

Chapter 4.15

Student Use of Social Media: University Policy and Response

Tamara L. Wandel
University of Evansville, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents information on the usages and intent of social media by college students and administrators. Primary and secondary quantitative data is provided, as well as qualitative information obtained from interviews of multiple constituents. Researchers and postsecondary employees can more effectively examine technological trends in regard to online social networking for non-academic purposes after considering this data. Theories of self-esteem, interpersonal communication, decision making, and innovation diffusion are integrated throughout the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Millions of American high school and college students have one thing in common: they log in daily to Web sites to view recently uploaded photographs, check out opinions on blogs, and see if friends have made any changes to their onscreen profiles.

Individuals born between 1981 and 2000, coined *Millennials*, are growing up in a world in which participation in online social networking is considered conventional behavior. Timothy Hawkes, the headmaster of The King's School in Sydney, Australia, perhaps summarized it best. As quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Goodman, 2007), Hawkes said, "...technology isn't part of students' lives these days. It is their lives."

Social networks refer to a collection of individuals linked together by a set of relations (Downes, 2005). Associated research tends to focus on social network analysis, a framework intended to enhance the sharing and interaction among groups and communities (Cho, Stefanone, & Gay, 2002). Online social networks possess a parallel purpose, with Web sites intended to assist users in meeting new people or staying connected with friends or associates. The Web sites allow for searches based on a multitude of factors including affiliations such as a college or high school. Some sites like Shelfari are designed around a common interest, in this case targeting book aficionados. Other online social networks are centered on a professional component, a quasi modern-day version of the now more traditional

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networking after-hours event. Two such examples include LinkedIn and MyRagan, designed for all professionals and professional communicators, respectively.

Online social networks are also termed virtual communities or profile sites, and the relationship-building capacity of these sites present more than simplistic social consequences. Network participants are exposed to groups centered on the advantages and/or disadvantages of specific colleges, clubs and professors. Higher education institutions are beginning to recognize that reputation, campus culture and even enrollment figures may be impacted by online social networking.

The objective of this chapter is to present the response of university administrators and students to the use of online social networking for non-academic purposes. Qualitative data from student and administrator interviews helps shape the chapter and allows for candid and relevant anecdotes surrounding the topic. The use of primary and secondary quantitative data offers insight and perspective to a compelling, complex and constantly evolving topic. Theories of self-esteem, interpersonal communication, decision making, and innovation diffusion are integrated throughout the chapter.

OSN REIGNING GIANT FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

The interests of college students are as diverse as the myriad of online social networking (OSN) sites available to them. From Bebo to Classmates.com to Friends Reunited to Friendster, university students have numerous OSN options as they put their technologically savvy skills to use in finding their niche. One network in particular dominates the college scene with over 85% market share of four-year universities in the United States: Facebook.

Originally called *thefacebook*, and targeting college students, Facebook is now the second

most trafficked online social networking site following MySpace. In hipper context, Facebook is "...the online hangout of just about every college student in the nation" (Levy, 2007). Mark Zuckerberg, the man credited with Facebook, dropped out of Harvard University to focus full-time on his creation. Like MySpace co-founders Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe, Zuckerberg had become frustrated at his own experience and felt he could develop something better than what existed. The story goes that he believed Harvard University was too slow in creating an online student directory, so he made sure his own version was both expedient and impressive. After 6,000 students at Harvard registered with thefacebook, within the first three weeks, Zuckerberg piloted the program at Stanford and Yale (Naposki, 2006). The online social networking site quickly became a sought-after commodity and officially became known as *Facebook* in August 2005.

Facebook initially required a college or university .edu domain extension, but the site has since expanded. High schools and companies now have access to the online social network within certain regions. The official site at www.facebook.com has a section detailing "How this expansion affects you," the Facebook member. It starts by explaining:

Now you can get all your friends on Facebook—people who couldn't get on before because their schools didn't offer e-mail addresses, because they went to work instead of colleges, because they graduated before Facebook even existed, or for any other reason.

Evidently people heeded the call. The site had 24 million members by June 2007 (Kirkpatrick, 2007) and more than 60 million active users as of January 2008, representing an average 3% weekly growth since January 2007. It is no wonder Facebook's originator understands the Millennial generation—Zuckerberg is 23 years old.

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