



Undergraduate students' purposes of utilizing social networks: A survey research

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Abstract

A survey research was conducted to explore undergraduate students' utilization of Social Networks in their daily life. Specifically, this study investigated the social networks utilized by undergraduate students, the duration and the frequency of their social network usage and their purposes of social network utilization. The participants of the study involved 102 undergraduate students in Computer Education and Instructional Technologies Department in Marmara University. The study results indicated that the most frequently utilized social network was Facebook and WhatsApp, as they have become an indispensable of our life. Most students use social media several times during a day and they devote an average of 5-10 minutes or 11-30 minutes in each of their entry to these web sites. So, it is difficult to guess how much time we devote Social networks just in a single day. These students utilized these sites for communication, cooperation, sharing, searching and entertainment purposes. Giving clues about the undergraduate students' daily utilization of social networks, this study shed lights on how utilize this sites for educational purposes as well.

1. Introduction

In the information age, the advances in ICT Technologies has made tremendous changes in how the people communicate each other and how they form their social environment. Instead of face to face relationships, the individuals started to communicate in online environments and the friends from schools and from next doors has been replaced by virtual friends in social networks. Today's youth spends a substantial time for social network utilization online, which is more than the time they spend with their friends face to face (Tınmaz, 2013). All these happenings put forward the concept of social media and several studies has been conducted to understand its utilization in the daily life.

Alican and Saban (2013) defined the Social Networks as the web sites that provides people with an environment for creating profile with personal information, developing new friendships from all over the World, maintaining existing friendships in an online environments, sharing and commenting on something and organizing events. With this high popularity of the social networks, various social network applications has been developed involving Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, Instagram etc... Embodying a variety of user-friendly attributes, such as multimedia sharing (pictures, photos, videos), instant messaging, video conferencing and tagging; social networking sites has become one the most popular Web 2.0 technologies (Deperlioğlu & Köse, 2010; Yükseltürk & Top, 2013). In social networks, the people have a chance to introduce themselves, to express their opinions freely, to communicate with people from all over the World, or to become a part of a social networking group that have a common purpose and interest (Karaca & Aktas, in press).

Social networks has been accepted as a new way to socially interact with people from all over the World. It has transformed the ways in which internet has been utilized by the users (Selwyn, 2011). Today, more than half of the internet users utilize two or more social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.) (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart & Madden, 2015). Having user friendly interfaces and usability opportunities and requiring no technical skills to be utilized, increased the popularity of social networking sites among the people from all age groups. According to 2014 statistics, the most popular social networking site is Facebook and %87 of the youth between ages 18-29 have a Facebook account in United States (Duggan et al., 2015). Kemp (2015) explained that Facebook has 1.366 billion active users in January 2015. The utilization of

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Facebook is also increasing in Turkey as it is in the top ten countries in using Facebook in the world (<http://www.socialbakers.com/>). Thus, Facebook provides a good platform to reach the young population in Turkey for educational purposes.

Tinmaz (2013) explained that today's youth utilize social networks with very different purposes, such as establishing new friendships, keeping in touch with existing friends and being accessible all the time. According to Richter and Koch (2008), Social Networking Sites provide users with the opportunities for identity management and for keeping in touch with other users. The authors defined six basic functions of Social Networking Services: (1) identity management (edit profile data), (2) expert search (find other users), (3) context awareness (awareness of a common context with other people), (4) contact management (crosslink with others), (5) network awareness (awareness of the activities of the contacts), (6) exchange views. In their research study, the authors found that the participants mostly utilized the social networking sites to keep contact and share information with the contacts or colleagues they already know. Furthermore, the participants utilized social networks for contact management, sharing pictures, expert search, getting to know people and presenting themselves. According to Duggan et al. (2015), a person has an average of 155 friends in a Facebook account and they described only 50 friends as actual friends. Most of these friends involved their current friends, friends from the past (old classmates), friends from work (colleagues). Also, 39% people explained that they are connected to people they have never met, so the social networks environments provide a good environment for meeting with new people as well. On the other hand, in the research conducted by Richter and Koch (2008), getting to know new people and dating and finding new business partners is not much frequently stated purposes for utilizing Social Networks. Thus, this study indicated that the social networks are generally utilized to maintaining existing friends rather than getting to know new people.

In today's world, social networks occupy an important place in individuals' everyday lives. According to Kemp (2015), an average social media user spends 2 hours and 25 minutes per day for utilizing using social networks. Dugan et al. (2015) explained that most Facebook users was mostly daily users and most of them visits this site several times in a day. Instead of simply viewing the content, they were actively using their account for sharing, posting and commenting on the content in Facebook.

As people started to spend a substantial part of their daily life using social networks, it took the attraction of several researchers from all the fields. Especially, it is of high interest that how the utilization of social networks influenced students' learning and educational processes. According to Selwyn (2011), the utilization of social networks have high impacts on university students as it influenced the nature of today's students who enter the universities. The students have a tendency to be a more flexible, multitasking and self-organized people. It also changed the nature of learning, which is based on the "principles of collective exploration, play and innovation rather than individualized instruction" (p.3). Accordingly, within the opportunities provided by social networks, the learners have become active producers of knowledge rather than consumers of the available content and learning have become a more collective activity, where the individuals learn from each other on a "just in time" basis.

With these educational challenges, many higher education institutions feel a need to catch up with social network applications and social network users. As the university students spend most of their time on these networks (Celik, Yurt & Sahin, 2015), it is of high importance to explore how long and for what purposes they utilize social networks. Learning about their daily utilization of social networking sites would be very valuable to understand how to utilize the social networking sites for educational purposes as well. Since the universities are in a good position to use social media practices to support the collaborative creation of knowledge among students, it is important to explore university students' utilization of social networks. Thus, this study has been conducted to explore the social networks utilized by undergraduate students, the duration and the frequency of their social network usage. Furthermore, the main purpose of this study is to determine the undergraduate students' purposes of social network utilization. This study results will shed in light about how to support social media practices in universities.

2. Method

This study utilized a survey research to explore Computer Education and Instructional Technologies Department students' utilization of Social Networks. According to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2006), survey research aims to collect descriptive data about the current state of the study participants. Similarly, this study aimed to find out the social networks utilized by undergraduate students, the duration and the frequency of their social network usage and their purposes of social network utilization.

1. Which Social Network Sites does the undergraduate students use?
2. How long does the undergraduate students use Social Networking Sites?
3. How often does the undergraduate students use Social Networking Sites?
4. What are the undergraduate students' purposes for using Social Networking Sites?

3. Instruments

In this study, the data were collected through a web-based survey, which involved two main parts. The first part of the questionnaire involved some descriptive questions about the gender and grade level of the students. Furthermore, this part involved some questions about which social media sites the students use, the duration and frequency of social media usage and how much time does the students devote to social media utilization.

The second part of the questionnaire involved a scale developed by Usluel, Demir and Çınar (2014). This scale aimed to determine the purposes of using social media. This 26 item 7-point Likert-type scale assessed participants' rankings from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In the research conducted by Usluel et al.(2014), the internal consistency of this scale was found to be very good ($\alpha = .92$). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient value was also high ($\alpha = 0.89$), showing good reliability estimates for the scale.

4. Sampling and Data Collection

The sample of the study involved undergraduate students at Computer Education and Instructional Technologies Department at Atatürk Faculty of Education in Marmara University. The data were collected through a web based survey, the link of which link was sent to 185 students, whose contact information is available. Thus, a convenience sampling method has been used to reach participants accessible (Frankel & Wallen, 2003). Among these students, 102 students participated to the study voluntarily with a response rate of 55%. Using a web-based questionnaire was an efficient method in the current study as it has several advantages of cost-effectiveness, confidentiality and easily scoring standardized items (Gay et al., 2006).

Some descriptive information about the participants has been provided in Table 1. Examining the Table, this study involved students from all grade levels and 56 male and 46 female students participated to this study.

Table 1. Characteristics of Sample for the Study (N=102)

	<i>N</i>	<i>N (%)</i>
Grade Level		
1 st grade	41	40.2
2 nd grade	17	17.6
3 rd grade	18	16.7
4 th grade	26	25.5
Gender		
Male	56	54.9
Female	46	45.1

5. Data Analysis

For analyzing the data, some descriptive statistics, involving means, frequencies, percentages and standard deviations, were conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 15).

6. Results

6.1. The Social Network Sites utilized by undergraduate students

As shown in Table 1, nearly all of the participant students uses Facebook (N=95, 93.1%) and WhatsApp (N=92, 90.2%) in their daily life. The utilization of other sites are also high as %70.6 of students uses twitter and %67 of them uses Instagram. Though the least utilized Social Networking Site is Foursquare, it is used by nearly half of the undergraduate students (N=44, 43.1%).

Tablo 1. The utilized social networking sites: descriptive statistics

	<i>N</i>	%
Facebook	95	93.1
Twitter	72	70.6
Instagram	67	65.7
Foursquare	44	43.1
WhatsApp	92	90.2

6.2. The students' experience (in years) with Social Networking Sites

In the present study, the undergraduate students have been asked about how long they have been using social networking sites. As presented in Table 2, most students have more than 4 years of experience with Social Networking Sites (N=66, 64.7%).

Tablo 2. The duration of students' social network utilization

	<i>N</i>	%
1-2 years	2	2
2-3 years	11	10.8
3-4 years	23	22.5
More than 4 years	66	64.7

6.3. The frequency of Social Networking Site Utilization:

In the present study, the undergraduate students were asked about how often they use Social Networking Sites. While 53.9% of students explained that they use Social Networking sites several times during the day, 42.2% of students proposed that they use Social Networking sites 1-2 times in a day. Only 4 students expressed to use these sites 1-2 times in a week. There were no students who never uses these sites or who uses these sites 1-2 times in a month.

Furthermore, the students were asked about the time they devoted to Social Networking Sites in each entry to these web sites. Most undergraduate students were proposed to devote an average of 5-10 minutes (N=39, 39.2%) or 11-30 minutes (N=39, 39.2%) when they enter to these web sites. Small percentages of

teachers expressed to devote a time range of 31-60 minutes (N=11, 10.8%), 61-120 minutes (N=6, 5.9%), or more than 120 minutes (N=7, 6.9%) in each entry.

6.4. The Purposes of Utilizing Social Networking Sites:

The participant teachers were asked about the purposes for using social networks and some of their responses were presented in Table 3. Examining the table, they mostly used social networks to send and receive messages with the friends (M=5.80, SD=1.52). Furthermore, the undergraduate students' utilization of social media for cooperative activities was also high as most students uses social media to cooperate with friends about an issue (M=5.61, SD=1.67) and to come together with the people having common interests (M=5.03, SD=1.83). Moreover, many undergraduate students used social networks for communicating with their friends (M=5.52,SD=1.80), and keep in touch with them (M=5.17, SD=1.75). On the other hand, the undergraduate students had comparably low ratings for using social networks to start communication with someone else, such as establishing new friendships (M=3.01, SD=1.84), communicating with no intimate friends (M=2.37, SD=1.71) and for saying something to the friends that cannot be possible to say in face to face ways (M=2.13, SD=1.68).

Furthermore, they used social networks for some searching purposes, such as searching information about a topic (M=4.98, SD=1.63) and finding out materials that support their opinions (M=4.74, SD=1.77). Also, many students used social media for entertainment purposes, such as viewing some humorous sharing (M=4.32, SD= 1.98) and when they are upset, social networks helps them to move away the things that make them unhappy (M=3.92, SD= 2.01). Finally, they used social networks for some sharing activities such as sharing some visuals that supports their opinions (M=4.32, SD= 1.88). On the other hand, the participants' ratings for utilizing social networks for creating a video album (M=2.79, SD=1.89) and creating personal event diaries (M=2.71, SD=1.88) were comparably low.

Table 3. Participant responses to some items of purposes for social networking site scale: descriptive statistics.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I use social networks for sending and receiving messages with my friends.	5.80	1.52
I use social networks to cooperate with my friends about an issue or stituation.	5.61	1.67
I use social networks to be informed about the social events.	5.54	1.69
I use social networks to communicate with my friends (i.e. instant communication, voice and video chat).	5.52	1.80
I use social networks to keep in touch with my friends.	5.17	1.75
I use social networks to come together with the people with common interests.	5.03	1.83
I use social networks to search information about a topic that I wonder.	4.98	1.63
I use social media to to find out materials(photos, video, texts) that supports my opinions.	4.74	1.77
I use social networks to form content (picture, video or text) about a topic.	4.57	1.71
I use social networks to reach the friends about whom I don't have any contact information.	4.36	1.98
I use social networks to share some visuals (picture, video) that supports my opinions.	4.32	1.88

I use social media to view some humorous sharings (i.e. cartoons, expressions).	4.32	1.98
I use social networks to organize socia-cultural activities.	4.14	1.93
When I am upset, I use social networks to move away from the things that make me unhappy.	3.92	2.01
I use social networks to create photo album.	3.54	1.97
I use social networks to establish new friendships.	3.01	1.84
I use social networks to create video albüm.	2.79	1.89
I use social networks to create a personal event diary.	2.71	1.88
I use social networks to communicate with the friends that are not so intimate to me.	2.37	1.71
I use social networks to say something to my friends that I can not say in face to face ways.	2.13	1.68

Notes: 1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree

7. Discussion

In this study, a survey research was conducted to find out the social networks utilized by undergraduate students, the duration and the frequency of their social network usage and their purposes of social network utilization. The study results indicated that the students uses a variety of Social Networking Sites, including Facebook, Whatsup, Twitter, Instagram and Foursquare and the mostly utilized sites were Facebook and Whatsup, as these applications have become an indispensable part of our daily life. These results supports the findings by Duggan et al. (2015), who found that more than half of the internet users use two or more social networking sites and the most popular social networking site is Facebook as 87% of youth has Facebook accounts. In todays' world, social networks occupy an important place in individuals' everyday lives as it has been used as one of the main ways for socialization and communication. Embodying a variety of user-friendly attributes, instant messaging, video conferencing and tagging) social networking sites has become one the most popular Web 2.0 technologies (Deperlioğlu & Köse, 2010; Yükseltürk & Top, 2013). In social networks, the people have a chance to introduce themselves, to express their opinions freely, to communicate with people from all over the World, or to become a part of a social networking group that have a common purpose and interest (Karaca & Aktas, in press).

The present study results indicated that most students uses social media several times during a day. Furthermore, when they are asked about the time they devoted to Social Networking Sites in each of their entry to these web sites, most students were proposed to devote an average of 5-10 minutes or 11-30 minutes. This results was supported by Dugan et al. (2015), who revealed that most Facebook users was daily users and most of them visits this site several times in a day. Entering several times in a day and spending at least 5-10 minutes means filling a large amount of time in Social networks in a single day. Supporting this idea, Tinmaz (2013) explained that todays' youth spends a substantial time for social network utilization online, which is more than the time they spend with their friends face to face. Facilitated by widespread availability of tablets and smartphones, we carry social networks to all the places with us and we have a tendency to check our social network account with every other notification. So, it is not possible to guess how much time we devote Social networks in a single day...

The participant students were also asked about their purposes of utilizing Social Networks. The results showed that they mostly used social networks for communication purposes, such as sending and receiving messages, communicating and keeping in touch with the friends. This was an expected results as one of main functions of Social Networks is to keep contact with friends and colleagues (Richter & Koch, 2014). Providing opportunities to reach people from all over the world, it has changed the nature of communication among the people. The utilization of Social Networks has become one of the key communication methods to maintain their social connections with existing and old friends, families, relatives or friends from school or colleague environments (Celik et al., 2015).

Though the utilization of social networks for communication purposes was high among undergraduate students, the participant teachers had low ratings for establishing new friendships or communicating with some no intimate friends in those environments. Although social networks provides good environments for developing new friendships from all over the World, the results suggest the university students have difficulties in meeting with new people or communicating with someone else who is not so close to them in social networking sites. According to 2014 statistics in the United States, people have an average of 155 friends in Facebook accounts and most of these friends involved their current friends, friends from the past (old classmates), friends from work (colleagues). Similarly, Richter and Koch (2008) found that getting to know new people and dating and finding new business partners is not much frequently stated purposes for utilizing Social Networks. Thus, the social networking sites has been generally utilized as an environment to communicate with their existing friends, instead of establishing new friendships.

Another interesting results of the study was that is that the social networks has a potential to make the students happy when they are upset. Many undergraduate students utilized social networks for entertainment purposes such as viewing some humorous pictures and videos, with a thought that it helps them to move away the things that make them unhappy. Thus, we can infer from here that social networks provides students with a peaceful and relaxing environment, in which they blow off steam by surfing on the site.

Also, the current study results showed that the students utilized social networks for some searching and sharing purposes, such as searching information about a topic, finding out and sharing some materials that support their opinions. According to Celik, Yurt and Sahin (2015), the new generation takes the advantages of the social networks to easily reach the information in a just in time manner. Selwyn (2011) explained that the utilization of social networks changed the nature of today's students who enter the universities as the students have a tendency to be a more flexible, multitasking and self-organized people. Utilizing the social networks, they deal simultaneously with many activities concerning daily life, and they share opinions, sources and materials that make them keep abreast of many different job and life related issues.

Furthermore, the undergraduate students utilized social networks for some cooperation activities, such as cooperating about an issue and come together with people having common interests. Providing opportunities to create virtual groups involving people with common interests, social networks provides good opportunities to reach people who have similar backgrounds or interests. According to Selwyn, the utilization of social networks changed the nature of learning, which is based on the "principles of collective exploration, play and innovation rather than individualized instruction" (p.3). Providing opportunities for collaboration and sharing information, the social networks helped to make learning a more collective activity, where the individuals learn from each other on a "just in time" basis. As learning is based on collective exploration and discovery of knowledge in social networks (Selwyn, 2011), one can come together with other people with similar backgrounds, discuss about different issues and learn from each other. Furthermore, social networks provides the university students a variety of educational collaboration opportunities, such as joining academic groups related to their department or class, sharing opinions about the lessons or homework, organizing educational meetings or conferences, or working on a group project online. The social networks can be effectively used in the distribution of information, group assignments, reference books and a variety of course materials (videos, pictures, presentations etc.).

With these challenges, many higher education institutions feel a need to catch up with social network applications and social network users. As the university students spend a substantial time utilizing these networks, learning about their daily utilization would be very valuable to understand how to use the social

networking sites for educational purposes as well. Since the universities are in a good position to use social media practices to support the collaborative creation of knowledge among students, it is important to explore university students' utilization of social networks. Giving clues about the undergraduate students' daily utilization of social network, this study shed lights on how utilize this sites for educational purposes as well. Future studies exploring university students' utilization of social networks for educational purposes should be conducted. Also, some qualitative studies should be conducted to explore the university students' daily utilization of social networks in a deeper way.

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