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# Who's Reading Your Wall? The Relationships among User Characteristics, Usage and Attitudes Regarding Official Academic Facebook Sites

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# Who's Reading Your Wall? The Relationships among User Characteristics, Usage and Attitudes Regarding Official Academic Facebook Sites

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# WHO'S READING YOUR WALL? THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG USER CHARACTERISTICS, USAGE AND ATTITUDES REGARDING OFFICIAL ACADEMIC FACEBOOK SITES

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## ABSTRACT

*As social networking websites continue to rise in popularity, their role as a communications tool for academic institutions raises intriguing questions. This is especially true of Facebook, which was originally begun as an exclusively college-based social network. Facebook potentially represents an opportunity to cost-effectively communicate with students, faculty and other members of the college community. The goals of this study were to provide descriptive statistics that might aid in better understanding if students currently do or do not visit academic Facebook pages and why they visit those pages, what is most likely to cause them to visit academic Facebook pages, and how universities might best utilize this tool as a means of communication.*

*The implications of that data could be extremely useful, especially in regards to resource allocation and future university communications.*

## INTRODUCTION

Almost since the late 1980's when the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPA-NET) and the National Science Foundation Network (NSFNET) adopted consistent protocols, the event that marks the beginning of the Internet, the Internet has been recognized as a powerful tool (Mackie-Mason, 1994). In that time the Internet has taken on many roles. From e-mail and bulletin boards to online banking and webinars, the possible applications of

the Internet for communication, collaboration, education and commerce are nearly limitless—the key word being “nearly.” In fact, one of the greatest limitations seems to be the willingness of individuals to actually utilize these resources. This fact is commented upon by many studies of the utilization habits, or lack thereof, of online banking and other e-commerce customers. Even Facebook, with its steadily growing international membership, may be underutilized. Although boasting far more members than the previous leader, MySpace, and benefiting from ever in-

creasing visibility, some individuals appear to resist employing Facebook. While users readily post on individual bulletin boards or “walls” and in effect converse in public for all to see, there is still reluctance to being overexposed or vulnerable, either due to a technical glitch or the ill-will of others.

The background and personal characteristics of the users may in fact play a significant role in a user's attitude and usage of Facebook for academic purposes. Age, gender, income level, education, years of Internet usage and other demographic variables all could potentially play a role in this issue.

Academia has begun to confront the issue of social media utilization. This trend can be seen in the steadily growing number of academic conferences and seminars, some of which promoted via accrediting bodies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), where social media is a significant focus. Just as Facebook and other social media outlets could arguably claim to have changed the game for marketing and commercial communications, many are wondering about the implications within the academic community.

Thus, the goals of this study are to provide descriptive statistics that might aid in better understanding if students currently do or do not visit academic Facebook pages and why they visit those pages, what is most likely to cause them to visit academic Facebook pages, and how universities might best utilize this tool as a means of communication.

## BACKGROUND

### Academia & Facebook

Begun at Harvard in 2004 as an online version of the annual Harvard Facebook, a publication with the faces, names, hometowns and intended majors of incoming freshmen, Facebook has evolved into much more (Hoovers Report, 2009). In 2007, Facebook began to allow outside applications, such as slide shows and games. Now open to everyone, users of all ages and demographic backgrounds, Facebook has become a significant company with more than 236 mil-

lion unique visitors, an estimated \$210 million in sales in 2008 and an exclusive relationship with Microsoft as its provider of advertising (Grover & Ante, 2009).

In many cases, in addition to the main university presence on Facebook, its smaller segments also can cultivate a following. For example, take the case of East Tennessee State University (ETSU), a respected regional, public, mid-sized university. In addition to the official Facebook page, there are more than 60 Facebook pages for various organizations, departments and programs related to this specific university, as well as nearly 500 Facebook group pages.

The academic community and online social networking community presents some areas of intersection and concern for universities. Academic libraries are one clear area of intersection between academia and social networks. In their March 2007 article for *Information Technology and Libraries*, *Checking Out Facebook.com: The Impact of a Digital Trend on Academic Libraries*, librarians, Laurie Chanigo and Paula Barnett-Ellis, surveyed 126 academic librarians on their awareness and attitudes towards what they christened, “the Facebook Phenomenon.” The study found that while some librarians were enthusiastic about ways to employ Facebook to promote awareness of their libraries, most consider Facebook to be “outside the purview of professional librarianship” (Chanigo and Barnett-Ellis, 2007, p. 23). An even less favorable article, “Facebook as a Social Search Engine and the Implications for Libraries in the Twenty-First Century,” found Facebook wanting in this capacity (Scale, 2008, p.553). The finding stated,

“Facebook as a people search engine, yields irrelevant results in response to search queries for unknown persons or groups. Facebook may also fail to provide timely and relevant results when attempting to get information from persons with whom the user has a weak relationship.”

The findings also indicate the limitations of users functioning as quasi-librarians as it relates to the quality of information retrieval (Scale, 2008).

Some areas of concern for universities were discussed in the *Intellectual Property and Technology Law Journal* article, “Schools and Social Media: First Amendment Issues Arising from Social Media,” various legal issues are examined and the implications discussed (Broek, Puiszis and Brown, 2009). Issues of freedom of speech, Internet safety, harassment and student bullying, as well as the confiscation of handheld devices, such as web-capable phones are each reviewed. By and large, most suggest that the school has a right to intervene to maintain the orderly functioning of classes.

Not all journal articles on the overlap of social networking and social media are so foreboding. Maria Tess Shier's article, “*The Way Technology Changes How We Do What We Do*,” paints pictures of both opportunities and concerns. While acknowledging the possibility of plagiarism, file sharing of copyrighted material and other inappropriate uses of Internet resources, she goes on to point out the benefits of Facebook to community building, saying,

“As a student's definition of community moves beyond geographic and physical limitations, Facebook.com provides one way for students to find others with common interests, feel as though they are a part of a large community, and also find out about others in their class.” (Shier, 2005, p. 83).

In fact, as of 2005, Shier points out that more than 600 colleges were participating in the Facebook network (2005). The article goes on to state,

“For professors and administrators, Facebook.com can be a way of connecting with students-especially important at institutions where student teacher contact can be limited... Professors or administrators who post a profile on Facebook.com find that it can be a good way for students to get to know them beyond the academic setting, seeing what hobbies or interests the student may share with the professor, which may encourage the feeling of a professor being approachable” (2005, p. 84).

### Online User Attitudes and Characteristics

True to the old axiom, one can lead a horse to water, but one can't make it drink, many online users appreciate the possible advantages and convenience afforded by the Internet, including social media outlets like Facebook, yet balk at fully utilizing these resources. From hesitant bank customers to squeamish shoppers, there have been multiple studies collecting information about these communities and their usage, attitudes, behaviors, concerns and demographic characteristics. These obstacles to usage carry a very real price tag for both the companies, institutions and other entities that expend precious resources attempting to communicate and interact via online options. Also users are likely to be charged extra or otherwise penalized as a direct result of their resistance to online options.

Documented differences of acceptance based on demographic factors offer potential insights. The implications of these insights when applied to students and university community members and their acceptance of university administrators and faculty members using Facebook for official purposes offer a rich area of investigation for this and future studies. For example, in the case of general consumers, a number of factors seem to separate avid e-shoppers from more cautious consumers. For example according to (Kwak, Fox & Zinkhan, 2001), demographic information directly ties to purchase rates indicating that a positive attitude to technology has a direct positive correlation to a consumers' willingness to purchase. Also, a high income level, a high level of education and being a male all increase the likelihood of online purchase. Surprisingly, age was not found to have a significant correlation to the decision to purchase online (Kwak, et al., 2001). Thus, these findings serve to call more attention to investigating demographics and their role in determining who will and will not utilize online resources, such as Facebook.

Perhaps even more surprising, a web user's attitude to web advertising was found not to be related to overall Internet purchasing and not to be as important in explaining web purchasing as Internet involvement (Kwak, et al., 2001). By this standard, an active blogger or social networking participant who despises Internet advertising and electronic commerce in general is still more

likely to make a web purchase than an Internet user who may appreciate the ad but feels less comfortable with the Internet in general, involvement being the key determining characteristic. In another study, *E-Shopping Lovers and Fearful Conservatives: a Market Segment Analysis*, potential online customers were divided into six segments: socializers, e-shopping lovers, e-value leaders, fearful conservatives, averters and tech muddlers (Allred, Smith Swinyard, 2006). The first three actively shopped online, and the second three did not (Allred et al, 2006). While all took part in online activities, each was characterized by certain viewpoints. The study found that the majority of online shoppers were younger, wealthier, better educated, bigger retail spenders offline as well and more "Internet savvy" than online non-shoppers. Also, socializers, who actually prefer to shop in person, but do so online when necessary and e-value leaders, who are bargain focused, are particularly valuable since they are influencers of the buying behaviors of others.

In the case of online non-shoppers, the main concern of the category known as 'averters' wants to see and judge what they buy before they buy it. Unlike, fearful conservatives, who were afraid of using their credit card online, and tech muddlers, who felt they lacked the technical competency, averters are easily converted by influencers. In many ways mirroring the previous study, but focused specifically on the attitude of those who resist Internet banking, *Consumer Resistance to Internet Banking: Postponers, Opponents and Resisters*, from the *International Journal of Bank Marketing* found that those who resist utilizing their banks' Internet resources generally fell into three categories: postponers, opponents and rejectors. (Laukkanen, Sinkkonen and Laukkanen, 2008). While all three expressed fearful attitudes about using online banking, postponers and opponents, both just had not gotten around to it, with the key difference being postponers hoped to sign up sometime in the next year and opponent forecasting more than a year in the future. Rejectors on the other hand were just dead set against the whole concept (Laukkanen et al, 2008).

With such reluctance among many to utilize online resources in general, even the much commented upon area of social networking, there are real questions as to the return on time and mon-

ey invested in such pursuits. As shown in these studies, issues of age, gender, income level, online buying habits, education and even number of years spent on the Internet, all have had varying impacts on the willingness of individuals to use online resources to a greater or lesser degree. Thus, knowing who and how many within the academic community possess a positive attitude towards the academic application of Facebook is vital if future resources are to be invested for maximum effect.

## METHOD

To answer the research question proposed above an electronic survey of students in a mid-sized regional state university in the southeastern United States was performed. Questions regarding academic Facebook sites were specifically used to create a consistent frame of reference among the survey group. Basically, due to the variety of page designs available on some social networking sites, the relative uniformity of Facebook's pages provides a consistency that serves as a control. The electronic survey was developed and administered via student e-mail addresses. Each student is given a university e-mail address upon enrollment. Thus, 9,529 students were sent an e-mail prompting them to take the electronic survey. The response rate was 7.3% with 689 responses; however, the usable response rate was 6.6% with 624 responses after some surveys were removed due to being only partially completed or respondents were not members of Facebook. Although the response rate was lower than expected, the diversity of the sample was good and reflected students from all levels and areas of campus. Upon completion of the survey respondents were given the opportunity to follow a link to a different website to enter their name in a drawing for one of two one-hundred dollar credits at the university book store.

## SURVEY

To qualify the surveys each respondent was asked if they were a member of Facebook. Survey responses indicating that respondents were not members of Facebook were removed since the Facebook is the social media of focus in the present study. The survey administered consisted of

demographic information including the age, gender, current university status (Freshman...Graduate, etc.), highest level of education obtained, and annual income. Respondents were then asked several questions; what is their frequency of visiting the universities Facebook page, reasons why they visited the universities Facebook page, what is most likely to cause them to visit the universities Facebook page in the future, is Facebook an inappropriate media for universities to communicate with students, how often students visited Facebook in comparison with e-mail, and the frequency in which they visited the university career services page.

## RESULTS

### Demographics

Since very little previous literature focusing on the use of university Facebook pages could be found resulting in no basic understanding of student usage, the survey was descriptive in nature to provide such foundational information. Thus, the survey results indicated that the majority of respondents were female students (68.2%) of traditional college student age (61% between ages 18 and 25). In addition, the status of these students were distributed in descending order as follows; Seniors (32.3%), Graduates (22.4%), Sophomores (20.4%), Juniors (17.3%), Not Currently Enrolled (5.7%), and Freshman (2.0%). Annual incomes were commensurate with a traditional college student with 72.2% reporting incomes of 18k per year or less.

### Usage and Attitudes

One primary goal of this study was to better understand why students currently do or do not visit the university Facebook page. Thus, we first asked respondents the frequency in which they visited the university's Facebook page. The results indicated that 66.8% of respondents never visit the university's Facebook page, while 33.2% of respondents answered that they visited the university's Facebook page at least once a month. Next, respondents were asked why they currently are visiting or would visit the university's Facebook page. The following are reasons respondents indicated that they are visiting or would

visit the university's Facebook page in descending order; Career and employment information (20.3%), alumni/student body networking (19.7%), academic research (18.8%), sports information (18.5%), and networking with other colleges within the university (12.2%). Although very few respondents answered anything for 'other', the most frequent response given for 'other' was to find student club or organization information.

To further understand why students would not visit the university's Facebook page, we asked respondents if Facebook was an inappropriate means of communicating with students. 31.2% of respondents believe that Facebook is an inappropriate means for the university to communicate with students, while 42.1% believe that it is an appropriate means of communicating. 26.7% of respondents indicated they were not sure of the appropriateness of using Facebook to communicate.

Respondents were then asked about how often they visited Facebook as a means for communication in comparison with their campus e-mail. Respondents visiting Facebook more than campus e-mail is 24.6% of our sample, while 38.7% of respondents indicated that they visit Facebook about as often as their campus e-mail. 36.6% of respondents said that they visit Facebook less often than their campus e-mail.

We asked students what would cause them to visit university Facebook pages. Responses indicated listed in descending order are; postings by other fans, friends, or members (39.9%), postings by individual college (rather than university) administrators or faculty (39.8%), media rich files (16.2%), links to Facebook applications (10.4%), and nothing (would not visit) (8.3%). The most frequent response for 'other' is class oriented mandatory information.

## DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study was to better ascertain if students currently do or do not visit academic Facebook pages and if they visit those pages, why they visit those pages. The results of this study indicate that students primarily do not visit University Facebook pages since only 208 students of the 624 who responded reported that

TABLE 1 RESPONSE CHARACTERISTICS		
Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
Male	212	31.8
Female	454	68.2
Age		
18 to 25	406	61.0
26 to 35	132	19.8
36 to 45	70	10.5
46 to 55	47	7.1
56 to 65	7	1.1
66 or older	4	0.6
Current University Status		
Freshman	13	2.0
Sophomore	136	20.4
Junior	115	17.3
Senior	215	32.3
Graduate	149	22.4
Not Currently Enrolled	38	5.7
Income (annual)		
Less Than 18K	481	72.2
18K to 30k	74	11.1
30k to 50k	61	9.2
50k to 75k	31	4.7
75k to 100k	15	2.3
More Than 100k	4	0.6
Frequency of Visiting University's Facebook Page		
Never	445	66.8
Once a Month	160	24.0
More Than Once a Week	49	7.4
More Than Once a Day	12	1.8

they visit these pages. To further delineate if and why students visit academic Facebook pages, we asked respondents if they thought Facebook was an inappropriate means of communicating with students. Approximately 58% of respondents are either unsure or believe that Facebook is an inappropriate means of communicating with students, which further explains why many students do not visit academic Facebook sites. In addition, when respondents were asked what would most likely cause them to visit these sites, 8.3%

(Table 1 continued)		
Reason For Visiting University's Facebook Page		
Sports Information	123	18.5
Career/Employment Information	135	20.3
Alumni/Student Body Networking	131	19.7
Networking with Other Colleges	81	12.2
Academic Research	125	18.8
What is Most Likely to Cause You to Visit the University's Facebook Page		
Postings by College Administrators or Faculty	265	39.8
Postings by Other Fans, Friends, or Members	266	39.9
Media Rich Files (Videos)	108	16.2
Links to Facebook Applications	69	10.4
Nothing (would not visit)	55	8.3
Facebook is an Inappropriate Place for Universities to Communicate		
Strongly Agree	84	12.6
Agree	124	18.6
Neutral	178	26.7
Disagree	209	31.4
Strongly Disagree	71	10.7
I Visit Facebook as Often as Campus Email		
More Often Than Email	164	24.6
About as Often as Email	258	38.7
Less Often Than Email	244	36.6

responded that nothing would get them to visit the sites. As a result, the data collected in this study would suggest that universities need to be very judicious in their use of resources directed at developing academic social media sites for purposes of communicating with students since the majority of students do not have a positive view of university social media sites.

Another objective of this study was to ascertain some information on how students who visited academic Facebook sites used those sites. Those

who do visit academic Facebook pages do so as a source of news regarding campus activities. For example, of the 208 students who reported that they do visit the Facebook pages hosted by the University, just over 50% indicated that they visit those pages for career and or sports information and or to stay up to date about news in a particular college. Only 19.7% indicated that they used these pages as a social networking site and only 18.8% visited the pages for research purposes. Thus, this would seem to signify students primarily view academic Facebook pages as a means of one-way communication where they can simply find news about the University.

When students were asked what would most likely cause them to visit academic Facebook sites, approximately 40% indicated that postings by university administrators or faculty would cause them to visit while the same percentage also indicated that postings by individuals outside the university would cause them to visit these sites. Although this is evidently a limitation to our study because we did not collect more detailed information about why these two groups would cause students to visit academic sites, taken in the context of the rest of the study some explanations may be inferred. First, if one considers that most respondents do not visit these sites and most have a neutral to negative view on the use of Facebook by universities, those who reported that they would visit as a result of postings by administrators or faculty may do so because those postings may be regarding something centered on the students' classes which they may feel obligated to view. This may be further supported by the evidence which indicates that many students use these sites to learn about university news. For those students who indicated that they would visit academic Facebook sites as a result of postings by those outside of the university may do so as a form of networking. This relative enthusiasm for pages with regular posting may be due to the perception that such postings indicate the presence of timely and relevant information. Whether posted from sources within or external to the university community, active and regular posting may serve to both attract attention and create an air of credibility.

These findings may be colored by the two limitations of how the online survey was adminis-

tered. First, the survey itself was voluntary with a reasonable incentive, the chance to win a gift certificate to the university bookstore. If a different incentive was used or participation was somehow mandatory a larger community may have presented itself and offered insights. Second, the survey itself was administered on a site designed for traditional laptop and desktop computers. As a result those members of the university community who favor handheld devices may in fact be under represented. Yet, even with these limitations, the facts themselves reveal some rich areas of inquiry waiting for exploration as well as clear implications for current administrators. Some of these, offer a very different perspective than might be expected based upon other sources.

CONCLUSION

Given the data that was collected in the present study, we offer the following suggestions for university administrators charged with developing or maintaining an academic social media site. First, it would appear that currently a majority of students have a neutral to negative attitude towards academic Facebook sites. Thus, careful attention should be paid to the amount of resources, especially time, that is committed to developing or maintaining university social media sites. Until a majority of students have a positive attitude towards the use of social media sites by universities, it may not make sense to devote much resource to these sites.

The second suggestion is to use social media not for what it was originally developed for, which is, staying in touch with others, but as a means of one-way communication. Most students who visit university social media sites do so to keep caught up on news on campus. Therefore, universities might be wise to begin to reduce the resources traditionally used for print media and begin transitioning that same information to social media sites. This would most likely lower costs and free up valuable resources for many parts of the university.

An additional suggestion for those charged with developing or maintaining social media sites on campus would be to not get over zealous regarding its use. According to our data, just over 75% of respondents indicated that they visit Facebook

about as much as or less often than their campus e-mail, which is contrary to speculations by many in academia that e-mail is an outdated means of communication for most current students. This is particularly important when one considers that 61% of our respondents are 25yrs of age or younger. Thus, it would appear that social media has not quite eclipsed e-mail as a major means of communication by current students and may not do so for many years. Therefore, university administrators should not abandon this form of communication in lieu of social media.

The final suggestion for using social media in universities is to survey students. Although the present study helped to answer some specific questions of concern at a particular university to help better use the resources devoted to social media sites, it is a good start but further surveys are needed for true customization of these sites. We feel confident that our suggestions are valid for most other universities; however, a simple survey of current students would help to further customize any university's social media sites to its student body.

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### **Business Disciplines**

We encourage the submission of manuscripts, presentation outlines, and abstracts pertaining to any business or related discipline topic. We believe that all disciplines are interrelated and that looking at our disciplines and how they relate to each other is preferable to focusing only on our individual 'silos of knowledge'. The ideal presentation would cross discipline borders so as to be more relevant than a topic only of interest to a small subset of a single discipline. Of course, single domain topics are needed as well.

### **Conferences**

Academic Business World (ABW) sponsors an annual international conference for the exchange of research ideas and practices within the traditional business disciplines. The aim of each Academic Business World conference is to provide a forum for the discussion of research within business and reference disciplines in the social sciences. A secondary but important objective of the conference is to encourage the cross pollination of disciplines by bringing together professors, from multiple countries and disciplines, for social and intellectual interaction.

Prior to this year, the Academic Business World International Conference included a significant track in Learning and Administration. Because of increased interest in that Track, we have promoted Learning and Administration to a Conference in its own right. For the full call for papers and more information go to <http://ABWIC.org> and <http://ICLAHE.org>

All too often learning takes a back seat to discipline related research. The International Conference on Learning and Administration in Higher Education seeks to focus exclusively on all aspects of learning and administration in higher education. We wish to bring together, a wide variety of individuals from all countries and all disciplines, for the purpose of exchanging experiences, ideas, and research findings in the processes involved in learning and administration in the academic environment of higher education.

We encourage the submission of manuscripts, presentation outlines, and abstracts in either of the following areas:

### **Learning**

We encourage the submission of manuscripts pertaining to pedagogical topics. We believe that much of the learning process is not discipline specific and that we can all benefit from looking at research and practices outside our own discipline. The ideal submission would take a general focus on learning rather than a discipline-specific perspective. For example, instead of focusing on "Motivating Students in Group Projects in Marketing Management", you might broaden the perspective to "Motivating Students in Group Projects in Upper Division Courses" or simply "Motivating Students in Group Projects" The objective here is to share your work with the larger audience.

### **Academic Administration**

We encourage the submission of manuscripts pertaining to the administration of academic units in colleges and universities. We believe that many of the challenges facing academic departments are not discipline specific and that learning how different departments address these challenges will be beneficial. The ideal paper would provide information that many administrators would find useful, regardless of their own disciplines

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