Emerging student support trends on social media platforms in open education system

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Abstract

Diversity of interactive environments has increased with use of developing technology in open education systems. In this sense social media platforms allows to coming together of learners. Distance education institutions can make important decisions by following students' interaction in these environments. Especially students established themselves non-formal social media platforms are subject of investigation. There are different support needs of students throughout student learning life in distance education institutions. These issues are called student affair in distance education literature. These issues may vary by countries, region or program. Anadolu University is a mega-university in distance education area. There are some student support issues in this system and they attempt to find supports. Some of them can be listed as follows: New Registration and Registration Renewal, Examination Services, Course Exemption, Student Certificates, Forgotten Password and Sign-in Problems, Academic Amnesty, Military Service, Student ID Cards, Diploma and Diploma Supplements, Associate Degree, Honor Certificate, Postage and Shipping Services, İnternational Programs and Tuition Fee. In this subject some solutions can produce by following trends of students. In this study, Facebook groups have been investigated which created by distance education learners on social media platforms. These groups were analyzed with maximum interaction and Open Education Faculty Department of Sociology Facebook group is selected. Interaction and trends in the group are discussed in the context of student support. NodeXL, Gephi and Quintly software are used for social network analysis based on shares, comment and likes. The research aims to uncover student support trends on social networks. Student trends will be discussed under categories. Findings of the research can contribute to development of student support activities in this open education system. Further learners' trends are important to show that intensity topics. Emerging student support trends on social media platforms is important to produce solutions.

Keywords: Student support; open and distance learning; social networks; content analyses; sociology

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1. Introduction

Educational activities are experiencing different effects by the rapid expansion of information and communication technologies in the world. An important issue particularly for open and distance education is using the Internet as a communication tool. Growing demand for learning significantly increases the quality of service in a competitive environment. Learners are choosing educational institutions, which offer the best opportunities. In this regard, efforts are required to improve the services of open and distance education institutions so that the institutes could achieve higher levels in the rankings.

Accessible information resources from anywhere and at any moment are quite significant support environment for learners. However, while the Internet provides unlimited data sources, reliable information out of the unlimited data sources is an important problem. Learners' access to the reliable sources of information must be provided by the educational institution. In this sense, different roles and responsibilities of institutions emerge in the information age.

According to the literature, support in general could be provided to the teaching staff, students, and other stakeholders. Because learners are in the center of learning experiences, the first stakeholders that need support services are learners. In this sense, the importance of learner support systems must be grasped well. Support can be given in different media. In particular, social media holding an important place in the daily life requires an examination of the environment in terms of learners.

2. Social Media as Student Support Media

In academic advising open and distance education learners, moderator, face to face counseling, e-seminars, counselling, etc. types of different support services can be offered asynchronously. All of these environments are formal ones offered by the institution. Students' learning environment formed by the students themselves is another point to be taken into account. These environments are made informally. Learners will have more freedom of movement. They receive information from peers. These informal structures can be set up quickly, especially in social media. In different areas, social groups with thousands of members could be established. Social media offering different media every day spreads more rapidly through the adoption of them by their learners. Features of the social platforms reflect the feature of the individual social interactions (Knoke & Yang, 2008). In this sense, the monitoring of learner interaction on social media, determining the trend of the learners will be guiding the corporate strategy to be followed.

3. Student Support in Anadolu University Open Education System

As of 2012-2013 academic year, Anadolu University gradually converted all the programs to the semester credit system. In the current study, data of the 2014-2015 academic year is analysed. Anadolu University Open Education System as of 2014-2015 academic year is a mega university with 2.636.601 students. Open Education System has 17 undergraduate and 34 associate degree programs including the 10 programs recently opened in 2015.

Open Education System offers support to the learners with the call center, 106 offices across the country, overseas contact centers, e-mail information center, web portal of ask-watch-learn, and the official social media accounts. Questions that students ask are found in this channel. Table 1 lists some of the questions asked to the call center, asked by e-mail, and to the web portal of ask-watch-learn.

Table 1. Subject headings of the frequently asked questions

Frequently asked questions	
Registration Renewal	Student certificate
Student Enrollment Status	Debt Inquiry
Textbooks	Honor - High Honor Certificate
Web / e-mail Services-Password	Military Operations
Tuition Fees	Excuse exam
Suspension of Registration	Exam Dates
Diploma	Academic Advisory Service
Student ID Card	Major Change
Responsibility Examination Unit	Transcript
Examination Center Change	e-Learning Portal
Training Operations	Second University
Internet Application and Registration Procedures	Passing System

When we examine the questions excluding the ones in the social media, we recognize that the questions are accumulated under the following headings: (1) Student Services (2) Examinations (3) Learning Environments (4) Registration Process, and (5) Open Education System. These titles help with categorization of the questions frequently asked by the students.

4. Aim

The support demands of the learners in the Open Education System are listed by analysing the data in the information systems. However, the supporting trends established by the questions asked by the learners to the learners in the informal settings is out of scope of the current report. Support trends of the students in social media is analysed in here.

The purpose of this research is to uncover the student support trend of distance learners on social networks. We will discuss the student trends of Anadolu University, a mega university well-known in the world.

5. Method

In this study, we investigated the Facebook groups of the distance learners. Upon examining the most communicative groups, the group of Open Faculty Sociology department is selected. The selected group has an informal structure established by the students themselves. It is one of the social media groups with high density interactions. A range of subjects are covered in the interactions of the group members. Interactions in this group are discussed in the context of student support. In which topics learners seek support, and intensity of the interactions have been investigated.

Mixed method is adopted in the current study. First, the numerical data of the selected group on shares and the likes from the social network were transferred to a computer with software NodeXL, Gephi, and Quintly. Descriptive statistics of the quantitative data obtained by quantitative research methods are presented. Data were compiled in the titles of Co-Commenter, Co-Liker, Commented Comment, Commented Post, Consecutive Commenters, Liked Comment and Liked Post. Quantitative data obtained herein was interpreted in terms of the related topics. In the second stage, content analysis of all the messages in the group is made. At the content analysis process, data are codified, the themes are found, data are organized and described according to codes and themes and final stage finding are commented (Yıldırım & Simsek, 2006). Nvivo-10 software package was used to analyse the data. Shares are first coded. Coding constitutes of an important stage of the process. Upon finishing the coding, themes are formed. Themes are listed according to what the learners shared. While forming the themes, a semantic integrity of the questions asked by learners is ensured. The main themes are shown in table 2.

6. Results

In this study, a total of one main group of Open Education sociology students (department group), and 4 subgroups (from 1 to 4 Class groups) are examined. In total, 66000 edges are examined. Edge action is considered as edge for Co-Commenter, Co-Liker, Commented Comment, Commented Post, Consecutive Commenters, Liked Comment and Liked Post. In the general sense, the number of the like action is 46344 with 71%, and forms a high density. Shared content is followed by a large proportion of learners and appreciated.
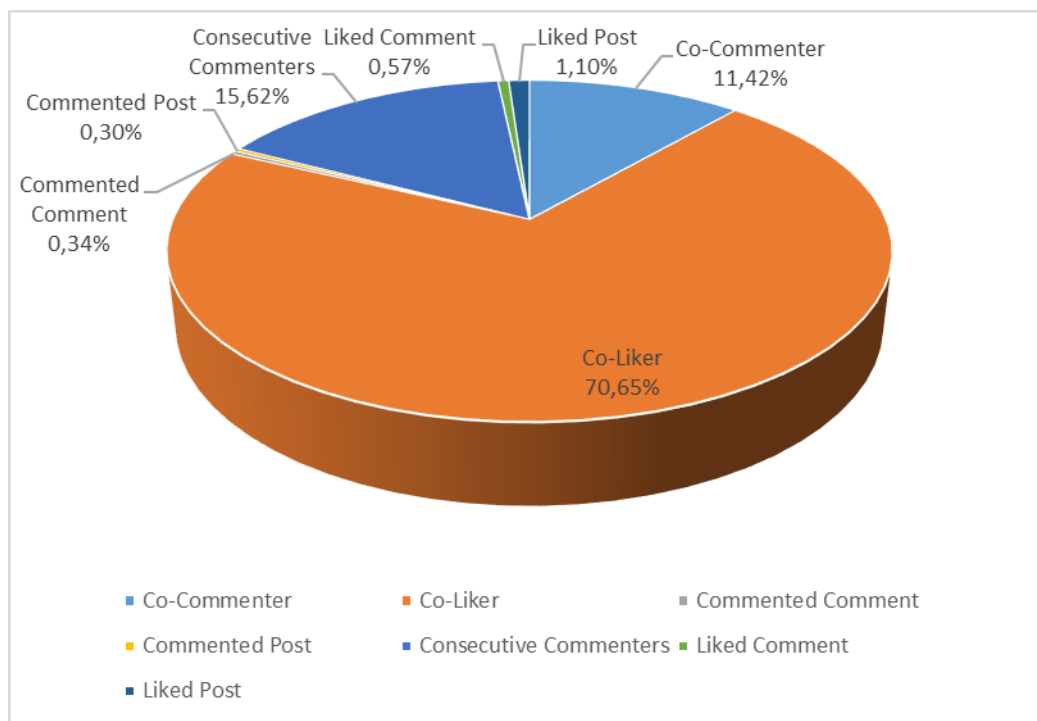

Fig. 1. Share type and percentage

Consecutive Commenters (10245) 16% refers to the sequence of the interactions. Co-coment comments illustrate the relationship between group members. Two people who comment a post is shown in this relationship. The percentage of this relationship in the group is 11% (7489). It is observed that the learners made a share and participate in their interactions. Sharing type and the number can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Sharing type and numbers

Frequently asked questions	N
Co-Commenter	7489
Co-Liker	46344
Commented Comment	223
Commented Post	199
Consecutive Commenters	10245
Liked Comment	377
Liked Post	724

Learners are often able to act primarily around like sharing. After successive interactions are observed. The interactions become denser on the basis of comments. These data demonstrate an intense participation of the learners in the social environment.

The reason of these interactions of the learners is another question. A detailed process of content analysis was carried out. The resulting support trends can be seen in Fig. 2.
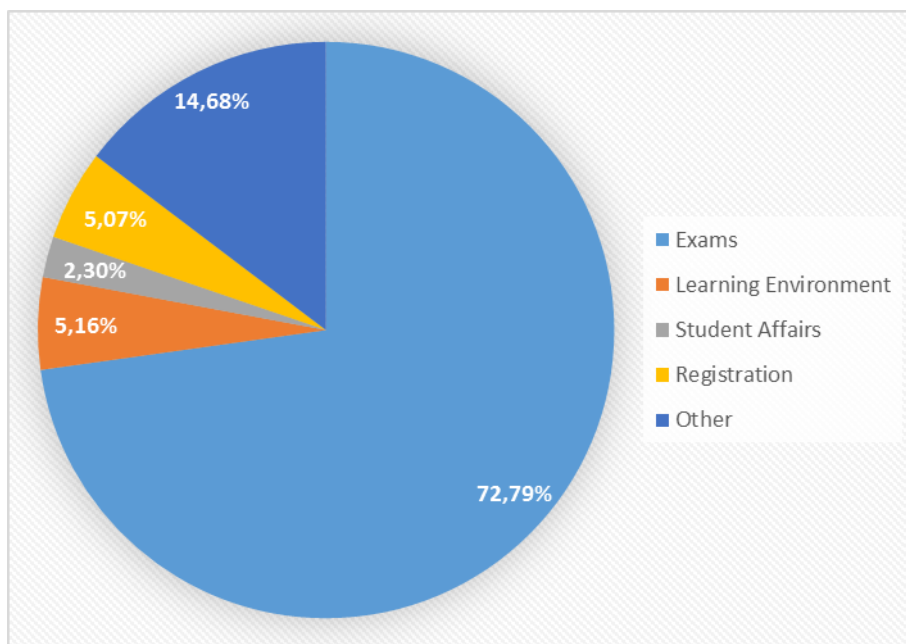

Fig. 2. Support trends and rates

Open education system applies the semester credit system. Each semester consists of a midterm and a final exam. The academic year covers the period between September and June generally. 72.79% of the interactions of the students are on the exams. There are 4 different exams including fall midterm and final exams, spring midterm and final exams. Exam themes cover the sub themes of exam preparation, attending exam, announcing the exam results, difficulty of the exam questions, question types, and exam centers. Thus it is seen that there is quite a busy exam interaction.

Examination is an issue that keeps popping up in the overall open education system. There are also support requests of the students in the other media.

Table 3. Support trends and numbers

Support topics	N
Exams	47650
Learning Environment	3380
Student Affairs	1503
Registration	3318
Other	9613

The other trends of the learners in social environment includes non-academic issues. The other theme is the second one with 14.68% (9613). The other theme covers the sub themes such as holy days and nights, religious holidays, public holidays, Mother's Day, and Father's Day.

Trends in learning environments is seen as 5.16 % (3380). Under this theme there are such sub themes of courses offered by the university text books, e-learning materials, increased exam questions, help materials prepared outside the university course, different learning resources.

A school year consists of two semesters in the open education system. Therefore, the questions and requests for assistance regarding the registration process occurs at the beginning of these two periods. Students in this period have requested support from different channels on the registration process. This trend in the sociology is 5.07% (3318). Under this theme, there are such sub themes including recording date, recording type, required documents, process steps, and the registration fee.

The theme of student services in this group has 2.30% (1503). Under this theme, there are such themes of identity cards, student card, course exemptions, and class pass system.

These sub-themes vary by department and program.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

There are different support environments in the open education system. Some of these environments are call center, offices in the country, international contact centers, e-mail information center, ask-watch-learn web portal, and the official social media accounts. Support services are available to students in all of these channels in the open education system. The information provided here is the most accurate source for students. Apart from this, learners may request support from informal sources. Trends in this environment is an area that should be examined by following the corporate sense.

In this study, Anadolu University, Open Education Faculty, Sociology students in the distance education program of the findings obtained through the Facebook group formed to contribute in terms of development of the student support system is considered. Trend of the learners is important since they show in which topics there is a densification. Detection of commonly encountered condition is important in order to resolve these problems.

Share type and number of learners in this group (Figure 1 and Table 2) show that they live more like sequential and interaction around specific topics. This shows that in general the students are not interested in the topics other than the well-known ones. In fact, the interactions made are limited.

Referring to the theme emerged from the content analysis (Figure 2 and Table 3) we can conclude that the focus is on the specific topics of interaction. Basically exam has been an important theme alone. The basis of the interactions of the students arise from the support requests on examinations.

In general, when the themes (Table 3) in the open education system are analysed, we see that Table 1 indicates the subject titles of Frequently Asked Questions. This support group is already among the general trend in the student support trends.

The support teams of the open education system support the students in the areas whose titles are shown in Table 3. However, the change in trends of the students to informal sources indicate no change in the trend support. In general, there is a need assistance on similar topics.

The request of the students on important topics such as exam date from the social environment indicates that the Open Education System is not able to deliver the needed information properly. Therefore, it is important for the institute to follow the students in the social media so that the institute can find better ways to deliver the needed information.

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