

# SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

The spark of using social networking technologies in education becomes a flame while numbers and figures demonstrate a remarkable growth of social networking users. Regarding to the mass numbers of users who are registered in social networking sites, it indicates the changing of life, hobbies and interests. While several studies have used social networking directly in education, this study aims to examine the students' perception of using social networking sites. Moreover, it considers how and to what extent social networking helps students. BarterTerms! as a social networking website which focuses on peer learning, was chosen for this study. Purposive sampling was selected as the research sampling. Semi-structured interviews and students' feedback on the website are the research instrument for this qualitative study. The main process of examination and analysis of study was divided into 15 weeks. The first week was allocated for meeting participants and introducing the website. During week 2 to 14 the online users' views and comments were considered. Interviews were conducted in week 15. Findings of this study show that learners use the BarterTerms! website to find new information. Meanwhile the most important factor which has attracted the attention of learners is the sharing of information. Moreover, through discussion, they are able to express their ideas and also influence other peers' thoughts. They also can improve their knowledge by correcting their misunderstandings. Finally, they really enjoy having discussions with their peers.

## KEYWORDS

Qualitative approach, Social networking, Higher education, Discussion, Interactivity, Constructivism

## INTRODUCTION

The term of 'social network' was first expressed by Barnes (1954) which he defined as a map of relationships between individuals or organizations which shows the ways they are connected to each other. Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, LinkedIn are some examples of online social networking sites. The spark of using social networking technologies in education becomes a flame while numbers and figures demonstrate a remarkable growth of social networking users. As Facebook© (2010) claims, it has more than 400 million active users while 50% of them log on to Facebook every day. Meanwhile, several studies have used social networking directly in education. A social content system was used by Abbitt (2007) to allow students to share resources and facilitate students' achievement. Facebook is used by English and Duncan-Howell (2008) to support the education of students in teaching practicum. Flickr is used by Lockyer and Patterson (2008) to examine the positive learning outcomes in a formal educational environment. Edalatifard and Tasir (2009) have considered which factors attract university students to use social networking while 'relationship' and 'user-based' were the result, Hamid *et al.* (2009) have examined the potential of online social networking sites in education and have found out that "content generating", "sharing", "interacting" and "collaboratively socializing" are well facilitated by social networking sites.

Regarding the mass numbers of users who registered in social networking sites, it indicates the changing of life, hobbies and interests. Meanwhile, the challenge is what are the students' views of using social networking sites? While social networking is favourable for students, how and to what extent can help them in learning? In this case, BarterTerms! is chosen as a social networking website which focuses on peer learning (Edalatifard & Tasir, 2010). While, most social networking websites have general purposes, the chosen website has focused on distributing ICT terms. Figure 1 shows the homepage of the website.

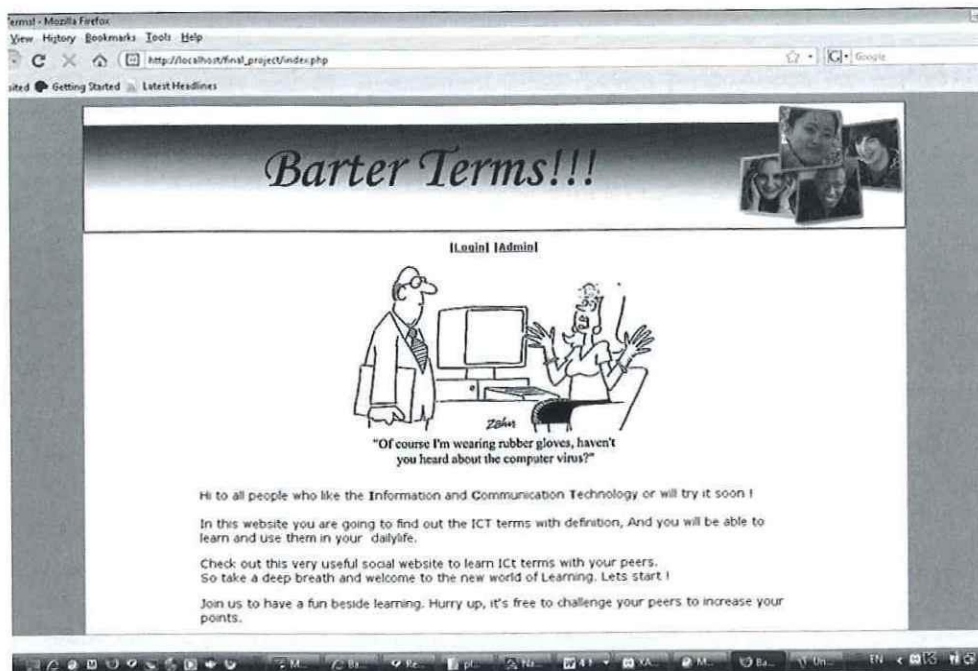


Figure 1. Main page of website.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study tries to apply a qualitative approach while it allows participants to speak their minds, disclose latent issues and therefore generate rich, detailed data. Semi-structured interview was used as the research instrument to collect data to find out students' perceptions and also to examine how the website helps learners. Users' comments are analysed to indicate to what extent the website can help learners to understand ICT terms.

The chosen method for selecting the sample is purposive sampling. A class of 20 university students was selected as the sample. They were degree level final year students who took a subject related to the ICT field. They comprised male and female students. This study introduced BarterTerms! as a social networking website to university students. The process of examination and analysis of study was divided into 15 weeks. The first week was allocated for meeting participants and introducing the website. As the website played a part to get direct feedback, during week 2 to 14 users' views and comments were considered. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at week 15.