

Will You be My Facebook Friend?

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Abstract: Launched in February 2004 by students at Harvard University, Facebook is an online social networking site initially designed to replace the University's paper student directory. Following its launch, it quickly spread to college campuses across the nation, quickly becoming a popular way for college students to maintain ties. However, does the fact that students are spending more and more time on their computers "facebooking" one another affect face-to-face communication, specifically on small, residential college campuses? Through focus group research at a small, residential college in Kansas, three themes emerged as to the effect of Facebook on a small, residential college campus: Facebook assists in maintaining long-distance relationships, Facebook helps to keep a person updated on the lives of those around them, and Facebook builds face-to-face relationships. These themes, supported by Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese's Uncertainty Reduction Theory, demonstrate that Facebook can assist in building face-to-face communication on small, residential college campuses.

1. Introduction

While employed at a small, residential, Midwestern college, I observed the advent of Facebook on that particular campus. Its sudden popularity and widespread use by the student body led me to question if the amount of time that students on small, residential college campuses spend "facebooking" one another affects face-to-face communication with their on-campus peers? If so, what is that effect?

Facebook's affect on face-to-face communication is a valid question that small, residential colleges might be asking due to the effect decreased face-to-face communication could potentially have on the environment of such a campus. Small, residential colleges allow students to be in close relationship with each other and with other faculty and staff. At such colleges, face-to-face communication and social activities are a natural part of the collegiate experience as are close mentoring relationships between students and faculty [1]. Students on small college campuses generally know many of their peers, join multiple campus organizations and participate in numerous extracurricular activities. Students on these campuses benefit from an established sense of community, which can only be developed from spending time with one another through a variety of activities [2].

The effect of online social networking sites on face-to-face communication has not yet been the subject of much academic study, perhaps because these types of sites are rather new. The majority of the information written about online social networking sites focuses on the dangers of revealing too much information, whether or not high schools and colleges should block such sites on their computer networks, and how marketers are looking at ways to reach the teen and early-twenty-something audiences through the sites.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

The research method chosen to study Facebook's effect on face-to-face communication at small, residential colleges was a focus group. The method was chosen for its advantages of providing data from a group of people fairly quickly, allowing interaction between myself and the respondents, providing opportunities for open responses, and providing opportunities for respondents to build upon the responses of other group members [3].

As focus group participants discussed the questions posed to them, three themes of the benefits of Facebook emerged: Facebook assists in maintaining relationships at a distance, helps to keep a person updated on the lives of those on campus, and builds on-campus, face-to-face communication.

Facebook assists in maintaining long-distance relationships

When college students arrive on their respective campuses each fall, they leave behind family and hometown friends, or they arrive on campus from a summer job, internship, volunteer or travel experience that most likely will have put them in contact with new friends and acquaintances. Where once letters, and then e-mail were the preferred method of communication that spanned the miles, the advent of online social networking sites has

provided a way for students to maintain contact with hometown friends and new friendships gained from summer experiences [4][5].

Not only does Facebook allow for easy and convenient access to instant communication, it also provides updated information on a person's life, whether it is biographical information, the status of a relationship, what the student is doing at a precise moment, or their latest pictures. These comments demonstrate the value of Facebook in maintaining off-campus relationships: "I use it (Facebook) whenever I need to give a quick 'shout out' to my cousin in California," "My little sister and I plan trips. She's off-campus so it's a good way for us to talk," "It's especially good for people that aren't on campus. That's what it's best for," "That's what I like it for. Facebook is more where I meet [with] people from [other] schools," "It's good for people who are off-campus," and "E-mails take longer." Facebook is also valued because shorter messages are acceptable when keeping touch with friends.

Facebook helps to keep a person updated on the lives of those around them

One aspect of Facebook that all focus group participants appreciated was a feature called the mini-feed, which tracks every piece of information that is posted on a person's profile or every action that they do, such as become a friend with someone. While a person does have control over how much or how little of the mini-feed is visible to others, many are able to figure out much of what is taking place in a person's life without actually talking to them, as one participant said, "It kind of keeps me up on people around me that I don't really know." The mini-feed also allows students the advantage of keeping current with friends they don't always see all the time as one participant mentioned, "I really like being able to catch up on what people are doing on Facebook because my schedule is different than most people's . . ."

Facebook builds face-to-face relationships

The third and final theme that developed was that Facebook helps to build and promote face-to-face relationships. One focus group participant mentioned the ability Facebook provided to put names with faces, saying, "If you see someone, and you know a name but you don't know a face, you can check the name and figure out who it is." Another participant noted that Facebook can perform the role of a first meeting and said, "You can get over initial insecurity. You can get the meeting-someone-stage out of the way all on the tidbits of information." Others added, "You might have common ground" and "You can hide behind Facebook." Furthermore, Facebook provides a way to expand a person's circle of on-campus acquaintances as one participant noted, "It brings you kind of together in a way because you have this common ground on Facebook, you're a Facebook friend, so it is a way to talk to people that you normally don't talk to. You're not on the football team but you can still be friends with the football players and can see what's going on in their lives. I think it kind of brings people together."

The opportunities that Facebook provided for interactions with other students that participants had not talked to previously, particularly underclassmen, helped in breaking the ice. Several participants mentioned that "friending" an underclassman gave the underclassman confidence in approaching upperclassmen and feeling that they were welcome in their world, as one person said, "I think it helps because somebody might say, 'Hey, they know who I am, I can talk to them now.'"

3. Conclusions

As the themes from the focus group demonstrate, Facebook can assist in building face-to-face communication on small, residential college campuses. Because Facebook puts names with faces and allows a student to discover common ground with another student, it opens the door and provides a common ground with which to communicate face-to-face with both friends and new acquaintances.

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