

Investigating the use of social networking services in Japanese EFL classrooms

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In this study, we investigated 92 university students' perceptions toward the use of social networking services (SNS) in English classes based through a survey consisting of 30 items based on Warschauer (1996). Participants enrolled in three EFL courses offered at two universities responded to the questionnaire after they completed a one-semester course which included blog assignments on a SNS. Thirty items of the questionnaire were factor analyzed and three factors were extracted: (a) Communication and Empowerment through the Use of Computers, (b) Recognition of the Value of Computers, (c) Reluctance to Use Computers. Based on the results of the factor analysis and additional comments provided by students, various aspects of pedagogical practice and research in the use of SNS in English classes are discussed.

Introduction

These days, many researchers have pointed out the potential of incorporating computers in the English language classroom (Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Sullivan 1993; Kern, 1995; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Warschauer, 1996, 2000; Lam 2000, 2003, 2006; Matsuda, 2001; Roed, 2003; Absalom & Marden, 2004; Fotos, 2004; Ward, 2004; Pinkman, 2005).

Pedagogic uses of computers in the English language classroom have included computer-assisted classroom discussion (CACD), e-mail exchanges, web-page authoring, and synchronous written exchanges, to name but a few.

Computer-assisted classroom discussion (CACD) helps learners to negotiate meaning in the target language, and encourages them to re-construct and re-think existing social structures and visions (Cooper & Selfe, 1990). It also helps to increase students' participation and collaboration (Sullivan, 1993; Kern, 1995; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Braine, 1997), boost students' writing complexity (Kern, 1995), reduce apprehension toward writing (Sullivan, 1993; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996) and raise the quality of performance (Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). After many schools and universities began to introduce local-area networked computer systems into their schools, learners have been provided with many chances to: (1) revise or edit their drafts with feedback from peers or teachers after finishing their work or while revising or editing (Hyland, 2000); (2) expand opportunities for such feedback from peers or teachers (Braine, 1997); (3) gain an increased awareness of their own writing processes (Nystrand & Brandt, 1989); and (4) allow for learners to control their discourse by participating in text interactions or discussions (Braine, 1997; Hyland, 2002). It is also argued that the use of computer networking helps learners to accomplish their writing tasks more easily than with pen and paper.

E-mail exchanges in second language learning can help the learning process to be more learner-centered, encourage students to share their ideas, enable them to revise and edit their writing, expand the opportunities for tutoring and collaborative work, increase the quality of writing, and motivate students (Warschauer, 1996; Absalom & Marden, 2004; Fotos, 2004). Of these researchers, Absalom and Marden (2004) have discussed the importance of using e-mail as a way to offer learners chances to interact with each other using their target language in an environment where students share the same LI. Furthermore, they emphasized the effectiveness of e-mail as a tool to encourage shy or quiet students to interact more with their classmates.

In a study conducted in Hawaii, Warschauer (1996) revealed several motivating factors for the use of computers in English classes. He found that a wide range of students have a positive attitude toward using computers for writing and communication in the language classroom, and that gender or the possession of computer skills did not have an effect on the outcomes. In terms of proficiency gains, Fotos (2004) conducted a pretest and posttest to examine score gains in English proficiency, finding that average gains in the post test scores of the scores found in the post test scores of students in a class using e-mail were higher than that of ones in a traditional reading class.

In respect to research on *Web-page authoring*, Warschauer (2000) considered the following factors to be necessary in order to make web-page authoring activities successful: (1) students must understand the purpose, (2) students must find the purpose to be socially or culturally relevant, (3) the electronic medium must be appropriate for achieving the purpose, and (4) students should be encouraged and enabled to use medium-appropriate rhetorical features to fulfill the purpose.

Several researchers have pointed out how student created web pages reflect the sociocultural context around them. The students, teachers, institutions and communities surround them influences their writing (Warschauer, 2000; Matsuda, 2001; Lam, 2006). For instance, Matsuda (2001) discussed the complex characteristics of voice in online writing, showing how Japanese bloggers drew from a wide range of discourse practices in shaping and expressing their on-line voice. Lam (2006) investigated an ESL students' production of

a website outside the classroom. She described the precise process that the student went through, where a student who struggled with academic English at school first, managed to obtain a new identity by using alternate styles of English at school through creating his website. While students may struggle in writing for global communities beyond their local communities, assigning students to make their own web pages may help some students to transform.

As for research into *synchronous communication*, Lam (2000, 2003, 2006) investigated the process of an ESL student's participation in a chat site outside of class, and found that the emergence of a new style of writing paralleled the development of a new identity. Although this student was quiet and shy in the classroom, Lam found that he appeared to be confident in communicating with others on-line. In other words, his identity gradually evolved through writing, which was influenced by the social and political context, illustrating the process of how one learner struggled with such contexts to create a unique identity.

Regarding research on the use of blogs into L2 instruction, Ward (2004) gives an account of the history of blogs and discusses several advantages of incorporating blogs into L2 instruction. For example, he noted that authors do not need to have technical skills as they are required in home page writing; they can send messages to people around the world without being intrusive; and readers can post comments for the author easily, which facilitates interaction. As they obtain frequent comments from readers using the commenting function, authors may recognize the existence of readers and continue to enjoy blogging without a great deal of anxiety about how they should express themselves. Ward also comments about the ambiguity of blogs due to their public expression of what has traditionally been allowed limited access, journal writing. Blogs are motivated by self-expression, but oriented toward collective work and networking. The recursive nature of learners' (bloggers') voices emerge from blogging. At the same time, Ward argues that the disadvantage of blogs in L2 instruction is the danger that students will indulge in superficial reading and slippery writing. Among the comments in the questionnaire obtained from his students, Ward found that students believe blogging improved their English, while at the same time they enjoyed interacting with their families and friends, and showed pride in what they created on their blogs. Students seemed to increase their willingness to keep blogging.

Pinkman (2005) also suggested that blogs may enable learners to communicate with others using computers. Though she shows that the learners have positive attitudes toward blogging from interviews and a questionnaire, she acknowledges the fact that only two learners were still blogging after the instruction. She speculated that the cause was a lack of regular feedback (i.e., comments) from classmates. Thus, the commenting function seems to be an important factor in motivating learners to keep on blogging outside the classroom and after the instruction ceases.

As a tool that incorporates many of the features of these aspects of CALL for English language learning described above, *Social Networking Services* (SNS) have gained in popularity in recent years, not only in the U.S and Europe, but also in Japan. In particular, blog functions have prevailed because SNS allow participants to make their own profiles and provides a daily diary open to the public so that they can expand and deepen their connections with others. The number of people using the most popular SNS in Japan ("Mixi") has topped eight million (Mixi, 2007). Despite its popularity, few researchers in our field have

conducted studies using the service, or investigated how we can incorporate this service into a course. In order to understand the possibilities for motivating students to use their target language on SNS, research is required.

Thus, we decided to investigate some aspects of the participants' perceptions of SNS and clarify the nature of students' underlying motivation for writing blogs. We will speculate on effective ways to incorporate the use of blogs in Social Networking Services in the English classroom at Japanese universities.

Research Questions

This study aims to identify forces that may drive students to learn English using blogs in Social Networking Services, and record their reactions to the practice of the use of SNS in their English classes. Thus, we posited the following research questions for this study:

- What are the underlying learners' motivational characteristics towards SNS?
- How did participants react to the practice of using SNS in their English classes?

Method

Participants

Ninety-two university students were surveyed in three EFL courses offered in two Japanese universities. All classes aimed at improving students' overall English and were taught by the same teacher. Because the Social Networking Service used in the study is an invite-only network, the students were registered in the social networking services (Windows Live Space), and invited by the teacher at the beginning of the course. All the classes involved the use of blogs in the SNS to communicate with other students inside and outside of class. As regular assignments, students were asked to search for certain information (e.g., about a foreign city or the musician that they liked) and post what they had found in their blog. They were encouraged to find somebody in the SNS with whom they could communicate in English.

Materials

The questionnaire used in this study is mostly based on Warschauer (1996), who used it to examine learners' motivation toward using computers in second language writing classrooms in the U.S., Hong-Kong and Taiwan. Because this study concerns only Japanese students, and the aim of the research mainly is to examine the motivation toward blog writing on the SNS services, some items were reworded. One researcher translated items written in English first and the translation was checked by several Japanese native speakers. It consisted of three parts featuring: 1) general background questions such as gender and major; 2) questions concerning the frequency of computer use, such as how often students exchange e-mail, use word processors, and browse homepages, and how often they use a personal computer a day, and; 3) 30 items arranged in a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1 point) to strongly disagree (5 points) to statements about their motivation for using computers in blog writing in the second language classroom (see the Appendix for the descriptive statistics for the 30 questionnaire items). At the end of the questionnaire, a

space was provided so that learners could write down freely their thoughts on the positive/negative aspects of using computers in English classes.

Procedure and Analysis

The teacher asked participants to access a website to respond to the survey in the three classes at the end of the fall semester 2006 (around the end of January 2007). The survey questions were in Japanese so that the students could sufficiently understand the content of the questionnaire.

Items 2, 5, 8, 10, 21, 26, 29, and 30 were reverse coded. Descriptive statistics were computed for all the questionnaire items to eliminate skewed items. The data were then analyzed using the procedure below. A principal axis factor analysis using a direct oblimin rotation procedure was performed on the 30 questionnaire items in order to determine the underlying characteristics of motivation for writing a blog among the participants. Based on the scree plot and the interpretability of the factor solution, a three factor solution was used in this study. Finally, comments students wrote at the end of questionnaire were analyzed to clarify in more detail.

In the analysis of the questionnaire, the mean and standard deviations for the 30 items were checked initially. Four items were negatively skewed. Thus, these four skewed items were excluded from further analysis: item 3 (I am not afraid of my mistakes in my essay being pointed out by a teacher), item 4 (I am not afraid of my mistakes in my essay being pointed out by a friend.), item 15 (Using the Internet is a good way to learn more about different people and cultures.), and item 24 (Learning how to use computers is important for my career.). Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 14.0 (2005). Cronbach alpha statistics were computed for the 26 remaining questionnaire items and a reliability of .847 was obtained.

Results

Underlying characteristics of motivation toward SNS

A principal axis factor analysis using a direct oblimin rotation procedure to see how the 26 items grouped together with 3 factor solutions. Three factors were extracted with an item loading greater than .45 as the criterion of salience. The factors accounted for 46.21% of the variance in the 26 items.

As indicated in Table 1, Factor 1 received appreciable loadings from the 16 items, the largest component of blog writing motivation for this sample. As shown in Table 1, the variables for this factor were quite diverse. For instance, five items (6, 7, 9, 12 and 14) were directly related to commitment to communicate, and two items (13 and 18) were relevant to self expression. Item 11 and 16 relate to learning interactively with other learners, while items 19 and 28 related to learning interactively with authentic texts or tasks. This factor is named *Communication and empowerment through the use of computers* since the items loaded on this factor support the use of computers to facilitate communication between learners both inside and outside the class. Overall, this factor relates to an affirmative orientation toward using computers communicatively.

Table 1. Results of Factor Analysis for All Subjects (N=92)

No	Items	F1	F2	F3
Factor 1: Communication and empowerment through the use of computers				
11	Using blogs and social networking services help people learn from each other.	.724		
18	Writing by computer makes me more creative.	.711		
7	I enjoy using the Internet to communicate with people inside class.	.710		
9	I enjoy using the computer to communicate with my teacher.	.705		
17	Learning to use a computer gives me a feeling of accomplishment.	.697		
6	I enjoy using the Internet to communicate with people outside class.	.685		
23	I enjoy the challenge of using computers.	.680		
14	Using blogs and SNS makes me feel part of a community.	.675		
19	Using a computer gives me more chances to read and use authentic English.	.657		
13	Blogs and social networking service help me develop my thoughts and ideas.	.631		
16	Communicating using a blog or a social networking service is a good way to improve my English.	.611		
12	An advantage of blogs and SNS is you can contact people any time you want.	.593		
28	Using a computer gives me more chances to practice English.	.592		
22	Using a computer gives me more control over my learning	.589		
20	I want to continue using a computer in my English classes.	.504		
27	I can learn English faster when I use a computer.	.466		
Factor 2: Appreciation of computers				
21	Using a computer is not worth the time and effort.		.721	
2*	Revising my papers is a lot easier when I write them on computer.		.695	
29*	Computers are usually very frustrating to work with.		.680	
5*	Writing papers by hand saves time compared to by computer		-.656	
Factor 3: Reluctance to use computers				
23	I enjoy the challenge of using computers.			-.478
1	I can write better essays when I do them on computer.			-.693
27	I can learn English faster when I use a computer.			-.515
30*	Computers make people weak and powerless.			.506
Eigenvalue		7.25	2.84	1.93
Percentage of variance		27.87	10.93	7.41
Cumulative Percentage of Total Variance		27.87	38.80	46.21

Note. Items with asterisks (2, 5, 8, 10, 21, 26, 29, and 30) are reverse-coded items.

Factor 2 received loadings from four items (2, 5, 21, and 29), all of which relate to the handiness of computers. Note that items with asterisks were reverse coded. Among those items reversely coded (2, 5, and 29) on this factor, item 5 was reversely loaded. It probably means that some respondents actually believe that writing papers by hand saves time compared to by computers. Our interpretation of this mixed factor loading is that participants see that the use of computers in English classes is useful although they recognize that it may be easier to write papers by hand.

Factor 3 received loadings from four items (1, 23, 27, and 30). Note that two items (23 and 27) loaded positively on the factor 1 was loaded negatively on this factor. This factor also includes item 30, which is reversely coded. Even though we found these complex loadings, we interpret it as indicating that some participants are reluctant to use computers in English classes. This factor relates to negative feelings about the challenge of using computers (item 1), the ease of writing and learning on computers (items 23 and 27), and learning enhancement which is facilitated by computers (item 30). We named this factor *Reluctance to use computers*.

Participants' reactions to the practice of using SNS in their English classes

Among the 92 students who responded to the questionnaire, 62 students (67%) wrote positive comments about the use of SNS in their English classes, and 56 students (61%) also wrote some negative comments about the use of SNS. In this section, we include some of the representative comments for the basis of later discussion. Five themes emerged in the analysis of the qualitative data. They included appreciation of having the opportunity to type in English, the commenting function of the blog, increased opportunities by virtue of being assigned to write blogs, and negative feelings towards blog assignments and the use of computers in English classes.

Appreciation of having the opportunity to type in English. Several participants stated that they were happy to have the chance provided to type in English, which they normally do not get to do without being assigned it. Other participants commented that it was easier for them to notice their mistakes. Three examples of the statements in this category are:

By typing a lot of English, it helped me remember the English that I was forgetting.

I don't normally write English on the computer but by writing the blog, I got used to typing English on the computer.

It was good that I started to be able to type in English. Moreover, I can view the whole writing so it made it easier for me to notice the mistakes I had made.

Appreciation of the commenting function of the blog. We also noted that some students found the commenting function useful for them to get to know people in the community. One student even commented that this practice may be helpful for overcoming an aversion to English.

I felt that it was good since we were able to comment on other people's blogs. I made friends by leaving comments. In this way, I think it will become popular among students and I think it will make students overcome their dislike of English.

By using the blog and presentations, I needed to state my opinion or comment to people who I had no acquaintance. It made me think about how to say and express my words.

Appreciation of increased opportunities through blog writing assignments. Many students commented on the usefulness of the classroom practice of having students write blogs often, making comments to others, and collecting information from the Internet for final presentations. One student even wrote that she was touched to know that she could make friends all over the world using SNS.

I was able to become friends with students from other schools.

By doing the blog, I think I became more faster at writing compositions in English.

With the blog assignment, there were more opportunities to read in English.

By writing the blog, it made me realize clearly about how much I can express myself using English. It was interesting to study cultures of countries on Wikipedia and the Internet.

By using the blog I was able to look at my friend's opinion and English writing. I was surprised to find out how good my classmates are with computer skills when everybody made presentations.

It's good to write diaries every day. Thanks to this class, I learned about blogs and Windows Messenger. Moreover, I got to understand a lot of vocabulary and how to write sentences. By writing the blog, I was able to experience intercultural exchange and got to know things I didn't know before and knowledge about social matters. And I was touched by the fact that I was able to make friends not just around me but friends from around the world.

Negative feeling towards blog assignments. However, the blog assignments were also perceived negatively by some students. Four students wrote specifically that their eyes got tired because they needed to spend a considerable amount of time looking at the computer screen. One student made the constructive comment that assignments with pen and paper may be preferable to deal with this issue.

Blog. I wish there weren't any blog assignments. They weren't popularized by my classmates and I wanted it to be more widely-used. I felt that the blog was completely an 'assignment'.

It was tough writing the blog in English every time.

There was too much homework using the computer. It made my eyes hurt and I started to feel confused with spelling when I actually had to write. I wanted the homework to be equally divided with handwritten homework and assignments with computers.

It was my first time to write blogs so I didn't know how and what to write. It's a fact that there had to be some kind of event or incident so that I could write on the blog. There was also a fact that I was slow at writing English so it took me 2 hours to write one blog. BUT, it made me think that I had to study more!

Negative feeling towards the use of computers in English classes. Several students were critical toward the use of computers in English classes. It is quite true that the pace of progress depends largely on their computer skills, not their English skills. As pointed out in the second comment, teachers need to be careful about assisting their students in their computer use. In particular, computer novice students need extra attention.

When using the computer, there were differences in the pace of progress according to one's computer skills.

I think it is important to explain carefully to people who aren't good at using the computer.

Discussion

This study attempted to identify the underlying characteristics of motivation toward writing a blog on SNS in the English classroom. In this section, students' comments provided at the end of the questionnaire were used to analyze the characteristics which emerged in factor analysis in more detail.

The largest observed factor of blog writing motivation loaded in the factor analysis clearly related to *communication*. In fact, there were many students who wrote positive comments about the course where students could communicate with each other in the course. For example, some learners commented that "the chances of conversation with classmates increased," "I was moved by the fact that I could make friends around the world using a blog and social networking service," and "I was able to have opportunities to get in touch with learners outside my class." Some students expressed their urge to cultivate their communication skills more in their future. Such comments as "Learning to use a computer gives me a feeling of accomplishment," "Writing by computer makes me more creative," and "I enjoy the challenge of using computers" confirms the students' communication oriented nature. Though anxiety tends to impede language learning, especially in listening and speaking tasks (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), blogging has the possibility to lessen the anxiety to communicate, and facilitate interaction among learners as research on e-mail in second language instruction has shown (Warschauer, 1996; Absalom & Marden, 2004; Fotos, 2004).

Interestingly, Fotos (2004) pointed out that many students feel e-mail writing is similar to talking. Absalom and Marden (2004) also discussed the potential for e-mail exchange to be transferable to students' speaking proficiency. One student in this study also commented

that, "blogging is easier than writing". In her mind, blogging seems somewhat different from other forms of writing as it provides a way for expressing her feelings. We found that blog writing in the SNS facilitates dynamic communication with a variety of people outside the classroom, while it makes many learners feel that they belong to an online community consisting of a variety of members. Though precise analysis of this factor is beyond the scope of this paper, this motivating characteristic may indicate the possibility of enhancement of online "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998) where students learn meaningful things and shape their knowledge, style and their own writing skills through communication with a variety of members within a certain community on the Internet.

Many students made comments on the efficacy of learning English through contact with other learners, authentic texts, and language learning tasks which is related to factor 2. Some students wrote comments such as "Because I often visit a variety of sites on the Internet, I could increase the time spent on reading and listening to English," "The chances of being exposed to English increased," "I was able to understand a variety of places around the world through presentations reported by classmates," and "I was able to read and understand other students' opinions and thoughts by reading blogs." These comments confirm that English learning through interaction with others and with various materials on the Internet certainly occurred and those interactions motivated students to learn English more. This factor indicates that many students, at least in this group, enjoy learning English through authentic exposure to English, writing their own blogs in English, and communicating with others in English, and those conditions stimulate their motivation to learn English in an authentic fashion.

Also, many students commented positively about aspects of the use of computers related to Factor 1, which could lead to *autonomous learning*. For example, some students commented, "I could increase the chances of writing English, searching for information on the Internet, and summarizing the information obtained", "I could speed up my composition writing," and "It was fun to research interesting things and summarize it to report back to class." One student commented that "the way of learning English using a blog made it easier for me to notice my own mistakes in English." Considering the importance of output for learners to notice the gap between what they would like to express and what they can express (Swain 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995), free writing activities such as participation on SNS helps students notice their mistakes by themselves, and that leads them to develop autonomy.

Compared to the original study by Warschauer (1996), which extracted three factors (*communication, empowerment, and learning*) from his questionnaire, we found that three different factors emerged in the factor analysis (even though we used the same factor analysis method, a principal component analysis with direct oblimin rotation). It was especially surprising that an unexpected construct which is related to a reluctance to use computers was loaded in the factor analysis.

Conclusion

This research attempted to clarify the motivating factors toward writing blogs on a social networking service among university students who participated in this study in Japan. Although this study has a certain value in classifying the nature of students' motivation, there

are at least two points that should be noted for future research. Though we made the questionnaire based on Warschauer (1996), some of the items may not have worked well for the students in this study as seen by the factor analysis performed. We also think that we should have developed more items concerning other aspects of SNS. We recommend that researchers consider these issues in future research so that they can depict students' motivation factors for SNS in a broader way.

Second, we found that the use of computers in English classes may actually make some students feel demotivated. As seen in Factor 3 loaded in the factor analysis and negative comments provided by the students, some students may resist the use of computers in their English classes. However, we are unsure about this possibility based only on the complex loading on the factor analysis in this study. Future studies which investigate the influence of the use of computers on students' demotivation may help us to understand this issue better, which is worthy of further investigation.

Skehan (2004) argued that although the Internet provides very rich input, it might prevent learners from stretching their interlanguage without sufficient chances for them to use it. In a course offering well-balanced input and output, where learners write a blog and make class presentations based on what they searched about certain topics, students can stretch their interlanguage effectively. We believe that blogging using SNS has the potential to cultivate students' motivation toward communication, which could be dampened in classrooms focusing mainly on oral communication.

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Appendix

Questionnaire Items Used In This Study and Descriptive Statistics (Original English version).

	Questionnaire Items	Mean	S.D.
1	I can write better essays when I do them on computer.	3.261	0.965
2*	Revising my papers is a lot easier when I write them on computer.	3.174	1.372
3	I am not afraid of my mistakes in my essay being pointed out by a teacher.	4.489	0.773
4	I am not afraid of my mistakes in my essay being pointed out by a friend.	4.413	0.899
5*	Writing papers by hand saves time compared to by computer	3.140	1.299
6	I enjoy using the Internet to communicate with people outside class.	3.554	1.087
7	I enjoy using the Internet to communicate with people inside class.	3.620	1.051
8*	I am more afraid to contact people by e-mail than in persons.	3.011	1.255
9	I enjoy using the computer to communicate with my teacher.	3.630	0.917
10*	If I have a question or comment, I would rather contact my teacher in person than by e-mail.	2.293	1.079
11	Using blogs and social networking services help people learn from each other.	3.685	0.988
12	An advantage of blogs and SNS is you can contact people any time you want.	3.641	1.049
13	Blogs and social networking service helps me develop my thoughts and ideas.	3.685	0.920
14	Using blog and SNS makes me feel part of a community.	3.261	1.092
15	Using the Internet is a good way to learn more about different people and cultures.	4.326	0.874
16	Communicating using a blog or social networking service is a good way to improve my English.	3.728	1.044
17	Learning to use a computer gives me a feeling of accomplishment.	3.141	0.928
18	Writing by computer makes me more creative.	3.087	1.100
19	Using a computer gives me more chances to read and use authentic English.	3.435	1.087
20	I want to continue using a computer in my English classes.	3.620	1.121
21*	Using a computer is not worth the time and effort.	3.891	0.972
22	Using a computer gives me more control over my learning	3.620	1.030
23	I enjoy the challenge of using computers.	3.043	0.943
24	Learning how to use computers is important for my career.	4.587	0.678
25	I can learn English more independently when I use a computer.	3.413	1.065
26*	Computers keep people isolated from each other.	3.065	1.082
27	I can learn English faster when I use a computer.	3.022	0.932
28	Using a computer gives me more chances to practice English.	3.533	1.016
29*	Computers are usually very frustrating to work with.	3.728	1.104
30*	Computers make people weak and powerless.	3.326	1.023

* Reverse coded.