

This exploratory qualitative research explores, through means of semi-structured interviews, how seven bachelor and seven master students apply Facebook in their academic experience. Results indicate that master students receive more academic benefits from the platform, citing reasons such as increased communication and collaboration, but the majority of students was generally positive about the influence Facebook had on their academic lives. However, the small sample size and selection process make it difficult to form conclusions.

Facebook or Studybook

How College Students Apply
Facebook in their Academic
Experience

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1. Introduction

In a span of only 10 years Facebook has gone from a small website restricted to Harvard college students to a massive social networking platform used around the globe. Due to its increasing prevalence in our society, there is both fundamental scientific and societal interest in finding out how it affects us as people in various facets of life. Its current use notwithstanding, the website was originally created by and for college students in order to supplement the social aspect of the academic experience. A recent survey showed 92% of American undergrad students use Facebook, averaging at 1 hour and 40 minutes per day¹. Both the percentage of use and average amount of time spent daily are indicators that Facebook is an integral part of modern-day college life. However, whether or not this a positive development remains a topic of debate. Certain classes at the University of Utrecht have started banning laptops from class, often citing the distractions of Facebook as a main catalyst². Any platform with such a massive impact is bound to be an interesting topic of research for many branches of scientific disciplines. However, most of the research on the topic of college students and Facebook found during the literature review was empirical in nature, written by research teams from the social sciences and communication studies. Specific research on how college students use Facebook for their academic experience written from the new media sciences humanities perspective is severely lacking.

This exploratory research will take a qualitative approach consisting of 14 semi-structured interviews about topics regarding the question: How are college students applying Facebook in their academic experience? The answer to such a question is multi-faceted and can therefore be divided further into smaller aspects of Facebook use. First and foremost, it is investigated how college students use Facebook for their coursework. This entails aspects such as a shared learning experience online, getting and giving peer feedback or other applications. A second aspect that will be examined is how Facebook affects the social aspects of academic life, with examples such as building and maintaining peer relations or networking with other students and staff. Due to the social nature of the platform, these two aspects will overlap slightly, but will mostly be addressed separately. An example of such overlap would be the relationship with teachers and staff through Facebook, given its ties to both coursework and social relations. The third aspect that will be investigated is how students perceive the effects of Facebook on their life. By analyzing and combining current research on the social, academic and cognitive effects of Facebook and subsequently asking students their opinions, a unique understanding can be gained. As opposed to earlier research, this study will focus on Facebook and the academic experience from the perspective of the user, detailing their personal opinions and experiences. Their answers questions could yield interesting insights that would not be gained from the pre-defined answer questionnaires designed by most researchers.

There is one main limitation for this particular study. The selection process for participants

¹ Junco and Cotten, "No A 4 U: The Relationship between Multitasking and Academic Performance."

² <http://www.dub.uu.nl/artikel/nieuws/experiment-docenten-verbannen-laptops-uit-collegezaal.html>

was carried out at the University of Utrecht based on the personal knowledge of the researcher about certain classes or people that are more inclined to use Facebook for their academic coursework or have opinions about its effects. It will be impossible to interview a representative sample of the Dutch student population, or even that of Utrecht. Although the results won't be generalizable, it will provide detailed information about the academic application of Facebook from the perspective of individual students.

2. Theoretical Framework

Given the ubiquitous nature of Facebook and its relatively young age, it is understandable that most humanities research done in the area of Facebook is focused more on comprehensive understanding and ways of use. Given the lack of a strict methodology or paradigm in the area of this study, new media researchers use data from a variety of sources, both empirical and interpretative, quantitative and qualitative. It is therefore difficult to determine what would qualify as written from a pure humanities point of view.

A meta-analysis showed that research on Facebook by the social sciences can be divided into five main categories: descriptive analysis of users, motivations for using Facebook, identity presentation, the role of Facebook in social interactions, and privacy. With regards to how college students apply and are influenced by Facebook, research has been done on various individual facets that are usually derived from these same categories. There are studies on how college students manage their identity³, what they disclose⁴, their perceptions of Facebook as an educational tool⁵, and the possibility of social interactions teachers on Facebook⁶.

Another category of research within the social sciences is the relationship between academic performance and Facebook. One recent study observed college students studying for 15 minutes while logging their distractions⁷. Students that accessed Facebook one or more times during the 15 minute period were found to have lower GPAs. This finding was corroborated in another study which focused on the relationship between multitasking and academic performance specifically⁸. Using Facebook while studying was negatively predictive of overall GPA.

While there are many studies researching the relationship with academic performance, some studies focus solely on cognitive capabilities. When comparing the results of working memory and

³ Dimicco and Millen, "Identity Management : Multiple Presentations of Self in Facebook."

⁴ Special and Li-Barber, "Self-Disclosure and Student Satisfaction with Facebook."

⁵ Arteaga Sánchez, Cortijo, and Javed, "Students' Perceptions of Facebook for Academic Purposes."

⁶ Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds, "I'll See You On 'Facebook': The Effects of Computer-Mediated Teacher Self-Disclosure on Student Motivation, Affective Learning, and Classroom Climate."

⁷ Rosen, Mark Carrier, and Cheever, "Facebook and Texting Made Me Do It: Media-Induced Task-Switching While Studying."

⁸ Junco and Cotten, "No A 4 U: The Relationship between Multitasking and Academic Performance."

attentional skills to Facebook usage, there are several significant conclusions. How often people checked status updates was predictive of the results on the working memory test⁹. A continuation of this previous study, with mostly the same team of researchers, expanded on the cognitive aspect by including verbal ability and academic attainment. They found that adolescents who had been using Facebook for over a year scored higher on verbal ability, spelling and working memory than peers who had used it for a shorter time period. As with the working memory test, verbal ability was also predicted by checking status updates of friends¹⁰.

One study developed their survey items from informal discussions with students¹¹. They found that most students feel that Facebook represents a much more natural learning environment than that provided by schools, with more than half of the students stating that they would prefer to receive assignments via messages or posted on a class group. Another study found that using social media actually increased higher learning, especially due to online discussions with peers¹². When students are asked about the possibilities afforded by integrating Facebook, they see communication with other students, access to notes and materials, and schedule views as likely positive outcomes¹³. However, all of the answers given by students in these previous studies were based on pre-determined answers as thought up by the research team. The use of open questions and interview techniques is more applicable for humanities research.

The main topics of humanities research regarding Facebook were gleaned from looking at articles prominent journals of new media science, *New Media & Society* and *Media, Culture and Society*. The topics found here are the role of Facebook in international politics, identity management, opinions on privacy and disclosure, user participation, platform affordances, cultural effects and influences and motivations for use. Examples of this are a comprehensive critical history of social media¹⁴, the role social media in cultural movements¹⁵ or the construction of online identity¹⁶. However, only a very select few were focused on the relationship between Facebook and college students. As a matter of fact, a very recent literature review in *New Media & Society*, on the topic of Facebook, did not make any mention of any research related to academic applications. It also made no distinction between the social sciences or humanities approach, nor what type of data was user to arrive at many of the conclusions¹⁷. This illustrates the earlier mentioned characteristic of new media sciences; given the absence of a clear methodology, sources from various disciplines and research methods are used to find answers.

⁹ Alloway and Alloway, "The Impact of Engagement with Social Networking Sites (SNSs) on Cognitive Skills."

¹⁰ Alloway et al., "Social Networking Sites and Cognitive Abilities: Do They Make You Smarter?"

¹¹ Grosbeck, Bran, and Tiru, "Dear Teacher, What Should I Write on My Wall? A Case Study on Academic Uses of Facebook."

¹² Meyer, "A Comparison of Web 2.0 Tools in a Doctoral Course."

¹³ Ophus and Abbitt, "Exploring the Potential Perceptions of Social Networking Systems in University Courses."

¹⁴ van Dijck, "The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media"

¹⁵ Musa and Willis, "From Twitter to Tahrir Square: Ethics in Social and New Media Communication"

¹⁶ van Dijck, "'You Have One Identity': Performing the Self on Facebook and LinkedIn,"

¹⁷ Caers, Feyter, and Couck, "Facebook: A Literature Review."

While many of these studies are written from different points of view, their results are still relevant for comparison to this sample. There are a few studies that do employ qualitative interviews to examine how college students experience and apply Facebook academically. They are focused on smaller aspects of the experience examined in-depth, such as the value of peer contact¹⁸ or how Facebook compares to a coursework platform in Hong Kong¹⁹. These were used as a reference point with regards to format and the development of questions. When applicable, the results and conclusions from other studies will be compared to the answers of the participants in this study, despite possible epistemological or methodical differences.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants for this study were all University students between the ages of 20 and 26 years old, with an average of around 23 years old. Since bachelor and masters students are on different academic levels, along with different expectations of time spent on school and collaboration with other students, it is to be expected that they utilize Facebook in different capacities. The differences between these groups would give insight into what aspects are dependent on or influenced by workload or having the same group of people in your class consistently. Therefore seven students from the Development and Socialization in Childhood and Adolescence Master's program were recruited for this study. There were also seven bachelor students recruited from a variety of academic backgrounds. The choice for DASCA was made based on practical reasons of access and personal knowledge of academically inclined Facebook use within the class, although preliminary informal interviews indicated that many students knew other masters programs with similar levels of student collaboration and participation via Facebook. Of the fourteen participants, five were male and nine were female.

3.2 Design

Given the exploratory qualitative orientation of this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the main instrument of data collection. The interviews were both transcribed for main points and recorded for details. The practices described in Seidman's guide for interviewing as qualitative research were used as guidelines for this part of the study²⁰. The questions in the interviews were based on the findings in the literature reviews and personal experience of the researcher. Interviews were carried out in Dutch or English, based on participant preference. They lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, with

¹⁸Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, "The Benefits of Facebook 'Friends': Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites."

¹⁹Deng and Tavares, "From Moodle to Facebook: Exploring Students' Motivation and Experiences in Online Communities."

²⁰Seidman. "Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences."

an average of 30 minutes. Since many answers were translated, some phrasing was changed slightly to increase readability, but the content itself has not been modified. To ensure anonymity, participants have been assigned either the letter B for bachelor or M for master, and a number from 1 to 7. After the interviews, the answers were processed an Excel spreadsheet for easy comparison.

4. Interview Analysis

4.1 Basic Facebook use

The time spent online varied greatly between participants. Quite a few participants insisted that they only spent 15 minutes a day on Facebook. Most participants said either half an hour or an hour, with only a few stating an hour and a half or more. Compared to results from a previous study, this is a much lower average²¹. Two master's students noted their lack of Facebook use during their holiday, indicating a clear preference for Facebook academically as opposed to just socially. Two other master's students also spontaneously mentioned having a tab open throughout the day for school related aspects, or checking group work pages continuously, indicating a connection for them between their time spent on Facebook and using it academically.

The main uses varied between participants, but a few of the masters students specifically mentioned school as one of their main uses. Surprisingly, only participant, B1, mentioned posting status updates as one of his uses. Two of the participants in the bachelors did say that they posted on other pages as a moderator, but without signing their names. One important trend that should be noted is the focus on groups. Most of the students stated that they mainly visit Facebook to check for chat and group updates, while only checking the newsfeed for a very short time or whenever they are bored. Groups are becoming more and more important and are being applied for diverse purposes. This illustrates that the main community of Facebook college students is splintering into smaller and more specialized communities, granting them the affordances they are looking for. Participant B5 noted that he has forwarded a large part of Facebook to his email and day planner, allowing him to stay in the loop without having to use the website itself.

Most of the students were unable to specify why they joined Facebook far beyond the simple explanation of "Everyone was doing it". Participant M2 explained her process in more detail:

M2: For a section in the bachelors. I didn't have Facebook before I came to Utrecht. I had no interest or desire to. It scared me. What do I put on it? After meeting my classmates, it turned out they all used Facebook. I thought we'd keep in touch, but I started missing out. That's why I created one.

This feeling of missing out when starting college without Facebook was shared by several participants. The fact that "Everybody was doing it" in and of itself was not the main reason, but

²¹ Junco and Cotten, "No A 4 U: The Relationship between Multitasking and Academic Performance."

missing out due to the transference of social communication to this platform was what persuaded to join. A few others created Facebook to stay in touch with foreign friends they met online or while traveling. Whatever their reasoning was in the past, there was little variation in their answers to their current level of enjoyment.

When asked to what extent Facebook was a gratifying or enjoyable experience for them, most responded negatively. Although many indicated pleasure from keeping in touch with far away friends or the gratifying feeling from finding people you are looking for online, a recurring feeling stated was one of a loss of quality and overload of useless information. Participant M2, who earlier noted joining Facebook due to the feeling of missing out, said that she wouldn't be upset if she had to delete her account. She felt the content didn't give her much gratification and that she would not be missing much.

Two other participants noted an ulterior reason to their lack of enjoyment. They find the ability to continuously monitor each other's lives and behavior disconcerting. The constant gaze of invisible others exerting judgment and surveillance can be compared to Foucault's notion of the panopticon. The panopticon was a prison where a single watchman could observe all prisoners without them knowing they were being watched. Foucault applied this as a metaphor for our society's inclination to observe and normalize behavior of others. The asynchronous communication with multiple audiences makes Facebook an example of a panoptic gaze exerting surveillance²². This gaze spurs a level of performativity and identity management by the user in order to seem desirable, or stay purposefully obscure.

B6: I used to think it was fun. I think because of all the big data issues I now think it's less fun. They know too much about you. Because I see what other people are posting and what conclusions I draw based on that, I do not want people who draw conclusions about me so then I don't post.

It could be that the combined trends of lower quality posts and a decreased desire to share with regards to privacy concerns have spurred the specialization noted earlier when discussing main uses. The ability to create groups of select people for different uses is integral to the way Facebook is currently being applied academically by students.

4.2 Facebook with regards to academic courses

Although it was to be expected given the method of selection for participants, there was a clear difference between the capacity in which bachelor students and masters students applied Facebook for their college courses. Most bachelor students had used it occasionally for particular courses, having created groups and noting the ease of use for collaboration. The master students however, were much more forthcoming about the benefits afforded by the Facebook group they created for their class.

²² Westlake, "Friend Me If You Facebook: Generation Y and Performative Surveillance."

Almost all were overwhelmingly positive about the role of Facebook in their education, some going as far as calling it an integral part of their learning experience. The findings in earlier studies indicating enhanced learning experience and improved communication and collaboration are supported by these answers²³. Among others, participant M2 mentioned the ability to quickly ask multiple people a question by simply posting it to the group.

M2: You post one questions and 19 others can read and react. Everyone's close to their laptop so you have a reply within 5 minutes. You could call, but that's more of a hassle. This way a lot of people can discuss and think about a problem together, it's very dynamic. Even if you weren't there, you can read back what others wrote.

Another benefit that was mentioned multiple times was the lower threshold to ask a question. The ability to ask peers when stuck without the fear of appearing stupid towards teachers had made it easier for some to reach out with the added benefit of a quick response. Earlier research has shown that this lower threshold is especially beneficial for introverted students, evoking less anxiety²⁴.

The ability to upload files easily to a group page or individual peers also allows for easy peer feedback. Although some participants prefer email for actual file transfers, they do state that the initial question is often asked via Facebook. Some bachelor students also applied and valued the ability to easily find people to ask for feedback, several stated that they do not need or want such help. The masters students however, in accordance with their higher level and workload, value the ease at which they can exchange their work.

M4: I've asked my colleagues to look over my papers. And my statistics homework. I really profit from it. I think it's really beneficial. It's difficult sometimes to gauge your own work and know what teachers want. Peer reviews are a nice middle ground, I find it helps to have another set of eyes look over my paper.

Despite the positivity expressed by many students, both masters and bachelors, the initiative has to come from the study body itself. Research has shown that higher education is the one area where Facebook is not being adopted. The main reason for this being faculty reluctance, which contrasts with willingness from the students²⁵. When asked if they had ever been in classes that encouraged Facebook use for the course, almost all bachelor students responded negatively. One bachelor student did note that during an exchange to Portugal he encountered a class that relied heavily on Facebook use, with

²³ Christopher Irwin et al., "Students' Perceptions of Using Facebook as an Interactive Learning Resource at University" and Meyer, "A Comparison of Web 2.0 Tools in a Doctoral Course."

²⁴ Voorn and Kommers, "Social Media and Higher Education: Introversion and Collaborative Learning from the Student's Perspective."

²⁵ Roblyer et al., "Findings on Facebook in Higher Education: A Comparison of College Faculty and Student Uses and Perceptions of Social Networking Sites."

the group page being the only option to upload presentations and hand in assignments. This was different for the masters students, as noted by participant M4.

M4: Yes, my masters program actually set up the Facebook page for us and told us not to use it only to communicate with current colleagues but also former students of our program who were in their second year.

The fact that the program seems to recognize the positive influence of Facebook is further exemplified in the fact that participant M2 noted that especially younger teachers encourage bonding as a group and collaboration via Facebook.

4.3 The curious case of Blackboard

Blackboard is the Course Management System (CMS) used by the University of Utrecht. It consists of an online environment to support teaching and learning, with functions such as assignment submission via file uploading, course information and a discussion board. Although the functionality of Blackboard and Facebook are vastly different, the discussion board shares many similarities with the academic use of Facebook as it is currently applied. The forum serves the purpose of allowing students to ask questions about a variety of topics, usually in pre-defined categories for specific parts of the course. An added benefit is the fact that teachers are also active on the forum for answering questions. In theory, it seems like a great place for students to communicate with each other and the staff. Despite the fact that Facebook was originally designed for college students, its focus is social networking and not academic communication and collaboration. Despite the availability of a dedicated platform cared for by staff, the forums are scarcely used and Facebook groups are the preferred method of communication.

When asking the students about their opinion, the responses from both bachelor and masters students were extremely critical of Blackboard. Although a few did say they appreciated the professional focus of Blackboard, the availability of information about courses, and the ability to submit work with ease, almost none were positive about its communicative abilities. On the other hand, Facebook is being praised for being fast, dependable and easy. Like participant M5 and B5, many complain about Blackboard being difficult to use.

M5: Blackboard is an okay platform for one way communication from the teachers, but it does not have any good format for two-way communication. It's kind of unwieldy. Making a post is much harder than it should be. If you compare that to Facebook, you click the comment space and press enter. It's much easier than navigating to a separate page to make a comment.

B5: On Facebook you can follow many things easier, have oversight, keep it in chronological order and you know what you've already read. In Blackboard, the moment you click on it, it's marked as read or you have to scroll even further. Blackboard is very confusing and not clear at all.

A study in Hong Kong comparing the CMS Moodle to Facebook found similar results. Students felt that Facebook was easier to use and more direct, seeing Moodle as more formal, associating it with homework and preferring not to share ideas there²⁶. Besides these technical problems, students are divided about the desirability of having teachers on the forum. Some participants, like M2, states she never sees teachers online. Participant B7 however, prefers there to be no teachers at all. It is interesting to see that both students and teachers exert a certain panoptic influence to varying heights. This same influence was felt by the students from Hong Kong regarding posting on Moodle.

M2: Teachers say they're online, but I never see them in an active role. If they would answer quick it might have some value compared to asking on Facebook, but now it feels like a black hole for questions that might deliver an answer from someone you don't even know.

B7: If a teacher reads along I have to pay attention to spelling or not asking a stupid question. With just students, it doesn't matter if you ask a stupid question.

4.4 Teachers on Facebook

Given that some students are already troubled by teachers reading their submissions on Blackboard, it is to be expected that they would not welcome teachers in their Facebook communities with open arms. Some students already had experience with teachers on Facebook but these were scarce and usually singular events. These were positive experiences with old teachers from high school or younger teachers that appeared more on their level. Most students however, had not had contact with teachers on Facebook and would like it to stay that way. Though some were quick to react with a resounding no, stating they would not accept a teacher's friend request, others were slightly more reserved.

M5: I don't think I've had contact with teachers on Facebook. I'm not sure, it might kind of diffuse the spheres. I don't think I'd want to. You want to kind of keep separate your own life and university life. It's one thing to have students that are on the same level as you in both spaces. Teachers are supposed to stay in their own lane. If we had teachers on the Facebook page it would influence how the conversation goes. I think Facebook is a place where that shouldn't happen.

Most preferred no teachers on Facebook, and like participant M5, several others also noted the desire to keep their professional academic lives and personal lives separate. A few students were

²⁶ Deng and Tavares, "From Moodle to Facebook: Exploring Students' Motivation and Experiences in Online Communities."

disconcerted by the idea of teachers looking into their whole lives, a recurring trend in these interviews, and one noted that such exposure to students could affect their judgment in class. A possible threat to their ability to speak their minds freely was another main concern. Students wanted to be able to criticize or vent about teachers, discuss recent parties and not have to worry about the exact grammar and spelling.

This almost unanimously negative response to teachers on Facebook goes against what has been found in previous research. A recent study found that interaction with teachers via increased expectations of motivation level, positive learning and a more positive classroom climate²⁷. Although not all participants in that study were positive, it was much more divided than in this sample. Two participants were more positive about the possibility. Participant B3 would have no problems having teachers of smaller courses in Facebook groups and on her friends list, saying she saw how it could benefit her academically. Participant M2 she wouldn't be surprised or troubled by a teachers on Facebook, given the increasing academic use. She saw an alternative Facebook group with the teachers included as a possible middle ground.

4.4 Academic Performance

Given that the effects of Facebook as a distraction have been researched in multiple papers²⁸, as well as its effects on grades²⁹, it seemed an obvious choice to ask students how they see the influence of Facebook on their productivity and academic performance.

Based on the answers in these interviews, whether or not college students use Facebook as a distraction from studying seems to vary greatly from person to person. There were no clear distinctions to be made between masters and bachelors students. Some, like participant B1, seem to be extremely afflicted, while others claim to be more bored by Facebook than school.

B1: Yeah, most of the time. The only time I check Facebook is while I'm in class or doing homework. I'm online a lot then. I check it every morning when I wake up. A lot is going on then. And always during class, sometimes before going to bed.

Participant M1 said that she used to have a lot of trouble with it during her bachelors, but has learned to control the urge. Many do seem to have some level of habitual Facebook use as a method of distraction or procrastination. Those that don't claim to have other websites to fulfill the same procrastinating purpose.

²⁷ Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds, "I'll See You On 'Facebook': The Effects of Computer-Mediated Teacher Self-Disclosure on Student Motivation, Affective Learning, and Classroom Climate."

²⁸ Junco, "Too Much Face and Not Enough Books: The Relationship between Multiple Indices of Facebook Use and Academic Performance."

²⁹ Junco, "The Relationship between Frequency of Facebook Use, Participation in Facebook Activities, and Student Engagement."

B3: It's kind of a reflex for when you're bored to open Facebook and scroll through my timeline. It's pretty distracting for schoolwork. Sometimes I close Facebook, only to open it again immediately after, forgetting I had just closed it.

When asked about how they perceived the influence of Facebook on their academic performance, about half of the participants felt that it had little to none. There was a very clear difference to be seen between the two groups of students for this topic. Several of the masters students felt that Facebook had increased their performance.

M2: I think it improves my performance. Especially because we have so many opportunities to discuss and collaborate. The Facebook group is always available.

Even the master students that felt it had little influence leaned towards the positive side. Participant B3, who was quoted earlier, felt that it had a negative effect, reasoning that her grades would be higher had she put all her Facebook time into academia. Participant B1, who uses Facebook extensively as a distraction as seen earlier, felt like it could be a distraction but with only a little negative effect. Several participants do see a possible threat to performance, but none felt it particularly applied to them and more to others. This could point to a possible blindside for participants like B1, since previous research from multiple sources has established a negative correlation between grades and Facebook use³⁰. This goes against the opinions of most participants in this particular sample, but since it is a very small sample and half the participants function at a very high academic level, this could simply be unrepresentative.

B1: For me, despite those reasons. Maybe a little negatively, but it depends on the person. I am quite conscious about my Facebook use and setting deadlines for myself. For me it doesn't really matter, but I think, I see, other people experiencing the effects and studying less.

4.5 Academic social networking

An important aspect of college life is learning how to work together and collaborate on projects. Since Facebook plays an integral part in the social lives of students, and we have already seen how it aids in collaboration, it is sure to play an important role in social bonding and peer relations. Therefore students were asked about how Facebook influences their bonding with other students, the friendships created within their own discipline, discussions about academic topics and the amount of face-to-face contact with their peers.

Another topic discussed the value of having peers as friends on Facebook with whom they don't interact with outside of school. Many felt it was convenient, with some noting they are not really

³⁰ Kirschner and Karpinski, "Facebook® and Academic Performance."

regarded as close friends. Previous research has found that Facebook can be an important source of social cohesion in the classroom³¹. An interesting point is the fact that participant M6 prefers to ask questions via chat first, and not post them to the main page. The desire to contribute relevant information trumps the desire to be helped, again indicating panoptic influence and identity management in front of their peers.

M6: I like everyone, but don't particularly want them on my personal page or friends list. However, I always want to post something that's relevant. Usually I first ask people via chat, then I don't have to post on the public page. That's why they're on my friends list.

M4: It really helps because people in this country live far away, the girl I work with the most lives really far away. We're both on Facebook on our phones and it's really easy to ask each other questions. It's really easy to keep up a relationship in that sort of way.

When asked if these friends on Facebook actually resulted in more friends in their particular discipline, most students felt it did not really make a difference. Although a few master students did feel like it helped with bonding and forming friendships, all bachelor students felt like it made no difference. Participant B3 felt that contact via WhatsApp was a bigger influence and participant B5 stated that he might be on more friends' lists, but he did not have more friends. On the other hand, participant M6 noted how having a group page spurred them to meet up for drinks or dinner, stating such bonding would not happen without Facebook. To illustrate the individuality of responses, two master students from the same class had very different responses to the same question.

M5: I don't think so. I talk to people from my masters but we're a small group so we would talk to them anyway. I do talk to people on FB but not more than if they weren't on Facebook.

M4: Yeah well we communicate a lot more. We're becoming better friends. I probably wouldn't feel as close to them if we didn't have a connection outside of class.

Almost all of the students discussed academic topics with their peers on Facebook, but to varying degrees of utility and perceived value. Although many bachelors referred back to such communication taking place only on the group pages for them, several masters students felt that these informal discussions contributed greatly to their understanding of the material. The responses by participants M1 and M3 also reiterate the high percentage of Facebook time devoted to academia for some masters students and the lower threshold to ask peers questions as opposed to teachers.

M1: Yeah, a lot. 90% of the conversations I have are related to the course. It helps me to learn, very useful. You get instant feedback, be more productive, you don't get stuck.

³¹ Roblyer et al., "Findings on Facebook in Higher Education: A Comparison of College Faculty and Student Uses and Perceptions of Social Networking Sites."

M3: If I have a specific question, yeah. Especially when thinking about a course related topic. You're both home and you discuss it. You wouldn't pick up the phone, but this is easier. The threshold is very low.

M7: Yeah I also participate in discussions. I think my grades are considerably higher because of it. It keeps you sharp when other people give you their points of view that you might not have considered.

Although such increased connectedness would certainly support increased communication in certain aspects, it might result in less face-to-face contact between students. If you can coordinate group work from the comfort of your own home, why even meet up at all? This philosophy was shared by certain participants, but about half of participants felt it did not matter or ultimately evened out. Perspectives seemed to be dependent on personal variables, with a large variety in answers. The reason many feel it evens out is due to the fact that they could see arguments for either side, with Facebook both increasing and decreasing face-to-face contact for different reasons.

B1: I think more. Because when you need to work together for like three or four weeks, you hear the information from the course, and you add each other on Facebook. You ask each other questions about the course, and because you have more contact in class due to getting to know each other. It's still about school, but you do talk more.

B5: Less. On the one side it's positive to use Facebook a lot. You're in the loop, have fun conversations, and comment or like on each other's posts. If you don't do it, you miss a lot and people form groups without you. It works both ways, it brings people together but also excludes.

M5: I don't think it's influenced a lot. I talk to people online in various ways a lot. I'm not sure what the specific component of Facebook is in that, but I don't feel that internet conversations influence how much I talk to my friends. I don't really remember a pre-internet time. Everything that's adult friendships comes with internet. I can't parse apart how it would be without the internet. Facebook is not different in that respect. It might be less. I'm a pretty introverted person most of the time. I prefer text-based communication. If I didn't have the internet I'd need to see them more often, which serves the same purpose for me. Internet probably makes me see my friends less, so Facebook too, but a world without internet is unimaginable.

The answer of participant M5 raises an interesting point. Many of the answers given by participants might be unreliable with regards to the magnitude of influence Facebook exerts. The inability to

differentiate between a time before and after the internet affects many of the topics discussed in this research.

4.7 Performativity

One of the topics that humanities research has focused on with regards to Facebook has been the performativity aspect of portraying oneself online. Given that previous research has clearly established influences from wanting to portray oneself positively towards others³², the presence of authority figures³³ and privacy concerns³⁴, it would be informative to see if students also see their peers as reasons to speak differently or change how they maintain their personal page.

The majority of students from both bachelors and masters indicate that they do change the way they speak to their peers, as opposed to their regular friends. The main differences that came up repeatedly were being more conscious about spelling, putting more effort into phrasing, being more direct instead of friendly and having more of a filter.

M4: I'm probably a bit more conscious about what I say. With my friends I have less of a filter but with my colleagues I'm a bit more professional.

B1: Yeah, I'm more direct on Facebook. It's clearer to everyone that it's only about school matters. I don't really ask how they're doing. Only about grades and coursework.

B2: I act more professional. I'm a bit more serious, less blunt and a bit more intelligent. I say things that sound intelligent to me, and don't say things that sound less intelligent.

This was certainly not the case for all students however, with several stating there being only a small difference, or none at all, between how they interact with friends and peers. The rationalization for this also varied from person to person. Although some felt that those on their Facebook friends list had already worked themselves up to a level where such limitations on free speech no longer exist, others seek out friends based on being casual thereby sidestepping the problem entirely. One participant mentioned already having a formal baseline for speech. Therefore, she does not have to adapt her speech pattern when talking in a more professional capacity.

Another aspect in which Facebook has been controversial in recent years has been privacy. The increasing awareness of people's own online presence, something several participants have indicated in their answers to previous questions, has been established as influencing what they post. While previous research has focused on the work place, where power dynamics are much more clearly

³² van Dijck, "‘You Have One Identity’: Performing the Self on Facebook and LinkedIn."

³³ Teclehaimanot and Hickman, "What Students Find Appropriate."

³⁴ Special and Li-Barber, "Self-Disclosure and Student Satisfaction with Facebook."

established, seeing if students also perceive such restricting influence from their peers. As discussed previously, none of the participants had posting content as one of their main uses. This meant that many stated that having their peers on Facebook didn't influence what they post because they don't post anything to begin with.

M3: I don't post a lot because you do want privacy. It's not that I'm embarrassed in front of my peers but there are pictures that I don't want to show everyone. Strangers can only see my name on my profile. I also have my 80-year-old grandmother on my list and I take her into consideration more.

As participant M3 states, her family seeing her exploits matters more to her than her peers. This sentiment is shared by several others, with two others mentioning their future employers looking in as a concern. The high impact of employers was also found in a recent study about identity presentation on Facebook³⁵. Not posting due to privacy concerns and wanting to only post relevant information in public places has been seen as responses to earlier questions, as well as an increasing awareness to their one's own online presence. Although their peers viewing their content is something most take into consideration, it is not more influential than their family members or employers.

M4: Yes, but also that has to do with jobs. It's all kind of in the same category. I tend not to post photos of partying or things like that, because I do want to be seen a bit more professionally but colleagues I have on Facebook. I censor myself more now, more than I did at the beginning of college.

4.8 Student perspectives on school policy

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, some classes have started putting restrictions on laptop use in lectures. One of reasons cited for this change in policy was students being distracting by their peers browsing Facebook during lectures. Since laptop usage is extremely prevalent, and the distractions Facebook poses have been well documented, it would be interesting to see how those that would be actually be affected see the situation.

When asking students about the possibility of school policy restricting the use of laptops or blocking Facebook, there were many conflicting opinions. For some, restricting laptops is not a viable option. Several participants state they are dependent on their laptop for taking notes. Those that don't require such electronic assistance, or simply don't take notes, are much less opposed to the idea. This topic is another where there was no difference between bachelor and masters students, and the opinion is based mostly on personal preference and experience. Although some have no problem excising laptops from the classroom entirely, several students like are more reserved and offer solutions to find a fair middle ground.

³⁵ Dimicco and Millen, "Identity Management : Multiple Presentations of Self in Facebook."

B4: I'd say preferably no laptops. A small designated area for laptop users in the classroom. That way they are less distracting for the rest of the class. It's really not acceptable, you don't Facebook in class or you at least do it secretly on your phone.

A similar solution of having designated areas for those using laptops was proposed by others as well. Participant M7 stated that those not wanting to be distracted should go sit in the front row, feeling that the distracted should adapt as opposed to the distractors. In a similar vein, participant M5 felt the system should adapt to the modern day college student. She felt that the current generation grew up differently than the professors, and that the idea that we need to go back to previous days of taking notes is based on a fear of change that doesn't really serve anyone.

With regards to the particular role Facebook plays in the topic of school policy, students are also quite divided. While many students complain about being both annoyed and distracting by their peers being on Facebook in class or in the library, completely blocking access to the social network was seen as too radical by all participants. Even those that complained admitted that it is has become so entwined with and integral to communication between students for group work, that blocking it completely would not be beneficial.

M4: I think Facebook is important on campus. When we work in the library, it's how we communicate with each other. You don't need Facebook during class, so restricting it during lectures is appropriate but not on campus

Like participant M4, almost all students felt that restricting Facebook access during lectures would be acceptable, and would even be appreciated by many, but doubt the technical and practical feasibility of such an endeavor.

5. Conclusion

Given the exploratory nature of this study, it is difficult to speak in terms of conclusive results. Based on the analyzed interviews, Facebook plays an important part in the lives of contemporary college students. Although it is utilized to varying degrees by various people, almost all are positive about its communicative properties. Students do indicate enjoying the platform less these days, having grown tired and accustomed to its content. Having their peers on Facebook makes it easy for students keep in touch, and in some cases build positive working relationships or friendships. It also gives them access to a low-threshold and informal source of help with course material or questions. The specialized Facebook groups for academic and social purposes afford students an easy platform for collaboration, discussion and socializing. The masters students in this sample applied Facebook more for their academic coursework than bachelor students. Most participants feel that teachers have no place on their friends lists or in their groups. Blackboard is regarded as inferior when scored against Facebook on communicative properties. Students utilize methods of identity presentation when talking to peers,

indicating increased professionalism. Influence of the panoptic gaze from fellow students, teachers, family member or employers is seen in many aspects of when and where students post or ask for help. Participants in this study felt Facebook did not affect their performance negatively in most cases, although many did use it as a distraction. Several master students even felt that the increased communication, discussion and shared learning experiences improved their grades. Students are generally positive about the opportunities given by Facebook. This results in students being against campus wide network restrictions on Facebook, but several seeing merit in blocking it in locations where lectures are being held. Students feel similar about laptop restrictions, but many propose a designated area of the classroom for laptop users.

The results from the interviews are, for the most part, congruent with results from previous research. Although many of the conclusions drawn here are not new, they were predominantly based on results quantitative survey studies with pre-defined answer categories. The qualitative format allowed a deeper exploration of the motivations and opinions of the students themselves. Although previous studies found positive attitudes towards teachers on Facebook, participants here were almost unanimously opposed. Opinions of participants also diverged from research findings with regards to the effect of Facebook on GPA. Research has found negative correlations between Facebook use and GPA. However, participants in this study did not perceive these negative effects. Although a few studies have taken a similar student oriented qualitative approach based on interviews, these are scarce and share an important limitation. The small sample sizes make comparing results from other studies a challenge, since a different selection could produce different results. This study has also attempted to look at group differences between bachelor and master students, an unprecedented comparison, but these differences also lack substantial basis due to the small sample size. These limitations do provide many options for future research.

6. Outlook

Due to the small sample sizes, individual differences and limitations due to practical reasons, results can vary greatly between classes, schools and countries. It is therefore still very difficult to provide a definitive yes or no answer to the question if Facebook is an efficient and effective tool for higher education classrooms. More comprehensive samples are needed and standardizing the methodology and variables to measure would increase the generalizability of results. Further exploring the decrease in posting and enjoyment would also be a good avenue of research, especially when relating this to panoptical influences of others and practices identity-management. This study has shown that masters and bachelor students in this sample varied in their perception of Facebook as an academic or social tool and their utilization of the platform for their coursework. Differences in Facebook application between subgroups of college students is an area in which literally no research has been done, both academically and in general. All of these would be good points to start from. Given the ever enormous

prevalence of Facebook in daily life and increasing prevalence as an educational tool, many of these topics are sure to be explored further in the future.

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