Understanding students' perceptions of the benefits of online social networking use for teaching and learning

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A B S T R A C T

The recent popularity of social technologies has motivated some university lecturers to use them for Online Social Networking (OSN) educational activities. These technologies have enormous potential to enhance the teaching and learning experience. However, there have been limited studies assessing how to effectively use social technologies and what the impacts are on students' learning experience, particularly with regard to their value in enhancing interactions. This paper focuses on students' experiences with using OSN for student–student and student–lecturer interactions. A total of nine focus group discussions with 46 students were held in Malaysian and Australian universities. A thematic analysis revealed that students identified a number of positive outcomes from using OSN to interact with each other and with their lecturers. The findings contribute to current understanding about how students leverage social technologies to enhance interaction among themselves, with their lecturers, and with the content of the course.

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1. Introduction

The emergence and popularity of social technologies in the past few years has motivated some lecturers to appropriate these technologies for educational activities in higher education. Social or Web 2.0 technologies include social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, and wikis. In this paper “online social networking” (OSN) educational activities are defined as the use of appropriated social technologies to facilitate a range of teaching and learning activities in collaborative settings. A previous definition of OSN offered by Boyd (2007) stated that online social networking is a mediated public characterised by four properties: persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences. This paper focuses on OSN educational activities; therefore we do not use Boyd's general definition but focus on what OSN means in the context of higher education. OSN encompasses the technologies commonly known as social networking tools, but is more broadly applied in this paper to include a range of social technologies such as blogs, wikis, and other tools commonly known as “Web 2.0”. Online social networking can also be distinguished from the social networking activities that occur offline (i.e., face-to-face). In the literature the terms social media and social technologies are often used interchangeably. Lowedahl (2011) defined social media as web environments where user-created content is aggregated, presented and shared. The term “social technologies” is used throughout this paper and includes technologies typically labelled as social media as well as other tools that enable collaboration, such as online discussion forums.

Within the context of higher education, social technologies can be used to support teaching and learning through OSN educational activities. Some examples of OSN educational activities are content generating, sharing, interacting, and collaborating. Content generating occurs when social technologies are used by students to easily create their own content, opinions and support across networks of users. For example, blogs can be used as reflective diaries and to develop online communities of practice (Osman & Koh, 2013; Sandars & Schroter, 2007). Students are able to share or publish their work and ideas on a public space for others to view and download. For example, multimedia files can be shared on file sharing websites such as Flickr, YouTube or SlideShare, and social bookmarking sites allow users to bookmark certain websites or tag keywords for users with similar interests to peruse (Gao, 2013; Lockyer & Patterson, 2008; Murray, 2008). Social technologies also support interactions among students by allowing them to actively participate in a discussion. They can leave comments on a blog or discussion forum and ask for more detailed explanations, add someone as a friend and initiate communication by leaving a message (Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, & Leveritt, 2012; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Munoz & Towner, 2009). Social technologies can be used by students to collaboratively learn how to solve problems with members of a group, or to organise collaborative learning and study groups (Gray, Annabell, &
Kennedy, 2010; Hemmi, Bayne, & Land, 2009; Kane & Richman, 2009). By collaborating, students extend their formal and informal interactions by establishing active communication with their peers, with the aim of working towards particular outcomes or producing deliverables, in both online and offline modes.

Many researchers have discussed the broad learning benefits of using social technologies in higher education (e.g., McLoughlin & Lee, 2008; Schroeder, Minocha, & Schneider, 2010) and there have been many published case studies of successful implementations of OSN activities in higher education (e.g., Amador & Amador, 2014; Bennett, Bishop, Dalgaro, Waycott, & Kennedy, 2012; Hosny & Fatima, 2012; Irwin et al., 2012; Lee, 2014; Pursel & Xie, 2014). Student perspectives are often considered in evaluations of specific OSN activities (e.g., Amador & Amador, 2014; Bennett et al., 2012) but detailed analyses of student perspectives covering a range of learning settings are less common (see Lee, 2014 for an exception). In addition, although social technologies are promoted as fostering collaborative learning and increasing interactions between students, little is known about how students feel about the interactivity benefits of social technologies. Studies that have examined OSN interactions have typically focused on the form of those interactions, rather than students’ perceptions (e.g., Kuo, Walker, Schroder, & Belland, 2014). Understanding how students feel about using social technologies to interact with each other or with their lecturers can help inform future implementations of OSN activities in higher education; tailoring educational activities to suit student preferences is likely to increase student engagement.

This paper aims to examine students’ perceptions about using social technologies to interact with other students and lecturers for university coursework, drawing on focus group discussions with students from various universities and disciplines. The paper is organised as follows. The next section describes the literature review on the topic of OSN use in higher education and focuses on the benefits of OSN for interactions. This is followed by a description of the empirical data collection and analysis process. The findings from a thematic analysis of student focus group discussions are then presented, followed by a discussion of the implications of the findings for understanding students’ experiences of using OSN to enhance interaction in higher education. The paper concludes with the contributions, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Social technologies in higher education: benefits and limitations

Contemporary social technologies are used by hundreds of millions of users, available for free, and are engaging and fun to use, making them appropriate to be harnessed for teaching and learning in particular to enhance social interactions (Brown, 2010; Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, & Chang, 2014; Hemmi et al., 2009; Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013; Selwyn, 2012). The increasingly ubiquitous access, ease of use, functionality, and flexibility of social technologies have made them appealing as flexible learning tools to be adopted in higher education (Brown, 2010; Schroeder et al., 2010). Some authors have suggested that social technologies support constructivist approaches to learning and have the potential to socialise online learning to a greater extent than previously seen in traditional learning environments (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008; Schroeder et al., 2010). Social technologies can support flexibility in learning processes and allow for easy publication, sharing of ideas and re-use of study content, and commentaries. They also support links to relevant resources in information environments that are managed by the students and lecturers themselves (Brown, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In this section we discuss the learning benefits of using social technologies in higher education that have been detailed in previous research, followed by a review of studies that have examined the use of social technologies in particular university settings, focusing on Australian and Malaysian contexts.

2.1. Learning benefits and limitations of social technologies in higher education

The extant literature has revealed several benefits of OSN for educational purposes. These include its use in improving students’ interaction (Crook, Fisher, Graber, Harrison, & Lewin, 2008; Odom, 2010); enhancing learning motivation and experience (Chen, Hwang, Wu, Huang, & Hsueh, 2011; Crook et al., 2008; Hosny & Fatima, 2012); and offering personalised course materials (Griffith & Liyanage, 2008; Rachman & Firpo, 2011). In addition, some researchers argue that OSN educational activities are valuable for developing students’ collaborative skills (Tay & Allen, 2011) where the students use social technologies that are appealing to them (Ellison, 2007; Hall & Hall, 2010). In some direct instances, the use of OSN has contributed to higher scores (Pursel & Xie, 2014) and better efficacy or mastery of task (Tower, Latime, & Hewitt, 2014). OSN educational activities may increase students’ participation in the classroom, particularly among quieter students. Students can reduce their anxiety levels by using social technologies, rather than raising questions out loud in front of their peers (Wheeler, Yeomans, & Wheeler, 2008).

Further, through the use of social technologies such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites, students are more likely to become active participants in producing their own knowledge (Preece & Shneiderman, 2009). Social technologies allow students to express themselves as they are given the freedom to publish their work online via blogs and wikis. Learning to use social technologies can further boost students’ motivation and encourage their attention to detail, resulting in an overall improved quality of work. A study by Rikfin, Longnecker, Leach, Davis, and Orta (2009) indicated that when students publish their work online for multiple audiences, their work is mostly original, interesting and engaging for others to see leading to a more positive assessment from their peers and lecturers.

Pertaining to the limitations of OSN use, Hamid, Kurnia, Waycott, and Chang (2011) reported some concerns raised by the students. These concerns include time management issues, lack of ICT skills faced by some students, and limited technical infrastructure in some higher learning institutions. In addition, using social technologies in higher education makes students’ work visible to others which can be motivating, but can also present challenges, such as students fearing others will copy their work and the need for lecturers to educate students about being careful when presenting their work in an online environment (Waycott, Sheard, Thompson, & Cleerehan, 2013).

2.2. Evaluations of social technologies in specific learning settings

A number of researchers have examined the use of specific social technologies in particular discipline settings in various regions (e.g., Alam, 2008; Bennett et al., 2012; Irwin et al., 2012; Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010; Zeeng, Robbie, Adams, & Hutchison, 2009). In this paper we examine students’ perspectives on the use of social technologies to support interactions in courses that have been taught face-to-face in Malaysian and Australian universities. Therefore, this review focuses on studies conducted in these countries.

Firstly, Alam (2008) explored the use of wikis and blogs for increasing student engagement and interaction across three universities in Australia. Feedback from students based on their experiences of using these social technologies included positive experiences in their interactions with the lecturers through blogs and comments (Alam, 2008). Zeeng et al. (2009) reported on the successful implementation of Flickr, a photo sharing technology, in a first-year photography subject within a design education programme in one Australian university. The success of the use of Flickr was later expanded to create a dynamic, global classroom, introducing students to international perspectives, and to partnerships with another university in Australia and one in the United States.
In a study by Irwin et al. (2012) in an Australian university, students' perceptions of using Facebook pages within individual university subject offerings were evaluated. Individual Facebook pages were developed for four university courses and used to provide information relevant to the courses and allow opportunities for student interaction. Based on an initial survey taken early on in the semester, the majority of students anticipated that a Facebook page would facilitate their learning, by increasing interaction with students and lecturers, and allowing notifications for course information. In the second survey at the end of the semester, it was found that 82% of students engaged with the course Facebook page, and the majority of students recommended using Facebook in future courses.

In a study of Facebook use for learning the English language in a Malaysian university, Kabilan et al. (2010) provided evidence that such usage of social technology is feasible as a mediating tool for language studies. They claimed that the features of Facebook helped to engage students in meaningful language-based activities and had the potential to enhance student interaction to improve their command of the language being studied. From a broader perspective, Zakaria, Watson, and Edwards (2010) who conducted a survey of 250 undergraduate students in one Malaysian university discovered that in general, students in the country were well exposed to these social technologies and were comfortable in using them for educational purposes. The study further indicates that the students established better engagement and interaction with the course and their peers, but minimal interactions with their lecturers (Zakaria et al., 2010).

Despite these positive experiences, it is important to acknowledge that the use of OSN educational activities will continue to be questioned in terms of their effectiveness as a medium to support teaching and learning. Certain courses such as chemistry, medical and engineering subjects which normally require special settings may not be suitable to use OSN. Waycott, Bennett, Kennedy, Dalgarno, and Gray (2010, p. 1207) claimed that new technologies are sometimes a “poor replacement for non-technology mediated learning” as there were instances when students felt they needed to be involved in “hands-on” face-to-face learning. This view is supported by Cloete, de Villiers, and Roodt (2009) who also identified that some course content is not conducive to online networking. However, courses in disciplines such as language, the arts, social sciences, business, ICT, and management could potentially benefit from using OSN (Hemmi et al., 2009; Virkus, 2008). Research also shows that students tend to separate “life” from “studying” and “home” from “lectures” (Wang, Woo, Quek, Yang, & Liu, 2012) which is consistent with the earlier findings by Jones et al. (2010) on students’ discomfort in mixing learning with social lives on social technologies. Thus, Waycott et al. (2010) argued that lecturers should integrate technologies into their teaching only if and when they see educational value in doing it. Therefore, a thorough evaluation needs to be conducted before OSN is adopted in higher education to assess its suitability for teaching and learning. This paper contributes to a better understanding of the suitability of OSN for educational activities by considering the views of students who have used these technologies to augment interactions in university courses. The methods used to conduct this research are described next.

3. Research methodology

The research question posed in this paper is: What are students’ perceptions of using social technologies to interact with each other and with lecturers in higher education?. To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative study involving focus group discussions with small groups of students. A total of 46 students took part, from different universities and disciplines. Given that OSN in higher education has become a truly global phenomenon, it is valuable to take a broad view and consider the views of students from different learning settings. The study reported in this paper is based on focus group discussions with students from both Malaysian and Australian universities. The context of the research was primarily selected for convenience: the lead researcher is Malaysian and had access to professional networks in Malaysian universities, making it easier to recruit participants. Meanwhile, the research was conducted in an Australian university and a number of Australian lecturers took part in an earlier study (Hamid et al., 2014). Both Malaysian and Australian universities have begun embracing social technologies in recent years (Bennett et al., 2012; Chen, 2011; Embi et al., 2011), providing a rich setting in which to examine this emerging phenomena.

According to Gibbs (2000), focus groups are widely used in academic research to examine attitudes, feelings, experiences and reactions in a way that would be not possible with one to one interviews, observations or questionnaires. The environment of focus groups allows students who participate to react and to build upon responses of other members or to “think synergically in a group setting” (Klein, Tellefsen, & Herskovitz, 2007, p.2117). Therefore, focus group is considered the most appropriate method to achieve the study purpose.

A total of nine focus group sessions were conducted: seven in Malaysia and two in Australia. Recruitment was conducted through lecturers who had taken part in a previous study (Hamid et al., 2014). Several factors resulted in the limited number of focus group sessions in Australia. These are the following: (i) unavailability of students who had moved on to other course(s) as they progressed into another academic year; (ii) some students were no longer in contact with the lecturers thus making it difficult for the lecturers to communicate with them; (iii) difference in academic calendar or semester systems between Malaysian and Australian universities during the data collection period for focus groups; and (iv) lecturers were no longer teaching the same course during the period when focus groups were conducted with the students, hence limiting the accessibility to the students to be interviewed.

Lecturers in Malaysia and Australia were contacted by email with an invitation to conduct focus groups with their current or previous semester’s students. The students needed to be those who had experienced using OSN for their course. Students participated in the focus groups on a voluntary basis. While there exists the possibility of bias in which students who enjoyed OSN would be more likely to volunteer, the invitation was made open to any students interested in participating in the focus group, regardless of their preference or enjoyment in using OSN or not.

The focus groups took around 60 to 90 min each. The sessions were held at the students’ universities without the presence of lecturers. Every student in each focus group completed a consent form giving their permission to participate in this study. The audio-taped focus group discussions were transcribed manually. For anonymity purposes, the students were identified using their focus group number and the order of seating in the focus group discussion.

The first author facilitated all the focus group sessions by adhering to the pre-prepared focus group discussion protocol. The students were asked several questions, centred on three main topics: their personal and educational use of OSN; the activities and experience of OSN use in class (specifically focusing on interaction); and the outcomes which include the benefits of OSN use.

The demographic information of the research participants in the focus groups is depicted in Table 1. Students in each focus group are represented by a code to protect their identity. For example, the code MU1 represents Student No. 3 from the second Malaysian focus group and AU1 represents the fourth student from the second Australian focus group. The courses where the students used the social technologies included the following: introductory courses on ICT in the context of teaching and learning English (i.e., Computer Application in English Language Teaching, and English as Second Language Classroom, Resources and Technology); an introductory course in Computer Fundamentals (i.e., Computing Literacy and Fundamentals of Computer Theory); Foreign Language Study; and Human Resource Information.
Systems. All courses were taught predominantly face-to-face; social technologies were introduced to augment interactions in a face-to-face teaching environment. The social technologies used were varied, and included Facebook, blogs, wikis, Bebo and others. They were used to facilitate class activities such as in the creation of content for blogging, interactions via Facebook, discussion via online discussion forums, and fast interaction based on short messages via Twitter.

The focus groups reached data saturation "when an additional interview did not yield any significant new insights" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 81). During the data analysis phase, analysis across and between the data continued until no more thematic patterns could be identified. Although the students came from different academic levels (i.e., undergraduate and postgraduate) and there were different groups of students (i.e., local and international, Malaysian and Australian), the data were treated equally without looking for specific differences of how social technologies were used by different groups. Rather than looking for differences, the analysis focused on identifying common themes relating to students' experiences of using OSN in their university courses.

All interview transcripts were printed, read multiple times, and notes were recorded in the margins to identify potential themes. These were then collated, reviewed, and examined for connections and redundancies. The data were analysed manually using thematic coding (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell, 2003; Kvale, 1996). Over time, the themes were expanded, contrasted and changed as we analysed more transcripts. To mitigate subjectivity bias and to provide triangulation, data analyses were reviewed by all authors. For the purposes of this paper, the analysis focused on identifying key themes that emerged when students discussed using social technologies for interacting with classmates or teachers. The results of this analysis are presented below.

### 4. Findings

Table 2 below, summarises the key themes that were identified in the analysis. These themes all relate to students' views on how using social technologies improved their interactions for learning purposes. Each of these themes is discussed further below, illustrated by examples from the focus group data.

#### 4.1. Engaging with content

Students believed that they experienced greater interaction with the other students and their lecturer when they used social technologies. They also perceived that they improved their own mastery of the course content when compared to their other classes without OSN use. One of the Malaysian students said:

We need to show our level of understanding of the subjects and it is assessed by the lecturers. Meaning to say, we have to learn and read a lot more. After that, we need to develop the assignment with...
materials that is supported by credible sources, as well as defend our arguments. We do that in normal classroom without social technology, but when we use OSN educational activities, we do it more actually.

[(M4S3)]

Learning from interacting enriches students’ own knowledge building as it promotes active and two-way communication. For example, social technology facilitated faster and more frequent interactions:

When we interact with someone or anyone, there always something new that I learn. Let say, we discussed about the topic we just learned, what I understood about it, etc. Then my friends who listened to me will add his or her perspective regarding the topic. It is not just typical feedback or discussion like “yes, I agree with you” or something like that. We sometimes discuss in detail. I realised that happened very frequently using OSN.

[(A2S3)]

From the above quotations, it can be seen that students believe that they are better engaged with the course content and feel that they have a higher level of understanding and mastery of the topics when they are given the chance to use OSN.

4.2. Peer learning

The term “peer learning” refers to students sharing information with each other to support both formal learning activities – such as revising for exams – and more informal, or incidental, learning (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001). Therefore, this theme includes all comments students made about sharing information with their peers to support each other’s learning. The analysis found that students shared knowledge with each other when social technologies were used. This was done through the sharing of materials collected for group assignment on wikis or by responding to the comments that other students were making. Students who were constantly online in the context of keeping updated about the course development often became the source of “information sharing”. For example, one of the students claimed:

I am online a lot more than my friends. So obviously they come to me and ask me if I have new information to share. I like to upload useful notes that I found from the Internet and let my friends know where I put up the materials. So it is easy now to share anything with my friends and even my lecturer.

[(M5S2)]

For some courses, the interaction level of the students with their peers and the course was stated in the course expectation, contained in the rubric. For example, in one of the focus groups, the students noted that the course rubric stated that the students’ collaborative work with the other students would be assessed. Some students found this requirement to share information and comment on each other’s work useful for expanding their learning:

We were asked to share our opinions with our friends whenever they requested for comments in their blog. Similarly, we also want the other students to share their opinions on ours. That way, we learn from one another. We will not know everything. Someone may have read and know more. So, OSN enable sharing to happen more often.

[(M2S1)]

In general, the findings show evidence of the greater occurrence of both off-curriculum (informal) and curriculum-based interactions among students, enabled by OSN. The findings also indicated that students’ informal interactions such as friendly chat among friends were often converted to curriculum-based interactions where discussions revolved around the course topics. Further, the evidence shows that students share knowledge with each other using OSN. Additionally, students interact with each other using OSN in a constructive manner, which implies that their contribution is done collaboratively and is meaningful for the other students.

4.3. Promotes critical thinking

OSN was particularly helpful for students in developing their ability to think critically and exercise their analytical skills. Most students said that the use of OSN enabled them to be more critical thinkers. Often this was because they were expected to comment on peers’ work, thus opening up the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills:

When I give comments, I want to make the best of comments which is constructive at the same time. I actually think really carefully before I leave my comment, or before I write my blog. So in a way, I think the use of OSN actually promotes my critical thinking. It is not that I don’t do that for other classes without OSN. But when we use OSN, what we write stays there online and more people are able to see it. Not just the lecturer who sees it.

[(M2S2)]

In situations such as the above where students’ writings are viewed in the public space, other people can also read the students’ output. The students attempted to produce their best work so that their output would be positively judged and assessed. This situation also resulted in students becoming more aware and more critical in their writings.

4.4. Self-directed learning

Another benefit claimed by most students, was the convenience of having self-directed learning enabled by the social technologies. In this context, the interaction is quite intimate between the student and the knowledge being learnt itself. Using OSN, students on their own or together with their peers were able to discover new knowledge related to the course. In this sense they were orchestrating their own interactions with information, teachers, and other students in order to support their learning.

Comparing OSN activities with class activities that did not involve OSN, one student considered that the use of social technology made her more independent in creating her own knowledge. In this sense, OSN generally enabled student-centred learning:

I never thought that I would need to do extra things. In other classes (those not using OSN), we just attended the class and do the normal assignments or project groups. But in this course, we got to create video, upload them, write story about the video, and then interact with friends about what the video is all about and how it is related to our topic. While it is burdensome to some extent, I can say that I learn more. So, social technology to me is a good platform to educate me how to play my part in creating my own knowledge. We are not spoon-fed as much as before I think.

[(M2S5)]

The above quotation shows that this student was relatively more self-directed and supported by peers to discover new knowledge through collaborative learning when using OSN, an observation that other students also made. This achievement is one of the benefits that most lecturers wanted to see in their students such that the students are able to be independent and no longer spoon-fed via the provision of lecture slides, one-way lectures in the lecture hall and frequent tutorials. However, it should be noted that students sometimes found the expectation of self-directed learning to be
“burdensome” as they were expected to invest additional time into OSN activities, which could in some instances become a barrier to students embracing OSN in higher education.

4.5. Self-monitoring of learning progress

Another benefit of OSN use was the ability for students to track their learning progress. This can also be seen as students interacting with the knowledge that they have acquired through the teaching and learning process via OSN. By knowing how much they have progressed in their learning, students are able to decide whether to modify (i.e., by maintaining or increasing) their interaction with the course content or to intensify their learning efforts. Two focus groups from Malaysia and one focus group from Australia (all at degree level of study) mentioned this benefit. For example, students could compare how much they had learned from early in the semester with their progress towards the end of semester:

Using WordPress or Windows Live, we can easily monitor and track our learning progress. Because when we first enter the course, we have to write our reflection from Week 1 and up until now, Week 11. I can clearly see what I have learnt before and the way until now. I can see the progression of my learning. \[(M2S5)\]

Some lecturers used e-portfolio; therefore their students were able to monitor the progression of their learning as most of their learning outputs were documented and archived in their “e-portfolios”. Students could record and compare their understanding of the topics as the course progressed. Students in most instances revealed that over the period of one semester they were able to see the evidence of their mastery of the topics just by looking at the produced “e-portfolios”. This provides evidence that with the use of OSN, students are able to track their learning progress such as their understanding of the course topic from early semester to the end of semester in a more systematic manner.

4.6. Platform to interact with lecturers

In terms of student–lecturer interaction, students generally believed that they interacted with their lecturers more frequently using OSN, compared with other forms of interaction. In most situations, students interacted with lecturers in order to get feedback pertaining to their course progress and requirements. OSN interactions were particularly useful for students when they were away for a certain period of time. Catching up with the latest development in the classroom with fellow students and the lecturer was another way students used OSN. Some students believed their interactions with lecturers increased with the use of OSN:

Beyond class contact hours, the lecturer usually interacts with us using email, or on Windows Live and also on Spectrum (the learning management system). For example, the lecturer would email us on a weekly basis to remind us what we should update on the WordPress and what we will do in the next class. \[(M2S6)\]

I think we have a lot less face-to-face interaction these days with our lecturer when we interact online. I mean, after the lecture, we don’t go see the lecturer in person. Most of the interactions beyond class were on OSN. In my case, interacting with the lecturer is getting easier with a social technology. I interact even more with my lecturer. \[(M2S1)\]

While face-to-face interactions are still maintained, with the use of OSN, students consider their levels of interaction and probability of getting feedback from their lecturers considerably higher. This indicates that the use of OSN provides an additional opportunity for students to be in constant contact with their lecturers regardless of time or location. OSN basically transcends the physical boundary as well as breaks the “emotional barriers” that the students may face with their lecturers in traditional modes of teaching and learning. However, it needs to be acknowledged that the use of OSN may increase workload issues for lecturers. There is a potential difficulty for lecturers in setting boundaries around their work time if students expect to use OSN to interact with lecturers outside of work hours.

4.7. Enjoyable and interactive learning environment

The use of OSN provided the students with a more enjoyable learning environment compared to the conventional classroom-based teaching and learning. Students said that they were more relaxed and willing to give their opinion through online environments such as Facebook. During the focus group discussions, some students described their personality traits and these appeared to influence students’ use of OSN. Although not asked about their personalities per se, it emerged that students clearly identified themselves as either extroverts or introverts. These extraversion–introversion traits influenced students’ use of OSN and how they benefited from or were challenged by OSN use. Students who considered themselves to be introverts (i.e., asking few questions, not preferring to speak up during class, and generally very quiet) thrived in the OSN learning environment:

I seldom ask questions. I just read selectively and respond to the lecturer’s questions only. When we use Facebook, I am more open and I ask more questions. This is maybe because I don’t have to bear the embarrassment if I ask silly questions; I don’t have to face it like in a lecture theatre. In Facebook, I feel less shy. \[(M1S1)\]

I’m one of them (introvert). I think this social technology is really good for students like me. I find myself to have better confidence when I express myself through writing. If you ask me to express myself verbally, I have some difficulties. Using blog for example, I feel liberated as I can think and then write whatever I want as long as it is within the context of the course. So I think definitely the blog has helped me a lot. \[(M2S6)\]

One student described the feeling of being more relaxed in the environment where OSN was used in her university. This was in comparison with how she felt in her home country in the Middle East. In her country, the culture and the religion of the people does not allow males and females to mix or socialise.

I really feel more relaxed using Facebook as we are able to freely interact with each other. Normally, male and female students we are not so freely communicating due to cultural and religious reasons. But when using Facebook especially in this university, now I am able to interact with my friends. I mean, as long as we are doing it for educational purpose and don’t go overboard with it, that should be fine. \[(M2S3)\]

The use of social technologies appeared to bring fun to the learning and provided a comfortable form of interaction for students who do not like to speak up in class. On a personal basis, the students used the technologies to interact with their friends and family members. By extending the use of social technologies familiar with the students for OSN educational activities, the “fun” factor is arguably maintained. This is an opportunity educators can leverage to make
learning enjoyable for the students, via harnessing familiar and fun social technologies for OSN educational activities.

5. Discussion

This research provides empirical evidence that complements previous findings on OSN use in higher education. The findings presented here suggest that students recognize and value the learning benefits of using social technologies in higher education, supporting earlier claims of the pedagogical rationale for using OSN in education (e.g., Augustsson, 2010; Hemmi et al., 2009; McLoughlin & Lee, 2008). Students appeared to enjoy OSN use, resulting in the creation of a more interactive and appealing learning environment — hence, increasing their learning motivation. The benefits that students described can be mapped to three forms of interaction that OSN fosters: 1) student–student interactions, 2) student–teacher interactions, and 3) student–content interactions.

5.1. Student–student interactions

As evidenced in the findings of this research, social technologies mediated improved collaboration among students anytime and anywhere. This increased collaborative activity among social groups is beneficial for students in the educational context. The ability of social technologies to enable students to interact and collaborate in a more effective manner is aligned to the pedagogical aspect of social technologies highlighted in Augustsson (2010) and McLoughlin and Lee (2007, 2008). This finding is also consistent with Eteokleous, Ktoreidou, Stavrides, and Michaelidis (2012) who examined the educational role of social technologies such as Facebook to support student activity via formation of “special interest groups” with the aim to facilitate students’ sharing, interaction and collaboration. However, some words of caution need to be considered in the use of OSN. For example, social technology designers need to be aware of the complexity of social interactions due to issues such as identity and privacy of the users (Kimmons, 2014; Merchant, 2012). Other researchers such as Russell, Malfroy, Gosper, and McKenzie (2014) claimed that the use of OSN has an impact on higher education, in which administrators and educators need to rethink the curriculum development, the professional development for teaching staff, as well as the institutional planning and policy (such as on the provisions of sufficient hardware, software and other related infrastructure to support OSN use in teaching and learning). In addition, student interactions via OSN can give rise to concerns about appropriate online behaviour, or “netiquette”. The students in this study did not raise these concerns but previous research has suggested that lecturers need to moderate students’ online interactions to ensure that these problems do not occur (Waycott et al., 2013).

5.2. Student–teacher interactions

The findings suggest that many of the students found OSN enhanced their interactions with lecturers. Notably this appeared to be the case primarily for the students in the Malaysian focus groups. This paper did not set out to examine the differences between Malaysian and Australian students; it was not the focus of the research and would have been difficult given the uneven number of participants from the two countries. However, the cultural differences are noteworthy and may have had an impact on the findings. For Australian students, interacting with lecturers was not a prominent benefit of OSN. While lecturers use Facebook or other social technologies for OSN educational activities, personal-level interactions with students may be less common in Australia compared to the practice in Malaysia. This situation can be explained using the arguments made by Hofstede (1986) who noted cultural differences or similarities from two perspectives, namely individualism vs. collectivism, as well as the degree of power distance between different cultures. According to Hofstede (1986), national differences can be understood in terms of national cultures. Cultures consist of power distance and individualism/collectivism. Power distance refers to “the degree of inequality in power between a less powerful individual and a more powerful other, in which individual and other belong to the same social system” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 83). High power distance in higher education includes the position of lecturer which is generally higher (i.e. more knowledgeable, much respected of their knowledge, etc) than the students. Individualism refers to the degree to which individuals feel they are “on their own” rather than part of a larger group identity. Culturally, Malaysian students and lecturers are more inclined towards large power distance and are low on individualism. On the other hand, Australians in general value personal space and have a high degree of individualism as indicated in Hofstede’s (1986) research. Deeper investigation into the topic of cultural differences with regard to the use of OSN in different countries and cultures is warranted in future studies as this current research only discovered a preliminary yet interesting finding.

Despite these potential cultural differences, the findings show that students valued the increased opportunity to interact with their lecturers afforded by social technologies. This suggests that students are open to using OSN for communicating with lecturers, which somewhat contradicts previous research that has found that students prefer to use social technologies for social interactions and more “official” channels for communicating with lecturers (Waycott et al., 2010). In this paper we have only presented student perspectives on this issue. While it may be beneficial for students to interact with lecturers via OSN, this can raise workload challenges for lecturers when those interactions occur outside of normal work hours. Our previous research suggests that, for some lecturers at least, this is not a concern, but other researchers have noted that this is a significant barrier to using social technologies effectively in higher education (Schroeder et al., 2010).

5.3. Student–content interactions

Two further findings highlight the potential learning benefits of OSN use, as seen from students’ perspectives. Firstly, social technologies appeared to promote critical thinking among students. In this research, students claimed that they were more critical in their thought process and were more analytical of the content they helped generate and share. Secondly, students reported being able to self-monitor their learning progress. This study suggests that by promoting the use of OSN in the classroom, students would be more responsible and independent in tracking their learning progress. They are then able to identify the steps that need to be taken by themselves, or with the help of their lecturers and peers on how best to get back on track. Further, some students who participated in this research reported that they experienced better engagement with the course content via OSN educational activities. Their comments suggested that they did not feel the same level of engagement in traditional learning environments.

In terms of practical implications, this research considers the views of students who came from various academic disciplines and from different levels of study (i.e., preparatory, undergraduate and postgraduate). In understanding the whole story, it is important to consider, evaluate and analyse views from the students’ perspectives. When higher learning institutions are integrating new technologies into teaching and learning processes, the perspective of the students needs to be considered; if the students are not receptive enough to the technology, lecturers need to find alternative strategies to ensure acceptance of OSN. This research described the reception by the students towards OSN use and the compelling benefits of OSN for enhancing interactions in such a way that lecturers are able to promote and leverage OSN use to further increase student–student, student–lecturer, and student–knowledge interactions.

Further, this research contributes to enhancing the empirical findings that are beneficial to inform lecturers who intend to adopt OSN for their teaching and the use of data from two countries broadens an
understanding about the similarities and differences between data sets from two different cultures. Insights from previous studies informed this investigation, while evidence from students provided accounts of real-life events which are helpful for lecturers to consider when planning to use OSN educational activities in higher education.

6. Conclusion

This paper discusses the interaction benefits of OSN use in higher education from the students’ perspective. In response to the research question, the findings offer a detailed explanation of how students view their interactions when using social technologies in higher education. The study considered the views of students who came from various academic disciplines and from different levels of study. Therefore, the findings in this paper represent the views of the students who are arguably the main “stakeholders” in higher education. As the research is based on real-life experiences, it contributes to enhancing the empirical research results that are beneficial for informing teaching practice in higher education.

While this research collected data from two countries, the number of focus group discussions was limited to nine (seven in Malaysia and two in Australia) with 46 students. Although there were limitations, this study has generated useful data to build more understanding and insight into the use of OSN for higher education. This research was designed to be an interpretive study investigating an emerging phenomenon. Due to this, the findings of this research are not readily generalisable to the context of other countries or to specific OSN use situations. Although this research was informed by rich data which in turn could provide opportunities for understanding the research phenomenon from a variety of other perspectives, there is an absence of “statistical generalisability”. This is consistent with the views of Myers (2009) and Walsham (2001) who argued that interpretive research (such as current research) is not suitable for generating “statistical generalisable” findings. Future studies could increase the sample size in order to make the findings more representative. A longitudinal and ethnographic study where a researcher spends a significant amount of time observing the students’ practices in interacting using OSN would be valuable in providing richer insights about how interactions take place when students use social technologies for educational purposes. Additionally, quantitative-based research via survey with a significant number of respondents may yield different results and the findings could then be generalised to a larger population.

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