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# Facebook on College Campuses: Usage and Opinions of the Social Networking Site among College Students

Kyle E. Smets

*Social Networking sites have emerged as college students' number one source of communication. Facebook, ranked the number one SNS among college students, has gone from a student-only environment to the general public. In addition to exploring how college students are using the site, I explore if students' sex and year in school play a significant role in opinions about the site and how it is being used. Through a sample of 149 undergraduate college students, findings suggest that students seem to be using Facebook in the same ways and for the same reasons with little variation. Furthermore, my research proves that certain opinions of Facebook vary with students' sex and year in school by older students have strong opinions of who is using the site and negative implications with females being more cautious of their privacy.*

## Introduction

Throughout the last decade, computers have been a staple in American's everyday lives. The emergence of computer mediated communication, or CMC, has shaped the way in which human beings interact with one another, especially young people. First letter writing became a thing of the past with the appearance of electronic mail, or e-mail. Next came the disappearance of phone conversations with the introduction of instant messaging. The most recent development in CMC is social networking sites, or SNS. Different social networking sites aim for different contexts whether it is job-related, romantically related, or aimed at a specific age group. These sites allow people to create online profiles and communicate with one another and discuss and share ideas (Raacke and bonds-Raacke 2008). One SNS in particular, Facebook.com, was originally created for and is incredibly popular among college students. Students who register with the site are able to not only create an online profile, but can express their likes and interests on their profile, upload pictures, join groups to connect with others with similar interests, and accumulate "friends" who are able to post comments on their pages and vice versa (Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe 2007). Because of this extreme popularity and use, the SNS has been opened to the public

and anyone can access or register with the site. Around 80% of college students use the website, and collectively college students have ranked Facebook.com as their number one source of communication above everything including phone and e-mail (Stern and Taylor 2007). Although Facebook was originally a college student only website, it has translated to the wider population and has become a dominant form of major communication among all different types of people. This is also a new phenomenon, and very little research and exploration has been done on the topic. Aside from the larger population, I seek to discover how are students using Facebook, and what are their perceptions of Facebook and how it is used? The results of this study will either prove or disprove the idea that opinions of Facebook and its usage are varied with students' sex and year in school.

## **Literature Review**

### *Facebook in Comparison to Other Social Networking Sites*

Although there are many different social networking sites on the internet, Facebook.com is the most popular among college students. Ellison et al. (2007) stressed the importance of studying the Facebook population because it “represents an understudied *offline to online* trend in that it originally primarily served a geographically-bound community (college campuses)” (p. 1144). Other social networking sites, such as Myspace.com, Friendster.com, or LinkedIn.com, do not have the close-quartered population of users that Facebook aims to bring together; rather they aim to connect people from all around the country or the world. A strong purpose of Facebook is to bring together college students online so that relationship can translate offline as well. Although not *all* college students are students are Facebook users, those who do use the site represent a larger portion of students compared to other SNSs. Hargittia’s (2008) study of

college students SNS usage distinguishes the difference of those who are SNS users, and more specifically Facebook users. The sample from the University of Illinois showed that 88% of them were SNS users, with 78.8% of that percentage being Facebook users. Raacke and Bonds-Raacke's (2008) showed similar results from a study of 116 students of an east coast university and found that 87.1% of the sample had an SNS account, and 90.1% of those accounts were with Facebook. Ellison et al. (2007) found that 94% of their 800 undergraduate student sample had a Facebook account along with Stern and Taylor (2007) who found that their sample of 532 students contained 70% Facebook users. This data makes clear that students are in fact using other social networking sites, but dominant populations of students are using Facebook.com as their SNS.

### *Student Usage of Facebook*

With Facebook.com being the most popular social networking site among college students, it is important to understand why this is so and how these students are using the website. By understanding the usage among these students, there could be a clearer comprehension of why populations outside of college students want to use the SNS. Through their studies, Stern and Taylor (2007), Hargittai (2008), Ellison et al. (2007), and Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) all reported that the most common finding of why students have a Facebook account was to keep in touch with old, or high school, friends. Ellison et al. (2007) reiterate that "students use Facebook primarily to maintain existing offline relationships or to solidify what would be ephemeral temporary acquaintanceships." (1155). This research demonstrated that students use this particular SNS to keep in touch with and maintain an existing relationship with those who may not be in their close quarters such as their college campus, and to further communicate with those *are* within their close quarters in order to strengthen the new relationship. Although

keeping in touch with pre-existing offline relationships was the most popular use among sampled students, there were other commonly recorded answers within the samples as well. Among these other popular uses were “making plans, checking out people (to find out more about them), checking up on their current boy/girlfriend, entertainment, and procrastination” (Stern and Taylor 2007:13), “to post/look at pictures, to make new friends, and to locate old friends” (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 2008:171). In their 2007 study, Stern and Taylor also acquired other student uses that were although uncommon, still reflected the motivation behind some of the students uses for the site which included answers of “to find out more about the girl I slept with the night before, to get random play or friends with benefits, to make people jealous, to be mean to someone, or to write mean rumors about people and defame people’s characters, although sometimes the rumors are actually facts” (p. 13). These answers reflect that although there is a majority answer of why students use the SNS, not everyone has the same ideas and motivations behind their usage.

### *Student Opinions of Facebook*

One aspect of Facebook usage that college students may have a strong opinion on is who, other than themselves, is using the site. Having gone from a student-only site to the larger population may feel like a threat to students. For example, Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007) did a study on 133 undergraduate students at a Midwestern university on their perceptions and opinions of professor usage and self-disclosure on Facebook. This study was set up for students to view one professor’s Facebook page with different degrees of self-disclosure. The results concluded that the more information the professor self-disclosed, the more positive comments they would receive from the viewers of the pages. Mazer et al. (2007) went on to explain through their findings that “when a teacher self-discloses certain information, such as personal pictures,

messages from friends and family, and opinions on certain topics, students may perceive similarities between themselves and the instructor” (p. 13). Although the sample felt that self-disclosure on Facebook was a positive thing for professors to do, Mazer et al. indicated that the professor must be consistent with their teaching style in relationship to how they displayed themselves. Professors that showed high self-disclosure and portrayed themselves in laid back atmospheres through informal photographs and messages but maintain a strict classroom atmosphere could have strong negative effects on the student-professor relationship (Mazer et al. 2007).

Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell (2008) also did a study that reflected certain student opinions of Facebook. Tong et al. sought to understand how the idea of “friends” on Facebook affected students’ perceptions of their peers. The conducted study contained 153 undergraduate students that were directed to a certain Facebook page where all aspects remained constant except for the amount of friends the user had, which were 102, 302, 502, 702, and 902. This study found that when students noticed the amount of friends that their peer had, their social attractiveness either went up or down. The page that contained a count of 102 friends was rated with a low level of social attractiveness. The highest rating of social attractiveness was with the page that contained the friend level 302, and proceeded to go down from there, almost matching the 102 and 902 friend levels with the same amount of social attractiveness (Tong et al. 2008). These conclusions draw the explanation that student do in fact judge their peers social attractiveness based on how they are using Facebook. “Individuals with too many friends may appear to be focusing too much on Facebook, friending out of desperation rather than popularity, spending a great deal of time on their computers ostensibly trying to make connections in a computer-mediated

environment where they feel more comfortable than in a face-to-face social interaction” (Tong et al. 2008: 542).

## **Methods**

### *Hypothesis & Methodology*

H0: Opinions of Facebook and its usage are not varied with students’ sex and year in school.

H1: Opinions of Facebook and its usage are varied with students’ sex and year in school.

The method used for this study was a pen and paper survey. The survey was comprised of 23 questions split into three sections. Section one asked of the participants’ demographic information which included their sex, year in school, state residency status, campus residency status, and major. All of these indicators were important for understanding the diversity among the participants and to be certain the sample wasn’t biased by any factors. Section two asked about the participant’s usage of Facebook through questions about account holding status, times per week they use the site, how much time they spend on the site, reason for having an account, what they do while using the site, privacy settings, and friend information. This section sought to get a full understanding on students’ usage and if there was any significant variation within the sample. Section three asked about opinions using a 5 point Likert scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. This section asked opinions of parent/professor usage, personal and peer judgment of popularity, privacy considerations, and negative implications. The “Neutral” option of the Likert scale was considered for removing, however because the section asked for opinions it was important to represent those students who simply did not have an opinion on the question that was being asked.

The quantitative survey method was used in order to connect patterns in the research. The participants had options they could choose from instead of writing in their own personal feelings or opinions so that the conclusions that were to be drawn could be compared. The survey was confined to the 23 questions for time purposes, and also to make sure the participant didn't feel anxious or that it was tedious. The sectioning of the survey was also important to give the participants breaks in the questions and topics being asked about.

### *Sample*

The sample was comprised of 149 undergraduate UNH students. The students that were sampled were enrolled in the classes that were randomly selected from the master list of the time and room schedule for all Fall 2008 courses. The first class was randomly sampled with a random number generator and chosen among all the offered courses at the university. However, after obtaining the surveys and choosing more classes this way, not enough diversity was being sampled; the class sizes were too small, there were biases in year in school, sex, and major as well. From there, another list of the large general education classes being offered was compiled and another random number generator led me to my final sample. The course offered a large number of students from different majors, sexes, and ranges from Freshmen to Seniors.

### *Variables*

For this study, two major independent variables were assessed: sex and year in school. These two variables were the most important in understanding how uses and opinions of Facebook differ between the sexes and students year in school. The dependent variables that were assessed included measures of account status, use of account, time occupancy, privacy issues, parent/professor usage opinions, personal/peer judgment, and negative implications. These variables will give insight on the patterns in usage among students and if there is any significant



differences among them. The variables will also make clear any patterns that indicate significant differences in opinion based on the dependant variables.

**Results**

*Section One: Demographic Findings*

The demographics of the sample gave insight to who was taking the survey. The results showed that there were no biases when it came to the participants of the survey and included percentages from each demographic option. Sex of the participants was represented on both sides, 34% male and 65% female. Each year in school was also significantly represented; 20% Freshmen, 42% Sophomores, 19% Juniors, and 18% Seniors. Other important demographical characteristics of the sample included in-state or out-of-state residents (48% to 51% respectively), on campus residents or off campus residents (67% to 32% respectively), and a representation of 21 different majors.

*Section Two: Usage Findings*

**Table 1: Account Holders and Non-Holders**

Do you have a Facebook Account?	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Yes	144	96.64	96.64
No	5	3.36	100.00
Total	149	100.00	

Table One shows that the vast majority of the sample had a Facebook account. Of the 5 participants that indicated that they did not have an account, 2 people never had one and 3 people

used to have them but deleted them for the reasons of “I decided I didn’t really need it anymore”, “I think Facebook is a waste of time”, and “it’s immature and people suck”. The majority of the sample, 74%, said that they check their Facebook account everyday and 81% said that they spend less than one hour on Facebook with each use.

**Table 2: Students’ Reason for Using Facebook**

Reason For Using	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
To keep in touch with old friends	66	47.48	47.48
To meet new people	12	8.63	56.12
To make plans with people	13	9.35	65.47
To keep tabs on boy/girlfriend	2	1.44	66.91
To find out more about people	16	11.51	78.42
To post and look at pictures	19	13.67	92.09
Other	11	7.91	100.00
Total	139	100.00	

As seen in Table Two, there is little variation when it comes to how students are using the site. As previous research indicated, most students are using the site to keep in touch with old friends. There was also little variation when students were asked what activity on Facebook occupies the most amount of their time. 52% of the sample said their time on Facebook was mostly occupied by “looking at pictures”, followed by 30% saying it’s “keeping up with friends (writing on walls, writing messages, etc)”. The majority of the sample, 84%, claimed that their Facebook profiles had privacy settings and only their friends could see their page. 37% of the sample said that they

had over 400 friends on Facebook, followed by 19% claiming to have 300-400 friends. Of those friends, 50% of the sample said they knew at least 75% of the friends that they had on Facebook.

### *Section Three: Opinion Findings*

This section sought to understand the patterns of opinions when it came to the participant's sex and year in school. The first opinion question asked participants opinion on the statement that "Facebook should only be used by college students". This question seemed to have larger numbers on the agree side for older students as well as females. 62% of the females sampled were on the agreeing side of this statement compared with 29% of males sampled. Older students also seemed to agree more with this statement with 76% of seniors in agreement compared with 44% of freshmen students. This pattern also held true when it came to the statements of "I think it is inappropriate for teachers or professors to use Facebook" and "I think it is inappropriate for parents to use Facebook". 52% of females agreed with the professor statement compared with 19% of males. In conjunction with this statement, 50% of seniors agreed as opposed to 30% of freshmen. As for the opinions about parent usage, 62% of females agreed compared with 38% of males; however there was no statistical significance for year in school with this statement with a percentage of 56% of seniors on the agreeing side and 50% of freshmen.

As for the questions of peer and personal judgment of popularity, there was no statistically significant difference when it came to opinions based on sex and year in school. When given the statement "In order to look popular, I try to have as many friends as possible", 92% of the sample disagreed. The statement "In order to look popular, I try to tag myself in as many pictures as possible" had 87% of the sample on the disagreeing side. 72% of the sample claimed that they do not think people judge their popularity based on different aspects of the Facebook page (number of friends they have, number of pictures they are tagged in, wall posts, etc). On the

other side of that question, 80% of the sample claimed they do not judge their peers popularity based on these measures.

**Table 3: “I withhold certain things about myself in my information section for privacy reasons”**

	Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
Strongly Agree	26.00%	42.55%	36.81%
Somewhat Agree	32.00%	41.49%	38.19%
Neutral	16.00%	8.51%	11.11%
Somewhat Disagree	14.00%	5.32%	8.33%
Strongly Disagree	12.00%	2.13%	5.56%

Table 3 represents a significant difference in opinion when it comes to privacy between males and females. 84% of the female sample were on the agreeing side of the statement and opposed to only 58% of the males sampled. In relation to this subject, the participants were given the statement “I think about who might be looking at my Facebook page (such as parents, teachers, employers, etc) when putting up info and pictures of myself”. Although there wasn’t a large difference between the sexes, females still were more on the agreeing side than males, 72% to 66% respectively.

**Table 4: “I consider any negative implications my Facebook might have on people’s opinions and perceptions of me”**

	Year				Total
	Fr.	Soph.	Jr.	Sr.	
Strongly Agree	10.53%	18.42%	22.22%	36.84%	21.28%
Somewhat Agree	42.11%	47.37%	55.56%	26.32%	43.62%
Neutral	26.32%	23.68%	22.22%	15.79%	22.34%
Somewhat Disagree	5.26%	7.89%	0.00%	5.26%	5.32%
Strongly Disagree	3%	1%	0%	3%	7%

Although there is no statistically significant difference amount considerations of negative implications according to year, there are a few things that should be pointed out (refer to Table 4). Among the “Strongly Agree” opinion, seniors held the largest representation with 36.84%; also the “Somewhat Agree” opinion had the largest representation of juniors with 55.56%.

Although there isn’t much variation, it is still important to note that the older students were more agreeing with considering negative implications of their Facebook accounts.

**Discussion**

Throughout this research, conclusions can be drawn students uses and opinions of Facebook. The findings show that there is no statistically significant difference when it comes to how students are using Facebook; no matter what their sex or year in school, students seem to be using the

SNS in the same ways and for the same reasons. However, patterns can be drawn when it comes to the opinions students have on Facebook and its uses; the opinions do in fact vary with students sex and year in school.

When it comes to uses of Facebook, the research done in this study did not show anything statistically worth noting. As noted in my previous research, students seem to be using Facebook in the same ways. Facebook remains a way for students to keep in touch with not only their old friends, but to solidify relationships with their new friends.

However, the research findings were able to make a connection between students' age and sex and their opinions of the site and usage. The fact that older students feel that the site should only be used by students and that professor and parent usage is inappropriate is something to take into consideration. When these older students first started using the site, it was only open to college students and the public was not yet allowed to use the site. The younger students may have been using the site since they were in high school and because of this they may feel that it is fine for other people besides college students to use Facebook. Females also represented a large percentage when considering who is viewing their Facebook page. A conclusion that could be drawn from this is that females *need* to be more cautious of what is on their site with the emergence of stalkers and sexual predators on the internet. On the other hand, females were more like to say it was inappropriate for their parents or professors to use the site because they might not want these certain people to see what they're doing while they are at college. Another thing to take into consideration is that older students are more aware of negative implications that their Facebook page may have on them. Older students such as juniors and seniors are preparing for internships, interviews, and careers. Students might be aware that their future

employers might be looking at the Facebook and may take into consideration that they may not be a great candidate based on what is on their page or how they display themselves.

All in all, returning to the research question and hypothesis, we can in fact state that students' sex and year in school do effect how they use Facebook and their opinions of Facebook. The study could have been improved with any qualitative research. Through interviewing college aged Facebook users, there could be more variance with opinions in relation to what students think about certain topics. Future research on this topic could include not only more qualitative studies, but possibly various samples from different parts of the country to see if students all across the country are using the site in the same way.

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Hello Everyone! My name is Kyle Smets and I am a senior here at UNH studying Sociology. I have developed this survey for my Social Research Methods class and want to thank you for your participation. The purpose of his survey is to get a better understanding on how students are using social networking sites such as Facebook. I am interested in learning students opinions of various aspects of Facebook, how they are using the site, and what this means for future computer mediated communication. Please know that this survey is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you don't want to, and may stop at any point you feel uncomfortable. Also know that your participation is completely anonymous; at no point in the survey does it ask for any personal or identifying information that could lead me back to you and your answers. When you are finished with your survey, please drop it into the box at the front of the room. If you have any questions regarding this survey or its results, feel free to contact me at [kem33@unh.edu](mailto:kem33@unh.edu). Any further questions or concerns you have can also be directed to my professor, Catherine Moran, at [clmoran@unh.edu](mailto:clmoran@unh.edu). Again, thank you for your cooperation and participation.

## Part One: Demographics

Please circle your answers

- 1) What is your sex?
    - a) Male
    - b) Female
  
  - 2) What is your year in school?
    - a) Freshman
    - b) Sophomore
    - c) Junior
    - d) Senior
  
  - 3) Are you an in-state student or out-of-state student?
    - a) In-State
    - b) Out-Of-State
  
  - 4) Do you live on campus, meaning either one of the dorms or the on-campus apartments?
    - a) Yes
    - b) No
  
  - 5) Please write your major below. Please write "Undeclared" if you have yet to declare a major.
-

## **Part Two: Uses of Facebook**

**Please circle the answer that best describes you**

1) Do you have a Facebook account?

- a) Yes
- b) No

1a) Have you EVER had a Facebook account? That is, did you have one at one time then decided to delete your account?

- a) Yes
- b) No

1b) If you answered Yes, why did you decide to delete your account?

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*If you do not have a Facebook account, you are done with this survey. Thank you.*

2) How many times a week do you check your Facebook account?

- a) 1-2
- b) 2-4
- c) 4-6
- d) Everyday

3) How many total hours do you spend on Facebook each time you use it?

- a) Under 1 hour
- b) 1-3 hours
- c) 3-4 hours
- d) Over 4 hours

4) What would you say is your main reason for having a Facebook account?

- a) To keep in touch with old friends
- b) To meet new people
- c) To make plans with people
- d) Keep tabs on boyfriend/girlfriend
- e) To find out more about people
- f) To post and look at pictures
- g) Other (Please Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

- 5) When you are on Facebook, which of these occupies the most amount of time?
  - a) Looking at pictures
  - b) Checking people's updated profiles
  - c) Keeping up with friends ( writing on walls, writing messages,etc)
  - d) Updating my profile and/or photos
  - e) Looking through and sending bumper stickers
  - f) Other (Please Specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
- 6) What are your privacy settings on Facebook?
  - a) Public; Everyone can see my page
  - b) Private; Only my friends can see my page
  
- 7) How many friends do you have on Facebook?
  - a) Under 100
  - b) 100-200
  - c) 200-300
  - d) 300-400
  - e) Over 400
  
- 8) Of all the friends you have on Facebook, how many would you say you actually know?
  - a) 25%
  - b) 50%
  - c) 75%
  - d) 100%

### **Part Three: Opinions of Facebook**

**Please circle the answer that you most agree with**

- 1) I think that Facebook should only be used by college students.

Strongly Agree

Somewhat Agree

Neutral

Somewhat Disagree

Strongly Disagree

- 2) I think it is inappropriate for teachers or professors to use Facebook.

Strongly Agree      Somewhat Agree      Neutral      Somewhat Disagree      Strongly Disagree

3) I think it is inappropriate for parents to use Facebook.

Strongly Agree      Somewhat Agree      Neutral      Somewhat Disagree      Strongly Disagree

4) In order to look popular, I try to have as many friends as possible.

Strongly Agree      Somewhat Agree      Neutral      Somewhat Disagree      Strongly Disagree

5) In order to look popular, I try to tag myself in as many pictures as possible.

Strongly Agree      Somewhat Agree      Neutral      Somewhat Disagree      Strongly Disagree

6) I think that people judge my popularity by my Facebook (number of friends I have, number or pictures I have or am in, wall posts, etc.)

Strongly Agree      Somewhat Agree      Neutral      Somewhat Disagree      Strongly Disagree

7) I judge peoples popularity by their Facebook page (number of friends they have, number of pictures they have or are in, their wall posts, etc.)

Strongly Agree      Somewhat Agree      Neutral      Somewhat Disagree      Strongly Disagree

8) I withhold certain things about myself in my information section or untag pictures of myself for privacy reasons.

Strongly Agree      Somewhat Agree      Neutral      Somewhat Disagree      Strongly Disagree

9) I think about who might be looking at my Facebook page (such as parents, teachers, employers, etc) when putting up info and pictures of myself.

Strongly Agree      Somewhat Agree      Neutral      Somewhat Disagree      Strongly Disagree

10) I consider any negative implications my Facebook might have on people's opinions and perceptions of me.

Strongly Agree      Somewhat Agree      Neutral      Somewhat Disagree      Strongly Disagree

*Congratulations! You have completed the survey. Thank you for your participation!*