control and learning effectiveness. In a recent study conducted by Young and Strelitz (2014) they concluded that Facebook usage is socially patterned based on race and class variables but weakly associated with loneliness and well-being.

Against this background, the main aim of this paper is to address the lack of existing research. The paper is structured as follows: definition of key concepts; theoretical research framework; research methodology; data analysis and results; limitations and future research; and conclusion.

KEY CONCEPTS

In order to present a theoretical discussion of identity formation and the learning experience in OSNs, the following notional constructs are presented briefly.

Identity formation

Identity is usually studied from philosophical, social and psychological points of view, thereby making it possible to study identities in social groups or OSNs from different perspectives. According to Rimskii (2011:79-80), the interpretation of identity most appropriate for the analysis of identity formation in OSNs, is that it is 'the state of the individual's consciousness in which, on the basis of the aggregate set of personal characteristics, one knows oneself, one recognizes the stability of one's own personality, one determines oneself from the surrounding reality, and one determines one's membership in a particular social group and, conversely, acknowledges the impossibility of belonging to other social groups'. This definition forms the basis for this paper as it encompasses most of the variables, characteristics and categorisations (which are biological, psychological, social and cultural in nature) of studying identity formation in OSNs.

Online social networks

Online social networks are webs of relationships that grow from computer-mediated discussions and conversations among people who share a common affinity (in these case students, articulate a shared connection and who differ and traverse in other ways (distance, time comprehension, imbeddedness in single locations, etc.) (Barker 2011).In order to communicate across time and space, these conversations take place online. OSNs hence grow from personal interactions of humans and technological infrastructure that connects those humans. In the context of this study, the definition of Boyd and Ellison (2007:1) has been

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adapted as follows: Online social networks refer to web-based services which allows individuals to construct a profile (identity formation) within a bounded system articulated by other users (usage patterns) with whom they share the connection and how they perceive the connections and feedback (learning experience) that takes place within this system.Hence, identity formation,usage and the learning experience in OSNs is an advanced process with various phenomological aspects and the transference from the real world might have far reaching implications. According to Attrill and Jalill (2010:1635), the factors that will impede on online social identities will be influenced by trust, the social setting, social identity, intent, privacy and the type of information the individual is willing to expose or present on their profiles.
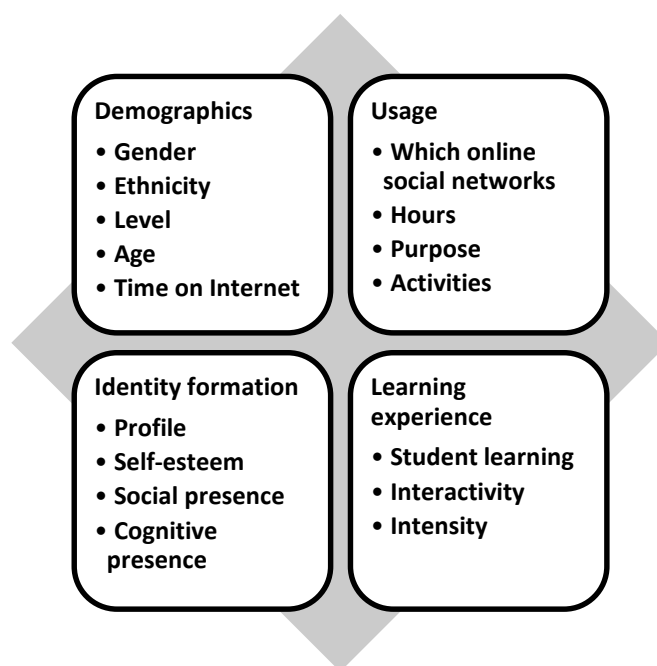
Learning experience

According to Greenhow and Robelia (2009:119), the context for learning is becoming increasingly complex across a range of physical and cyber spaces, especially how students learning experiences in OSNs are transforming education. In OSNs this learning experience is dependent on information and knowledge obtained through interactions and transmitted ubiquitously through social interactions without considering real-world consequences. This is confirmed by Kirkwood (2008) who found that students search for information of knowledge for their homework, assignments and studies and Hung and Chung (2013)who argued that OSNs serve as storehouses of knowledge in which information and knowledge creation and sharing is growing rapidly for problem solving and learning purposes at universities.

THEORETICAL RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

In line with the research problem the objectives were to evaluate lecturers perceptions on students usage of OSNs and how it affects their identity formation and learning experience. After an extensive literature search using these concepts and by using inclusion and exclusion criteria, six instruments were selected of which criteria have been adapted for the purpose of this study. Findings of this review indicated that the most appropriate elements to study these concepts are the ones presented in the theoretical framework in Figure 1.

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Figure 1: Theoretical research framework

This framework has been adapted from existing instruments and questionnaires including: *demographics* (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe 2007:1149); *usage* (Ellison et al 2007:1150); *identity formation* (identity profile adapted from LaRose, Lai, Lange, Love & Wu 2005; self-esteem adapted from Rosenberg's 1989 self-esteem scale updated by Ellison et al 2007:1152; social presence and cognitive presence adapted from Garrison, Cleveland-Innes & Fung 2004:67); and *learning experience* (student learning adapted from Garrison et al, 2004:72-73 and Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert 2008:233; interactivity adapted from Garrison et al 2004 and Pempek et al 2008:234; intensity from Ellison et al 2007:1150).

Because successful OSNs are characterized by the constant creation of new knowledge and the fast dissemination and representation thereof, commitment to and understanding of individuals in the OSN, the main thrusts of the research were perceived and analysed from a knowledge management perspective. Because knowledge management is defined as the generation, storing, representation and sharing of knowledge to the benefit of the organization and its individuals, it is arguably specifically relevant to study the use of OSNs for identity formation and the learning experience (Barker 2006).

METHODOLOGY

The main research question was to determine the following: Lecturers perceptions on how students usage of OSNs influence their identity formation and the learning experience. This paper is built from an interpretative paradigm which means it is explorative in nature to obtain new insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Babbie & Mouton 2007). Two methods of qualitative research were used: firstly a sound theoretical research framework has been developed based on a thorough literature review; and secondly a semi-structured interview sheet has been developed to obtain insight in lecturers perception of students usage

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of OSNs, identity formation and the learning experience. Theoretical statements, which are defined as summaries of central assumptions, suppositions, conjectures, assertions of declarations based on certain theories, models or the literature, were used in the compilation of the semi-structured interview schedules (Taylor, Trenkel, Kupca & Sefansson 2011:3).Because it is argued that existing approaches do not fully capture the richness of the concept by not taking into account the social identity dimension, which reflects the main aspects of the individual's identification, a new method has been developed to address this gap. Reliability was ensured by taking notes, recordings and transcriptions of the interviews. Validity was ensured through the following: *face validity* (the superficial appearance of the measuring instrument, whether or not it appears to measure what it sets out to; *concurrent validity* (to establish consistency between different measurements); and *predictive validity* (considers how accurately predictions based on theory are realised in the research by means of the measuring instrument) (Gravetter & Forzano 2006). In addition, the following three measures of validity of interviews proposed by Du Plooy (2009) were also applied, namely: *time* (each interview lasted the same time namely one hour); the *pace* of the interviews were kept the same; and the *bias* of participant answers was kept to a minimum by not bringing aspects under the attention of the participants that they were unaware of before.

Sampling

Given the fact that this is a relative new field of research, only four exploratory semi-structured interviews were conducted with four lectures at Sunway University, Malaysia over a three-day period in October 2014, purposefully sampled because they use OSNs actively for learning purposes. The duration of each interview was approximately one hour and recorded to ensure a complete record of all interviews were obtained to assist the researcher to compile a full transcription of each interview to facilitate the data analysis stage (Daymon & Holloway 2011:234). The standardised questions were closed and structured, based on the main categories identified in the literature review and development of the measuring instrument, while broader and more open questions were asked relating to lecturers perspectives on the students usage of OSNs. The semi-structured interviews also gave the opportunity for follow-up questions to be asked, based on participants' answers, which allowed the researcher to explore new avenues in the research not necessarily anticipated at the outset (Keyton 2006:276).Although a measuring instrument was also developed and tested with a pilot study of 43 second and third year students at the same time in October 2014, the quantitative research has only been conducted in November and December 2014 and the results will only be available at a later stage. Important to note is that because no existing measuring scales have been found in the literature, several items have been developed for the current study taking into consideration that the validity of the measure depends on the correspondence between a concept and the items it is supposed to measure (Pinho2013).The semi-structured guides included a list of issues obtained from the theoretical statements based on existing literature to guide the research and aligned it with the questionnaires which were later used in the quantitative survey. The categories developed for the questionnaires were used in the semi-structured interview schedules to facilitate the data analysis process.

Data analysis

De Vos' (2007) data analysis method based on an integration of Marshall and Rossman's (1995) data analysis steps and Creswell's (1998) analytical spiral were used for the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews. These steps include: planning for recording the

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data; data collection and preliminary analyses; managing or organising the data; reading and writing memos; generating categories, themes and patterns; coding the data; testing the emergent understandings; searching for alternative explanations; and presenting the data (De Vos 2007:334-339).Because data analysis is also concerned with integrating order, structure and meaning to the collected data; the researcher searched for statements in the data that relate to the predetermined categories to contribute towards generating theory (De Vos 2007:333). Similarly, according to Daymon and Holloway (2011:323), qualitative analysis is the process of searching for categories and patterns in the data collected by means of coding, which enables the researcher to relate the findings to concepts and themes identified in the literature 'to generate theory, new models or theory-based generalizations'. Hence both manifest and latent analysis were conducted. Manifest analysis was done by reading and understanding the response at face value to ensure what was said by each respondent is coded and used for the categorical analysis and for frequency coding. Latent analysis was used to look at the deeper meaning, deducing by sentence nuance, what is 'meant' by a response to obtain a deeper meaning, underlying ideas and thoughts of sentences (Babbie & Mouton 2007). The following ethical considerations were considered: to ensure anonymity of the participants during the interview; the use of pseudonyms; informal consent through the signing of an agreement between the participants and the researcher to ensure confidentiality; and protecting the data, research notes and transcriptions which were analysed by the researcher (Babby & Mouton 2007; Daymon & Holloway 2011; Thomas 2011).

FINDINGS

The main purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to determine the key trends based on lecturers perceptions of students usage of OSNs for identity formation and the learning experience and to determine whether the theoretical statements derived from existing literature could be integrated in the questionnaire based on the insights obtained through these interviews. Of the four respondents ($n=4$), one was an Indian female, one a Chinese male, one and Indian mail and one a Chinese/Eurasian male. The average age of the respondents were 42 years, and they all held positions ranging from lecturer to professor with four years average in the same positions in the faculties of Arts (1) and the Business School (3). The results of the closed-ended questions indicated that the average number of students per class at 1st year level was 135, at 2nd year level 43 and at 3rd year level 85. None had postgraduate students. The average time they spent on OSNs per day was 4-5 hours, the number of online groups/friends were 20-50 accumulated through the years, the main reasons for using the OSNs was to connect with students and the average time spent for learning purposes was 60 minutes per day. The most used OSNs for *learning purposes* were Facebook, E-Learn, Twitter, University website and Online discussion forums where Facebook, E-Learn and LinkedIn were mostly used for *profile information*(to stay on trend, to see what students get up to, to engage with staff, academia and students and for research). Only one lecturer used Blackboard for learning purposes and to engage with students.

Table 1 presents the key categories based on the literature review which were generated in terms of the manifest and latent content of the open-ended questions.

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Table 1: Manifest and latent content of the open-ended questions

Questions	Manifest content	Latent content
What are students perceptions of the use of OSNs for the teaching experience?	• Technology is a big part in students lives • Students grew up with Internet – it's a part of them • Lecturers who don't use Internet for teaching are seen as unable to connect with this generation • Using Internet makes them feel comfortable • Helping them collaborate • Meet coursework requirements and deadlines • I suggest they create the group, and then they do so • Connecting online allows them to get to know each other better • When they post comments, I can see where their thoughts are going, and perhaps intervene when necessary • They need enough room to pause and reflect on who they are • They ask some questions about their beliefs	• Strong links between generation and Internet (this is the Internet generation) • Using the Internet for learning is as normal as going to a classroom for this generation • Lecturer needs to be a catalyst for learning and collaboration between students • Classroom environment is sometimes too big to get to know students on a none-on-one basis • Online is used to guide students in their thought processes regarding coursework/assignments/the course in general • It is important to them to find innovative ways of getting to get knowledge • Helps gauge the progress of the course- how are students learning, are they applying what they have learnt, etc. • They see lecturers as catalysts to give them the room and freedom to explore themselves
What are students perceptions of the use of OSNs for identity formation?	• Virtual space gives opportunity to be their true selves as opposed to class room setting • They are still very young and can use social networks to explore themselves	• Virtual space provides comfort and is 'safe' for them to be themselves • Social networks may help students develop their own epistemologies • Social networks have definite value in aiding students in forming identities
How are students identities constructed and formed in the OSNs for the learning	• Two identities emerge: one is very polite and cultural (Asian/Malaysian); on the other hand they are more themselves on the Internet, so they must find a	• Internet provides virtual safe haven to be oneself • Students become relaxed and more open and opinionated

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	balance between these identities	• Challenge lecturers on feedback/tasks
experience?	• Students start off with being very polite because of formal teaching environment, but slowly move to being more informal	• Comfort: students can say and do things more comfortably online as opposed to real life
	• They reveal less in the beginning, and are more reserved with questions and information	• They just want to be themselves
	• More inclined to say/do things in group as opposed to saying/doing those same things in class	• Lecturers must accept them for who they really are
	• Identities constructed based on how they would like to see themselves	• It's a mix: they see what others in the group are doing and push boundaries and explore different aspects
In what way do you think students will use OSNs for the learning experience?	• Get help/clarity on an assignment • Get content of lectures • Get rubric (for scoring on tests/assignments) • Problem solving • Stimulate debates around issues • To be part of a group • It legitimizes Facebook in a way • Lecturers sometimes use the Internet as a requirement, because you can keep track of how the requirements are progressing and being met • Students are already using social networks for their own personal communication, so learning is just an extension of that	• Internet provides convenience in gaining implicit information on courses (rubrics, understanding materials/content of lectures) • Internet provides study community/sounding board for students to get help on difficult tasks • Gives new purpose and meaning to using Internet and social networks • Information sharing is 'caring'! • Students use OSNs to get information from lecturer or from others
Do you think students realise that it is important to use the OSNs for their identity formation?	• Inadvertently the Internet helps to create/precipitate identity formation • I can see how my students in year one progress through their studies to year three • Get to know them better • They become more mature • Good tool for learning purposes • Good tool for communication • Push students more towards being positive contributors to their society • Important to use as a tool • It's a very good platform for students	• Because this is an 'Internetgeneration', identity formation through OSNs is unconventional in the sense that this generation is born into the Internet – it's a part of the generation which is expressed in their identities • Lecturers do perceive the changes in their students • Seek to aid students in discovering themselves and push them towards being contributors to society

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Why do you think students want you to use the OSNs to enhance their learning experience?	• Students create groups for courses – students initiate • Use posts to remind students of deadlines • Post interesting or motivational media (articles, videos, pictures, articles) • Post information on assignments • Limitless activities to engage in • When student and lecturer are familiar with the same platform for engagement, it's easier to connect that way • Sharing course information and deadlines	• The Internet creates opportunity for a deeper learning experience and understanding • Drawing on different sources of media and information, students can learn more about the subject matter and perhaps industry of the course • This generation is not new to the idea of using OSNs to connect and engage • Studying at university may be daunting, especially for first years - social networks work as a buffer to make a more comfortable environment for students to connect and engage with each other, as well as their lecturers
What do you notice on students profiles?	• Students are very open with their profiles • Not always open to adding lecturers as 'friends' • Sometimes I see things I don't want to see • Almost all students have profile pictures, ethnicity, interests, identity, pictures, comments, share certain videos they find funny/interesting gender on their profile • Students don't normally post things on their own profiles that are course related	• Although the Internet is integral in the life of this generation student, they still tend to compartmentalise their lives – don't add lecturers as friends, maybe have more than one profile for different audiences
Do you think students realise it is important to present themselves in a specific manner?	• In the long run yes • In some courses they do teach students the do's and don'ts of information sharing on the Internet • Students present all aspects of their identity (mostly); gender, ethnicity, interests and hobbies • Some students have more than one profile to cater to the different audiences who view them • For me it is not important who or	• This may be a cultural implication, or a generational one – compartmentalisation between generational identity and cultural identity • Some university courses also teach principles for students to live by – with special regards to sharing information/identity online • Students need to consider the consequences of posting things on public sites

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	what they are • Facebook is an outward reflection of how students want to be seen • No, not really important for students to be who they are not on Facebook – we want to see them as they are	
Do you think students think it is important for lecturers to present themselves in a specific manner?	• Yes, to have a formal identity • A lot of lecturers have two accounts – one for social another for students • I want a professional looking profile, but to still be approachable to students • I am quite open to students perceiving me in my many roles • I still think students give a fair representation of themselves • Identities presented are a mix of the real them and the ideal they want others to see • Students are proud to participate in OSNs for learning purposes • Currently, I don't have any of those rules • I want my students to see me as someone who is there to guide them and encourage them	• Lecturers are still authority figures and should be seen as such • Lecturers create two profiles – this may be because they want to be approachable to students, as well as have their own social lives
What considerations do students think lecturers should take into consideration in the use OSNs for identity formation and the learning experience?	• When I post something (status or pictures) I am very aware and conscious of the effect it might have on my students • I endeavour to give a fair representation of myself • Social networks are necessary to use in the learning environment – it's effective • I want students to be who they are, so I am also who I am on the Internet • Take into account when you put certain things on the Internet, it must not be too controversial because it could be taken up in the wrong way and someone could be offended by it • I create groups but students can't necessarily see my private profile • I am considering creating another Facebook account – just for students • I try to think that I am giving a fair representation of myself on Facebook	
What types of identities are created by students?	• Mostly social – got to do with the age group • They are very experimental at this stage in their lives • The ideal self • Students are not always inclined to show the real them	

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	• They want to be part of the in-groups • The 'in' and 'out' mentality of the generation • Students feel they belong when they are in a group, and create profiles to meet the expectations and the tendencies of the group	
How do you think students want the lecturer to manage information/ knowledge creation and sharing in OSNs?	• Try not to interfere, until it becomes necessary • It's hard, sometimes comment trails get very long • Be aware of the discussions going on, be ready to intervene when something seems to be going wrong • Lecturer needs to be the mediator when there is conflict • Lecturer needs to be the moderator to make sure students stay on track • It's mostly about being the 'referee' and observing - too much interference and students won't learn anyway • Be a 'fly on the wall' and just observe • Usually, I initiate most of the discussions, and actively participate in discussions to make sure students don't veer off topic	
What are students perceptions on security settings on the OSNs?	• I am very conscious about who sees what on my profiles • Don't perceive students to be very aware/conscious about their privacy settings • Privacy settings should be taken into account • You don't want your life to be open to just anyone to come and see what you are doing • Doesn't seem as if students mind too much • Some people are too mindful of security settings or being too guarded • Most important thing is to be yourself • This generation thrives on the skill of seeing authenticity and people for who they really are	
How do you think students feel they should be encouragedfor active participation in OSNs?	• Capture them in class first • Create the need for them to connect with you • Find a way to make them comfortable to use social networks for connecting with lecturer • I incentivise by making it part of the course requirements • By using the Internet as a tool for assessment • For students to achieve certain assessment outcomes • Try to build or encourage self-esteem and participation in groups	
What do you think students perceive as the value of OSNs for learning purposes?	• Offers a comfortable zone beyond the classroom and very formal academic setting • When students are comfortable in their own space, receive encouragement from you, they learn more • Yes, there is definite value • No judgment, no grading, easy to learn environment	• Online as a medium of education/learning is a convenient tool • Provides safe space for lecturer and student to interact • Free of judgement = a lot more open conversations • Convenient for sharing information quickly and

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	• Easy to give opinion, ask questions openly • I can share course content easily (slides, assignments, extra information) • Answer questions, give feedback • I think it is important for some learning to take place on the Internet – not all • Some courses the learning takes place through actual application	efficiently • Because Internet is so integral to this generation, meeting them on their level will help with teaching them to enhance the learning experience

Table 2 presents an overview of the additional categories generated from the open-ended questions not evident from existing literature or in the theoretical statements.

Table 2: Categories generated from open-ended questions

Category	Description
Convenience	It's convenient, quick and easy to connect with students via OSNs.
Authenticity	Lecturers get to see the "real" students; students get to know their lecturers on a different level.
Comfortable/safe environment	Students and lecturers can easily connect and engage. For students, OSNs are a comfortable space to debate, raise questions, find solutions to problems – mainly because they are familiar with the platform.
Guidance	Lecturers aim to use social networks more for guidance and encouragement. They want to guide students in the right direction with their thoughts, help increase self-esteem, and encourage them to continue learning
Innovative learning	Lecturers and students post a lot of different media that is either course or industry related. This enhances the learning for students, and helps them think of their coursework on a somewhat different level.
Acceptance	Students want to feel that they are accepted by their group, and by their lecturer. This sometimes creates the need to create different profiles, in order to cater to the different audiences that may view them on these OSNs.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results indicated in the tables above, the following results on *identity formation* emerged from the semi-structured interviews:

• Lecturers feel that students do tend to show their 'real' identities in the OSNs but it might not always be the case. Only one lecturer said 'yes, they use their real identity and have no pretention'. The other lecturers felt different. For example one lecturer said 'Sometimes they try to be their ideal self, but eventually you see the true self come out in their conversations' and they mostly present a social self, especially the younger students. One lecturer felt students 'present the ideal them because what you see on their profiles and what the comment is might not be as open' and that they would 'create identities that would make them appear *cool'*. The other lecturer said 'about 25% project an ideal identity'.

• All respondents made some reference to the fact that this is a generation born into technology, and that someone from the students generation can almost not comprehend forming an identity outside of the Internet. One lecturer for example said that identity formation is important in OSNs 'because if you ask a student a question in class, they

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might say *I don't know,* or *I am not sure*, but on Facebook they seem to be more confident'.

- There is in some cases a 'cultural element' where students are perceived a little different in real life as opposed to how they present themselves on the OSNs. For example, one lecturer said 'because we deal with a lot of Asian and Malaysian students, I would say on the one hand you have that very polite cultural identity and on the other hand they also want to be themselves, so they negotiate between these two identities but tend to become more informal later'.

- It was felt that some students, as well as the lecturers, still tend to compartmentalise their lives. One lecturer actually pointed out that lecturers set the tone for interaction to be formal or informal and said: 'many lecturers have two personalities or identities, one is the more intimate self which is private, and then they have this lecturer persona for students – so the minute they have this, the students take it as an indication to say this lecturer is formal, so this is going to be formal, therefore I am expected to be more formal and that usually makes these OSNs falls'.

- They agreed that students have multiple profiles, and select who gets to see which profile. However, they felt that students should be more aware of privacy settings to protect them or the lecturers. One lecturer emphasised that 'you can't control what a student says, but after he says, you can intervene and you can reduce the effect by controlling/managing the situation … sometimes the information they share are not factual or accurate' which emphasises the fact that information should be managed by the lecturer as 'expert'.

- They are aware of creating and sharing information (most but not all), and in a sense want to still present identities based on what will get them accepted in specific groups of people or the in-groups. However, one lecturer said that 'sometimes they make comments which could easily be misunderstood or incorrect, that's when we intervene and suggest to them to think a little differently'. Another lecturer said 'I think they enjoy interacting on Facebook and E-learn for social interaction and a learning experience'

The lecturers perceive the use of OSNs *for learning purposes* important in terms of the following results which emerged from the semi-structured interviews:

- They all perceived that OSNs provide a comfortable space for students to freely communicate with lecturers – ask questions, get information on assignments, see how they will be graded, get important 'last minute' reminders or information that a lecturer can post on a group. One lecturer said 'most times when they don't understand an assignment, or sometimes lectures and the content of lectures, they use the OSNs for learning purposes, especially if it is graded, it matters a lot to them to be able to score – they also see it as an avenue to clarify ideas and get discussions going on how they can solve the problem'. Another lecturer said 'today's kids are very comfortable to use OSNs, so we should try and understand their preferences and ensure that more learning takes place at their level'.

- The lecturers felt that using the OSNs as a tool for learning/education is convenient because they believe they can help their students learn more through different media (video clips, articles, pictures, status updates) about course content and the course industry. One example of a course-related information and message posted by a lecturer is 'to create a video clip that is not just about learning, but it's in relation to the subject matter. They learn additional competencies, like how to shoot a video, how to do editing, overlay with music, developing story-boards for the commercial, and then they present it in the class, I have industry people come in to do judging as well, so I am seen to be fairer. Take the average of the marks, and the best videos will be uploaded to my blog'.

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- According to the lecturers, the 21st century student is a tough generation to gauge, as students can see how much a lecturer knows about technology, and whether they are being authentic about it. One lecturer emphasised the fact that 'by having the experience of using Blackboard [a type of OSN], Facebook gets more interaction comparatively because I think it is more a youth and cultural thing'.
- Lectures agreed that in most cases the students perceive it the responsibility of the lecturer to encourage participation and stimulate discussions, whilst other times the students take the initiative, create groups, start posting interesting media and stimulate discussion among them. For example, one lecturer said in terms of interactivity 'Actually it's so limitless, because I would sometimes incorporate news channels, CNN, even the local online newspaper sights, and then they would go onto YouTube links, you know *upworthy'*. Another lecturer said 'I try very hard to encourage their participation, but most of them are silent or simply click *like,* so they all have PhDs in *likes'.*
- They all agreed that students like to connect, yet want some privacy; they want to show the real them, yet want to show an ideal self that is easily accepted; they share personal information (gender, ethnicity, interests, learning activities), yet are not always 'proud' to tell friend (although they are proud to tell parents they actively use the OSNs for learning purposes). One lecturer said that not many lecturers use other OSNs than their formal E-Learn to connect with students 'because that's university policy that we need to use E-Learn as a common platform and any announcements you make on a social media site, should be replicated on this platform to be fair but I use Facebook because the students check it more often and get it in real time – I have to use Facebook to get them to go to E-Learn'.

The lecturers all felt that OSNs are useful to enhance the students identity formation and learning experience because they can post useful information to their students, learn more about their students, how to positively contribute to their growth as people and they are seen as a 'guide' and 'encourager', not just as a teacher. Furthermore, lecturers perceive that OSNs do tend to aid in bridging the divide between student and lecturer, while still maintaining the distinct identities and roles of each. They confirmed that OSNs and online learning play a very important role in students identity formation – especially the young ones who come straight out of high school. They have the opportunity to explore themselves, to test group boundaries, and to develop their own epistemologies in terms of how they want to view the world, and how they want the world to view them. As the students mature, the lecturers indicated that they could see the maturisation process and when exploration slows down. They can also see the 'real' versus the 'ideal' identity that each student is portraying. Lecturers concluded that they aim to guide and help develop their students to become positive contributors to their communities, the university and to society at large. For example, one lecturer emphasised the importance to create a comfortable zone beyond the classroom and very formal academic setting because 'when students are comfortable in their own space, and they have encouragement from you, where you don't judge them in that space, it boosts their self-esteem and is a very good avenue for progression in academic work'. This was confirmed by another lecturer who said 'I think that OSNs can be a very positive thing because it helps those who suffer from low self-esteem to reinforce the positive aspects of their personality'.

CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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This study suggests that lecturers perceive that the use of OSNs to enhance students identity formation and the learning experience is indeed possible, specifically in terms of three main aspects. Firstly, OSNs allow students for knowledge collecting, understanding, identity constructing and connecting with others through a comprehensive knowledge system as extension of the classroom to help students to improve on searching and absorbing knowledge. Secondly, students should pay attention on to their identity formation and security settings to ensure that their online presence can be managed. Thirdly, although interactive use of OSNs might be good for students learning experience, the results of this study suggests that it will only happen if 'managed' effectively by the lecturer as 'expert'. Although the findings cannot be generalized because of its qualitative nature and that it was only conducted at one university where the Internet was accessible and available, the culture of a university and students creativity requirement might be different in other universities. However, it is believed that this paper contributed academically by exploring the categories of the usage of OSNs in these contexts which supported the theoretical statements derived from the literature and theory. Furthermore it served as an excellent foundation in the finalisation and formation of the measuring instrument which were used in the follow-up quantitative analysis. Further research will be conducted at an open distance university in South Africa to compare the results.

CONCLUSION

A review of existing literature on OSNs, which became a new phenomenon in human communication, interaction and the learning experience, illustrates the need for a new and/or improved measuring scale. The results confirmed that a link between the usage of the Internet for learning purposes (they perceived students to be more open for information sharing to build a sense of belonging, group cohesion, participation, obtain feedback, etc.); identity formation (they tried to increase their self-confidence and self-esteem through social and cognitive presence in their online profiles, developed positive attitudes, etc.); and lecturers confirmed that students realised the importance of interactivity and intensity in OSNs, especially for learning purposes (many adapted their identity to be accepted by the in-groups, managed information to enhance student learning, took responsibility, networking, collaboration, etc.). Given the scarcity of research in this new and relatively under-explored area, this paper can be seen as an important starting point for future research to clarify and consider the wider implications of the use of OSNs in educational institutions. While this paper outlined some of the basic concepts and approaches, much will still be done and several options exist to further extend this initial study. The following quote from Tang and Ding (2014:464) is specifically relevant to indicate the importance of knowledge management in these OSNs: 'The Internet is becoming an important information or knowledge source and a widely used communication platform for college students. With the development of Internet technology, virtual interactions among professional persons are being increased quickly and which leads to the emergence of virtual networked knowledge society'.

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