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Author(s)

Wesseling, Nathalie

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HOW STUDENTS USE FACEBOOK

Nathalie Wesseling
Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences
n.f.wesseling-weijers@hva.nl

Abstract

In this paper I investigate the way in which first year students in the Department of Media, Information and Communication at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, use Facebook. I provide an overview of recent studies on Facebook usage and present the results of a survey (in the form of an online questionnaire) on the Facebook activities of 618 students (78.6 % of all first year students) in this department. Previous studies identified four major Facebook activities: 1) information sharing (receiving/providing information and generating ideas), 2) sharing for educational purposes (for learning, problem solving and sharing work), 3) social purposes (retrieving personal information about others or themselves, chatting, making appointments and generally keeping in touch) and 4) leisure (gaming and relaxing). The questionnaire's answers were grouped accordingly and then compared, to provide a better understanding of how students use Facebook. In addition, a range of variables were measured in the survey, in order to map student characteristics such as gender, age, place of birth, living arrangements and the socio-economic status of their parents. Those variables were compared with the Facebook activities using PAWS Statistics 18.0 (formally SPSS) to determine any correlation.

Keywords: Students, higher education, new media, social media, Internet, Facebook, background variables, communication, integration, engagement.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study is part of a wider PhD research project in which I investigate the relationship between certain aspects of media literacy and student success in higher education. These aspects are better known as information problem solving skills (IPS-skills). A research course designed to teach these skills will also measure them amongst first year students in the Department of Media, Information and Communication at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. In addition, the different background variables will also be investigated. Several surveys were conducted throughout the college year 2011/2012, amongst a limited enrolment of 960 students, in order to uncover those background variables, the way in which students communicate outside of the Institute and their use of social media sites (SNS). In this study I'll concentrate on one specific SNS, namely Facebook.

Although Facebook is not the only SNS available on the Internet, it is by far the most popular amongst students (Hargittai, 2008; Junco, 2012a; Special, 2012; Wesseling, 2012a). The reason for its popularity could be attributed to the fact that Facebook is a multifunctional platform in its own right. Previous research has investigated the multifunctionality of Facebook and the various activities involving Facebook usage. In this paper I'll focus on these activities and how students use Facebook. And by questioning why students select these particular activities, I will not only be able to determine the activities, I'll also be able to group them by purpose. In addition, by defining the groups, I will be able to measure the various methods of Facebook usage amongst my students more effectively. Finally this will enable me to answer the paper's central question: How do students use Facebook?

1.1 Social network sites and society

Before I describe Facebook activities based on recent studies involving this particular SNS platform, I will set out the characteristics of SNSs in general, why Facebook claims such a special place amongst them and how it distinguishes itself from the others.

The best known SNSs with the greatest number of users are: LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter, Facebook Google+ (eBizMBA, 2012) and in the Netherlands, Hyves. The latter is a Facebook-like SNS used by a younger age group: predominantly primary and secondary school students (Duimel, 2010). The common features of these SNSs are that users can "create and maintain a public profile within the SNS and contact other SNS users" (Special, 2012, p. 624). However some SNSs also allow users the option to join or start "groups based on shared interest or associations, participate in discussion forums with other users, upload and share media (videos, photos), and organize events" (Special, 2012, p. 624) or share links and other information (and sources). The combination of all of these

functions, in addition to the potential to chat or play games within an SNS, is only available within Facebook and Hyves. And, although the secret of Facebook's success can't be entirely established or explained, its manifold possibilities certainly contribute to its success. Furthermore, both the increasing volume of users and the popularity of Facebook must be seen in the context of society as a whole.

The influence of technology in general and of the Internet in particular, has brought significant change to society. With the refinement of technology and the ever expanding role of computers, it is easier to access, store and above all, share information. The emergence of Smartphones and tablets has made the Internet, and thus Facebook, readily accessible at all times. So how do students use Facebook and how does it rank in comparison to other methods of communication? To answer this question it is necessary to map the various Facebook activities and, for the purpose of my research, its relationship to education.

1.2 Research on Facebook use and education

Although Facebook is a relatively new phenomenon, this SNS has already generated a significant amount of research on its usage and in particular, Facebook usage and its relationship to education and background variables (Beak, 2011; H.E.R.I., 2007; Heiberger, 2008; Junco, 2012b; Kirschner, 2010; Kolek, 2008; Lee, 2012; Pasek, 2009). The educational benefit of Facebook has been investigated by the manner in which students 'engage': Whereas *"...engagement encompasses various factors, including investments in the academic experience of college, interactions with faculty, involvement in co-curricular activities and interaction with peers"* (Junco, 2012b, p. 188). Engagement must be seen in line with Tinto's integration theory (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Studies using the integration theory found a direct correlation between a student's integration and their success in higher education (Beekhoven, 2002; Berger, 1999; Cabrera, 1992). Whereas integration is divided by social and academic integration. In summary: Social integration involves the contact between students and staff and the feeling of wellbeing at the institute. Academic integration refers to their academic achievement and whether or not a student shares academic norms and values. Studies using engagement, yet omitting the artificial distinction of social and academic integration, also revealed a direct influence on the students' academic performance (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Pascarella, 2005). It would be far too ambitious to unravel all of the differences between the two theories in this paper, however, there is one distinction I wish to make.

The integration theory was founded in the early seventies, before society was digitalised or medialised. Although the original idea of integration has been altered to better match contemporary society, the engagement theory enables us to readily incorporate modern utilities into the theory, which must be taken into account when studying contemporary students, their (communicating) behaviour and its relationship to education. Secondly, the engagement theory is a better match to the Dutch academic world, because the integration theory originated in the USA and thus incorporated campus life, whilst there are no campuses in the Netherlands. Therefore, contact between students would naturally differ; in consequence, the level of their (social) integration would also differ. Having said this, let's take a closer look at the studies.

One study (Junco, 2012a) found a positive correlation between Facebook usage and the time spent on education and/or extracurricular activities, although it was negatively related to student engagement. Other studies (H.E.R.I., 2007; Heiberger, 2008) found a positive correlation between Facebook usage and student engagement. Other studies left out the engagement factor altogether and examined the use of Facebook and its relationship to grades. One study (Pasek, 2009) found no direct correlation between Facebook usage and grades and another (Kolek, 2008) found no difference in the overall grade point average (GPA) between users and non-users of Facebook. Yet another study (Kirschner, 2010) found that Facebook users did have a lower grade point average, when compared to non-users. And finally, Junco (2012b) found a negative correlation between the hours spent on Facebook and the overall GPA, and a weak correlation to time spent preparing for class.

1.3 Measuring Facebook use

All in all, there is not a great deal of consistency in the outcomes of the various studies. Whilst they do all conclude that Facebook might influence education, they cannot provide a clear indication as to how. This leads me to assume that the answer should be sought in the way they actually measure Facebook usage, because the studies don't share similar methods of measurement. The studies measured Facebook usage as follows: 1) user or non-user of Facebook (Kolek, 2008), 2) use of SNS (Facebook and MySpace) by hours per week (H.E.R.I., 2007), 3) use of Facebook by hours per day and week (Heiberger, 2008) and 5) 14¹ Facebook activities measured in a five-point Likert scale (very 'frequently'

to 'never') (Junco, 2012a, 2012b) and 6) hours spent on Facebook a day, number of groups and application use (Kirschner, 2010). In consequence, research on these subjects tends to have had a scattered approach, which could give rise to contradictory conclusions.

As you can see, the three most recent studies, by Kirschner(2010) and Junco (Junco, 2012a, 2012b), don't just measure usage and time spent on Facebook, they also distinguish between the different activities conducted on Facebook. I would like to propose taking this one step further, by categorising these activities as suggested in prior research (Wesseling, 2012b). These categories are: 1) information sharing (receiving/providing information and generating ideas), 2) sharing for educational purposes (for learning, problem solving and sharing work), 3) social purposes (retrieving personal information about others or themselves, to chat, make appointments and generally keep in touch), 4) leisure (gaming and relaxation). In addition, if one studies the relationship between Facebook and student success in particular, *'it makes sense to determine if students have contact with each other and if so, in what way. It is then possible to distinguish contact between students through their own Facebook page or by different group-pages (class, project/group, year/cohort, etc.)'* (Wesseling, 2012b).

In the next section I will outline the method used to determine the way in which students use Facebook and how those activities are grouped within the various categories. After analysing the results using statistical tests, I will close the article with a conclusion and recommendations for a follow-up study.

2 Method

In total three surveys were conducted using Google-doc to digitally distribute the questionnaires and gather the answers. Although the survey was a mandatory component of the first year career-counselling course, not everyone participated. Furthermore, the surveys were conducted on three separate occasions throughout the year, during which time some students left the Institute, either voluntarily or due to poor results. This meant that out of a limited enrolment of 960 students and the initial 904 students who actually started at the Institute, 823 participated in the first survey conducted at the beginning of the year (September 2011). This meant that 92.7% of the sample frame was met. The background variables measured in this survey were: gender, age, socio-economic status of parents, living arrangements and place of birthⁱⁱ.

By the time the second survey was conducted (January 2012), a total of 121 students had left the Institute (52 voluntarily, 69 due to poor results). Of the remaining 783 students (the second sample frame), 78.4 % (614) participated in the survey. This survey was used to investigate the way in which students communicate with each other, whether or not they use Facebook, how they use it and if they have contact with other students using separate group pages.

The third and final survey was conducted at the end of the first year (June 2012). According to student administration, of the 744 students still enlisted at the end of the first year, 445 (59.8%) participated. This survey incorporated some questions on whether students use Facebook via their Smartphones and if so, if they ever log out of Facebook via their Smartphone, and how often students check Facebook during the day. It also investigated whether students use group pages in order to see if there has been a change in recent months.

The data from all of these surveys was downloaded using Microsoft Excel into an SPSS file. After being screened for anomalies, the data was analysed using PASW (formally SPSS) Statistics 18.0.

3 Results

In a previous study (Wesseling, 2012b) I revealed the way in which students have contact outside of school. Directly after ping and what's app (52 %), Facebook (26.3%) was cited as the second most preferred method of communication. E-mail was third (17.9) and just 0.7 % used their phone solely for calls, whilst the remaining 3.1 % claimed to use a combination of these different methods of communication. This prompted me to investigate actual student activity on Facebook and how students contact each other. For the key difference between using a phone or computer to call or send messages and using Facebook, is that one can choose a variety of communication methods on this multifunctional platform. One can chat directly with another student with the option to create or join group pages, in order to be informed within your own timeline, whenever someone posts a message.

The second and third surveys measured whether or not a student had contact with other students via Facebook and if

they joined a group page related to the Institution. The group pages are divided by: 1) project group (6-9 student per group), 2) class page (+/- 30 students per class) and 3) year page (all the students in the first year, max. 960)

As you can see in *Fig. 1*, as the year progresses the percentage of Facebook usage by and between students

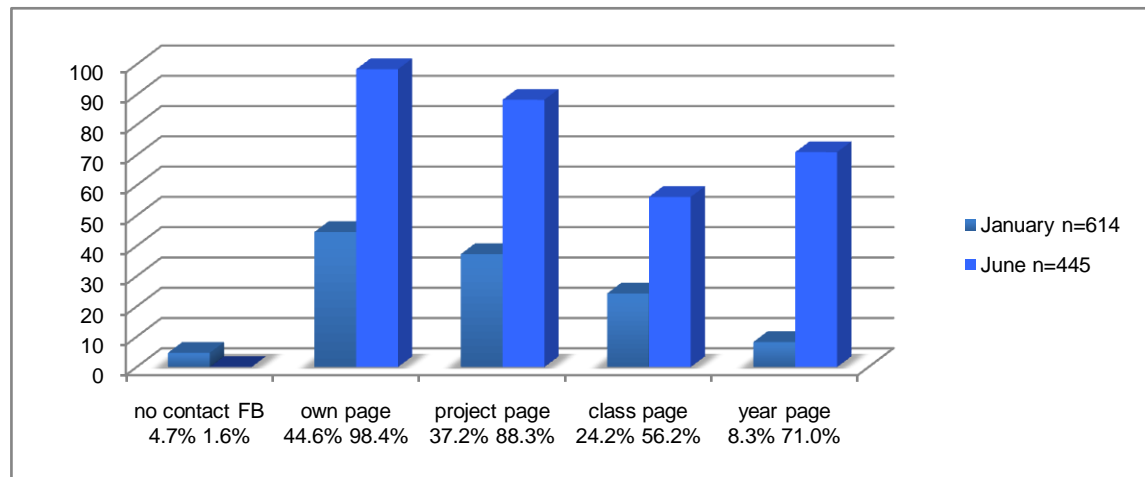


Fig. 1

increases from 44.6% to 98.4 %. In addition, the use of separate pages also shows percentage increases. The project page from 37.2% to 88.3%, the class page is a little less popular, but still grows from 24.2% to 56.2 % and finally the first year page sees the biggest rise; from 8.3 % to 71.0%.

Taking all of these figures into account, it is clear that students use Facebook in order to have contact with each other. It might also imply that the function of Facebook is more than merely a social one. Naturally, the students have contact with each other because they initially met through the Institute and therefore have a link to education, but could there be more to it? The second survey also asked what students actually do on Facebook. You'll find this question, which was originally in Dutch, in appendix one. In addition, I coded the answers according to the categories mentioned above; Information, Education, Social and Leisure. For each student the answers were counted per category. In *Fig. 2* you'll find the percentages of the number of markers that were met, per category. The chart clearly shows that students use the SNS for social purposes (70.1%) and to exchange information (70.2%). It also shows that 49.7% of students use Facebook for educational purposes.

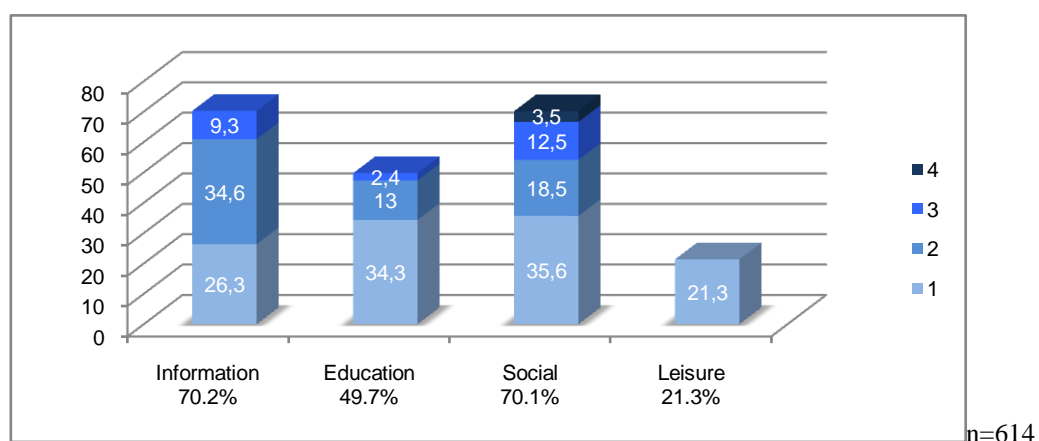


Fig. 2

n=614

The next step was to establish if there is a difference in the way students use Facebook in comparison to their background variables. The categories were compared with gender, age, place of birth (in or outside of the Netherlands), living arrangements (at home or not/ in or outside of Amsterdam), and the socio-economic status of their parents. Using the Pearson Chi-Square test I discovered that none of the variables had a significant influence on the way the students used Facebook.

4 Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to determine how students use Facebook. Interest in this particular subject was triggered by the various theories on student success and the way in which student communication has changed in contemporary society. If the level of integration or engagement influences the success of a student, then one should trace all potential activities a student might undertake, that may increase the level of this integration or engagement. Furthermore, my second survey demonstrated that students don't only text (and rarely call) each other outside of school, but that they also use Facebook. After conducting the third survey, this was proven to be true for almost all first year students.

However, previous studies on Facebook and its correlation to education were not conclusive enough to prove that Facebook has either a beneficial or had a negative impact on the success of a student. A closer look at these studies concluded that the methods they employed to measure Facebook usage, were simply too diverse. Furthermore, most studies lacked the potential to determine all activities. Two studies did include different activities and measured how often these activities were conducted. And all of the research measured whether or not Facebook was used and then emphasised the time spent on Facebook. In my opinion however, it is not the time spent on Facebook, but rather the activities that are conducted on Facebook, that can determine if it has a positive or negative influence on education. This is why I proposed categorising the activities by purpose; for educational purposes, for information sharing purposes, for social purposes and for leisure purposes.

As shown above and as expected, the categories Information and Social were the biggest. However, almost half of the respondents use Facebook for educational purposes. Furthermore, the way in which students use Facebook was not influenced by any of the background variables. This means that the different categories can be measured against grade points in a follow-up study, to reveal if there is a direct correlation in the way students use Facebook and its positive or negative effect per category. Next to these categories, the grades must also be compared to the use of different pages for those student activities related to school. In this case if one's page is connected to fellow students, and if one is a member of a project-, group- and/or year page. These can all be regarded as a means of integrating or engaging in college life and should therefore, not only be addressed when investigating student success, but also if one solely looks at Facebook usage. A follow-up study must reveal whether or not the way in which students use Facebook has a direct influence on their grade points. To conclude I would like to state that, due to its multifunctionality, this SNS is far too complex to simply consider how much time is spent on Facebook or the frequency of use of activities on the SNS.

About the author

Mrs. Nathalie Wesseling (M.A.) is a lecturer in the Department of Media, Communication and Information at the Amsterdam University of Applied Science. She coordinates large projects involving 960 students and 60 teachers and is responsible for all first year research courses. This paper is part of her PhD research in which she investigates the relationship between media literacy and student success in higher education.

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