Students’ perceptions of online discussions, participation and e-moderation behaviours in peer-moderated asynchronous online discussions

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this study was to investigate the relationships between students’ perceptions of online discussions, participation and e-moderation behaviours in peer-moderated asynchronous online discussions. Using survey data, the learning system’s activity log and discussion transcripts, the authors analysed how 84 learners’ perceptions of online discussions influenced their participation and e-moderation behaviours. The results showed that Cognitive and Skill II (critical thinking skills) perceptual aspects significantly influenced the quantity posting and participation patterns. Meanwhile, Skill I (reading and writing skills) and Efficacy were critical factors that influenced quantity non-posting participation. It was also found that the perceptual aspects significantly influenced learners’ e-moderation behaviours to the extent that Affection and Efficacy were critical factors that influenced lower-level e-moderation supports, while Cognition, Affection and Skill II were critical factors that influenced higher-level e-moderation supports. All e-moderation supports were found to be correlated with peers’ quantity posting and participation patterns, except for Access and motivation support.

Introduction
Discussion forum is an asynchronous tool that has been utilised either as a main means for communication and interaction in distance education (e.g. Lee & Tsai, 2011), or used as a method complementing face-to-face teaching (e.g. Zhan, Xu, & Ye, 2011). With few drawbacks, it offers many advantages, including promoting self-regulated learning, facilitating collaborative knowledge construction and supporting critical thinking skills (Wang & Woo, 2007; Yeh, 2010). Advantages such as these will be achieved if students are willing to participate in collaborative learning activities in the first place. However, a low participation rate in online discussions (ODs) is a widespread problem observed by researchers (Hew, Cheung, & Ng, 2010; Xie, Yu, & Bradshaw, 2014). Prior studies discussed the effect of intervention factors such as peer moderation and instructor facilitation (An, Shin, & Lim, 2009; Hew & Cheung, 2008). Although such interventions seemed to be externally appropriate motivators for some individuals’ online participation, they were not adequate in upgrading and sustaining the participation for all members. Prior research alluded to the possible influence of perceptual aspects on a person’s behaviour (Cho & Cho, 2014; Vonderwell, 2003).
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Hajar Ghadirian is a postdoctoral fellow at University of Tehran. She is doing her project on ‘Examining the effectiveness of instructor-base and peer-oriented online Social annotations (SA) on quality and quantity of students’ knowledge construction during collaborative learning.’ She began working on social network analysis and lag sequential analysis as two main techniques for analysing the process of learning in online contexts.


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