Perspective of Iranian University Students about Academic Use of Social Networking Sites: A Study of Facebook

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Abstract
Social networking sites such as (Facebook) FB have become popular among millions of users including higher education students. It has become a significant part of students' life. Consequently, there is more and more discuss over the potential of this site to support academic purposes. In this context, this paper explores whether FB have a place for academic purposes among Iranian higher education students by investigating whether they find opportunities to use FB for educational purposes related activities and what is the students' perception toward using FB for academic purposes. Data were collected using survey questionnaire which was carried out among 70 undergraduate students at one of universities in Iran. The findings of the study confirmed that there is not a significant difference between male and female samples in the academic use of FB
Keywords: Social Network, Facebook, Higher Education, Iran, Academic Purpose

Introduction
Social networking sites (SNSs) have attracted millions of users worldwide (Boyd, & Ellison, 2007). Anderson (2008) claims that SNSs can be used effectively to expand learning beyond course-based groups. Such expansion may include a network of peers, teachers, professional experts and other communities (McLoughlin, & Lee, 2008). Researchers believe these sites can be used to complement traditional and online classroom activities (Dalsgaard, 2008).
Facebook (FB) is one of the most famous examples of SNSs for educational purposes. This site is very popular among students (Lorenzo et al., 2007). In general, due to the accessible nature of that via computer and mobile technologies it has become an integral part of higher education students' social life. According to "FB Statistics", 85% of four-year university students use FB, many of whom do so daily (comScore, 2007).

Although FB is not created for educational purposes (Dalsgaard, 2008), it is argued that they may encourage informal dialogue and knowledge sharing, mediated by the students themselves (Anderson, 2008; McLoughlin, & Lee, 2008; Selwyn, 2007). Such a site also draws interest from Higher Education Institutions, faculty members and educators and its potential for academic purposes. FB use can help students adjust to their university life, build friendships (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), and experiment with English.

Since its introduction, there has been a global flow in media attention on the FB phenomenon. Though, most academic research on the subject is based on North-American case studies (Bosch, 2009).

Although, FB use by university students in Iran has grown rapidly within the past few years, to date a search of major library databases and online journals yielded no results for studies on FB within the Iranian students particularly, in identifying students' perspectives in using this site for academic purposes. Because of this lack of research, the studies about the using FB for academic purposes need to be done. As a result, this paper contributes to the growing discussion on students' perspective in using FB for academic purposes and to explore to what extent University students are using FB to engage in study-related activities. This project was therefore developed to focus on:

1- What is the level of students' current engagement in using FB for academic purposes?
2- What is the perception of university students regarding the use of FB for academic purposes?
3- Is there any significant difference between male and female regarding the use of FB for academic purposes?

Literature Review

SNSs have attracted a huge number of following among teenagers and also university students (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Salaway & Caruso, 2008). It is not surprising to find SNSs making its way into the educational environments with many claiming that these social applications have even more potential to further improve learning and sharing of information among learners and teachers (Ferdig, 2007; Maloney, 2007; Pence, 2007; Simões, & Borges, 2008).

Generally, one of the categories that research about FB as the most popular SNSs falls into it is the potential use of FB for academic. Research has suggested that FB is a potentially useful tool for promoting effective academic practice. Downes (2007) argues that FB is distinctive from other SNSs because it has stronger roots in the academic community, and further proposes that the site's varied anddistinctive functions allow it to provide a very different model of how online tools can be used in educational contexts.

Fernàndez and Gil-Rodríguez (2011) reported many higher education institutions in the USA and Canada have started to integrate FB as a platform for educational purposes of a different type. The University of Michigan, for example, uses FB to publish news and connect its students, Stanford University uses the social network to share its research data and even for its lecturers' tutorials, or as a repository for its learning resources, Florida University makes similar use of FB.

Similarly many faculty members and educators are already exploring ways in which these tools can be used for academic purposes and teaching and learning (Schwartz, 2009; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Selwyn et al., 2008). During a qualitative study at Yale, faculty members claimed that their posts on FB indicated to students that they were part of the same academic

community, and that it helped break down barriers between themselves and students (Duboff, 2007).

FB allows students to foster positive relationships among students, generally peers of similar age and interests, to encompass learner motivation and engagement (West et al., 2009; Kabilan et al., 2010) to get involved in achieving the learning tasks, to a successful transfer of knowledge (Madge et al., 2009) to develop a positive attitude towards learning, to improve the quality of learning (Pasek & Hargittai, 2009; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010), to bring into effect multiple social interactions, to develop communication, cognitive and social competencies (Ross et al., 2009) and to communicate with the teacher outside the classes (Selwyn, 2009) etc.

It became more than just a social network for some students and started to become an informal educational network as well. There is evidence that students are using SNSs for informal learning (Selwyn 2009; Madge et al., 2009; Mazman & Usluel, 2010; Vivian & Barnes, 2010). Selwyn (2009) climes that most of the learning taking place in FB is the kind of learning that would happened, for instance, in the school corridors, canteens and phone conversation after class.

This clime proposes an informal learning that rests in the hands of the students which is not classroom-based or structured (Anderson, 2007). Selwyn (2009) research on undergraduate use of FB suggested that the nature of student interaction was profoundly informal and often at a tangent with the official learning objectives of instructors. Madge et al (2009) noted that, the first year undergraduate students generally thought the use of FB was most importantly for social purposes, secondarily for informal learning purposes (i.e., for student-to-student interactions about academic work-related matters).

It has been suggested that university students' social networking with peers and professors can be a way for obtaining information, knowledge, social acceptance and support, which can then lead to higher levels of their self-esteem, satisfaction with university life and consequently performance proficiency (Yu et al., 2010). Similarly, Kosik (2007) found that students use FB for academic purposes, particularly to connect people in their classes, and to get information about assignment. Meulemans and Chu (2008) found that the majority of students on a graduate programme used both FB and Myspace to communicate with other students about school, instructors and courses. Likewise, Shukla (2008) proposed that graduate students of biology discussed course topics in FB ranging from cell development to residency programme. Some research, has explored how students feel about having lecturers on FB (Hewitt & Forte, 2006).

FB has the potential for educational collaboration, group work or discussions. Bosch (2009) climes that a large number of students on FB often actively participate in discussions and groups, it cannot be ignored as a potential educational tool. Bosch (2009) continues that compared to university course sites, e.g. Vula at UCT, students are more engaged with FB, and perhaps educators need to explore ways to tap into an already popular network.

In relation to potential of FB for educational collaboration, group work and discussion, Madge et al (2009) found that as the academic year progressed, so did education-related activity on the FB Walls of British students. This activity included contacting other students to organize group meetings for academic project work, organizing study groups, for revision and coursework queries. It became more than just a social network for some students and started to become an informal educational network as well. It actually motivates students to share and discuss for peer-to-peer learning.

Similarly, at the University of North Carolina, students said they preferred conducting discussions in FB versus the standard course management system, listing pre-existing familiarity and user experience as key factors (Stutzman, 2008). Another, recently published experience refers to Computer Science studies at the universities of Newcastle and Durham in which collaborative groups were created to develop software and it was observed how the students naturally chose for FB instead of other proposed, collaborative technologies such as email, wikis, Skype, forums, etc (Newcastle & Durham Universities experiences, 2009).
Selwyn (2009, p. 161) identified five themes that emerged from education-related interaction on student FB Walls: '(1) recounting and reflecting on the university experience; (2) exchange of practical information; (3) exchange of academic information; (4) displays of supplication and/or disengagement; and (5) 'banter''. These quotations highlight the potential of FB to informally discuss academic work.
In contrast, using technology always doesn't support for academic purposes. Lipsett (2008) for example, reported that in the UK, most schools and universities block access to FB website, but a government-funded guide argues that they are consequently missing out on their potential for education. On the other hand, many students still are not aware of academic potential of FB and the opportunities which this site provides. For instance, In order to investigate how students are engaged in FB academic activities, it was found that majority of students spend significant time on FB more for social uses and less for academic purposes, even if they take part in discussions about their assignments, lectures, study notes or share information about research resources (Grosseck et al., 2011). Most recently, the survey by Meulemans and Chu (2006) indicated in using FB and MySpace, some students reported an unwillingness to communicate with professors via these means and indicated that email was a more appropriate means to communicate with faculty.

Methodology
Research Design
This study was a cross-sectional survey primarily designed to quantitatively examine the perspective of Iranian undergraduate university students about using FB for academic purposes.

Sample
This research was conducted with 70 undergraduate Iranian students (38.6% male and 61.4% female) at three Iranian public universities. Their ages ranged between 18 and 29, with those between 19-25 for 91% of the sample. The focus was on FB as this is the SNS that has become one of the most popular online destinations (Pasek & Hargittai, 2009) particularly for Iranian students of higher education. From the total number of respondents, it indicates that 11.4% of them have joint to Facebook Less than 6 months, as compared to those have joint more than 2 years (50%), Meanwhile, 17.1% of respondents indicate that they have joint to Facebook in 6 months to 1 year.

Instrument
A specific questionnaire was designed for the purpose of this study. We adapted also some questions from other questionnaire that had been reviewed in existing scientific literature (Hussain et al., 2012) consisted of three sections to elicit the opinions of the respondents. The first section contained items on respondents' demographic information (e.g, gender, age, In order to obtain a measure of respondents' experience with the site, they were asked also how

long they had been using FB, (less than 6 month; 6 month -1 year; 1-2 years; more than 2 years). The average FB login duration (less than 10 minutes; 10-20 minutes; 21- 30 minutes; more than 30 minutes). The other section students' FB engagement contained a total of 6 items measuring students' current engagement in using FB. The third section including students' general perceptions towards using FB for academic purposes. The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being 'Strongly Disagree' and 5 being 'Strongly Agree'.

Data Collection and Data Analysis
The survey questionnaire was distributed in May 2013 among 95 undergraduate students. The first question was a filter one (whether the students do or do not have an active FB account), in order to make sure that only those with a FB account would fill in the questionnaire and if they answered yes, they were asked to provide the following information specific to their FB use. Out of almost 95 students, 70 (73.68%) have accepted the request. The sample thus constituted is called a convenience sample (Gravetter & Forzano, 2009). The data is not representative for the entire college/student population, but it can be a starting point for future studies and discussions. The collected data then were analyzed using SPSS version 21 using descriptive statistics (frequencies, respondents' perception towards academic use of FB. a samples t-test was then used to explore gender differences in respondents' toward academic use of FB.

Results
The structure of our sample is inverted to the gender structure (38.6% male and 61.4% female). Hence, majoring in these specializations is a much bigger percentage of girls than that of boys. In these circumstances we can say that boys were more receptive to our request of filling in a questionnaire on the topic of using FB for educational purposes. The results are presented in tabular cum graphical form for the first section some questions.
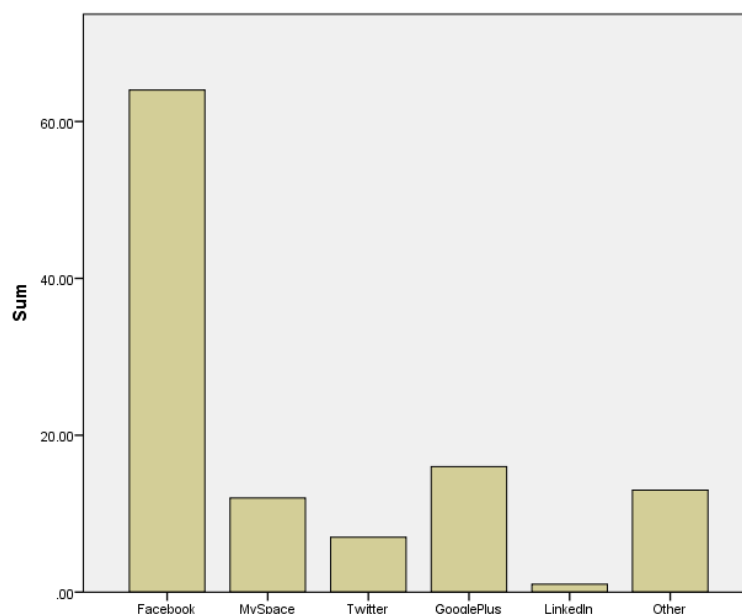

Figure 1. Social Network site users among Iranian undergraduate students

Figure1 reflects various types of social networking sites which Iranian undergraduate university students usually use at campus and/ or homes or in their hostels. According to the

figure 91%of the university students were using Facebook, 17% MySpace, and only 2% LinkedIn, whereas used 10% twitter, and 26% Google Plus; however, 64% joined Google Groups for their academic purpose.

Similarly, the frequency of daily using FB by university students has motioned below. The data affirms that 18% of the students used FB website for Less than 10 minutes, 12.9% did so for 10-20 minutes and use 20% 21-30 minutes daily whereas 42.9% logged in more than 30 minutes. The majority of respondents, approximately 2 thirds, use FB daily for a relatively short period of time (one hour at the most). Even if they use it for a short time, it seems important for us to underline the fact that they do use it daily (recurrently), which can reveal a lot about a possible habit of using Facebook. Thus, it becomes part of their daily life, which may lead at some point to a certain addiction to FB.

Research question 1- *what is the level of current students' engagement in using FB for academic purposes?*

In this section, the results indicated a high level of students' engagement in using FB for academic purposes. Respondents generally agreed with statements describing to communicate with classmates (80%) as well as using FB for getting latest information related with the studies, educational developments/ opportunities and current affairs (65.7%). For example, students generally agreed or strongly agreed with items; I use FB to communicate with my classmates (Item #1), I use FB for getting latest information related with my studies, educational developments/ opportunities and current affairs. (Item #5) and I use FB for academic networking at national and international level (Item #6). Agreement or strong agreement with these items ranged from 64.2 to 80% as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1.
Survey Results For Items Reflecting Students' Engagement In Percentage

	Level of agreement (%)				
	Strongly agree	**Agree**	**unsure**	**disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
I use FB to communicate with my classmates	47.1	32.9	0	7	12.9
I use FB to communicate with my lecturers	4.3	20	0	31.4	44.3
I use FB for sharing learning experiences and research findings.	10	47.1	2.9	30	10
I share academic events over the FB	8.6	22.9	8.6	35.7	24.3
I use FB for getting latest information related with my studies, educational developments/ opportunities and current affairs.	14.3	51.4	1.4	30	2.9
I use FB for academic networking at national and international level	17.1	47.1	5.7	14.3	15.7

Research question 2- *What is the perception of university students regarding the use of FB for academic purposes?*

Overall, the results indicated a high level of undergraduate university students' perception regarding the use of FB for academic purposes. Respondents generally agreed with statements describing perception of university students regarding the use of FB. For example, students generally agreed or strongly agreed with items; Using FB Should be integrated completely into the higher education process in the future (item #5), FB has positive impact in higher education (Item #1) and Using FB can be important in students' educational success now and in the future (Item #4). Agreement or strong agreement with these items ranged from 50 to 57.1% as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2.
Survey Results for Items Reflecting students' perception in Percentage

	Level of agreement (%)				
	Strongly agree	Agree	unsure	disagree	Strongly disagree
FB has positive impact in higher education	20	30	37.1	7.1	5.7
This could be beneficial to students if they can communicate with all lecturers via FB	8.6	27.1	37.1	17.1	10
Using FB can be important since it helps students to achieve their educational goals	14.3	31.4	28.6	20	5.7
Using FB can be important in students' educational success now and in the future	20	30	20	24.3	5.7
Using FB Should be integrated completely into the higher education process in the future	25.7	31.4	14.3	18.6	10

However, there was academic use of Facebook as 76% of students affirmed that they used the website for sharing their learning experiences and research findings, 59% shared academic events over the social network website, 92% used for getting latest information related with their studies, educational developments/ opportunities and current affairs. Likewise, 87% of the users were of the view that they used it for academic networking at national and international level.

Research question 3- *Is there any significant difference between male and female regarding the use of FB for academic purposes?*
An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the academic use of FB for male and female undergraduate students. 27 male and 43 female were randomly selected from three public universities in Iran to serve as subjects.
Levene's Statistics for Equality of Variances examines the objective that, the two population variances are equal for all variables. The Levene statistic is F, and the corresponding level of significance is large (p> .05). Thus, the assumption of homogeneity of variance has not been violated, and the Equal variances assumed t-test statistic is allowed to be used for answering research question of academic use of means (Table 3). The result from the analysis indicates that there is not a significant difference between male and female samples in the academic use of FB, t (df = 68) = -.566, p= .514. The magnitude of the difference in the means (CI: 95%) are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
Group Statistics and Independent-samples T- Test

	Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
Equal variances assumed									Lower	Upper
	.011	.919	-.656	68	.514	-1.735	2.646		-7.016	3.545

Conclusion of the Study

The study concluded that Iranian undergraduate university students used social network with more interest in Facebook as it became most popular amongst others. The findings of this study in line with previous research such as (Downes, 2007; Fernàndez & Gil-Rodríguez, 2011; and Hussain et al., 2012). For example, Downes (2007) found that FB is distinctive from other SNSs because it has stronger roots in the academic community. They used social network sites for getting enjoyment, searching and making friends as well. In students' engagement they use Facebook to communicate with classmates also getting latest information related to the studies. Moreover, the finds of the study confirmed that students use Facebook for academic purpose. They believe that FB should be integrated completely into the higher education process in the future as well as it has positive impact in higher education. Finally, the findings of the study confirmed that there is not a significant difference between male and female samples in the academic use of FB.

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