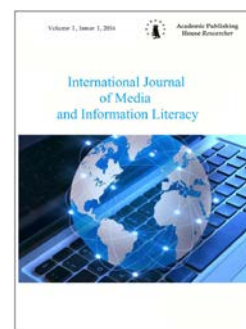


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Understanding the Phenomenology of Asynchronous Online Interactions in an Academic Business Setting in the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract

Interpretive discussions on asynchronous online interactions in an Omani academic setting seem to be muted in the literature. The purpose of this phenomenological research was to understand the meanings constructed by Omani International Business Administration (IBA) students enrolled in Electronic Commerce (MANG2402) class as regards their confabulations using Facebook as a platform of interaction. We examined the written reflective narratives of 25 IBA students describing their lived experiences of asynchronous online marketing exercise during Spring 2015 Semester at the College of Applied Sciences – Rustaq, Sultanate of Oman. Our analyses of data surfaced the following main themes: (a) Facebook Engagement as a Space for Information Dissemination; (b) Facebook Engagement as a Node for Building Relationships; (c) Facebook Engagement as a Boost for Business Engagement; (d) Facebook Engagement as a Concave of Knowledge and Skills which consisted of the following sub-themes: Acquiring Subject-specific Knowledge, Gaining General Knowledge, and Developing Communication Skills; and, (e) Facebook Engagement as an Avenue for Wholesome Entertainment.

Keywords: phenomenology, asynchronous online interactions, Omani business students, facebook, social media.

1. Introduction

Asynchronous online interactions in an Omani academic setting seem to be muted in interpretive research literature. Our research problem was located in the social construction of meanings in a technology-mediated communication in asynchronous online interactions of individuals. The problem was situated in the context of social media engagement using Facebook as the platform of social interactions, where social media represented technology per se. In a broader sociological view, social media engagement may be construed as the interaction between individuals on social networks which is seen as the interplay of trust and knowledge (McGurk, 2015, in Segumpan, 2016). What meanings were constructed by people as regards their engagement in social media? This was the pivotal question that guided our research.

Online social networks are effective teaching tools because of their rationality and cost-effectiveness. It is rational since most students already use the system; it is cost-effective because

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the network infrastructures are ready-to-use (Towner et al., 2007, in Mathupayas, 2011). According to Vural and Bat (2010, in Topaloglu, Caldibi, & Oge, 2016):

Social media are networks where individuals interact with others using writing, pictures, videos and audio files the content of which is determined by users completely without time and space limitations and where sharing, interaction and discussion are fundamental. Social media has become an ideal channel today by making continuous updates, multiple uses and virtual sharing possible (p. 351).

Serrat (2010, in Segumpan, 2016) views social media as an umbrella term encompassing technology integration with social interaction to produce some value. In our research, this “social interaction” was observed in social media engagement among our participants. Through multidirectional conversations, social media afford shared community experiences for content to be created, organized, edited, combined and shared. They comprise of online technologies and practices that users leverage to share concepts, experiences, insights, opinions, and perspectives in social interface (Serrat, 2010, in Segumpan, 2016).

Various social media such as Google+, Facebook, Researchgate and Twitter have emerged due to the rapid development of the Internet, which resulted in fundamental changes in communications and information exchange (Cai et al., 2014, in Topaloglu, Caldibi, & Oge, 2016). According to eBizMBA (2016, in Segumpan, 2016), Facebook is the number one social media platform with 1.1 million users, followed by Twitter with 310,000,000 users, and LinkedIn with 255,000,000 users. These figures appear quantitative in nature but this piece of information provided support to our choice of using Facebook in our phenomenological research.

Schwartz (2009, in Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010) views engagement with social media, in particular, Facebook, as a form of communication, saying that “*I now see Facebook as part of a larger commons, a space in which we stay connected ... (it helps) keep my metaphorical door open, and that increases the potential for real-time, face-to-face conversations that are rich with connection, depth, risk-taking, and growth*” (p. 138). Mazman and Usluel (2009) made an elaboration:

While social networks have been adopted and being used extensively by many people, it is notable that they are not adopted in the educational field as much in other fields, despite providing various advantages for the educational context as in personalization, collaboration, information sharing, common interest, active participation, and working together (Mazman and Usluel, 2009: 26).

The literature review seems to have muted the voices of people in surfacing the meanings of social media engagement in an academic setting. No study of this kind yet was made which understands the lived experiences of higher education students, in particular, in social media engagement using the Facebook platform in the context of the Sultanate of Oman.

2. Materials and methods

Objective of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Omani International Business Administration (IBA) students engaged in asynchronous online interactions in an academic setting. Specifically, this study sought answers to the research question: What were the meanings that surfaced from students’ Facebook engagement? We were interested in understanding the meanings attributed by Omani IBA students of their engagement in social media, in particular, Facebook.

Methodology

Phenomenology as Research Frame

Our research was anchored on descriptive phenomenology, a type of phenomenology inspired by the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Husserl was a German philosopher considered by Vandenberg (1997) as the “fountainhead of phenomenology in the 20th century” (p. 11). Phenomenology is not underpinned by the positivist need for ‘right’ answers; rather, it aims to develop an empathic understanding that truth is multiple and that context determines the meaning of the experience (Henry, Chapman & Francis, 2011). The aim of descriptive phenomenology as espoused by Alkharusi (2013) is:

...to understand the shared meanings of several individuals, to be interested in understanding rather than explaining lived experience in a close and natural way, to describe how individuals experience and interpret their realities, to allow participants to talk about their own experiences in their own words, and to consider central meanings or essences of the experience. By assuming that there are universal perspectives among all people who share a common experience, the inquiry aims to identify those universal elements and perspectives that constitute general experience (Alkharusi, 2013: 119).

Descriptive phenomenology examines how individuals live; that is, how they behave and experience situations (Giorgi, 1985, in Makoe, 2007). The individuals' descriptions are based on their experiences within the context in which the experience is taking place. The lived context of the individual is central to this research. The meaning of the phenomenon, such as social media engagement, can only be revealed in its totality and its relationships with its particulars and therefore essences can only be seen in every constituent of the meaning (Makoe, 2007).

Mastin (2008) defines experience in a phenomenological sense, as a construct that:

"...includes not only the relatively passive experiences of sensory perception, but also imagination, thought, emotion, desire, volition and action. In short, it includes everything that we live through or perform. Thus, we may observe and engage with other things in the world, but we do not actually experience them in a first-person manner. What makes an experience conscious is a certain awareness one has of the experience while living through or performing it" (Mastin, 2008: 1).

According to Husserl (1970, in Lester, 2016), "pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions". Using phenomenology as our research frame, we examined how Omani IBA students described their lived experiences in Facebook engagement.

Participants and Study Setting

The participants of the study involved college students enrolled in Electronic Commerce (MANG2402) class during the Spring 2015 semester at the College of Applied Sciences (CAS) – Rustaq. CAS is a public higher education institution under the Ministry of Higher Education, Sultanate of Oman. In addition to its Rustaq campus, CAS is also operating in Ibri, Nizwa, Salalah, Sohar and Sur.

All participants were females, Omani nationals, and enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in International Business Administration (B.Sc. IBA) program. At the time of this research, the CAS-Rustaq was offering the following business-related Majors: International Business Administration (IBA), Tourism and Hospitality, and Accounting.

MANG2402 aims at providing IBA students the knowledge and skills on how to use or apply technology in their business-related transactions and activities, among others. It is a required 3-credit course with two (2) contact hours each for Theory, Practice, and Extra Practice, irrespective of the Major, and is offered during the fourth semester. It has no pre-requisite course, which means that students could even register for this course in earlier or later semesters. At the time of this study, the main topics in the course included the following: Overview of Electronic Commerce; E-Marketplaces, Structures, Mechanisms, Economics, and Impacts; Retailing in Electronic Commerce; Consumer Behavior, Customer Service, and Advertising; Business to Business E-Commerce; E-Government, Online Publishing, E-Books, Blogging and E-Learning; and, E-Commerce Security, Electronic Payment Systems New Developments.

Data Collection

One of the authors taught MANG2402 at the time of this study. In the beginning of the semester, the course expectations were explained to the students, including a graded individual project known as Social Media Engagement. In this activity, we required the students to open a Facebook account and add one of the authors into their account in order to monitor the unfolding of activities and discussions among the members. They had the option to use their real names or use pseudonyms for privacy issues. Prior to registering for the course (i.e., MANG2402), only a handful of them had Facebook. The students were instructed to create a "secret" group in their Facebook, the members of which were restricted only to their friends who had similar likes, hobbies and interests. Figures 1 and 2 show sample screenshots of the groups created and the conversations made.

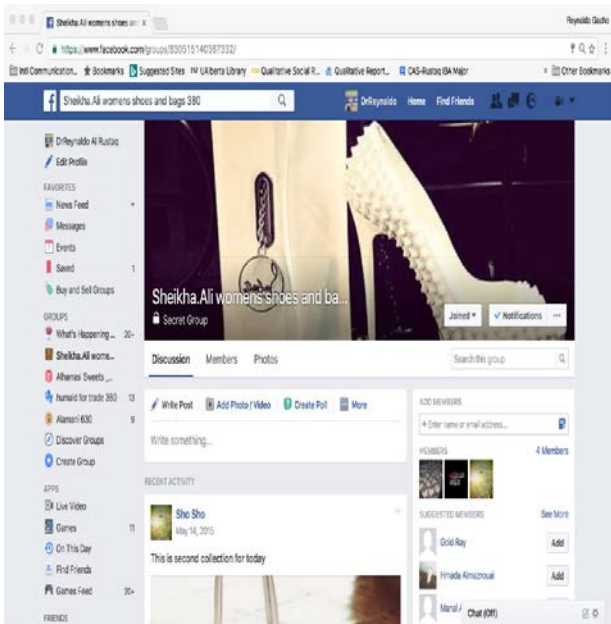


Fig. 1. Screenshot of a cover page of a Facebook group.

Facebook was used as the platform for social media engagement because according to Lee, Hosanagar and Nair (2015, in Segumpan, 2016):

Facebook messages have rich content attributes (unlike say, Twitter tweets, which are restricted to 140 characters) and rich data on user engagement. It requires real names and, therefore, data on user activity on Facebook is often more reliable compared to other social media sites (Lee, Hosanagar and Nair, 2015, in Segumpan, 2016: 75).

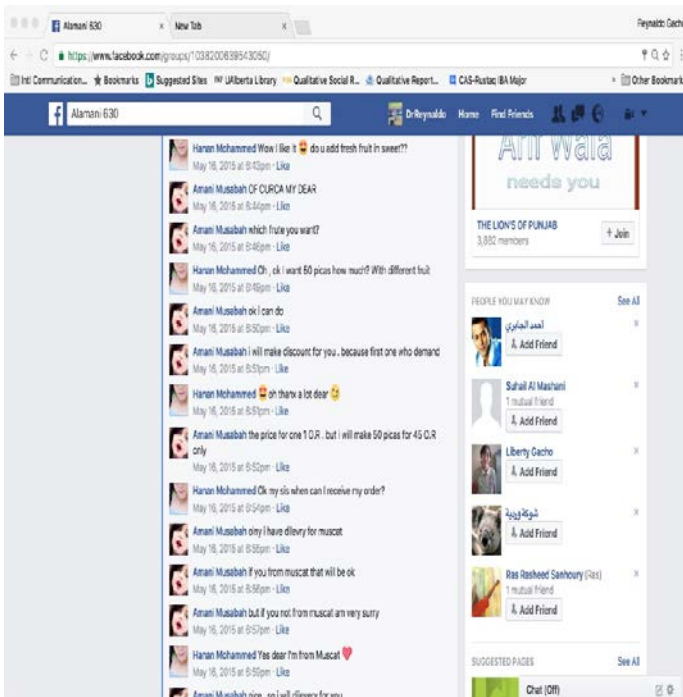


Fig. 2. Screenshot of sample conversations.

The students were given detailed information and specific instructions on the nature of, and expectations from, Social Media Engagement as a class activity, especially its relevance to the course. Whether the students had new or existing Facebook account, students were instructed to

choose a hypothetical business that they would like to venture into in the future – a product-oriented business (e.g., selling mobile phones), a service-oriented business (e.g., managing a laundry shop), or both product and service-oriented business (e.g., a restaurant). The students had to simulate the role of sellers (marketing professionals, in general) and their friends as buyers, or more broadly, as customers. The course, as mentioned earlier, covered topics related to marketing, such as retailing and advertising, thus, students were expected to put into practice the theories and principles learned from lectures and laboratory exercises.

The online asynchronous interactions of the students with their “customers” took place outside of lecture hours, between weeks 10 and 12. Quoting VanGorp (1997), Carter (2000, in Segumpan, 2016) explains briefly what happens in asynchronous interactions.

Users can control the timing of communication interactions, thereby affording a period of unspecified latency. This latency allows participants the time they need to read, reflect upon, and formulate a response to previously received messages (Carter, 2000, in Segumpan, 2016: 14).

We, as researchers, were neutral; i.e., we acted only as observers in order not to influence the unfolding of discussions and flow of interactions. We upheld the principle of *bracketing*, which is a method used to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process (Tufford, 2016).

Immediately after the conclusion of the allotted period, we requested the students to reflect on their Facebook engagement experience. One session was dedicated solely for this purpose in order to elicit freewheeling ideas and opinions. The intention was also to create an environment where students’ lived experience was described naturally as well as ensure that each submission echoed individual voice. Students’ narratives were guided by the main point for reflection: Describe your experience of using Facebook in the course and write in details how you felt about the course activity (i.e., Social Media Engagement).

Narrative Analysis as Analytical Frame

Meanings from the data were surfaced using narrative analysis. These data were the reflective write-ups made by the participants after the period of the Social Media Engagement was over. At this stage, students’ names and registration numbers were withheld for privacy and confidentiality reasons. Privacy refers to the research participant’s direct disclosure to the researcher while confidentiality refers to the extent to which the researcher protects the participant’s private information. Privacy is a basic human right while maintaining confidentiality is a professional obligation (Columbia University, 2016).

As explained by Riessman (2005, in de Jager et al., 2016), narrative analysis is the analysis of text in “storied” form; in this case, written narratives of participants’ “stories” of their lived experience in online asynchronous interactions in a simulated marketing environment. Citing Riessman (2005), de Jager et al. (2016) espoused further:

A narrative text involves the telling of a sequence of events, which, in the act of narrating are organized by the narrator. The narrator interprets the text, selecting information to include, how to describe it, and how various elements are connected. Therefore, narrative analysis focuses on the narrator’s construction of meaning: in other words, not only what happened but how they understand or make sense of these events. It privileges knowledge gained from personal experience as opposed to master narratives or dominant discourse surrounding a given topic. The notion that meaning is partly or entirely socially constructed is implicit in the philosophical underpinnings of narrative analysis. It acknowledges the role of the researcher in the process of meaning making. Researchers must organize information generated from narrative interviews and interpret it. Research output represents how the researcher has made sense of how the participant has made sense of their experiences (Riessman, 2005, in de Jager et al., 2016: 1410).

We analyzed manually a total of 25 narrative scripts and examined themes that surfaced. Braun and Clarke (2006, in Segumpan, 2016) define thematic analysis as a method for “*identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes... data set in (rich) detail*” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, in Segumpan, 2016: 77). We used the framework of Braun and Clarke in making sense of the reflective narratives written by the participants, which consists of the following phases: Familiarizing with the data; Generating initial codes; Searching for themes; Reviewing themes; Defining and naming themes; and, Producing the report.

Quality of Data

The issue on 'data quality' is akin to the notion of reliability and validity in quantitative research. Researchers such as Whittemore, Chase and Mandle (2001) speak of primary validity and secondary validity in qualitative research. The former includes (a) credibility, (b) authenticity, (c) criticality, and (d) integrity and the latter includes (a) explicitness, (b) vividness, (c) creativity, (d) thoroughness, (d) congruence, and sensitivity. Being phenomenological in nature, our study used a different lens in reflecting 'reliability and validity' as construed in quantitative research. We situated 'data quality' in the following context as compiled in the work of Noble and Smith (2015):

Accounting for personal biases which may have influenced findings. In our research, we accomplished this by being neutral in the online discussions. We had to bracket our personal subjectivities regarding the topics or issues raised in the asynchronous discussions and in analyzing the data.

Acknowledging biases in sampling and ongoing critical reflection of methods to ensure sufficient depth and relevance of data collection and analysis. We acknowledge that our participants were not selected according to biased criteria because those who participated were students enrolled in MANG2402 (Electronic Commerce).

Meticulous record keeping, demonstrating a clear decision trail and ensuring interpretations of data are consistent and transparent. In our research, all records of interactions and discussions unfolded online; that is, in social media, with Facebook as the platform. Data were interpreted according to the phenomenological research tradition.

Establishing a comparison case/seeking out similarities and differences across accounts to ensure different perspectives are represented. We did not make a comparison of the findings but rather, we surfaced the various meanings from the lived experience of the participants.

Including rich and thick verbatim descriptions of participants' accounts to support findings. Being phenomenological in nature, our research focused on themes that emerged from the social interactions of participants using Facebook as a platform.

Demonstrating clarity in terms of thought processes during data analysis and subsequent interpretations. We were clear with our data procedures, especially as regards thematic analyses using the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, in Segumpan, 2016).

Engaging with other researchers to reduce research bias. We had confabulations with each other and researchers in the qualitative tradition and provided independent reviews of how our research and data collection and analyses unfolded.

Respondent validation: includes inviting participants to comment on the interview transcript and whether the final themes and concepts created adequately reflect the phenomena being investigated. This is known as member checking in the phenomenological research tradition, defined by Henry, Chapman and Francis (2011) as the "returning of findings to participants for them to validate their contributions" (Henry, Chapman and Francis, 2011: 129). Although this procedure is done by many qualitative researchers, we skipped member checking; we were guided by the wisdom of Henry, Chapman and Francis (2011) that "member checking is incongruent with phenomenology because there is no directive in interpretive research to prove or generalize, so the idea of validation is illogical...phenomenological research is to develop a comprehension of what it is like to live experiences" (Henry, Chapman and Francis, 2011: 30). They clarified further:

Member-checking threatens the rigor of phenomenological studies. A far better strategy is to seek clarification during the co-construction of the data. With careful planning, including a sound appreciation of the chosen philosophy, the emergent data and interpretation will prove rich and meaningful and member-checking can be made redundant in phenomenological research (Henry, Chapman & Francis, 2011: 37).

3. Results

Facebook Engagement as a Space for Information Dissemination

One of the themes that surfaced was Facebook Engagement as a Space for Information Dissemination. The participants expressed views that their engagement in Facebook, could allow them to exchange information. They constructed their experience as a form of information sharing and dissemination. For instance, it was mentioned by the participants:

I know that by my experience, that I do my small business which about sweet by Omani hand. And I used the face book for promotion my business when I used the social media I get some advantages like: Reached to large number and different people from different s countries. Also, Easy to promote the products. (Participant #035)

I found difficulties in what information I have to represent for our group members about our products to attract them. I found difficulties in term that not all of my groups members interact with me, some of them were very lazy they never interact. (Participant #036)

The meanings that surfaced also echoed the usefulness of Facebook engagement as a mechanism by which the participants could share with the online community information about the nature of their business undertakings, such as selling products, providing services, or both.

Facebook allows us to create special Pages for businesses or brands. I created a Facebook to provide services for which is about photography and I promote about my business in this great site. Actually I have Instagram before 2 years. I see that communication on facebook is more than 52 Instagram. When I create account on facebook many people contact with me on my page and others on private message. Some of the want my studio to ret for them and other want to know where my studio located and so on. Therefor, Facebook is main program to promote about any products and is a good idea that allow us to share information with others and ask the any question. Facebook offers a very customisable ads placement service, which is also very easy to use and cost effective. (Participant #019)

In the preceding comments, the tone was about the promotion of a business. The meaning surfaced that through Facebook engagement, people are able to advertise their business in a savvy way. Another perspective, shown in the comments that follow, construed Facebook engagement as a way by which people (e.g., customers) could acquire information per se online. When customers, for instance, were searching for information, social media could be a good avenue for obtaining such information.

More explanation, if you want advices to make your business successful only asks them. You will find a lot of information that can help you. Also, you can know news during social media. Social media become one of the primary resources for news because all people who work in media have account in social media. Moreover, you can share your ideas. (Participant #036)

Facebook Engagement as a Node for Building Relationships

The participants also construed Facebook engagement as a means of developing relationships with their social networks, thus, the theme Facebook Engagement as a Node for Building Relationships emerged from the analyses. From the written narratives, it surfaced that engaging in social media, in particular, Facebook, would allow the participants to establish relationships with other people, such as their customers. One participant quipped: “*My best experience in face book is make relationship with customer*” (Participant #035). In real-life business, customer relationship does matter. Forging relationships with customers, for instance, could bring in better sales and customer loyalty. Grant (2010) says that if we are conscious of what we can do for customers and how we can help them, there will be symbiotic, life-nurturing relationships, which will consequently make business easier.

The analyses echoed that Facebook engagement was seen as a way of developing connections with people, be they customers, suppliers, distributors, employees, or investors. This could be constructed as a form of social capital, cited in the work of Grant (2010) as the personal relationships among those that people do business with. As expressed by the participants:

I have my own face book occurring in real life and it's called my life. The only advantage I can see of Face book is that you can connect with people who are a great distance away but then is not that emails are for. People use Face book in different ways and for different purposes to connect with friends. (Participant #207)

I will talk about my experience in the use of Facebook in my project which is in my opinion a cultural openness cognitive widely between countries and helps to speed communication and mutual understanding between people and knowledge of the most important news and the most important events on the social, sporting, artistic and religious level and all other areas, and help to create new social relationships away from the places of work, study and family. (Participant #070)

Facebook allow me create many relationship with many friends from different country and I learn from their experience and knowledge. Facebook help the me to attract with customer and help me to deal with them... (Participant #128)

The asynchronous conversations among the participants also surfaced a positive tone among them, in particular, with regard to their overall experience vis-à-vis Facebook. As mentioned by the participants:

I have benefited a lot from my experience about social commerce via Facebook. This experience has provided me many benefits including: is able to interact with others and become characterized by social and personal relationship with others has become strong. Through this experiment can reach a large number of people. (Participant #004)

Also I learn how can attract customers to buy my products and make good relationship with them. I used interesting advertising to attract customer and the facebook give me good chance to offer my products such as allow to download images and videos so the customer can show my products and some do not have these services so facebook is good program. Moreover help my business to be very easy and successful. (Participant #166)

Facebook Engagement as a Boost for Business Engagement

The theme Facebook Engagement as a Boost for Business Engagement also emerged from the interpretive lens of the study. The meanings surfaced a theme that recognized Facebook engagement as an encouragement to the participants to venture into real and actual business work sooner or later in their life. A participant wrote: "And now I can open my own project, promotion in an easy and fast way is not a lot of time, effort and money" (Participant #004).

In the future if I make a business certainly I will use Facebook or any social media programs because I think it is effective way to promote your business and to make it successful. And now I become more excuses about the use of the face book and how to deal and communicate with consumers. Especially because I have an idea in the future I want to create a small business to sell sunglasses and surely I will use social media programs. (Participant #070)

In addition, I will increase the flowers in my account and continue to promote my business in facebook which is the tourism in Oman because I want to improve my knowledge and need to attract a lot of customer to visit my country. (Participant #128)

The above statements voice out a promising perspective as raised by the participants themselves. The study was able to surface a meaning that Facebook engagement could serve as a motivation to the participants to engage into real-world business. A participant said:

It helped me to learn how I can become a business women and establish a new business in the future...I will continue my business which is the Belgian Chocolate in Facebook because I like this project so much and I want to increase my knowledge in how I can attract my customers. Also, I am going to add new followers in order to learn from them and from their experience and knowledge. (Participant #036)

At the end, social networks is very important in our life. From my experience in Facebook and promote the products in it, I feel I am business women because I receptive to the idea of electronic commerce. (Participant #137)

Facebook Engagement as a Concave of Knowledge and Skills

Another theme that surfaced from the analyses was Facebook Engagement as a Concave of Knowledge and Skills. This reflects a positive vibe that the participants had with regard to their experience in engaging in Facebook. In particular, this theme epistemologically defines knowledge and skills as an offshoot of social interaction from Facebook engagements. Three sub-themes emerged from this theme, namely, (a) Acquiring Subject-specific Knowledge, (b) Gaining General Knowledge, and (c) Developing Communication Skills.

Acquiring Subject-specific Knowledge

The meanings that surfaced from the study showed knowledge converging on business affairs and business administration, thus the sub-theme, Acquiring Subject-specific Knowledge. In particular, it emerged from the analyses that Facebook engagement could afford the participants knowledge that they could use in their future business undertakings. It was not the intention of our study to dig into the philosophical nature or categories of knowledge that surfaced from the analysis but rather to deconstruct knowledge in terms of new concepts and ideas which were acquired by the participants from their Facebook engagement. For instance, it was mentioned in the narratives:

I know how to persuade the customers and don't make them have doubt about our business. Also, I get the ability in how to promote and every time I try attracting the customers in different ways to get high satisfy of our customers. One more advantages it make me know about the cost of market and the ability to face the compotators and make my business improve at all time. (Participant #046)

I get good experience and information that help me in future to know how to market and promotion for my owner business also I have good information to solve many problem that can affect me to promote in social media. I have learned from this experience that social media is a creative way to marketing through. As well as, I was able to advertise my products and services in various forms, it can be photo, video or audio as well. Through this I believe that this originative way of doing business is easier and cheaper. (Participant #068)

Positive impressions were created by the participants as regards their Facebook engagement experience. They echoed learning derived from such experience with regard to their construction of the notion of business, in particular, concepts related to marketing and electronic commerce. Sample narratives include the following:

Firstly I do not know how the electronic trade before I start this project, but through this project I understood and learned how to be electronic commerce are and how will promote efficiently in a good way. Moreover, this project helped me how to share the products and its information easelly. In addition to that, Through this project I gained experience of how the electronic commerce exactly in the Facebook program. (Participant #137)

My social media experience is very interesting and useful for my major. I learn a lot of things about social media. Also I am very interest when I deal with the customer and promote about my businesses in facebook program. (Participant #128)

Gaining General Knowledge

Another sub-theme that surfaced was Gaining General Knowledge. Epistemologically, this relates to the learning experience that transcends the boundaries of business per se. As expressed in the views that follow, Facebook engagement was also construed as a vehicle for learning concepts and ideas that relate to general issues or broad topics other than business. In particular, the findings of our research surfaced technological knowledge, or the social media application itself, such as how to use videos and to set security setting of the group. For instance, it was highlighted by a participant: "I have gained many experiences such as: how to create a group on Facebook and also how to open an account in Facebook" (Participant #004). It was also mentioned in the narratives:

facebook one of the useful program...I learn how to put photo of my product or how to put video and common. In addition, I learn how to create my page. Also how create security group... (Participant #888)

The study was able to surface other forms of general knowledge that the participants acquired from Facebook engagement. In the sample narratives that follow, the participants highlighted some situations, in particular, the advantages and disadvantages they faced while engaging in online discussions.

My experience in social media is perfect experience for me because is the first time for me to use Facebook and I learn things. Firstly I learn how to use Facebook tool, how to create new group in Facebook and how to connect with people. There are a lot of advantages for Facebook you can chatting together, share information, business promotion, and entertainment. And there are a lot of disadvantages for Facebook it is has negative effect on teenagers, get various, there are a lot of hackers and sometimes you lose your account. (Participant #000)

I use facebook to do my project and I do not have enough information about facebook. Also before using facebook I think this program is bad program and after using facebook my ideas changed. I learn many things... (Participant #166)

Developing Communication Skills

Developing Communication Skills also surfaced as another sub-theme of the analyses. This could be epistemologically understood as skills learned from the exchanges of ideas and views among the participants and their social contacts. Facebook engagement was seen as helpful in improving communication skills of the participants. A participant, referring to the Facebook engagement experience, quipped: "It helped me to improve my communication skills due to my interaction with different friends" (Participant #036). Another view expressed was: "Communicate

with a very large number of visitors to web pages and this means that you can see the challenges that face and the aspects of prefer or hate that what they offer of products” (Participant #137).

The following narratives show how the participants spoke positively of their Facebook engagement experience, in particular, how the engagement experience helped in harnessing their communication skills:

Through this project; I learned how to communicate with others and how to make ads electronically. In addition, I learned to use Facebook in a good way and how to create a new group with different people. Also, I learned how to respond the customers when I communicate with them. (Participant #777)

It has increased my experience through this project, and I learned a lot of things that I knew nothing but as an act of a private collection and dissemination of the all-new. Also I learned how to communicate with customers and argue and debate in price. In addition, when I saw my colleagues who offer their products to customers and pricing was increasing enthusiasm I have to do more. I felt like I was a real merchant and I liked the project so much... (Participant #019)

Facebook Engagement as an Avenue for Wholesome Entertainment

The last theme that surfaced from the analyses was Facebook Engagement as an Avenue for Wholesome Entertainment. Epistemologically, this theme refers to Facebook engagement as a source of fun and enjoyment among the participants. For instance, a participant wrote: “The fact was my experience on social commerce via Facebook very fun. I am also happy because I can really attract the attention of consumers by me” (Participant #004).

The experience of engaging in online interactions served as a platform for participants to derive pleasurable experience from their online confabulations. The narratives below echoed such wholesome entertainment among the participants:

I helped me to entertain because it has many of entertainment methods like photos, jokes and videos....It helped me to represent my idea or my opinion in my friend group and that help to make them feeling happy. (Participant #036)

My experience in the use of a social networking programs were wonderful and very helpful for me. I was used Face book to promote my products to customers. I was achieved great profits is not money, but the experience in the promotion of products and the method of dealing with people and with the products that I sell. (Participant #097)

4. Discussion

The findings of our phenomenological research provided an understanding of the lived experience of Omani IBA students of their asynchronous online interactions. The meanings that surfaced from our research indicate that one of the key educational attractions of Facebook engagement could be seen in the ease of education-related interactions and exchanges between students. It provides the opportunity to re-engage participants in the learning process, promoting a ‘critical thinking in learners’ about their learning (Selwyn, 2007). Facebook could be used as a good educational tool to organize class activities and student’s communications. Student may interact with each other for many purposes such as getting information about class activities, networking with each other, getting class notes, and to set up meetings and to create project groups (Al-Mashaqbeh, 2015: 60).

In our study, Facebook engagement could be construed as social networking used by our participants in promoting their products, services, or both. It enriched students’ experiences in creating pages then allowed them to search for potential customers or persons with similar interests and invited them to view and possibly joined their page as a friend or follower. Social networking was also used to broadcast announcements or communicate with members (Perryman, 2011). As expressed in our research:

I Gained from this experience many benefits such as I got to know ways to promote the product in the social media and how to deal with people in a successful manner and think in new and attractive ideas to the customer also the idea of promoting a particular product in the social media attract many customers and increase the sales ratio therefore rises profit it is also famous for the project. (Participant #666)

According to Greener and Grange (2013), the Facebook application, like other social networks, encourages sharing of knowledge, ideas, friends, thoughts, favorite items of all kinds from leisure activities to places, and is an effective way to promote events. Academic research into

Facebook has been mainly concerned with privacy and digital identity issues but there is an urgent need to explore such technologies in relation to education if teachers are not to be marooned in a technological backwater (Greener and Grange, 2013: 93).

From the narratives, Facebook may appear to be like many other social networks where students are attracted to it because of a combination of self-presentation (Selwyn, 2007) and personal satisfaction from being engaged in social interactions online. As seen in the narratives below, Facebook engagement could be akin to knowledge acquisition in its generic sense, but zooming our lens in the meanings constructed by our research participants would point to one theme, which was related to business.

How can choose my friends and customer. Moreover, there are many experience I get it from using fecebook. One of this who to use this program in useful way... moreover, I learn how to deal with different customer. so I know that customer have advisers taste. that mean I learn how to choose product that are suitable for all customer with suitable price. (Participant #888)

Put it in another perspective, to cite Brown and Adler (2008), with technology growing exponentially, the web has provided newer ways to learn. Mobilization of such fast evolving technologies impact how students learn through social media and social networking. A new theoretical framework represents how knowledge is constructed within this growing virtual arena and needs to be further understood by educators. The challenge now is to engage diverse learners in learning not just about something but learning to be a full participant in the field (in Salomone, 2013: 1). In our research, students were active learners and as Salomone (2013) puts it, “*These days, engagement with learning is likely to mean engagement with technology. This is because networked computers seem to offer open-ended possibilities for promoting and supporting engaged learning*” (Salomone, 2013: 1).

Another implication of our research could zoom in the epistemology of engagement, which is construed by Heldref (2003, in Salomone, 2013) as the “*time and energy that students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities*” (Heldref, 2003, in Salomone, 2013: 8). Krause and Coates (2008, in Salomone, 2013: 17) suggest that engagement is the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes.

If Facebook engagement is a socially mediated phenomenon, and the construction of knowledge through collaboration and active learning is what many teachers in higher education have found to be a more meaningful approach to learning and teaching than offering pure knowledge acquisition, then encouraging students to be connected, using any current technology, makes sense (Greener & Grange, 2013: 93). Students’ reflective interactive experiences and subsequent personalization of experiences in their social interactions online were extremely critical in helping them define their overall engagement experience. The use of active collaborative learning within a meaningful construct created optimal engagement opportunities for students, which helped them stay connected, and ultimately engaged (Salomone, 2013: ix).

5. Conclusion

Our research was able to surface meanings from the voices of participants in their technology-mediated communication. In particular, our findings show that the meanings in socially constructed asynchronous online conversations demystify Facebook engagement as a Space for Information Dissemination; a Node for Building Relationships; a Boost for Business Engagement; a Concave of Knowledge and Skills; and, an Avenue for Wholesome Entertainment. These themes and sub-themes provided an understanding of Facebook engagement in the context of Arab learners, in particular, among Omanis. We have thickened the discussions of the phenomenon of Facebook engagement and as aptly expressed by Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read (2002): “*Success in the online environment depends on the creation of safe spaces for conversation, problem solving, and intimacy among students who might never meet. The virtual online space provides metaphorical cafés for human contact*” (in Perryman, 2011: 38).

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