

## FRIENDSHIP PATTERNS AMONG MALAYSIAN YOUTH IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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### ABSTRACT

*Individuals across Southeast Asia are demonstrating a high adoption rate to technology. With the rise of online communities, communication has shifted away from traditional face-to-face models of interaction, to a digital approach to maintaining and establishing relationships. This article reports on a research aimed to investigate the type of exchanges via these platforms and how Malaysian youths create and maintain their social circles. Data was obtained using a questionnaire survey and interviews. Findings suggest that these youths were highly motivated to use social networking sites for socializing, keeping abreast with global issues and for academic purposes. Although the negative outcomes of socialism online are not very significant in this study, the relevant parties should monitor youths' use of information technology to ensure Malaysian youths have a healthy social lifestyle as well as to promote their positive development.*

**Keywords:** *Friendship Patterns, Social Networking Sites, Youth, Development, Behavior*

### ABSTRAK

*Individu di seluruh Asia Tenggara menunjukkan kadar penggunaan teknologi yang tinggi. Selaras dengan kebangkitan komuniti dalam talian, komunikasi telah beralih daripada model tradisional iaitu interaksi bersemuka kepada pendekatan digital dalam usaha mengekal dan membina hubungan. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji jenis pertukaran melalui platform ini dan bagaimana belia Malaysia mewujudkan dan mengekalkan kumpulan sosial mereka. Data kajian diperolehi menggunakan soal selidik dan temu bual. Penemuan kajian menunjukkan bahawa belia-belia ini sangat bermotivasi menggunakan laman rangkaian sosial untuk bersosial, mengikuti perkembangan isu-isu global dan untuk tujuan akademik. Walaupun hasil/dapatan negatif sosialisme dalam talian tidak begitu penting dalam kajian ini, pihak-pihak yang berkaitan perlu memantau penggunaan belia dalam teknologi maklumat untuk memastikan belia Malaysia mempunyai gaya hidup sosial yang sihat dan juga untuk menggalakkan perkembangan positif mereka.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Pola Persahabatan, Laman Rangkaian Sosial, Belia, Pembangunan, Tingkah Laku*

### INTRODUCTION

The use of internet tools for communication has paved ways in which youths look

for friends through various social networking sites such as Friendster, Facebook, Twitter and MySpace to explore their identities, seek out, and create “virtual” communities. However, Facebook is the fastest growing online social network with more than 850 million users worldwide as of March 2012 and out of this, 194 million users are from Asia (greyreview.com). The country with the highest number of users in Asia is India and this is followed by Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia. Interestingly, Malaysia with a small population is able to surpass countries like Japan and Korea. Research in countries such as India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea and Japan, (2012) show that youths tend to open up more easily and discuss freely when they are online. Turkle (2011) says that social preferences are evolving to include and in some cases favor technology over people. This has also contributed to negative effects where interpersonal exchanges online has made youths vulnerable to bullying and abuse. Regardless of such negative impact, it cannot be denied that this technology has created pathways for interactive manner of acquiring knowledge and provided vast opportunities for youths to socialize.

Rosen, cited in Stone (2010), explain that the current generation wants immediate responses to their queries or issues as they have grown up in an environment where technology enables the expectation for instant responses and attention. So it is not wrong to say that today’s generations are experiencing a new wave of interpersonal communication. With the rise of online communities, communication has shifted away from traditional modes of interpersonal communication that have long been based on face-to-face models of interaction.

More than a third of young people in the United Kingdom believe that their online friends know more about them than their real life mates, with many believing it is easier to open up in cyberspace. A survey by MySpace in Britain found that 36 per cent of those polled between 14 and 21 found it easier to talk about them through modern technology, confessing that they shared more about themselves with online friends. Based on these studies, the findings support the observations of Chan and Cheng (2004) that friendship develops through interaction between two people over a period of time and this is mainly through intimate or face to face interaction.

In the context of Malaysia, developing friendship on cyberspace is evident. Hence it is necessary to expand our understanding on how youths use diverse combinations of the digital media particularly the social media to develop, engage and maintain friendship.

This research aimed to answer the following questions:

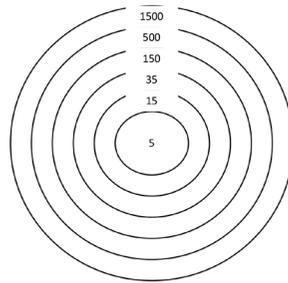
- a) What motivates youths to use social networking sites?
- b) What type of exchanges take place via social networking sites?
- c) To what extend does the social networking sites contribute to their development.

## RELATED LITERATURE

Friendship refers to the quality or condition of being friends and maintaining a friendly relationship (cited in <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/friendship>). In the cyberworld particularly in social networking, “Friends” are not the same as “friends” in the everyday sense; instead, friends provide context by offering users an imagined audience to guide behavioral norms (Boyd,2006). The phrase social networking site (SNS) is an umbrella term for all social media and computer-mediated communication (CMC). Elison and Boyd (2007) define SNS as web-based services that allow individuals to construct profiles, display user connections and search and communicate with that list of connection.

To study how friendship patterns are formed online, Dunbar’s circles of acquaintanceship model illustrate the online friendship patterns. This model proposes that humans ‘sit in the middle of a series of expanding circles that progressively include more individuals’ (Dunbar et al. 2005: 97) ranging from 5 to 1500 individuals. Each circle represents a group of individuals that have their own traits (Dunbar et al. 2005).

The innermost circle of an individual’s personal friendship network is known as the support clique, and contains approximately 5 individuals (Dunbar et al. 2005). The next circle is known as the sympathy group which contains 12-15 individuals. The sympathy group is essentially the core of one’s social network, and is categorized by monthly contact, general support and advice, and social integration. These 2 circles seem to equate with the friend selection process on SNSs and strongly reflects how students use such sites to gain support or sympathy. Following the sympathy group is the circle known as the close network, which contains about 35 individuals. This circle is categorized by less than monthly contact, a low level of support, including basic emotional support, and is known as the general network of friends (Dunbar 2004). This is the most common type of friends found on SNSs. The next circle is known as the personal social network, or the ‘cognitive group’, and contains about 150 individuals (Dunbar 2004). It is known as the ‘cognitive group’ as Dunbar (2008) proposes that this number is the maximum number of people that the brain is equipped to know at a certain level of emotional intensity at any given time. This group is categorized by an explicit and personal relationship that maintains a level of personal trust and has a history of past interactions (Dunbar et al. 2005). This also explains the unique feature of SNS that allows individuals to meet strangers. According to Haythornthwaite (2005) many SNS participants are not networking but mostly communicating with people whom they already know.



**Figure 1 - Dunbar's circles of acquaintanceship model  
(Dunbar et al. 2005: 97)**

A study conducted by Moorman and Bowker (2011) looked at the usage of online social networks and its impact on the quality of relationship and psychological adjustment. The findings showed that females used these online platforms to build more intimate relationships compared to their male counterparts. However there was a positive affiliation between the quality of friendship and self-esteem among students with low Facebook usage. Ito (2010) found that the interest based networks like Facebook which encourage peer-based sharing is an important instrument for informal learning. That was supported by the findings of Greenhow and Robelia (2009) that informal learning has the ability to provide validation, appreciation, emotional support and task support around learning activities. Similarly a study by Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan et al. (2010) investigated whether university students considered Facebook as a useful and meaningful platform to support, enhance and strengthen the learning of the English language. This study revealed that students believed Facebook could be used as an online platform to facilitate the learning of English. However, the role of instructors and teachers still played a role in determining specific objectives and outcomes with such implementations in order to ensure a meaningful learning experience.

A study by Gross (2004) involving 261 in 7th and 10th grades in California revealed that these students use the online platform to connect with friends and to complete assignments. The data that was collected through a series of questionnaires, reports and observation suggest that the use of such platforms prevent social isolation and depression as students are constantly connected to their peers. Similar to the previous study, Mikami et al. (2010) revealed that online social networks are used by youths in order to connect with friends. It portrayed that these youths had a positive connection with their peers. Their peers also provided positive comments and encouragement on their profiles. This also supports the argument by Bane, Haymaker and Zincuck (2005) that peer support online is vital as it is a platform to provide and receive emotional support, socialize and share experiences which can help one to blend in with society.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Sample*

A total of 750 youths between the ages of 15 and 30 participated in this study. These youths were secondary school children, college students and tertiary level students in the Klang valley. Questionnaires were distributed to the youths in the institutions with the help of research assistants and the research team also personally administered the instruments at some institutions. Interviews were conducted with 20 youths who had volunteered to be interviewed on one-to-one basis. The interview data was used to supplement the quantitative data.

### *Instrument and measurements*

This research employed a mix method of data collection. For the quantitative data, a set of questions were designed based on questions in the Pew Internet and American Life Project by Princeton Survey Research Associates International (2006). Part A of the instrument consisted questions required for demographic information. Part B consisted of 50 statements using a 4 point Likert scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 4 strongly agree. Part C consisted several open-ended questions. This survey instrument was distributed to 750 youths and a total of 714 completed questionnaires were received by the research team. The data was analysed using SPSS version 20. The 50 items in the questionnaire were categorised into five broad themes, namely usability, educational values, friends and social, self-development, parents, and others. The in-depth interviews conducted individually were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

## FINDINGS

The finding of the current study is reported according to the constructs below:

### *Usability*

In terms of usability, item 32 (I use the SNS using the computer) scored the highest mean score of 3.33. This is confirmed with the findings for item 31 (I access the SNS using my mobile phone) where only 35.2% responded positively. Item 45 (Having one SN account is enough) recorded 74.9% positive response. Item 1 (SN is part of my everyday activity) recorded 68.9% responding negatively. This is further supported with the findings in item 34 (I visit the SNS everyday) with 59.9% of the respondents visiting the SNS daily and slightly more than (56.7%) at least twice a week. However, half the respondents (51.3%) agreed that having SNS is a must. They (62.4 %) also do not see the necessity to update their SNS in terms of status, pictures, and comments in their page. The respondents in the interview revealed that although SNS have become a rising trend today, there are also individuals who do not succumb to its temptation.

### *Educational Values*

The mean score of 3.15 indicates a positive respond from youths regarding the

usage of SNS to get useful information.

The findings also showed that youths responded positively to item 4 (I use SNS to find out about things going on in school, college / university or work) with 81.4%. For item 39 (My teachers/lecturers are on my SNS) 64.2% responded positively and this clearly indicates that teachers and lecturers today are actively using these platforms to engage with students in teaching and learning. For instance, most educators especially at the tertiary level post assignments, Q & A sessions, forums and they even allow students to submit assignments through such online platforms. Due to this flexibility it is clear that findings for item 3 (I use SNS to get useful information) and 4 (I use SNS to find out about things going on in school, college/university or work) are equally high.

The respondents interviewed mentioned that it was easier to communicate online to complete such work as they could share online materials and suggestions at any time of the day. One respondent mentioned that in this case he did not mind having his teachers on his friends list as he was able to communicate outside of the classroom. In addition, another respondent who happened to be a young teacher who is a part time student at a university mentioned that she did not mind befriending her students online as she was able to provide them important announcements and questions to be discussed in class the following day. Through this she felt that she was able to complete more work in the classroom.

On the other hand, using SNS as a means of support to perform better and as a means to provide moral support did not show significant findings as only slightly more than 50% of the respondents responded positively to items 14, (SN gives me moral support to complete school work/ assignments) and 22, (SN gives me support to perform better at school/college/university/work). This indicates that these youths still preferred face-to-face interaction for such support.

### ***Friends and Social Factors***

The findings show that youths respond negatively to item 7 (I use SNS to find people for dating) with the mean score of only 1.78. However, youths agreed that they use SNS to meet new people. The mean score for item 8 (I use SNS to meet new people) shows 2.66 which are slightly higher from the average that youth meet new people by using SNS like Facebook and Twitter. It is easy for youths to meet new people by using SNS with no boundaries. When questioned on how they select their friends, all the respondents explained that they would only befriend people that they know face to face. All the respondents also indicated that they would not befriend strangers as they were aware of the negative consequences. For instance, one respondent commented on a recent rape case whereby a schoolgirl had befriended a stranger on Facebook a few days before the incident took place. This implies that, these respondents are well informed of the cybercrimes that could possibly take place by befriending strangers. Item 10 (I use SNS to learn more about people) shows a positive respond with a mean of 2.89. SNSs like Facebook or Twitter provides

a platform for youth to create a private profile, send and share images, messages, thoughts and posting on each other's wall for everyone to view. This helps youths to understand more about the people they know by going through their profile.

Besides that, youths responded positively to item 11 (I use SNS to keep in touch with old friends) with 85.4 %. The interview findings also revealed that majority of the respondents received online support from their friends on these SNS. For instance, it was discovered that when the respondents posted emotional messages or comments, their online peers will provide words of encouragement and positive feedback. Furthermore, majority of the respondents also mentioned that they were able to sustain a longer friendship on SNS. Respondents mentioned that it did not matter as to how often you had a conversation online with these friends but what mattered the most is that you have acknowledged the existence of their friendship by accepting their request. This clearly shows how youths build relationships or friendships and sustain them through SNS.

Item 27 (SN helps me to organize an event by creating a site about the particular event (e.g. birthdays/weddings) and 28 (SN helps me send invitations to my friends for an event) shows that SN helps youth to organize an event by creating a site about the particular event (e.g. birthdays/weddings) and SN helps youth to send invitations to friends for an event. The mean score is higher than the average with a 2.98 (72.9%) and 3.07 (77.8%) respectively. In addition, item 37 (I share pictures with my friends on SNS) with a mean score of 2.87(68.40%) indicates that youths use SNS to share pictures with their friends online. However, when questioned on their privacy settings in sharing these pictures with friends, all the respondents mentioned that they were aware of the privacy settings and they will always make sure that their pictures are only available to close friends and family members. One respondent was always aware of the social mishaps of sharing personal information and pictures online. She cited some misuse where strangers created profiles using other users' pictures. In general, it is safe to say that the respondents were well informed on cyber safety.

According to item 40 (Communicating with friends online helps save money compared to calling or messaging through phones), youths agree that communicating with friends online helps save money compared to calling or messaging through phones. This can be clearly seen with the mean score of 3.32 (81.2%). The mean score is higher because interactions between youths and their friends using SNS only require Internet connection which today can be found for free almost everywhere. Item 48 (SN strengthens my friendship with people) showed that youths generally agreed with the statement (697%).

### ***Self-development***

Item 15 (My SN is important to enable me to communicate with others) scored a mean of 3.16 (81.5%). This is evident through the mean score of item 23 (I feel free to communicate with others) which is 3.08 (77.8%). Being able to communicate with other is a sign of self- development.

Based on item 49 (Being on the SNS helps us learn more about life), it was found that respondents agreed that being on SNS helps them to learn more about life and this is supported by a mean score of 2.83 (66.8%). This is further supported through the interview data which revealed that youth these days who are connected to SNS used these platforms as an informative platform in order to keep abreast with the world. Some of the respondents mentioned that this was a sure method of immediately knowing happenings around the world. The example given by a respondent was the Tsunami tragedy in Japan whereby within minutes everyone on Facebook was giving their well wishes and prayers to the victims. One respondent mentioned that this is a clear example of how people put aside their differences when facing difficult times.

The respondents mentioned that through these SNS they were able to build on their grammar and vocabulary and this is mainly done by reading their peers comments or postings online. It was found that when their peers used new vocabulary, some of the respondents actually took the initiative to look up some words. This reflects their self-development in terms of enhancing their language skills. Although the respondents were able to develop themselves in the areas mentioned above, they all mentioned that being active on SNS does not necessarily boosts ones confidence level. One respondent mentioned that he has come across individuals who have thousands of friends on their SNS, constantly post interesting comments and have amazing pictures uploaded. However, when she met an individual in person, the individual turned out to be a socially awkward person and he was unable to engage in a decent conversation. This shows that the virtual world need not speak the truth at all times.

### ***Parental Factors***

There are only two items on parental factors; (29) my parents approve my online friends and (30) I do not share my SN activities with my parents that were related to parents. Half of the respondents (50.7%) claimed that they do not share their SN activities with their parents.

To item 29 (My parents approve my online friends); about half the respondents say that their parents approve their friends on SNS while 41.3% of the respondents reported negatively on this statement. Eight out of the ten respondents mentioned that they found it out of the norm to actually befriend their parents on SNS. One respondent mentioned that although the youths today find it awkward, the younger generation condone to this virtual relationship as it is common for them to keep in contact with their parents through these SNS.

One respondent on the other hand stated that it is not so important to befriend his parents online but what is more important is that parents should be more aware of their children's activities on these SNS. Based on the responses received through the interviews, all the respondents agreed that being on SNS has more negative effects than positive ones. Firstly, one respondent shared that being on these SNS

leaves us vulnerable to stalkers and sexual offenders. According to the respondent, if we are not careful with our security settings our, personal information and pictures will be readily available to the entire world. Another respondent mentioned that there is an application of Facebook called “Foursquare” where users are required to check in and this will send notifications to their online friends on their whereabouts. This can be harmful in many circumstances especially when you are alone.

In relation to bad mouthing people on these SNS, a few respondents mentioned that some comments posted on such sites can cause racial and political unrest within the country as it seems like the more advance technology gets the more people tend to misuse it and become insensitive. These are clear examples of the harms that SNS can bring to an individual and to a nation. Four respondents also added on by stating that the use of SNS has helped them enhance their language skills.

## **DISCUSSION**

Examining the results of the current study, that large number of the respondents preferred to use the computer rather than the mobile due to the connectivity and user friendliness of the features and the screen. The findings also confirms that majority of the respondents do not believe in having too many accounts. This finding also suggests that SNS may not appeal to all youths. There is a high possibility that although these respondents are on SNS, they may not be regularly using it as 40.4% do not feel having SNS is a must. However, despite this inclination, the youths revealed that majority of youths use SNSs to keep abreast with information updates. There are groups and friends who post about the activities and happenings. Hence, youths are able to access this information that is readily available online. This is because social sites are easy to access daily through laptops or hand phone. Furthermore, students these days have access to such digital gadgets and connectivity all the time. They utilize better support using video sharing sites like YouTube to provide significant promise for communication. There are also more spaces that are wired in public places. Therefore, they are able to reach out for information immediately. It was also revealed that the respondents use SNS to obtain useful information especially in relation to school, college and university assignments. SNS has transformed the mode of teaching and learning and it is no longer confined to the classroom. This finding can be an indicator to show that SNS provides them the academic support to some extent.

Generally SNS communication does not replace intimacy or face-to-face interaction. Perhaps the Malaysian culture here does not approve relationship development in cyberspace or the respondents were not comfortable to respond to personal matters. These respondents were of the opinion that not all support can be obtained via online activities. This could also mean that cultural values play an important role for our youths’ online behaviour. They tend to reveal that although they could meet new people online but for personal matter and deeper friendship

development they will not share too much as the preference to keep that kind of relationship can only happen if they knew them personally. This is in line with Haythornthwaite (2005) who stated that social network sites enable users to make their profiles visible to familiar people and that most of the time interaction takes place with people they already know offline. Thus it would not be wrong to say these youths disapprove being close too online unless they were their old friends. These youths moved in social groups in an effort to be more accepted but were wary about social ills and related cybercrime. There is a tendency or desire to communicate using SNS is very high among youths as they are able to do it within their comfort zone without meeting them face-to-face. Parents do play a role in their children's online behavior to some point, although parents do not question their children's involvement in SNS. This finding could be related to the younger group who are still at school. Either parents may be ignorant on cyber activities or they do not have the time to monitor their children. This is something to be concerned about as youths are vulnerable to social ills. It is also interesting to find parents who befriend their children online and this surely allows them the opportunity to tap on the children's online behavior to some point.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study explores how youths between ages 15 and 30 used the diverse social networking sites to develop and engage in maintaining friends. On the whole, the study does not support claims suggesting that users replace face-to-face socializing with SNS (Turkle, 2011). What motivates them to be involved in SNS reveals that friends, especially old friends, are considered very important to these youths and social networking is a good way of keeping their friendship going. Although the youths do not connect to SNS regularly, having them in their list of friends is considered important to them. As it is a preferred mode as far as friendship is concerned.

However, the respondents strongly believed that they needed to have face-to-face interactions with them from time to time. Social networking sites are also considered an important platform for them to keep abreast with happenings around the world. Some felt that being on SNS also helped them in their language development as they managed to improve their writing to some point. The findings also revealed that social networking was more for academic reasons as they were a need and less in terms of moral support. These youths also reported that SNS played an important role for social support among friends. Youths are aware of the cybercrimes that take place in the SNS and they are careful of the privacy matters especially being on SNS with people they respect like their teachers or lecturers. In conclusion, this research proves that today's youths have become very dependent on social networking sites. Although they claim to spend long hours in SNS, it is not worrying as they seem to know their limits.

On the contrary if they spend a great deal of time online without participating in other useful events or activities it can affect their all-round development. This also limits their face-to-face interaction with people causing them to lack people skills or inter-personal skills. This pattern of keeping friends could contribute to the lack of social and community values. Although we have embraced a borderless world which is considered healthy in terms of knowledge sharing and collaborating, a world without privacy has its drawbacks and may not be healthy. "Whether the Internet is increasing or decreasing social networking could have enormous consequence for the society and for people's well-being" (Kraut et al., 1998:1017). This research was carried out in the Klang valley with youth in secondary schools and institutions in higher learning. It is recommended that a bigger research be carried out with a multi-informant pool as the findings may show different patterns of youth engagements via social media.

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