

Chapter 50

Online Behavior of the Social Media Student

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ABSTRACT

A survey of 100 undergraduates and 30 post-secondary faculty members was conducted in order to examine the current attitudes and perceptions of both groups toward the integration of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter in education. Results indicate that both parties are willing to incorporate these social media sites into academics but caution that digital identities are not necessarily representative of face-to-face behavior, thus suggesting the need for an awareness of social presence for online interaction between students and faculty. Social cognitive theories are applied to the use of social media as an instructional tool and a set of best practices for implementing social media in academics is proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Educators are teaching a new generation of students. Unlike generations X, Y, or Z, the Social Media Generation is not determined by the year in which a person is born but by the amount that person interacts with others through social media tools. As a result, the Social Media Generation includes all ages and backgrounds. Kindergartens, elementary schools, the Queen of England and the Pope have Facebook pages. This year, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, beat out the President of the United States, thirty-three Chilean miners, Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai,

and the Tea Party for *Time Magazine's* Person of the Year. This speaks volumes to the relevance social media has in our society and suggests that social media is much more than a temporary fad. This all-encompassing Social Media Generation lives in an environment where communication is instant, connectivity is expected, and digital identities and relationships mimic real world actualizations. As a result, more and more educators and educational institutions are integrating social media with academics in the hopes that doing so will relate to students and keep them engaged in learning, but are these two worlds compatible?

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The mission of this chapter is to survey current post-secondary undergraduates and faculty located throughout the country in order to take a pulse on the attitudes and perceptions of social media in education, and to reconcile these attitudes with common and acceptable online behaviors. Through the lens of social learning theories, the authors explore how students construct and maintain multiple digital identities in order to interact with social, business, and academic networks. Accordingly, a set of guidelines and recommendations for the use of social media in education is drafted.

BACKGROUND

Social Media

The term *social media* generally refers to the big three networking sites: Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, but can be expanded to include microblogging sites, wikis, social bookmarking, blogs, content management systems, and any other type of consumer-generated material. Of these tools, Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly used in academia. Though MySpace still boasts 57 million unique U.S. users, the number of active users is dwindling and, as a result, MySpace is often left out of the conversation of integrating social media with education (Owyang, 2010).

With over 550 million (and counting) users, Facebook is the largest proprietor of all social media and serves one out of every twelve people on the planet. The website is accumulating approximately 700,000 new accounts per day (Grossman, 2010). Statistically speaking, it is a good possibility that you own a Facebook page and understand how it operates. Users can create a free account on Facebook, which requires only an e-mail address. The profile page allows users the option to customize sections such as birthday, relationship status, schools attended, interests, political views, religion, a short biography, and

favorite quotations among others. Additionally, photos and videos are staples of most Facebook accounts. Once the profile is created, friends may be accumulated through importing contact lists from the user's email account, or searching for friends by name or institution. Moreover, Facebook continually suggests friends with similar profiles and establishing friendships involves either sending or accepting a "friend request." More information regarding Facebook can be found at the following sites:

- <http://news.cnet.com/newbies-guide-to-facebook/>
- <http://www.mahalo.com/how-to-use-facebook>
- <http://www.facebook.com/help/>

Facebook is used a variety of ways in academia. Most educational institutions have a Facebook page, which is often used to recruit new students and update current students and alumnae. In addition, Green and Bailey (2010) loosely identify five uses of Facebook in education. These include sharing and discussing homework and answers (mostly unique to K-12 students), interacting on study group pages (mostly unique to post-secondary students), creating group pages for school-related clubs and organizations, creating individual pages for academic and degree programs, and communicating with the instructor (both formally and informally) via individual instructor pages.

The second most popular social media site in education is Twitter, a microblogging application that allows users to send bursts of information to its followers in 140 characters or less. As of September 2010, Twitter's population of 105 million is growing at an exponential rate of approximately 300,000 per day (Facult Focus, 2010). While it does not cultivate a platform for social interactivity, as Facebook does, Twitter's popularity in academia has been nevertheless steadily increasing, and is most commonly used

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