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Social Media Use Among Teenagers in Brunei Darussalam

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Abstract. This paper presents a study on the use of social media among teenagers in Brunei Darussalam. The aim is not merely to reveal the social media usage behavior of teenagers in Brunei Darussalam, but also to illustrate the benefits and challenges brought about by social media usage among youths in the social-cultural context of Brunei Darussalam and its national ideology of Malay Islam Monarchy. Four findings of social networking, romantic intimacy, social media addiction, and cyberbullying are presented and the corresponding social-cultural implications and interventions are discussed. It is hoped that an awareness of how social media usage among youth are perceived in a different social-cultural context and bring about greater mutual understanding in this increasingly divisive world.

Keywords: Social media · Teenagers · Youth · Brunei Darussalam

1 Introduction

Social media is widely used among all strata of societies, its use is most prevalent among teenagers [35]. Even as social media has brought about benefits to and enhancement of social relations [15], it has also brought about negative effects that detriment and degrade social relations [50]. While there is considerable study of social media use among teenagers [7], [14], these studies are mainly based in the United States of America, which is a primarily liberal and westernized country [6], [14], [18]. Considering that social media use among teenagers is a global phenomenon, it is necessary to study this phenomenon in countries that are less liberal and westernized in order to have a complete understanding of this contemporary phenomenon. This paper explores the use of social media among teenagers in Brunei Darussalam, which is a quaint and largely conservative, Islamic country.

The aim of this paper is not merely to reveal the social media usage behavior of teenagers in the social-cultural context of Brunei Darussalam, with its national ideology of Malay Islam Monarchy. It is also hoped that a greater awareness on how social media usage is perceived in different social and cultural context can help to bring about greater mutual understanding amidst dissimilarities in this increasingly divisive world.

The paper is organized as such: the next section provide a brief review on social media. This is followed by a description of the social and cultural context of Brunei Darussalam and its national ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy. The research methodology is then discussed before findings from this study is presented. The implications and proposed follow up to address the findings are then discussed before the paper is concluded.

2 Social Media

Social media can be defined, “as a group of online applications that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content” [20]. Social media can be classified by their social presence or media richness and self-presentation or self-disclosure, which, according to [22], can be further categorized into five groups: (1) collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia); (2) blogs or microblogs (e.g. Blogs, Twitter); (3) content communities (e.g. YouTube); (4) social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) and (5) virtual gaming or social worlds (e.g. HumanSim). In 2015, active social media users exceeded 2 billion worldwide, with Facebook being the most widely adopted social media platform with about 1.366 billion active users across the world [23].

In most societies, teenagers are perceived to be more expressive, more open to changes and even deemed as trendsetters [6]. Compared to earlier generations, most teenagers are exposed to new technologies such as computers, mobile phones, and the Internet at a very young age [6, 7]. Thus, it is somewhat unsurprising that teenagers are among the most active social media users [14], [19].

Research showed that social media are commonly used for communication or social networking; to post comments and sending instant messages to friends or classmates [15], [28], [35], [38]. Additionally, the use of social media to enhance learning among students is also apparent [4]. In the study of social networking use among American teenagers, it was found that the students collaborated via social networks to discuss their homework or group projects [4]. Similarly, students’ use of social media to access their learning contents during class session was also reported [32]. Indeed, for the purpose of the students’ learning and conveniences, online videos are uploaded onto the social media platform for sharing purposes. Interestingly, social media is also widely used to strengthen social intimacies, particularly among young people who are involved in a romantic relationship [8], [17].

Nevertheless, as much as technologies (such as the social media) are celebrated for their benefits, they are also condemned for some detrimental effects. A number of studies

revealed how high levels of social media use is positively connected to addiction-like behaviors [44], [48]. Other studies also illustrated that cyberbullying via social media is prevalent among young people. Previous research investigated the types of cyberbullying experienced by the young people and these include name-calling, susceptibility to rumors, gossips and threats [13], [25], [36], [49].

3 Brunei Darussalam

Brunei Darussalam is located in South East Asia, on the island of Borneo. It has a land area of 5,765 square km, with a population of about 420,000. The official languages are Malay, English and Chinese, and Islam is the national religion.

Brunei Darussalam was a British Protectorate from 1889 till it gained its full independence in 1984. The country is ruled by a king, the Sultan of Brunei. He is the head of state and also head of government. He is concurrently the Prime Minister, Defense Minister, Finance Minister, as well as the Foreign Affairs Minister. The Malay Islamic Monarchy is the country's distinctive ideology which guides social norms and government administration, "promoting Islam as the state religion and monarchical rule as the sole governing system" [45].

Apart from the Shari'a law (Islamic law), applicable only to Muslims in the case of divorce, inheritance or sexual crimes (immoral activities such as adultery known as *zina*, close proximity between sexes in secluded areas known as *khalwat*, or illicit sex resulting in unlawful pregnancy), Bruneian judicial system practices the Secular law, originating from English common law [45]. The sale of alcohol is prohibited by law and the sale of pork is limited to certain restaurants and markets. In comparison to other predominantly Muslim South-East Asian countries (e.g. Indonesia and Malaysia) and the more liberal jurisdiction in the Middle East (e.g. Egypt, Dubai and Qatar), Brunei Darussalam is culturally and religiously more conservative.

Socio-cultural norms values and attitudes are heavily influenced by the Malay Islamic Monarchy ideology. Some of these norms, values and attitudes include respect for the elders, good manners, honesty, trustworthiness and obedience to religious practices and obligations. Families are close-knitted and it is not uncommon to find multi-generations living under one roof.

About 50 percent of Brunei's population is below the age of 24. As education is fully funded by the government to Bruneian citizens in state schools and is made compulsory, the youth literacy rate is at a high of 99 percent. Courses on Islam and the national ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy is made mandatory by the Ministry of Education. Moreover, Muslim students are also required to attend religious schools, in addition to studying at the state schools.

The teenagers in Brunei are largely technology savvy as information technology is well integrated into the education system. Majority of the educational institutions are equipped with computer laboratories and Internet access.

According to the official 2013 Brunei Darussalam Household Information communication technology (ICT) Survey Report, the most frequently used social media platform in Brunei is Facebook, followed by Instagram [2]. The mobile penetration rate is at 114 percent, among the highest in South-East Asia. Most Bruneian access the Internet through the mobile subscription lines. However, there is little or no research on the social media use and their implications towards Bruneians.

4 Research Methodology

The phenomenological strategy of inquiry is adopted in this study. The rationale behind using the phenomenological approach in this study derived from the importance of describing the little known yet complex phenomenon social media use among teenagers in Brunei.

The phenomenological approach seeks to understand human experience from the everyday lives of those who experience an event, phenomenon or object [11], [26]. The phenomenological approach is useful where the focus of a study is on the subjective views of people, describing specific and in-depth information from the actors or subjects [26]. As argued by [26], by using an interpretive phenomenological dimension, the study can contribute significantly to the “practical theory, which can be used to inform, support or challenge policy and action” [26, p. 1]. The phenomenological approach has close affinity with other qualitative research strategies such as ethnography, and case studies, and methodology such as ‘grounded theory, hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism [5], [26], [34].

Qualitative methods are used to collect data in as it enables holistic and descriptive data upon which new insights into the lived experiences of the participants can be generated [29, 30]. Indeed, qualitative methods can be used to understand social life and social change [33]. The qualitative method emphasizes an interpretive, naturalistic approach to research inquiry, involving a combination of different research methods such as in-depth interviews, personal observations and case studies to ensure research rigor and credibility of the research inquiry [12].

A total of 143 Bruneian teenagers between the ages of 13 and 19, involving both males and females, are recruited for this study. They are selected randomly throughout the four Districts of Brunei Darussalam, i.e. the Brunei-Muara, Belait, Tutong and Temburong districts. The teenagers are divided into 30 separate focus groups. Each focus group ranged from four to six participants. Each focus group discussion lasted for approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

The collected data are recorded and transcribed verbatim, segmented and coded. Open coding and axial coding techniques [41] are used to identify categories and later connected to discover broad themes respectively. Direct quotes from respondents that emphasized those themes were incorporated into the thematic data analysis [10], [46].

5 Findings

The findings reveal four social media related behaviors among teenagers in Brunei Darussalam.

5.1 Social Networking

Many teenagers shared that they used social media for its intended purpose of social networking with friends and relatives. Although some admitted to stalking their friends, others shared that they used social media to communicate with their teachers and follow up on school work. Some of the supporting evidence for this is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1.

| Evidence of Social Networking | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Plain Social Networking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>To connect, ask my friends this and that...all through Facebook.</i> • <i>I tend to share or update status, like for example. "I'm bored. I'm bored."</i> |
| Stalking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I'm a stalker...I visit others' pages.</i> • <i>Same here, the most I do is check (on others) when I go on Facebook.</i> |
| Follow-up on School Work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Sometimes we discuss about school work.</i> • <i>We ask friends whatever that we may have forgotten or anything about school.</i> • <i>I ask about homework, plus we can easily contact our teachers.</i> • <i>We ask about our homework, what to bring for the subject on the next day, ask about our studies... We also Facebook with our teachers. If we don't know their mobile phone number, we contact them through their Facebook instead.</i> |

5.2 Romantic Intimacy

Another social media usage behavior among teenagers in Brunei Darussalam is to attain some degree of romantic intimacy with their 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'. While most

uses social media to connect and keep in touch with their ‘boyfriend’ or ‘girlfriend’ or to coordinate social outings, some post pictures of themselves in intimate or sexy posture. Supporting evidence for this is shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

| Evidence of Romantic Intimacy | |
|---|--|
| Connecting with ‘boyfriend’ or ‘girlfriend’. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>My boyfriend and I would be joking, and talk about just anything.</i> • <i>My boyfriend, I use it often to contact him.</i> • <i>What’s good is that I can just call my girlfriend.</i> • <i>I use it a lot to contact my boyfriend, so it’s good in terms of keeping in touch, no matter where you are.</i> • <i>To be in contact with our boyfriend, because we’re in different school.</i> |
| Post pictures of themselves in intimate or sexy posture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Like on Facebook, you tend to see pictures of them kissing or hugging, and they are our school friends... in fact, guys like us will judge those girls who take pictures of them like that, it’s like if they’re like this, they’re guaranteed to have bad personalities, they’re cheap and guys will not be serious with them.</i> • <i>Yes, we know that girls now are pretty much daring, they would take sexy pictures of themselves, we have seen these pictures of our own friends, but we don’t do it, it’s disgusting.</i> |

5.3 Social Media Addiction

When asked about the unintended or negative implications of their social media activities, the teenagers admitted they are addicted to and easily distracted by their social connectivity. This, they said, made them to be less focused in their studies and spend less time on their school work, and even distract them from performing their prayers, which is an obligation as Muslims are expected to pray five times at specified time each day. They also stayed up till late at night to engage in long online chats, affecting their sleep. Supporting evidence for this is shown in Table 3.

Table 3.

| Evidence of Social Media Addiction | |
|---|--|
| Distracted from Performing Religious Obligation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Especially in terms of our studies and performing prayers...like if it’s time to pray, we still play on the mobile phone, got shouted by dad. But yeah, still play with it and go to the room...</i> • <i>Religiously, I think kids are already far left behind...like me, at noon time I’m a good boy. By</i> |

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| | <i>night time, I would be different. I would be (on) Facebook, going online and chat with my friends, sometimes, dirty chats like that... so I'm not confident to say that I'm holy; if I am, I won't be leaving or skipping my prayers.</i> |
| Affect Sleep | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Like me I would chat till morning, during school holidays that is, like if I want to stop, (I can't). I soon changed my mind (and continue chatting online).</i> • <i>I chat a lot, with my friends online, till the break of dawn. (We) talk about anything...</i> |
| Distracted from School Work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I get scolded by my parents for being too busy with my social media activities, like during exam period, I hardly study.</i> • <i>I've always been scolded by my parents, because I'm always playing games and Facebooking, and my homework usually left undone.</i> |

5.4 Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is also frequently mentioned by teenagers. According to them, the use of social media to send insulting messages and spread rumors or gossips, as well as name-calling, is widespread. Such cyberbullying often progress into the real world, resulting in discord among the teenagers in school. Supporting evidence for this is shown in Table 4.

Table 4.

| Evidence of Cyberbullying | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Cyberbullying | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>There was one time, someone commented on my picture, saying my face looked like a pig, so we ended up fighting.</i> • <i>It's just bad because, sometimes things like bullying and spreading of rumors on Facebook and all can create family problems, break relationships, you insult each other, you say this, they say that.</i> • <i>Because of saying things on the Facebook, like name-calling, like laughing at your dad's name which they think is funny, so you end up fighting in school.</i> |

6 Discussion

The findings of this study provide a glimpse into the use of social media among teenagers in Brunei Darussalam. The findings of this study also add to a growing body

of literature [7], [24], [27], [46] on how teenagers use social medias. It reveals that, apart from using social media for its intended purpose of social networking, teenagers in Brunei Darussalam are also using it to achieve a degree of romantic intimacy with their 'boyfriends' or 'girlfriends'. In addition, there are also signs of social media addiction and cyberbullying. While these findings are consistent with studies on the use of social media among teenagers in other countries [7], [9], [16], [47], its significance lies in the context of Brunei Darussalam, especially considering its conservative and Islamic culture as embodied by its national ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy.

A key use of social media among teenagers in Brunei Darussalam is for social networking. This is unsurprising as this is a primary intent of social media [20]. What is perhaps intriguing is that these teenagers also uses social media to follow-up on their school work, and even to connect with their teachers. While this is a positive use of social media in itself, reports in other countries about such mentoring relationship morphing into illicit sexual relationship between teachers and students [1] can be a red flag for more care to be exercised. To prevent mentors from becoming predators, it will be prudent for schools or even the Ministry of Education to establish some guidelines or code of ethics on how teachers and students can engage one another on social media. The challenge is not so much in the establishment of such guidelines but on where the line should be drawn in such a way that facilitates the use of social media to encourage learning, but yet inhibit the development of illicit relationship. Further research is needed to not only understand the substance of such guidelines, but also how it can be effectively enforced.

Another finding from this study reveals that youths in Brunei Darussalam use social media as a platform to connect with their 'boyfriends' or 'girlfriends', or share pictures of their intimate behaviors. While the development of romantic relationship or even intimacy among teenagers may not be an issue in liberal western societies, such behaviors is a major concern in Brunei Darussalam as it does not conform to the values and beliefs of the Malay Islamic culture. These practices contravene the teachings of Islam, where, in Quran verse (17:32), 'the wrong doings of 'zina' or sexual involvement without marital relationships, are despicable and carries a huge sin and which is 'haram' or forbidden'.

While addiction to social media are also found in other countries [31], [42], most of these have only revealed how such addiction has led to being distracted from school work and affecting sleep quality [51]. This study shows that social media addiction has also distracted the teenagers from performing their religious obligation of praying five times every day.

Taking the findings on romantic intimacy and social media addiction together, the use of social media among youths in Brunei Darussalam has brought about behavior that are deemed to be unacceptable in Islamic beliefs. This indicates a tendency for teenagers to be less pious towards the teaching of their Islamic faith. However, instead of dismissing the use of social media altogether, not least because it has the potential to bring about positive outcomes such as enabling teenagers to follow up on the school work, a more enlightened approach is to engage the teenagers through social media

such as dissemination of religious information and teachings via social media. Indeed, similar approaches of active engagement and education have also been posited by other scholars [7]. Further research is needed to study how such engagement and education can be effectively implemented, especially in culturally and religiously conservative context such as the situation in Brunei Darussalam.

Cyberbullying is another finding revealed in this study. Cyberbullying via social media has become a convenient alternative to traditional forms of bullying among the teenagers [43] and this form of bullying has been found to be widespread in some countries [37]. In extreme cases, cyberbullying is also known to induce depression and even suicidal thoughts among teenagers [39, 40]. Considering the pervasiveness of cyberbullying around the world, it will be advisable for schools and the Ministry of Education to proactively put in place cyberbullying awareness and prevention programs as well as train teachers to be effective counsellors of both cyberbullies and their victims [3]. More research is also needed to understand the effectiveness of such awareness and prevention programs.

7 Conclusion

This paper presents a study on the use of social media among youths in Brunei Darussalam, revealing the presences of social networking, romantic intimacy, social media addiction and cyberbullying behaviors. The unique implication of these behavior to the social-cultural context of Brunei Darussalam, especially in terms of its national ideology of Malay Islamic Monarchy, are discussed. Corresponding interventions approaches as well as future research directions are also proposed.

As with all research, there are limitation to this study which should be cautioned when understanding and using the findings. Even as the interpretive phenomenological methodology adopted in this study limits the transferability of findings to other context, the intent of this study is not about establishing findings that are transferable to other context. Instead, this paper aims to bring about an awareness of how social media usage among youth are perceived in a different social-cultural context and bring about awareness of different worldviews and greater mutual understanding in this increasingly divisive world. Readers are thus cautioned against simply extracting the findings in this paper and extrapolate onto other context. More importantly, this paper alludes that despite differing cultural norms and religious beliefs, similarities and general consensus about the good, the bad and the ugly of social media exist. Such a consensus can be harnessed to bring about greater cooperation and exchange of knowledge in making social media less bad and ugly on one hand, and more good and beautiful on the other.

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