Abstract

This paper aims to outline how social media platform especially the modern digital media have improved the communication and connection of online communities. It provides an overview of the current situation of social media platform usage by the online communities as well as statistical data on the usage. The discussion is focused on the areas of business and economic activities, education, sport, religion, political and social activities. Supporting evidences are provided to explain how the social media platform has played its roles in improving the communication of the online communities and the many positive outcomes and impacts on the online communities.

Nowadays, with the advancement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), social media platform especially the modern digital media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube have been widely used by online communities to communicate and connect with one another. The availability and ubiquity of smartphones allow people to constantly use the social media platforms (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Having access to the social media platforms is a dominant use of smartphones (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Online communities can connect with each other anytime and anywhere. Social media platform has improved the communication and connection of online communities.

New communication technology makes persistent contact and pervasive awareness possible and is evident in the technologies known as social media (Hampton, 2016). Persistent contact is the affordance of the communication technologies which enable people to articulate their association and keep maintaining contact over a period of time (Hampton, 2016). Most of the technologies can afford persistence with the ability to broadcast information from person to network that sustain contact without drawing from the time and resources which are required to maintain ties via other channels of communication (Hampton, 2016).

In the digital era, social media platform has an impact on communities to the extent that people are not able to live without social media platform (Lin, 2020). At this point of time, people can communicate with their families and friends across the globe with the click of the button (Ng, 2019). It is evident to suggest that social media have reestablished transgenerational contact and technologies play an essential role in the persistence of the relationship between the child and parents during the transitional life course events (Hampton, 2016). People are able to stay in touch with their families and friends and keep up to date on the latest news (Ng, 2019). People can obtain updates instantly through the various social media channels (Ng, 2019). The generation of millennial are mostly impacted by the existence of social media platform as 40% of them are relying on social media platform for current affairs (Ng, 2019). For those people who are interested in writing a blog, it only takes a few seconds or a few minutes to create a blog online and express any thoughts and ideas on a certain issue on the blog (Landry, 2014).

Network diversity is related to improved access to sources and diverse resources (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). The increase in visibility amongst network members used to flatten to a single audience on social media platform such as Facebook that might close structural holes which provide bridges to resources and information and increase the community bonds (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). Social media platforms foster networked, persistent and pervasive relationships in the community (Hampton & Wellman, 2018).

Based on statistics, Facebook is the primary social media platform in the United States as it has 2.01 billion users and 88% of users aged between 18 to 29 years old are using the social media platform (Willis, 2017). Facebook allows people to stay connected with anyone from the relatives to the best friends and people could share pictures, videos and links on the Facebook page (Willis, 2017). On the other hand, Twitter is known as a fast-paced network which enable users to post any content instantly within 140 words or less (Willis, 2017). Twitter consists of 328 million users and 36% of users aged between 18 to 29 years old are using the social media platform (Willis, 2017). Another popular social media platform is Instagram as 59% of users aged between 18 to 29 years old are using the social media platform (Willis, 2017). As a way to attract people’s attention, Instagram has created stories, filters and stickers on the platform (Willis, 2017). Instagram stories have 250 million users thus far (Willis, 2017). The other social media platform is Snapchat that allows users to share content which would be seen for 24 hours only (Willis, 2017). Snapchat has approximately 166 million users and 56% of users aged between 18 to 29 years old are using the social media platform daily (Willis, 2017).

The business communities are mostly active in using social media platform to communicate and connect with clients and to support their business activities (Lin, 2020). If the customers are interested in the product that they are searching for on social media platform and the staff of a particular company often communicate with the customers regarding the product on social media platform, the customers are definitely willing to purchase the product (Lin, 2020). This would lead to the business to be able to grow productively at a faster rate (Lin, 2020). Companies that have about 4 to 10 social media platforms would likely be able to reach out to its audience on social media platform such as Facebook, post an interesting picture to stay connected with younger audience on Instagram and build professional relationships by posting on LinkedIn (Lin, 2020). With the existence of social media platform, the staff of the company can respond directly to their clients if they have any doubts, questions or suggestions on the product of the company (Lin, 2020). This is the assurance to customers that the companies are focusing on the needs and desires of the customers which would benefit the company and the customers (Lin, 2020). Customers would appreciate the responses by the staff of the company when they add comments on the social media pages (Lin, 2020). Acknowledging each and every comment by the customer shows that the staff of the company are attentive of the customers’ needs (Lin, 2020).

Facebook and Instagram live have created marketing potential mainly for universities (Willis, 2017). Similar to the way most universities have utilised Instagram stories and Snapchat, the marketers of higher education are able to use the live feature to engage with the current and potential students with the sharing of the occasions and events by the university in real-time (Willis, 2017). The live feature allows the students to somehow partake in the events such as the university’s graduation ceremony or concert and experience the real sense of how life on the campus is all about from the students’ viewpoint (Willis, 2017).

In Malaysia, e-commerce where online business transaction via the social media platform is gaining increasing popularity especially during the current Covid-19 pandemic when travel is restricted and people are advised to stay at home. Companies such as Lazada and Shopee are reported to be doing very well as more and more consumers are purchasing products online.

Social media have allowed people from different countries to share their own stories (Willis, 2017). Other than the Internet which connects people all over the world, Snapchat is the first social media platform to provide people of an inside perspective on various foreign places (Willis, 2017). With live story streams and story explorer, the users can get a peek of how life in the other cities or countries are all about (Willis, 2017). Snapchat features cities from across the globe and features them on the application with live feeds of Snapchat by people in the chosen cities (Willis, 2017). For example, people are able to view the cities in Brazil and a peek of life of the citizens of Brazil by simply clicking on the “Rio” feeds (Willis, 2017).

Apart from cities, live feeds can be used to share events (Willis, 2017). From the perspective of a higher education, live feeds are the best platform for sharing students’ events, community activities and football tournament (Willis, 2017). Snapchat gives universities an opportunity to share on-campus experiences (Willis, 2017). By using the live feeds or a Snapchat account, universities would be able to show students of the life on campus from the students’ point of view (Willis, 2017). Students who use Snapchat to share their experiences are basically creating a connection with the university and sharing stories on students on Snapchat would lead to a higher interest of students and guide prospective students to decide if a school or university is suitable for them (Willis, 2017).

Due to the current Covid-19 pandemic, many schools and universities are ordered to be closed. However, they are still able to connect with their students and continue the learning process virtually via the social media channels.

Students can write blogs and use the chat rooms in order to connect with one another (“Social media can help teens develop skills,” 2015). This helps them in their writing skills, reading skills and critical thinking skills (“Social media can help teens develop skills,” 2015). With social media platform such as Facebook and MySpace, students are able to improve their social skills and cooperate by working on assignments outside the class (“Social media can help teens develop skills,” 2015). By watching news, television programmes related to current issues and documentaries, students are likely to be able to improve their social and political awareness (“Social media can help teens develop skills,” 2015).

With the existence of social media platform, people are able to broadcast live events, namely, sports events or concert. For instance, football fans around the world could watch their favourite teams playing in the English Premier League (EPL) or the World Cup through social media platform. Similarly, the motor sport fans can watch the live events of Formula 1 Grand Prix car racing. People can exchange views on the strengths and weaknesses of their teams as soon as the games have ended and some of them have establish friendship and rapport via social media platform.

During the current Covid-19 pandemic when churches, temples and mosques are ordered to close down, various religious bodies are using the social media platform to stay connected with their members. For example, churches are having the live streaming of their Sunday service with their Christian followers. In the same way, Sunday schools and bible study classes are conducted. Consequently, the spiritual and mental wellbeing of the people are being safeguarded and this is important especially during this challenging time of the pandemic.

These days, social media platform is widely used by politicians in their election campaign to spread their propaganda. This has proven to be effective as their propaganda is able to reach the online communities instantly through the mobile phones. There is no longer the need to do door to door campaigning which is slow and time consuming. People are able to get the results of the election quickly through the social media platform. It is evident to suggest that social media, due to pervasive awareness and persistent contact, play a vital role in political action (Hampton, 2016).

It is an undeniable fact that social media platform has tremendously improved the communication and connection of online communities as evidenced in the areas of business, education, sports, religion and other cultural and social activities. This is particularly true during difficult time such as the current Covid-19 pandemic when most countries closed their borders in order to prevent the spread of the virus. Though unable to meet and communicate face to face, the communities are still able to connect with each other via social media platform virtually during festive celebrations such as Christmas and New Year. Equally surprising is that more and more funeral ceremonies are attended by the relatives and loved ones by using social media platform due to the restriction on travel. No wonder people are saying the world is getting smaller and smaller with the availability of the sophisticated social media platform.

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