

Crossing Boundaries: Identity Management and Student/Faculty Relationships on the Facebook

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ABSTRACT

This poster describes preliminary results from an ongoing investigation of student/faculty relationships in the online community Facebook. In spring of 2006, a survey was conducted in two large courses at a mid-sized public research university to understand how contact on Facebook was influencing student perceptions of faculty. We found that contact on Facebook had no impact on students' ratings of professors. We found it striking that one third of the students we surveyed did not believe that faculty should be present on the Facebook at all. Some raised concerns about identity management and privacy issues. We discuss the implications of these findings and the potential for further research in the area.

Keywords

Online communities, social networking software, identity management

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic communities are places where intricate hierarchies, rich organizational traditions, and interpersonal ties are supported through the use of many different communication channels. (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1998). When online communities begin to complement existing channels for social interaction, aspects of everyday practices are often cast into sharp relief as community members integrate new channels of communication into their daily lives.

Facebook is an online social networking community that has become popular at academic institutions. Members can create profiles about themselves, create and join groups with other members, make "friends," and share pictures and messages. Although it is difficult to determine precise adoption rates (the site has not made quantitative data available on a per-university basis), Stutzman found 90% saturation among undergraduate students at one college (2006). A Facebook representative reported that 85% of students at participating institutions have accounts and 60% of these log in on a daily basis (Arrington, 2005). Facebook seems to have become a pervasive element of students' lives; as such, the potential exists for it to have a significant impact on social practices in academic environments.

Faculty members are also creating accounts and communicating with students on Facebook. Because there is no way of knowing whether a given account on Facebook was created by the person

whom it purportedly represents, it is difficult to establish precisely how many legitimate faculty accounts exist. Through personal contacts, we learned that some faculty members at various institutions are establishing accounts as a way of connecting with students. We heard anecdotes about increased communication and friendlier relationships with students.

These observations raised questions: "How are student/faculty relationships affected by interaction on Facebook, if at all?" and: "What does the social landscape look like when faculty begin to frequent an online place where students regularly socialize?" Because social networking communities are built to support presentation of self, identity management is likely to be a significant issue for participants in communities whose membership crosses perceived social boundaries and organizational power relationships.

2. QUESTIONS & METHODS

To begin to explore student-faculty relationships on Facebook, we designed a two-year study, the first half of which has been completed. In the first year, we conducted a survey both to investigate links between student perceptions of faculty and encounters with faculty on the Facebook, and to establish baseline data about students' attitudes toward faculty presence on the site.

We recruited participants in two undergraduate courses whose professors had established Facebook profiles for at least six months. The survey was announced as a study on student/faculty relations with no mention of Facebook. The survey first covered general perceptions of the professor, of teaching style, and of the class overall. Then participants were asked basic demographic data such as age, gender, and class attendance. Finally, we inquired whether or not respondents were on Facebook, and whether or not they had seen their professor on the site. If they had, there were several questions about the interaction that took place. We also asked students if they thought that faculty should be on the Facebook and why or why not.

3. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Of the 176 students enrolled in the classes that were surveyed, 136 students responded (77%). Of those, 106 students (79%) were on the Facebook. Of the students who were on Facebook, 38 (36%) had seen the professor's profile, and 20 (19%) were "friends" with the professor on the site.

Students rated their professors on five facets, which were then averaged together to get a holistic rating of the professor. We found that contact with the professor on the Facebook had neither a significant positive nor negative affect on students' ratings. (2T

T-Test, 99% confidence) (See also Table 1). The average rating by students who had not seen their professor on Facebook was 4.7 on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 was the highest rating. The average rating by students who had seen the professor on the Facebook was also 4.7. Ratings on individual facets also did not vary significantly for either class.

Table 1: Students' Ratings of Professors

Overall Rating	Contact on the Facebook			
	Seen Prof.	Not Seen Prof.	Friends w/Prof.	Not Friends
Low (1-2)	0	< 0.1%	0	< 0.1%
Mid (2.1-3.9)	12.2%	13.8%	15.0%	13.0%
High (4-5)	87.8%	85.1%	85.0%	86.0%

We believe that a ceiling effect may be at play. These professors are highly respected and extremely well-liked by students regardless of their online activities. Despite the consistent ratings of professors, some students self-reported that Facebook interaction had had a positive impact on their perception of the professor. No students reported that the Facebook had had a negative effect.

We found that students had mixed reactions to the presence of faculty on the site. Most (66%) of the 102 students who answered the question "Do you think faculty should be on Facebook?" indicated that faculty presence was acceptable. Many of the remaining 33% raised identity management or privacy issues in written comments. Interestingly, gender seems to be a predictor of comfort with faculty on the site—men were over twice as likely to condone faculty presence on Facebook (See Table 2). (Both of the courses surveyed were taught by male professors.)

Table 1: Should Faculty be on the Facebook?

	Women	Men
Yes	35%	73%
No	65%	27%

One student noted that the Facebook "can unfairly skew a professor's perception of a student in a student environment," which indicates that she perceives the Facebook as a place that is "owned" by students as a group. Another stated, "I think the students should not have to worry about being monitored. The Facebook should be a fun website." Several students noted that student profiles often contain information they do not want professors to see.

Not all students' comments indicated that privacy was their main concern about faculty on the site. Some students conveyed a sense of anxiety about interacting with faculty. Many students indicated that the student/faculty relationship should remain professional and should not be familiar or sociable:

Facebook is a more social network.

It's a social network for students.

They have no need to network with students for social purposes. Faculty & students should remain separate when it comes to social functions.

...if they "poke" me, I might find it strange.

Still, two thirds of the students surveyed reported that they are comfortable with faculty on the site. Positive comments tended to focus on the alternate communication channels afforded by the site and on the potential for students to get to know professors better. Students who raised privacy concerns seemed to be either unaware of privacy options offered on the site (such as creating special, limited profiles for viewing by specific users) or the design of these privacy features did not conform with the expectations and experiences of privacy they brought to the site. (Note that the privacy controls on Facebook have changed significantly since these surveys were conducted in response to concerns voiced by the community.)

The next phase of this research involves in-depth interviews with both students and faculty to obtain a richer sense of how social norms are emerging on the site and how students and faculty are negotiating privacy concerns and managing their Facebook identities.

Goffman has observed that, when presenting one's self to others, the performer strives to maintain a great deal of control over her persona and minimize the appearance of characteristics that are contrary to an idealized version of herself (1959). boyd and Heer (2006) have described the social networking site Friendster as a complex (and often awkward) site of performance comprised of various channels such as imagery, publicly articulated social networks, and testimonials through which users attempt to exert control over their public image. It appears that part of many users' experience on such sites is a perceived loss of control over performance as they address broad, unknown audiences that may include peers, supervisors, subordinates, parents and—especially in the case of academic communities—professors and mentors. Social networking sites like Facebook offer tradeoffs to community members who must balance the potential social gain associated with new opportunities to establish ties and the social pain of relinquishing some control over the presentation of self.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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