

Chapter 12

Social Learning Sites?

Using Students' Views to Explore the Use and Possibilities of Facebook for Educational Purposes in Flanders

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites are extremely popular nowadays – especially amongst students – and are increasingly the subjects of educational research. But there is a sparse research base on students' willingness to adopt social networking sites in their education. In this chapter we investigate to what extent Facebook is used as an educational tool. By means of semi-structured interviews, we asked students why they use Facebook and whether they allow faculty members into their personal sites, or not. During the period of one academic year 2009-2010, 15 students of different bachelor programs in a Flemish University were interviewed several times. The results demonstrate that students draw a sharp distinction between the ways they use Facebook, and why they do so. Furthermore, they barely use the social networking site for educational purposes. Consequently, students are not inclined to allow faculty members presence (as 'friends' on Facebook). These results are interpreted in terms of privacy concerns, and we conclude this chapter with some critical reflections concerning the current research about the effectiveness and the educational possibilities of social networking sites.

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INTRODUCTION

Almost a decade and a half ago, Andrew Weinreich launched SixDegrees.com, a website now believed to be at the same time both the first instance and precursor of more current social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, Hyves, and so on. In the years to follow a multifarious gamut of initiatives proliferated, exhibiting the same characteristics as SixDegrees.com: the possibility to create profiles, to list friends, to surf friends' lists (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). SixDegrees.com's popularity waned pretty soon though and in 2000, the site was shut down. At the start of this new decade however, social networking sites have become widely accepted amongst youngsters and young adults. According to Tufekci (2008), 80% to 90% of college students have a profile on a social networking site. Our own research points to similar results. In a Web survey conducted with 143 bachelor students, 88.8% indicated they are a member of at least two social networking sites (Bruneel, Elen, De Wit, & Verhoeven, 2010).

One of the first social networking sites that popularized prototypical features (e.g. the possibility to create a digital representation of oneself by means of profiles, the possibility to make public comments on other users' profile, the ability to make friend lists) of social networking sites was Friendster, which was launched in 2002 and rapidly gained momentum (Boyd, 2008). The real breakthrough came with MySpace (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008, p. 130), "due in large part not because of innovative functionality and utility, but because it centralized many attractive functions that were already a part of other social networking sites in a user-friendly way". Launched in 2003, MySpace soon gained tremendous popularity: only four years later, it was by far the most adopted social networking site amongst youngsters – attracting 230,000 new users each day at some point in time (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Sellers, 2006). This popularity however, did not mean MySpace was the only one of its kind. On the contrary: despite

MySpace's popularity, a plethora of other (often culturally bounded) social networking sites emerged.¹ Those other social networking sites were no mere epiphenomena: MySpace soon experienced competition from a lot of them (e.g. Bebo, Grono Hi5, Hyves, LunarStorm, Mixi).

Until recently, Bebo and Facebook seemed to be the two main contrivers 'assaulting' MySpace (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2007). Today, it seems as if the global dispute has been settled and that the battle has been won by Facebook. In a follow-up study, Lenhart found MySpace was no longer the most consulted social networking site: in September 2009, 71% of a sample of American young adults (in previous years always more inclined to use MySpace) owned a Facebook account, 66% of them owned a MySpace account, and 7% of them owned a LinkedIn account (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). In July 2010, Facebook reached over 500 million active users (Facebook, 2010). Currently, Facebook is not only the social networking site that is being used the most, it is also by far the most discussed social software program in the literature (Epperson & Leffler, 2009). This brief history implies at least two conclusions. Firstly, despite the rise and fall of different social networking sites, these sites, as a social practice seem to be here to stay. Secondly, social networking sites seem to be adopted by youngsters in a capricious (that is, they are always searching for the most popular one), but enduring way.

In this chapter we focus on Facebook, currently the most popular social networking site in the world. Taking into account the steady adoption of Facebook by college students, a lot of scholars see opportunities and possibilities to use Facebook as an educational tool. Obviously, their interest is not new: ever since technological progress allowing distance education (like the introduction of television into schools), scholars have been paying attention to an education that is one way or another technologically mediated or facilitated (Cuban, 1986). This curiosity equally applies to social networking sites: over the last years, a lot

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