An Empirical Study on Online Social Networks Sites Usage:

Online Dating Sites Perspective

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Abstract

Dating through Internet is providing incredibly useful features. When singles are looking for partners, internet can provide effective and more enjoyable alternatives at a low searching cost. It also provides many new ways and organized approach to mating ritual. This study identifies the attitudes of young adults towards online social networks and online dating sites usage. Besides, this study also examines the different behavior between male and female online daters. The results of this study show that most young adults have a Facebook ID. Only just over ten per cent of them date online. One major finding is that females are searching their long term partners through online dating sites, while the males are mainly interested in building casual relationships.

Keywords: Online dating, Internet, Social networks, Young adults

1. Introduction

Youth are spending large portion of their time for social and emotional development through media (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). Social networking is one of the applications that have grown rapidly in prevalence and among the popular one in recent years is social networking on the Internet (Pempek et al. 2009). Today online dating site is one of the most popular social networking systems, which individuals, couples and groups contact and search their personal, romantic and sexual partners. In this network people contact and communicate over the Internet through personal computers and cell phones. According to Hancock, Toma & Ellison (2007) online dating sites are involving the deliberate misrepresentation of the truth, but it is still one of the popular new tools for initiating romantic relationships. Interaction through online is regarded as a separate and integrated part of modern social life driven by the same needs as face-to-face interaction (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). Thus, communicative actions taken by members of the community can be expected to share many features with the web of human acquaintances and romances in the social offline world (Holme, Edling & Liljeros, 2004). According to Wellman (2001) western peoples interact with each other through online as like as any other offline methods. Moreover, this study will provide important information for enhancing our understanding of social

networks in general. Dating is a part of life among Western societies but it is still prohibited in many countries in the world (Sheehan, 2003).

Driven by the social needs of human life and well being, people make relationships, specifically romantic ones, driven by human basic needs. People have traditionally invested great deal of effort in "engineering" romantic encounters, including matchmaking, placing personal advertisement in the newspaper and more recently engaging online dating (Hancock et al., 2007). Online dating site is one of the top most growing areas of World Wide Web. According to Online Publishers Associations (OPA) online dating site is another largest paid segment other than pornography. The residents of United States spent $469.5 million on online dating and personals in 2004 and over $500 million in 2005. A report published by Jupiter Research cited by Albo (2009) entitled, "US Paid Content Forecast, 2007 to 2012", online dating sites are projected to increase from $900 million of revenue in 2007 to $1.9 billion in 2012, or an increase of 16% over five years.

The purpose of this study is to provide descriptive information about the use of online dating sites by university students. Crucial questions for understanding the use of such applications address time commitment, why university students use these sites, how they interact on these sites, and the nature of their influence on the development of personal, romantic and sexual relationship in young age. Here we consider these questions with respect to some popular online dating sites in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

In a research conducted by Hancock, Toma and Ellison (2007), online dating was defined as "the place where individuals created profiles, and initiate contact with others through an online service". Walther (1996) classified online dating as a computer-mediated communication that surpasses the level of affection and emotion of parallel interaction. Wysocki (1998) supports Walther's viewpoint, arguing that forming relationships through Internet progress more quickly and intimately than face-to-face relationships due to anonymity nature of online dating sites. According to Cooper and Sportolari (1997) relationships can be made offline through telephone contact and face to face meetings, with online contact acting to enhance self-integration, eroticization, autonomy and intimacy. Other research found different aspects of online romantic relationship, including cyber-flirting (Whitty, 2003), cyber-sex (Wysocki, 1998; Blair, 1998), and cyber-cheating (Hardie & Buzweel, 2006).

A large scale empirical study by Madden and Lenhart (2005) in USA uncovered peoples online dating sites usage behavior. Their study reveals that most of the Internet users are currently single and are looking for romantic partners, 74% of them have used the Internet in one way or another to further their romantic interests. This study also found that a significant number of Americans personally know others who have tried and succeeded in online dating. Almost 15% of the respondents said they know someone who has been in long-term relationships with someone else or married someone whom they met online. A telephone survey of Australian adults by Hardie and Buzwell (2006) revealed that 13% of the respondents have had online social relationships. Most of them are students, young, single and comfortable with new technology. Single and partnered individuals equally admitted that they had experienced online romance, indicating that many of them may be cheated by online daters.

Using Gale-Shapley algorithm, Hitsch, Hortaqsu and Ariely (2005) investigated the mate preferences and matching in a dating or marriage market of the online dating sites users. The results of this study clearly indicated that there is a stronger emphasis among women than among men in terms of the partner's income. A sample of 300 university students survey by Donn and Sherman (2002) explored young adults' attitudes and practices regarding internet use to facilitate romantic relationships. The study results show that most of the students have had experience knowing and developing a relationship with someone whom they met online. Much of the research to date on social relationships have been based on US and UK data, but relatively little is known about Malaysians' use of the internet for social interaction. Online social network sites are different from traditional media such as television, film and radio as they allow two way and innovative communications with others.

3. Method

3.1 Participant and Data Collection

Student samples have been widely used in past research on online social network usage and online dating sites usage (Ellison et al., 2007; Wiley & Sisson, 2006). This paper utilizes a subset of a large study, where the total sample was 416 respondents from a public and a private university in Selangor, Malaysia with an undergraduate student population of nearly about 6000. In this study, an in-depth interview was conducted with a few lecturers from one university in order to verify the content validity of the key elements used in the questionnaire before

the final survey was conducted. This study employed a survey research design and administered a personal survey conducted by the researchers. A total of 378 questionnaires were finally used. For this study students were the respondents because they have Internet experience and also, fulfill our research objective. Studies suggest young consumers such as students (Sorce, et al., 2005) are the most suitable group to be considered in this study. The majority of the respondents were female (61.64 percent), more than half of the respondent (52.38 percent) were between the age of 21and 23. The Chinese group was the highest contributors of the total respondents (50.0 percent) and the second highest group is represented by Malays contributing 43.91 percent.

3.2 Statistical Analysis

Bivariate frequency distribution of the respondents, according to age, race, gender and length of online dating service was presented. Data collected on demographic variables were processed and reported in percentage through descriptive analysis. Descriptive analysis helps the transformation of data in order to describe a set of factors that will make them easy to understand and interpret. Non-parametric Mann Whitney U test was applied to identify the relationships between online dating and gender groups.

4. Results

4.1 Time spent on online Social Network

According to the respondents, time spent by students on social network varied differently. On average time spent on social network ranged from seven minutes to two hours per week and from three minutes to three hours per day. The time spent is usually longer during holidays. The total time spent on online social network in a week is shown in Table II. The table indicates that majority of the users spent one to two hours on online dating in a week

4.2 Use of online social networks

Among the five popular online social networks usage in Malaysia, Facebook is the most popular online social networks for students in Malaysia (80.68%). The second popular online social networks is MySpace (51.85%), followed by Tagged (20.90%), Hi5 (9.26%), and only 1.8% used eKawan. From the data it is found that 14.29% are using other international social networks.

4.3 Motivations for using online social networks

Students were also asked about their reasons for using social network online and nine reasons are presented in Table 3. Majority of the students reported they are using social network to communicate with their friends and sending or receiving messages (67.20% and 79.63% respectively). It is believed that a significant portion of these students used social network online as a communication medium. As a result, online social networking sites can be the most effective communication method between students. As can be seen from Table 2, 57.93 per cent or 219 students use social network online for passing their time or fight with their boredom. The percentage also gives insight that online social networks can be used for entertainment purposes when peoples are bored into their life. Turning to other purposes of usage of social networks 43.65 per cent of students are using social network for looking at or posting photos. There are 129 students out of 378 respondents using online social networks for finding out or planning their event purposes. 17.5% of the students use online social networking systems for getting recently met friends or people. Students are least interested to get contact information (such as email, phone number etc) through their online social networking systems (9.79%). There are only few students (6.08%) who use online social networking system for other purposes.

4.4 Frequency of Daters

Most students started using online dating after they began university life (55.3%, though some did so before they start their university life (31.7%). In this research online daters are defined as the students who have gone to online dating sites or other social network sites where they can meet people online. Looking at the total respondents only 12.17% (46 respondents) say they have personally gone to dating websites and they said they are going to dating sites for seeking romantic partners. Previous studies in USA found that almost 11% of them have experience with online dating websites (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Our study shows a little bit higher percentage of online dating site users compared to the study done in USA by Madden & Lengart (2006). One possible explanation is that the Malaysian society is becoming more modern and broad minded that most of them now search their own life partner themselves rather than being determined by their parents, like it used to be among the older generation. Nowadays the matchmaker role for matrimonial purposes is very minimal. On average we found that students have been using dating sites for about one to one and a half years.

4.5 Experience with Online dating sites usage

The survey shows that online dating is a pretty good experience (Table 4). More than 30% of the daters report that they had a positive experience with online dating websites, while 8.70% said it was mostly negative, 52.17% reported it was both positive and negative and 4.35% were not sure.

4.6 Knowing someone who has used a dating website

While most of the students do not have experience with online dating, but almost 20% know someone else has tried these services. According to the respondents, most of the single and looking for boyfriend or life partners know someone who are online dating seekers.

4.7 Marital status on dating sites

Due to the anonymity nature of the Internet, most of the students agree that a lot of people who use online dating lie about their marital status; 66% agree that many people, while 7% disagree and 27% say they do not know.

As the two gender groups were not normally distributed, a Mann-Whitney U test was performed to test the relationship between genders and find relationship over online dating sites. The results shown in Table 5 indicate significantly higher intention among females for making long term relationship and romantic relationship over online dating sites but these are not statistically significant. The results also indicate that male are more inclined to find casual relationship and better match through online than female and these results are statistically significant.

5. Discussion

This study examines the attitudes of young adults using social networks as well as online dating sites in Malaysia. Regardless how busy students are during their weekdays in the university, they are still very keen to use at least one social network online every day. Online social network usage is one of the main activities of their everyday experience. Nowadays online social networks is growing in popularity as more than 40% (46.82%) students reported in this study spent about one to hours every week in online social networking.

This study also identified the reasons why university students use online social network. Consistent with previous studies (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009; Valkenburg et al, 2005), the way students use online social network is to facilitate social relationships. This study reveals that, 67.20% of students use social network to communicate with friends. The second reason is for entertainment purposes such as to pass time and to fight boredom etc. Clearly Facebook is the most popular online social networks in the students' community.

Internet is providing incredibly useful features when it comes to matching their partners online, because it adds up to effective and more enjoyable alternatives associated with searching. It is also more modern and organized approach to this mating ritual. The main intention of this study is to assessing the attitude of the students towards online dating site usage. Our study results show that only 12.17% or 46 students (out of 378 students) dating through online, of which 55.3% of the daters started using online dating after they began university life. More than 30% (34.78%) of the daters have positive experience and 52.17% of them have both positive and negative experience.

This study also provides an examination not only the percentage of online dating sites users, but also provides the intention of students to use online dating sites. Consistent with expectations evaluating students' intentions Mann-Whitney U test results shows that females are more inclined for making long term relationship and romantic relationship over online dating sites than their counter part. On the other hand male wants causal relationship and better match. This study also confirmed the findings of another recent study in USA by Madden and Lenhart (2006).

6. Implications

The findings of this study should assist academicians and parents of each family in Malaysia in their understanding of the current dating with partners especially in an Internet-based dating environment. It will also help parents to better understand current scenario of young adults searching their dating partners online. Although this study is based on online social network sites perspective, the study also hopes to shed some light on active group in the society who are trying very hard to identify the worst situation passing by the young adults in the world. It is important for them to recognize the factors so that they can take the necessary steps to overcome their current hard situation. The results of this study should also enlighten online social network site management in planning their marketing strategies. This will serve as a platform that will lead to sustained confidence of the online daters in Malaysia.

7. Limitations and Future Direction

It is necessary to recognize the limitations of the current study. Firstly, since the survey was conducted among a group of students from two private universities, the results should be interpreted with caution, particularly with respect to the generalization of research findings of Malaysian online daters as a whole. Next, the sample size itself is relatively small. To accurately evaluate Malaysian online daters' perceptions of online shopping, a larger sample size is desirable.

Future research needs to focus on a larger cross section of Internet users and more diversified random samples to verify the findings of the current study. Moreover, future inquiries could examine the causal relationships between reasons and how online daters' perceive overall online dating sites using some theoretical aspects. In addition, future research needs to examine online dating service providers in the context of cross-national and cross cultural differences.

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Table 1. Respondent Profile

Variables		Freq	(%)
Gender	Male	145	38.36
	Female	233	61.64
Age	18-20	136	35.97
	21-23	198	52.38
	24-26	32	8.46
	27 and above	12	3.19
Race	Malay	166	43.91
	Chinese	189	50.00
	Indian	16	4.23
	Others	7	1.85

Table 2. General information

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Time spent in a week		
Less than 1 hour online	133	35.18
1-2 hours online	177	46.82
3-4 hours online	49	12.96
More than 4 hours	16	4.23
others	3	0.79
Total		100.00
How often use social network		
everyday	115	30.42
once a week	137	36.24
once in 2 weeks	54	14.28
once in month	34	8.99
less than once a month	38	10.05
Total	378	100.00
Which network they use		
MySpace	196	51.85
Facebook	305	80.68
Taged	79	20.90
eKawan	9	2.38
Hi5	35	9.26
Others	54	14.29

Table 3. Purposes of Online Social Networks Usage

Why do students use Social Network online	Frequency	Percentage
Communicating with friends	254	67.20
Looking at or posting photos	165	43.65
Entertainment (to pass time, to fight boredom etc.)	219	57.93
Finding out about or planning events	129	34.13
Sending or receiving messages	301	79.63
Getting to people better (friends or people recently met)	66	17.46
Getting contact information (email address, phone number, etc)	37	9.79
Other purposes	23	6.08

Table 4. Experience with Online dating sites usage

Experience on Online Dating sties	Frequency	Percentage
positive	16	34.78
negative	4	8.70
positive/negative	24	52.17
Not sure	2	4.35
Total		

Table 5. The relationship between gender and intent to find relationships over online dating sites (Mann-Whitney U test)

	Long term relationship	Casual relationship	Romantic relationship	Find a better match
Mann-Whitney U	15919.500	16376.000	15352.500	14804.000
Mean rank				
Male	182.79	193.06	178.88	203.90
Female	193.68	187.28	196.11	180.54
Sum of ranks				
Male	26504.50	27994.00	25937.50	29566.00
Female	45126.50	43637.00	45693.50	42065.00
Z	-1.400	-.577	-2.216	-2.481
Sig. (two tailed)	.162	.564	.027	.013