SOCIAL MEDIA AND CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT: STUDENTS’ PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of the last 15 years or so, social media have shown many facets—from connecting people on a global-scale, to penetrating aspects of lives which otherwise might have remained private or limited to a small audience. In the realm of education, social media have also begun to infiltrate the academic world by influencing and shaping students’ perceptions and influencing learning engagement. With millions of students and teachers simultaneously active on social networks, it is significant to observe how the media could influence student-teacher classroom interactions as well as their online communications. Some studies have documented that teachers who disclosed information about themselves on social media were perceived as more credible by students because they were regarded as more relatable. Moreover, students’ stereotyping beliefs and attitudes towards teachers also come into play when formulating perceptions about teachers on social media. For instance, their communications with teachers are often formal and impersonal on social media, as teachers are viewed as authoritative figures. Consequently, students’ perceptions towards teachers would have a significant repercussion on their interpersonal relationships, which in turn impacts students’ motivation and learning engagement. Thus, this research was conducted to establish preliminary findings whether social media shape students’ perceptions and whether these ramifications would result in positive or negative learning engagement. Consequently, the results indicate that students are more susceptible towards teachers who are active on social media because they are perceived as being more akin to a “real person” who can easily be reached for immediate classroom information and instructions. Such accessibilities via social media enable learning processes to be less contrived by just the physical classroom settings.

Keywords: social media, Facebook, perception, engagement, teacher, student, classroom context, communication, disclosure.

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INTRODUCTION

The most notable aspect of the 21st century cutting-edge technology innovation and revolution has been the uprising of the Internet; and subsequently, the introduction of various Internet by-products. Perhaps the most popular and influential by-products is the social media such as Facebook, Twitter and many other social networking sites. Facebook, for instance, is one of the most prevalent social networking sites where studies have shown that between 85% and 99% of college students use Facebook (Jones & Fox, 2009; Matney, & Borland, 2009). In the same vein, researchers from the Pew Inter Life Project found that between 67% and 75% of college-aged young adults use social networking sites (Hew, 2011). Recent data, collected by the EDUCAUSE Centre for Applied Research (ECAR) from a sample of 36,950 students from 126 U.S. universities and one Canadian university, showed that 90% of the students use Facebook on a daily basis (Staines & Lauchs, 2013). While there is little research on the consequences of Facebook use by college students, some studies have examined the relationship between Facebook use and psychosocial outcomes. For example, there is a positive relationship between using Facebook and maintaining social capital (Junco, 2012).

Despite being known primarily for social networking activities, Facebook is quickly being recognized as a promising e-learning platform (Bosch, 2009). In this light, students are found to be more engaged in learning using Facebook as compared to using a traditional university LMS such as the Blackboard. In addition, some studies suggest that students are receptive to the possibilities of integrating Facebook into university courses, with the potential for learning benefits associated with increased communication among students, greater access to course materials, and improved logistical management of courses and interaction with lecturers (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009).

Accessing the Internet has been relatively easy in our society that many users opt to use Facebook or other social network tools as their preferred mode of communication. As such, communicating face-to-face is often done out of convenience. Teachers also are seeking ways to integrate social media into the classroom in order to encourage their students’ learning engagement and participation (Dawkins, 2010). However, it is important that one considers the ramifications that come with this convenience. Computer-mediated communication has an impact on human communication and human relationships; therefore, it is important that researchers have a better understanding of this relatively new medium as well as the effects that this medium has on interpersonal relationships (Kauffer, 2011).

The teacher-student relationship is important to be observed because this relationship can have a direct impact on students’ perceptions and attitudes toward teachers. Nonetheless, there seem to be multiple possibilities for inappropriate, sometimes unintended, self-disclosure between teachers and students which could lead to a detrimental effect on the teachers’ credibility. Hence, it is vital to understand students’ perceptions and reactions to potentially inappropriate personal information posted by teachers on Facebook in order to safe-guard the teacher-student relationship. In the same light, Rogers (2015) claimed that teachers and students need to maintain a certain distance in order to assert a sense of respect. Befriending students would allow them access to a more private and personal information than they would normally have. Such circumstance could in turn alter the teacher-student dynamic in the classroom context. Thus, this research was conducted to establish preliminary findings whether social media - specifically Facebook, is an additional mediator in shaping students’
perceptions which could lead to the students' engagement in a corporeal classroom setting.

**Literature Review**

**Students’ Perceptions and Attitudes**

Educators are increasingly advocating the use of social networking sites as a communicative and pedagogical tool to supplement teaching and learning. It has been postulated that mediated communication can prompt the formulation of perceptions. O'Sullivan, Hunt, and Lipper (2004) examined the repercussions of mediated immediacy - a form of communicative cues in mediated channels that can shape perceptions of psychological closeness between students and teachers. In this context, factors such as the use of a specific font, language, and punctuation in social media would affect students' perceptions of their teacher's immediacy. A study conducted by DeGroot (2008) corroborated the study that factors such as font-use, language, shared and liked pictures and videos, on Facebook influence students' perceptions towards their teachers. Moreover, according to Palfrey and Gasser (2008), millennial learners or generations born into the digital age perceive the world differently. Their perceptions are embedded with a looser concept of privacy, friendship, information ownership, communications, creativity, risk and threat as well as productivity than the previous generations. Thus, it can be postulated that students may perceive a teacher's use of Facebook as an attempt to foster positive relationships with his or her students, and to encourage positive classroom engagement. In the same vein, it may desecrate students' engagement in the event if the expected behaviours were failed to be demonstrated which could lead to the risk of the teacher's credibility to be doubted.

Despite this potential consequence, teachers can enhance their credibility by signifying an understanding of the contemporary culture embraced by students. With appropriate control of content postings and proper interactions between students and teachers, online relationship can have a positive outcome on the instructor's credibility (Johnson, 2011). Apart from the affirmative notion on the teachers' credibility, Facebook is also used to form impressions and perceptions of others which are communicated via the disclosed and posted pictures and status updates to maintain a certain self-presentation (Van Der Heide, D'Angelo, & Schumaker, 2012). In the context of teaching and learning, the perception on the act of self-disclosure can lead to students having the motivation and positive perception on their teacher's credibility; however, the act of self-disclosing has to be deemed as appropriate (Hill, Ah Yun, & Lindsey, 2008). At the same token, any content on the teacher's profile which does not align with the societal expectations and standards can lead to students questioning the credibility of the teacher (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009).

Interacting with students on Facebook would allow the students to obtain a glimpse of the teachers' personal lives to which they would not otherwise have access to. Hence, the teachers are coerced to make a decision as to how to handle oneself when interacting with students on Facebook. In this context, understanding the students' perspective would shed light on how teachers should conduct themselves on Facebook (Ledbetter & Keating, 2015). Ledbetter & Keating (2015) stated that appropriate contents include status updates about family and personal relationships, as well as a few professional postings, as these topics are viewed as acceptable.
There is an unambiguous relationship between perception and impression formations and uncertainty reduction in computer-mediated communication. Herein, communicators often engage in uncertainty reduction techniques; and in the process, they form perceptions, and impressions. Thus, this notion further explains that the initial impressions and perceptions formulated would be used as the basis for all future interactions. In view of this concept, when students go online and search for their teachers’ Facebook account, inevitably they would use bits and pieces of any available information to form impressions and perceptions of their teachers.

**Perceptions and Students’ Engagement**

The term students’ engagement in classroom is derived from a much broader expression in the current literature. In a numerous number of studies done, student engagement is viewed to be one of the vital indicators in the educational system. In a study done by Pike, Smart and Ethington (2012), the definition of students’ engagement was operationalized as what students did at their college or institute and the experiences that the institutions and academicians made available for them. In contrast to the aforementioned definition of the term, Cavanagh (2012) had utilized the term students’ engagement in a classroom setting which consisted of two attributes: the tasks expected of them and their ability to carry out the tasks assigned to them.

In this study, the term students’ engagement is adapted from the Axelson and Flick’s (2010) concept of students’ engagement where students demonstrated their interest and involvement in learning and their degree of connectedness to their classes, institutions, and each other. Thus, for this study, the definition for students’ engagement is operationalized to demonstrate how “engaged” students are specifically in the classroom. The attributes of their engagement would be gauged on their responses - how interested, involved, and inquisitive they are in the classroom. At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that there have been studies reported that students respond better towards teachers whom they perceive to be more relatable to them in which is determined via the teachers’ self-disclosure and personal anecdotes (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009). However, this finding vary significantly among different cultures depending on whether or not it is a high power distance culture or a low power distance culture. For example, in a study done in Turkey by Baran (2010), where it rates highly for Hofstede’s Dimensions of Power Distance; the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations, institutions, families and other social groups accept and expect power to be distributed unequally, there were students who expressed negative opinions about teachers’ high level of self-disclosure. This circumstance is due to the fact that teachers are perceived as authoritative figures; and therefore, all matters are to remain formal and impersonal. However, it is important to note that only a small number of students who responded negatively as compared to a larger number of students who perceived teachers’ self-disclosure as favourable (Baran, 2010).

Furthermore, in a research done by Wentzel (2016), the author discussed that students’ perception of teachers they view as caring were not significantly influenced by their ethnicity. In this light, the approaches employed by the teachers would be a significant factor to how the students’ formed their perception, prioritizing certain behavioural aspects over others. Similarly, a research was carried out in Indonesia to observe the importance of both students’ and teachers’ perception of student-teacher interpersonal relationships on students’ motivation. The findings reported that although a healthy interpersonal relationship between students and teachers are strongly
associated with learning motivation and achievement, students in Indonesia still considered their teachers to be distant and strict, yet strongly cooperative (Maulana, Opdenakkar, Brok, & Bosker, 2011). These findings are imperative as studies have been done to determine if there is a direct correlation to how interested, engaged, and motivated students are, with how they perceive their teachers’ support towards them (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

It is also vital to take into consideration that though students’ perception towards their teachers and the interpersonal relationships formed between students and teachers affect their classroom engagement, there is a delicate line as to how much a teacher can disclose, without appearing to crossover the set boundary of teacher-student relationship (Hershkovitz, Forkosh-Baruch, & Ang, 2014). Such notion is deliberated through the portrayal of a few case studies, where teachers who disclosed personal information that traversed this boundary had their careers detrimentally impacted along with negative perceptions directed towards them. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to observe and exercise the expected norms and values cherished by the organization and society at large, to ensure that the teacher-student relationship is positively enhanced and will ultimately lead to students’ learning engagement. To wrap up, the current literature indicates that students’ perceptions of teachers are in fact the key element in students’ learning engagement. Nevertheless, a healthy balance between student-teacher interpersonal relationships while maintaining a professional behavioural conduct on both sides appears to be the most favourable in forming and sustaining a positive perception.

Methodology

Instrument and Participants
A questionnaire was used as the research instrument. The questionnaire entailed perceptive and attitude statements directed to how students perceive their lecturers as well as the impression that the students have about their lecturers who are active on Facebook which in turn affect students’ classroom engagement. All survey items were formulated using a Likert-scale type response. For this study, the questionnaire comprised of two sections: 1) students’ demographic information and 2) twenty statements probing students’ perceptions towards lecturers who are active on social media which could consequently influence classroom engagement. The survey was administered using an online survey instrument provided via surveymonkey.com. Data collected was scrutinized and analysed. One hundred and twenty students of ADTP in Sunway University, Malaysia participated in this research study. The participants were purposively sampled since these participants have their lecturers in their friend’s list on Facebook. Facebook was chosen as the social media platform since Facebook is widely used as a means of communication amongst the lecturers and students at ADTP, Sunway University, Malaysia.

Results

Table 1: Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>17</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>22</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>24</th>
<th>Not Stated</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 represents the demographics of the 120 ADTP students who participated in the survey. There were 71 male students, age ranging from 17 to 24; while there were 48 females in the similar age range and, one individual did not state his/her age and gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I feel it is appropriate for lecturers to post their personal information on Facebook.</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I do not feel comfortable to be “friend” with my lecturer on Facebook.</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I like my lecturer better when I see that he/she has similar interests (music bands, movie genre, book and etc.) as me on Facebook.</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I think my lecturer is more open to friendly communication when she/he adds students on Facebook.</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I feel closer to my lecturer when she/ he shares more about her/his personal life.</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>65.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I think my lecturer would be perceived as more credible when she/he maintains online relationship with students.</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I feel closer to my lecturer by looking at his/her latest post and make judgments based on what I’ve perceived.</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I think my lecturer is a friendly person if she or he is a Facebook user.</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I think lecturers would be more popular when they have a Facebook account.</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I tend to judge my lecturer’s credibility based on his/her Facebook posts and pictures.</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I respond better in class to lecturers who I think try to actively engage all students in the class.</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I respond more in class to lecturers who I think like to share personal experiences and anecdotes.</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>71.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I find myself doing better in a course when I have a good relationship with my lecturer.</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>81.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I find myself responding better in class with a lecturer who I feel actively rewards my attempts to participate rather than criticize me when I fail to participate.</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I would say that my first impression of a lecturer affects how well I do for their subject for the rest of the semester.</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I respond better in class towards lecturers who do not delay their students' requests and enquiries.</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I find myself doing better in class the more I get to know my lecturer.</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>70.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>I expect my lecturer to be formal but I find myself doing better in classes with more interactive lecturers.</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I do not think seeing a lecturer’s social media profile beforehand would affect how I respond to him/her in class.</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I find myself responding better in class towards lecturers who incorporate sense of humor in the classroom.</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>81.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussions**

This research paper was done to discover if social media, specifically Facebook is an additional mediator in shaping students’ perceptions which could lead to students’ classroom learning engagement. As the results suggest, a teacher-student relationship plays a vital role in how students perform in class. More than 80% of the respondents agreed with the statement “I find myself doing better in a course when I have a good relationship with my lecturer”. This finding is corroborated with a study done by Madill,
Gest, and Rodkin, (2014) in which they postulated that teachers who develop good relationships with students promote motivation and achievement in class. Moreover, a staggering number of respondents (99 out of 120 students) agreed that they responded more in class to teachers whom they perceived as actively trying to engage them in classroom activities. An interesting note was documented by O’Connor, (2013) highlighting similar notion of class-participation that indicated teachers who are involved yield better responses from the students.

A majority of students (67.5% of the survey participants) also agreed that even though they expected teachers to be formal, they found themselves doing better in classes where teachers interacted more with them. This implies that students respond better when teachers are more approachable and relatable, with whom they can have interactive relationship with (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000). To further support the aforementioned statement, 98 out of 120 respondents agreed that teachers who used humour in classroom helped them to respond better in classes. Moreover, 85 participants concurred with confidence that they could do well in classes when they were given the opportunity to know their teachers better. In addition, 89 participants agreed that they responded better to learning when teachers provided immediate feedback to their enquiries. Thus, findings reported above illustrate that positive interactions between students and teachers are significant to ensure that students actively engage in classroom learning activities.

While this may be true, a significant number of respondents (81 out of 120 students) also agreed that their impressions and perceptions of their teachers determined how well they perform in the subject itself. These findings are supplementary to the notion that pre-conceived perceptions of people come into play when reacting to them later on (Wood, 2013). This is where social media mediates the students’ engagement in classroom. One of the findings reported in this study shows that 98 respondents agreed to the statement “I do not think seeing a lecturer’s social media profile beforehand would affect how I respond to him/her in class”. This illustrates that teachers who display the same mannerisms, characteristics and level of accepted self-disclosure on social media as well as in the classroom are perceived to have a positive effect on the students’ perception of the teachers’ credibility (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009). A majority of the respondents (85 out of 120 students) also agreed that personal anecdotes and experiences shared by teachers facilitated their classroom responses.

Hence, from the findings reported in this study, it could further be hypothesized that attitudes and the level of self-disclosure displayed by teachers on social media and in classrooms, for as long as they are maintained within the acceptable norms and values defined by the organization and society, would have a positive effect on the students’ perceptions of the teachers’ credibility. In turn, these perceptions would yield positive classroom learning engagement in students.

**Conclusion**

The millennial generations who have been exposed to the Internet revolution and the generations that are being born into the digital age are both open to communications which are not limited merely within the physical classroom context. Teachers who are active on social media are perceived as being more akin to a “real person”, instead of a mere source of knowledge and information. Undoubtedly, it can be postulated that social networks can play an imperative role in creating a better learning environment. More
researches are needed to further examine the different types of communicative online behaviours displayed by students or even the quality of online contents disclosed by teachers on social media that would inherently promote positive perceptions, and ultimately a better classroom engagement – one that could enrich students’ learning experiences.
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