



THE STUDENT' S USAGE / UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL NETWORKS AS AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Communication has been digitalizing and becoming a phenomenon belongs to the digital world day by day. Many people from all age groups have been participating social networks for different purposes and the number of users has been increasing. Through these networks, individuals have been communicating, engaging in interaction and have been sharing, collaboration and even learning activities in these environments.

This research is descriptive and reveals how student in the faculty of Communication Sciences look that Facebook used for educational purposes. The study was conducted as based on the hypothesis of 'students are actively using Facebook as an education environment'. To test this hypothesis, 52 students from 4 departments and different classes has taken as a sample group and participation was on a voluntary basis. There is an expectation in the matter that students of Communication Sciences Faculty should show more interest to social media and the phenomenon of social network. In this study, it is primarily aimed to determine the level of usage of Facebook on students of Communication Sciences Faculty by questioning thoughts and behaviors about the Facebook usage on educational purpose.

Key Words: Facebook, Social Networks, Communication, Education

INTRODUCTION

Social network, particularly Facebook, can be defined as an online service, platform, or area where social communication and/or social relations can be established and individuals intensely share information. This definition implies that communication students should have more expertise and interest in social media than any other group of students. Based on this assumption, the present study investigated the views and attitudes of students of the Faculty of Communication Sciences at Anadolu University in Turkey, which is a country where the total number of Facebook users ranks sixth in the world. The sample of the study consisted of 52 students from 4 different departments. Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview about their understanding and usage of the Facebook as an education environment.

Starting with emergence of the Internet as a public sphere, many unprecedented changes have occurred in communication types and formats in daily life. Face-to-face communication in interpersonal relationships has been gradually replaced with communications via technological devices. This change has also been associated with new types of relationships (Murray, 2008, p.8). Social networks within the scope of social media are almost at the heart of these virtual communication forms. Social networks are platforms for virtual social lives created by people over the Internet. Individuals define themselves in such networks so that they communicate with other people sharing same or different cultural backgrounds/dimensions through powerful communication opportunities provided by the Internet. The first known network in this area is considered the Six Degrees which was constructed in 1997. Particularly after 2003, rapid and important developments were experienced in social networks; consequently the number of users has increased quickly. The worldwide growth of social communication networks gained incredible pace and popularity. Among these networks, the most common one is known as Facebook (Toprak et al., 2009: 27).As of December 2011, Facebook has more than 845 millions of active users around the world. Fifty percent of total users actively login the site every day. Users spend a total of 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook. More than 425 million active users have mobile connection to Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>).

When over 845 millions of people worldwide started to spend a substantial part of their daily lives in Facebook, this social network also attracted interest of sociologists and psychologists. According to researchers, social networks improve communication skills, enhance participation as well as social commitment, reinforce peer support, and ensure realization of education based on collaboration strategies. Furthermore, social networking sites can be easily and inexpensively used without substantial support from universities. That is also to say that they can be successfully integrated into educational processes. In appears that this type of use rapidly becomes widespread all around the world (Gulbahar et al., 2010: 2).

It is a fact that Facebook is the largest social network with the biggest audience compared to similar media, particularly because it enables people communicate with their friends and exchange multimedia-based information conveniently. Hundreds of people, unaware of each others, may gather around a particular purpose via this social network and they may even decide to act together. Many individuals increasingly spend more time on this new medium. Despite it is generally accepted and as a social network, Facebook could also gain a unique position as a learning technology for educational purposes.

With a population of 31.526.840 Facebook users, Turkey ranks sixth in the world, following the United States, India, Indonesia, Brazil, and the Mexico. Also, 40,52% of the country's general population and 90% of the population with Internet access login the Facebook. Approximately 37% of the Turkish users are women and 63% are men. As far as age groups are concerned, 63% are between 18 and 34 years, 18 % are younger than 18 years, and the remaining 19% are above 34 years (<http://www.socialbakers.com>). These figures imply that Facebook has a great potential for education of relatively young population of Turkey.

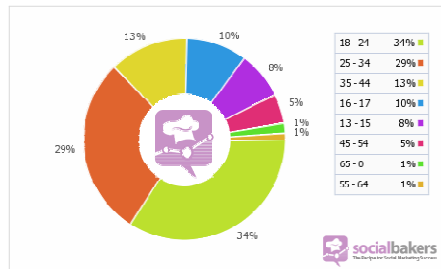


Figure 1. Use of Facebook in Turkey by Age Groups (<http://www.socialbakers.com>).

METHOD



This study investigated the understanding and usage of students regarding the use of Facebook for educational purposes. The study was conducted to test the hypothesis stating that "The students, who are more related to computers and online activities, are looking positively to the use of Facebook for educational purposes."

The data were gathered through a semi-structured interview to get concept from students of the Faculty of Communication Sciences at Anadolu University in Turkey. It is expected that students of communication faculty should have more expertise and interest in social media including social networks.

There were a total of 52 students from 4 departments of the Faculty of Communication Sciences at Anadolu University. The semi-structured interview was carried out to all 52 participants. Analysis of data was performed both by methods of qualitative data analysis methods.

The semi-structured interview is configured in order to collect information about demographics of the participants, adoption level of social networks and the most popular networks, and views on educational uses of Facebook. The validation of the questions was checked through a pilot study implemented in the same faculty before the actual implementation.

Due to the nature of the study, descriptive statistical techniques were used in analyzing and reporting data. The findings were presented in relevant tables or figures and corresponding interpretations followed right after them.

SOCIAL MEDIA VERSUS CONVENTIONAL MEDIA A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social media is a common concept which gained its position and popularity in our life as a recent consequence of Web 2.0. It refers to the locations with highly accessible and sharable content. It has become more widespread through social interaction using Internet and Web based technologies. In other words, the concept of social media refers to platforms such as social networks, blogs, micro-blogs, and forums where self-generated contents of users are shared by the user like a publisher. The possibility to make shared content reach more people may be increased when they are shared with popular individuals or if the shared content gains good interest. People share any and all types of personal experiences ranging from life stories to usefulness of a product or service purchased through social media such as Facebook, Friendfeed, Myspace, Twitter, and Youtube. Social media differs from conventional media. In general, particular resources are required for publishing information in conventional media; while social media is relatively without cost, and access devices are open to everybody. User is defined as a consumer-producer. He/she has active position as defined in the uses and gratifications approach. He/she both generates and consumes the content. The common characteristic of social media and conventional media is the ability to reach small or large audience. The content may reach nobody or to millions of people. After the entry of social media into our life, many issues in human life started to change; since content is produced by the user, creativity gained importance and participation took center stage. The strict differentiation between producer and audience of the content in conventional media is gone (<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article>). Features providing support in determining differences between social media and conventional media may vary depending on the method used. Those features may be; access, accessibility, availability, novelty and permanence.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

In general, social network can be defined as an online service, platform, or area where social communication and relations can be established, and also individuals share information. Social networks offer the user ability to share online their views, feelings, activities, events, and fields of interest.

Today, many social network sites emerged, which reshaped communication, interaction, collaboration, and efforts of people. Degree of participation to social networks also constantly increases. Individuals may define themselves over Internet in the social life and they become a member of social networks in order to reach and communicate with friends of similar cultural level, field of interest, common background, and mutual friends. Thus, a group of friends can be enlarged and information exchange is enabled (Jordan, 1999, p.191).

Facebook

Facebook is a social network which aims to enable people communicate with friends and exchange information. Being developed by Mark Zuckerberg, a student at Harvard University, in 4 February 2004, for enabling communication between Harvard students. Later, it covered schools located around Boston and it started to accept membership of all students and graduates from all schools in the United States of America within one year. While individuals may become member using only e-mail address of the relevant school high schools and some large companies were added to the network and Facebook was opened to all e-mail addresses with some age constraints in 11 September 2006 (<http://www.Facebook.com>).

Facebook is an online social network software which enables users connect to each other via private or public correspondences based on different authorization levels in networks and join other groups and share contents with other users. Similar to other online social network sites (i.e. Friendster, MySpace), users define themselves via online profile, gain friendships, and write comments or information to profiles of others or the social content.

Since social communication networks are new, studies on their uses in education are very scarce. Based on several studies, a substantial proportion of students spend non-negligible time in such social networks (Jones, Blackey, Fitzgibbon, & Chew, 2010, p.776). This trend shows that educational environments constructed in social networks will better attract attention of students. When this is done successfully, it is often stated that educational experiences will be more effective.

Social Networks in Educational Environments

Social network sites offer several possibilities such as socialization of individuals, ability to communicate with people living worldwide, ability to be a member of group which cannot be possible in real life due to geographical and physical constraints, self-expression and ability to receive information and share it. Problems pertaining to confidentiality, misuse of information and social network dependence are also undeniable facts. However, it is possible to make social networks advantageous through positive uses.

Social networks can also be successfully used in the field of education. Seguin and Seguin (1995, p.30) recommends educators that they may gain benefits such as program exchanges, job announcements, creating relief funds or searching such funds, arranging concurrent or non-concurrent conferences, and publishing studies conducted by themselves or their students. Moreover, studies such as course plans, activities etc. can be more efficiently used by a larger number of educators over a database. An interesting example in this area was presented by Heather Rogers of the Haversack Towson University. She used the Facebook Group titled "Female of 324 Reading Methods Group" for meeting teacher candidates in a reading class. The group functioned as a platform where class works were discussed, questions were asked, opinions were criticized, information was sent, and views were supported. The researcher recommended the construction of book clubs for supporting students read, performing book discussion, and using social networks for sharing readings. She also mentioned that these social networks might be used in courses like history and literature, preparing cultural guides and programming applications (Gulbahar et al., 2010: 3).



When we examine advantages deriving from the use of social networks as an educational tool, interactivity and participation provided by such environments should be also mentioned. Advantages possibly deriving from use of social networks as an education tool can be listed as follows (Balci, 2010, p.466):

- Independence from time and location
- Improvement in quality, success, and efficiency of education by use of computer for education
- Ability to learn in more systematic manner and in shorter time due to advances in computer technology
- Individualization of learning
- Ability to have instant feedback
- Offering the student ability to repeat course content as much as desired
- Ease of displaying the content
- Allowing to the design of visual and auditory learning environments
- Ability to present courses that require laboratory applications to students via simulation, animation, and virtual laboratories
- Archiving course content and synchronized class (virtual class) applications Bidirectional communication
- Tendency towards more voluntary behaviors on the side of students for improving research, knowledge, and skills in comparison to conventional programs
- Offering possibility to evaluate performance of students Minimizing risk of error in measuring evaluation results
- Improving skills of students and teachers to reach, evaluate, use, and efficiently cite the knowledge

FINDINGS

Personal Details

A total of 52 students, studying in the Faculty of Communication Sciences at Anadolu University participate to the study in a manner of volunteer. 1 of them is from 3rd term, 3 of them are from 4th term, 28 of them are from 6th term, 1 of them is from 7th term, 17 of them are from 8th term and 2 of them are from 9th and + term.

Of the students participating in the study, 29 were female and 23 were male. This is consistent with the overall gender distribution.

When we look at the ages of the participants 3 of them are 20, 6 of them are 21, 17 of them are 22 years old, 10 of them are 23, 7 of them are 24, 4 of them are 25, 1 of them is 27, 3 of them are 27 and 1 of them is 28. 22-23 age group establishes the majority of the participants.

There are four departments in Communication Sciences Faculty. 13 participants study at Department of Journalism, 12 participants study at Department of Cinema and Television, 15 participants study at Department of Public Relations and Advertisement and 12 participants study at Department of Communication Design and Management.

49 of 52 students responding the survey have a Facebook account. Some of the students have two or more social network's membership. Following Facebook 26 students have Twitter accounts. The other networks they mentioned are; MSN, Foursquare, LinkedIn, Friendfeed, GTalk, Formspring, SoundCloud, Hocam and LiveMocha.

Like the other Facebook users of Facebook on the world, 6 students log in to Facebook once a day and 39 of them log in more the once a day. Only two of the participant's tell that they log in to Facebook sometimes like once a month. He told that;

"I use Facebook by force. One or two courses are held on Facebook. We don't see each other at school, we don't say hello to each other but on the social networks we talk without difficulty. They effect becoming face to face and being together. I am negative to do the courses on social networks."

Two of the students do not use social networks and 1 of the students does not have a Facebook account.

One of the student's explain why she does not use social networks ;

"I don't use social networks, because I believe that it is a kind of voyeurism. I can communicate with the people in daily life face to face or through e-mail. I can do most of the activities done through social networks without using them."

Participants' friend numbers are also important, 2 of the participants have less than 50 friends and 2 of the participants have more than 800 friends, 7 of them have 50-200 friends, 21 of the have 200-400 friends and 16 of them have 400- 800 friends in their friend lists.

Having a professor in student's friends has some effects on the participants. 47 participants are friends professors. 28 of the participants have 1-10 professors in their friend lists. Only 2 participants have more than 50 professors in their lists. 36 of the participants told that being a friend with a professor do not effect them. But the other participants told it effects, in their on words;

"I mostly don't effected but when I want to share funnies or political things I hesitate."

"It is useful and positive to hear about the students ideas about courses directly. But at the same time the things that should stay between students can be heard by the professors, it is a negative thing."

"They don't have an effect on stopping myself from saying what I want to say but usage of language becomes formal."

"I become formal when I think I have professor friends in my list, I become more formal on my share's and don't use swearing."

"Being friend with a professor makes me being recognized by them so I can take advantage of this. When I need to reach them in the future it can be easy to reach."

"Knowing their other life except school, to follow their share's and communicate with them easily."

"To check their ideas about the agenda."

"Being friend with professors allows me to communicate with them outside the faculty, it provides intimacy and provides positive communication."

"It is a good source of information about the course."

"Makes easy to reach the professor to ask question."

"Following the announcements about the course is easy."

Usage of Facebook

Twenty eight participants are agree that Facebook helps to the way of thinking about the facts and the people, 10 of the participants are neutral and 11 of them are not agree.

Almost all of the participants are agree (except one) that Facebook helps to be informed about the interest areas.

Twenty four of the participants thinks that it relaxes, 13 of them are neutral and 12 of them are disagree.

The interesting point is 43 of the participants think that Facebook keeps people away that make them bored, but 29 of the participants think that it has no power of keeping them away from boring things to do.

Forty eight of the participants think that they learn that there are people having same interests and problems.

The number of participants who use Facebook as a leisure time spending medium is 44, 6 of them are disagree with this



statement.

In contrast with a general thought 39 participants are disagree with the statement that Facebook meets need to go to places of entertainment.

When we asked that if the Facebook makes them rest or not the number of the participants who are agree, disagree and neutral are almost equal.

Participants are disagree with the statement that Facebook takes his/her mind from troubles and difficulties, and they are also disagree that Facebook helps to shape their angel of view to the life.

When it comes to passing time 45 of the participants are agree that Facebook is a good medium.

Participants are mostly (34 of the participants) agree on that Facebook is not enthusiastic.

Forty three out of all participants think that Facebook makes time pass amusing.

To the statement, it allows me to be aware of the newly released products, 43 participants are agree, they think seeing an ad or getting a recommendation from facebook or friends effect their opinions.

All of the participants agree that it contains information about their interests, actually this comes from the nature of the medium.

Participants are nearly equal percentages about the Facebook helps the participation in community life statement.

Forty participants are agree to the, I can learn what is happening in my country from Facebook statement.

When the participants asked whether the facebook is used for courses 26 of them mentioned that it is used for sharing the course materials. They (45 of them) mentioned that there are facebook groups of some courses and the announcements are made from this group which they have to be member of. Three of the participants told that they do the course process completely over Facebook. And just one participant said he does not think that Facebook is used for the educational purpose.

Participants were asked if the age and title of the professor effects the use of Facebook as an educational tool; 38 of them said that it is not important, only the interest is important about this issue. If we lend an ear to their words;

"No it is not important. If a professor decies to use Facebook, he/ she has prepared the infrastructure."

" Age and title is not important for academicians, like all occupational groups. If the professor self educated him/ her self about the technology it is enough."

"I think they are important because of conversange and the space of communication."

" The age and the title is not important. If someone knows how to use he/she can use. But the share's of the professor from Facebook page can change my thoughts about the professor."

" Age and title is important because youngsters use technology much more effectively."

"Age and title is important for the communication over Facebook. Young proffersors are more active on social networks."

Participants asked their thoughts about the Facebook use for their courses:

"I don't find such medium serious, I don' think they are mature enough."

"By using social media profesor can draw students' interest about the course."

"Because of my classes and current faculty, use of social networks effectively for the courses improves me."

"Use of Facebook for the courses siplify the communication process. The things that the professors want to announce, notes and ideas can be shared and reach to many people easily. Also forming group and doing group work becomes easy."

" I don't find realistic and sincere when a professor does not use formal student message system but the social networks for announcements. But I am agree that social networks shoul used because they are fast and reaching information is easy."

" If the courses can be all nd interactively over social media it will be good, but the students should routed correctly and they should learn to provide their self control."

" Usage of social media for the courses make student more active and the students can express themselves more freely."

" Social media is accelerating study to be done and ensures the participation of all by providing a common share."

" In the mean of our courses, feed backs, course instructions and sharing activities of the group makes understanding the course much better."

" In the mean of courses I find usage of Facebook very positive. We can also get answer to our questions very quickly"

" Communication is very easy for us. When we miss a course, we can get information what was done at the class and our home work shortly information about the course."

" If the courses will be held live and interactive it can be nice. But if the professor will prepare a video, and share this video as a course material this won't be a beneficial way for us."

" Social media is the most important medium nowadays, because of this usage of Facebook for the courses can increase the attendance, productivity and participation to the course."

"Fulfills the need of age, and eliminates the limitations of time."

" Groups can get together eliminates the limitations of time and space; notes, ideas and requests can be shared easily."

" Easy and fast reach to the information."

" Looking to the course material several times consolidates the knowledge."

"Comments and ideas can be taken on the Facebook and students can see different perspectives"

"Being more active is possible."

" Communication with the professors is easy and this has a good impact on the course."

"It is possible to join to the course from any where and any environment. You don't need to go a specific place for the course."

"Reduces the waste of paper, and from this point of view we can save the ecosystem."

" Students who can not show their reaction in daily life are expressing themselves easily on the Facebook."

" Everyone can share his/her opinion freely."

"Social media is a medium which is used by students frequently, so the professor can easily reach to the students. Finding a student who does not come to school is easy."

There are also negative opinions about usage of Facebook as an educational environment.

"I don't think Facebook and similar networks are healthy. First of all the professors shoul learn the other sharing mediums (like Sakai) actively."

" First of all there is no social media course or courses about dijital world. Because of this social media use is superficial."

" I agree announcements over Facebook is efficient but doing courses over Facebook is not a healthy method."

We use Facebook to organize the studies, from point of view it is useful . Except this I am negative about taking the course over Facebook. It won't be productive."

" Professors open course groups and do their sharings and announcements from these mediums, because we are at the Facebook and Twitter. But there is a point which is forgotton sometimes, that is we sometimes don't want to share our private -non-school- times by these content. This bothers students."



- " I use social media just to look at the announcements an rarely use for complain about the courses (especially during the final exams) and criticize them."
" Face to face communication at the courses is important."
"Lack of motivation can occur."
" It weakens the social relations and doing the courses over Facebook makes us addicted to computer and results in still life."
" Student can lie as 'I haven't seen' ' I haven't heard'."
" We won't have chance to say 'I haven't seen, I haven't heard'."
" Lack of attention can occur because we have to be active in more than one groups for the courses."
"It causes non-sociability."
"I don't think it will be effective. There are many distractions and it is har to get students attention in this environment."
" We can have communication problems. This makes us robots. Face to face communication increases the warmth. Social media doesn't cover it."

When overall approach to Facebook is considered, it was revealed out that students have positive attitudes and they are using the network particularly for communicating and sharing. The use for getting announcement to and sharing with friends in the profile list is widespread. It is also used for learning reactions of others to events and messages shared and for forming an opinion. The interactivity which always increases due to the improving technology laid the ground for new information and communication environments. Social networks are one of these new communication environments. Individuals communicate, interact, cooperate, and even carry out their learning activities through these networks. People are connected to social networks almost every day and they spend some time there, which increases day by day. Many people from different age groups join social networks for different purposes and the number of users joining the social networks is gradually increasing. As mentioned before, the total number of Facebook users in the world is above 800 million. The incredible development of the social networks are mainly due to the ability of sharing of personal lives with different individuals, learning of daily news and events, and exchanging information. All these are happening in social networks with remarkable speed and precision. It appears that the use of this environment by more instructors for educational purposes is not a distant future because almost all instructors participating in the study somehow use Facebook in their courses; even the instructor with the lowest frequency of using this technology makes announcement about the course by creating a group. It should be noted, on the other hand, that instructors are neutral about efficiency of this environment on intra-class discussions. The students are also showing positive attitude to using Facebook as an educational environment.

CONCLUSION

Social networks have affected the modern society positively and have changed some of people's habits. Effective use of features and opportunities of social networks supports instructors' empowering of the educational process with active learning, creativity, problem-solving, cooperation, and multifaceted interactions as well as students' using and improving their academic performance, inquiry, and alternative thinking skills.

It develops communication skills, extends participation and social commitment, strengthens peer support, and enables the realization of cooperation-based learning. In addition, social network sites can be used easily and conveniently, they can be integrated into the educational practices successfully and such utilizations are becoming widespread rapidly. Social networks, represented as Facebook in this study, provide the users a communication environment which is not limited with space and time because they are online tools that generate interaction by allowing new opportunities for more information, interest, and data sharing.

Based on the results of this study, social networks are used actively by the instructors in the Faculty of Communication Sciences for mostly announcements and sharing the courses documents. The present study shows that students in the Faculty of Communication Sciences have adopted Facebook and they are using it intensively. A large proportion of the students are able to use social media anytime and anywhere via mobile Internet. Hence, utilization of Facebook to support learning also becomes meaningful and widespread. The students mostly use Facebook as a medium to make contact with classmates and professors; for sharing information, documents and homework. Facebook is used in the delivery of information, reference books, group assignments, and course sessions. Instructors and students can send materials, addresses of web sites, and videos regarding courses on Facebook and presentations, assignments, and other products of the students that can be shared by forming links to Google documents, students are positive at the point of sharing but they are not positive about taking whole course over Facebook.

Social networking sites are becoming more involved in our daily life day by day. As of today, instructors can neither conduct a course completely through Facebook nor they can ignore this development comfortably, also students are too. None of the students participate to the study denies that Facebook is an effective medium; they all agree that they should benefit from its tools. The students think that the younger faculty members use Facebook and similar technologies more in their courses compared to senior faculty members.

It should be noted that this study is limited with the findings of a certain academic organization's students, namely a faculty of communication in Turkey. Both the national and institutional cultures might have affected the results. Future studies may compare experiences of instructors and students regarding the use of social networks in educational practices after they have enough experience on conducting courses over the social networks. Furthermore, new studies may look at how communicational uses of social networks have influenced educational uses. Finally, possible interactions between alternative uses of social networks and individual differences of learners should be investigated.

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