
Effects of Social Networks on Social Life of Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to determine the effects social networks on social life of freshmen and sophomores. The study was designed as a qualitative case study. Data was collected through focus group interviews. The participants were 24 teacher candidates studying in various departments in the faculty of education. Only four students expressed that social networking has no effect at all while others agreed that social networking has somewhat positive or negative effects on their social lives. The most common positive effect emerged as keeping in touch with the ones whom can be seen rarely or cannot be seen at all. The pictures and videos shared in social networks seem to help the users start conversation. Although, the participating students expressed that communicating with old friends through social networks as one positive effect of these sites, they also mentioned that changing lifestyles by time may cause negativities in communication. Some of the participants had complaints on side effects of adding their relatives to the friends list. As a significant finding of the study, some students pointed out they spend too much time on social networks because they cannot find anything better to do. It seems that at least some of the students could have used social networks less if they had more opportunities of spending their spare time on sports, arts or other social events.

Keywords

Social networks, Facebook, social life, undergraduate students

Introduction

The Internet is an attractive medium. It attracts people from all ages, all occupations, and all social levels. The Internet has provided us new ways of communicating with other people. Computer mediated communication channels such as instant messaging, video chatting or social networks have become very popular especially among young people. Students today network with each other using technology as much as, if not more than, face-to-face communication (Heiberger & Harper, 2008).

Why is computer mediated communication so popular among young people? With so many young people spending significant amount of their time on computer mediated communication channels, it comes to mind that they must be meeting personal and social needs from these technologies. The literature too suggests "social needs" as one of the primary reasons. For example in a study, Young (1997) classified three major areas of reinforcement of using the Internet as social support, sexual fulfillment, and creating a persona. Another study revealed primary reasons for adolescents' instant messaging as facilitating social relationships, exploring self by taking feedback from others, and compensating for social limitations (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). In a content analysis of adolescents' personal web pages, youth were often found to express themselves by posting information about their interests and their identity (Stern, 2004). Surveys on social networking site memberships revealed that adolescents and college students primarily use these sites to stay in touch with friends they see often and those whom they see rarely (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; cited in Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009).

One type of computer mediated communication that has grown rapidly in prevalence and popularity in recent years is social networking. Social networking sites provide an easy, accessible way to interact with peers by enabling users create personalized websites and share information. Social networks have such special place among computer mediated communication channels that some researchers (Muise, Christofides & Desmarais, 2009) define them as "rapidly expanding phenomenon that is changing the nature of social relationships".

A recent study by Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert (2009) revealed that regardless of how busy college students were, social networks (Facebook in particular) was a part of their daily life. Many other studies had reached similar conclusions and drew attention to the frequent use of social networks by college students. Throughout the current study, it was hypothesized that such frequent use of social networks will have impacts on social life of undergraduate students.

Method

The study was undertaken as a qualitative case study to reveal the effects of social networking on social life of undergraduate students. The Facebook use of undergraduate students (teacher candidates) was selected as the case. The Facebook was chosen as the case because clearly, it is the most popular social network these days.

The Facebook offers several options for communicating with others. Users can create their own profiles, a personalized web page which often includes a photograph of the member and personal information describing his or her interests, can view one another's profiles, share text, audio, and visuals, and can communicate through various applications similar to email or message boards. The Facebook users can control who can and cannot view their postings and personal information by editing their privacy settings. Generally, in order to be able to share information, users must be Facebook friends or members of a group. Friendship starts on invitation. An individual who is invited may either accept or reject the offer, thus providing individual control over one's list of friends.

The participants of the study were 24 teacher candidates (6 males and 18 females) studying in the Erciyes University Faculty of Education. The Erciyes University is located in Kayseri, a middle sized city in central Turkey. The Faculty of Education has around 3000 students (70% females, 30% males) studying in 9 departments. The students are generally from middle and low socio-economic class.

Most of them start to use social networks after admission to the faculty. The study group consisted of freshmen and sophomores who volunteered to participate. Students' departments were not taken into consideration since it was hypothesized that this variable would not affect their use of social networks significantly.

Data was collected through unstructured focus group interviews. The participants were asked "how has Facebook usage affected their social lives". Eight interviews were made in total and each interview lasted about thirty minutes. In order to make the interviews in a relaxed atmosphere, each focus group consisted of students who were friends in real life. Since the researcher was the students' instructor and knew them by name, these arrangements could be done easily. Data was analyzed using content analysis. Only the responses which were related to the general theme were taken into consideration.

Findings

The content analysis revealed three main categories regarding effects of the Facebook on social life. These main categories are i) positive or desired effects, ii) negative or undesired effects, iii) neutral effects, and iv) relation between Facebook use and social or sporting opportunities.

Positive or desired effects of the Facebook on social life

The findings show many positive effects of the Facebook on participants' social life (Table 1). The Facebook seems to be helping users in communicating with their friends whom can be seen rarely or cannot be seen at all in real life. The Facebook also seems to be helping the users to know and learn about their friends. "If did not use the Facebook, I would have lost all my contacts after admission to the faculty", is one participant's sentence explaining this situation.

Three users stated that pictures or videos shared in the Facebook environment help them to start conversation thus, making communication easier. This way of communication is realized by liking or disliking the posts or by making comments on the shared objects.

Table 1. Positive or desired effects

	f
The Facebook helps me to maintain reconnections with friends whom I lost my connection.	3
The Facebook helps me to maintain communication through shared pictures or videos.	3
The Facebook helps me to maintain connections with people whom I cannot see or I can rarely see in real life.	2
The Facebook helps me to know about what my friends are doing.	2

Negative or undesired effects of the Facebook on social life

Along with positive effects of the Facebook use, participants also mentioned about negative or undesired effects. As seen in Table 2, they mostly complain about maintaining reconnection with old friends does not make them contend in cases where lifestyles have differentiated. They stated that they could not feel the same old intimacy once lifestyles have changed. The following sentences express this situation:

“As time passing away she has changed, I have changed too. But communicating with her makes me feel better. Remembering old memories makes me feel different.”

“Old friends make comments on your wall. You can see that their ideas and views have changed. Sometimes this feels cold.”

Adding relatives as Facebook friends seems another unwanted think to do, at least by some of the participants. Some students find it irritating when their relatives try to control their Facebook behaviors. On the other hand, some students stated that they get friendship requests from people whom they do not like to meet in real life. Should be noted as an interesting Facebook behavior, the participants stated that some of their classmates do not talk to them in real life but add them as Facebook friends.

Three students stated that they cannot trust relationships or conversations in the Facebook environment because this environment is virtual. As known, communicating through text messages is different from face-to-face communication hence a portion of information like gestures or intonation cannot be transferred. The participants think that even though they know the person in real life, they cannot be certain if he is telling the truth when they communicate with him in virtual environment.

Interestingly, expressing political views in the Facebook environment may cause social problems, at least in some cultures. Perhaps as an extreme case, one student told about a case on expressing political identity in the Facebook with the following words:

“The instructor of a friend of mine has seen his Facebook postings. He saw his political identity there. They were not Facebook friends but he has seen it from someone else’s account. Then the instructor has done bad things to him.”

Table 2. Negative or undesired effects

	f
The Facebook helps me to maintain connections with my old friends but once we are reconnected, in some cases where lifestyles were differentiated, I cannot feel the same old closeness.	12
I do not wish my relatives to be my Facebook friends and access my Facebook activities.	4
I do not trust relations in virtual environments.	3
I get friendship requests from people with whom I do not want to be friends in real life.	2
Political identity expressed in the Facebook may be disliked and cause problems.	1

Neutral effects of the Facebook on social life

Four participants stated that the Facebook has no significant effects on their social life (Table 3). They believe that use of the Facebook have changed nothing at all. On the other hand, some participants think that the Facebook is neutral in fact and use of the Facebook may be either beneficial or harmful depending on the user behaviors.

Table 3. Neutral effects

	f
The Facebook has no significant effects on my social life.	4
Positive or negative effects of the Facebook vary on how you use it.	2

Relation between Facebook use and social or sporting opportunities

Two participants stated that they use the Facebook so frequently because they cannot find any other activity to do. They complained about lack of social and cultural activities and inadequacy of social or sporting facilities force them to stay at home and communicate through social networks.

Discussion

As we know, social networking sites are designed to foster social interaction. The current study was undertaken as a qualitative case study to reveal the effects of social networking on social life of undergraduate students. The Facebook was chosen as the case because of its popularity among college students. According to the findings, most of the participants agreed on the effects of the Facebook on their social lives. The Facebook seems to be helping users in keeping touch with their friends whom they can rarely see or cannot see at all in real life. In other words, the participants use the Facebook to maintain friendships. They did not mention about making new friends through social networks. A recent survey of college students in the U.S. also showed that social networking sites are used for social interaction in order to maintain friendships rather than to make new friends (Ellison et al., 2007). The users maintain this interaction not only by directly communicating (i.e. sending a text message) but also by making comments on shared pictures or videos. It is likely that these comments function like a conversation starter in face-to-face communication.

On the other hand, maintaining friendships is not free of problems. Maintaining reconnection with old friends does not make the users contend in cases where lifestyles or views have differentiated. They may not feel the same old intimacy again once lifestyles have changed. Another problem is that some of the participants think that even though they know the person in real life, they cannot be certain if he is telling the truth when they communicate with him in a virtual environment.

As another finding of the study it was found that relatives were not desired as Facebook friends by some of the participants. According to West, Lewis & Currie (2009) the reasons for not wanting older adults, and particularly parents, as friends are related to embarrassment, social norms, and worries about mothers being exposed and made vulnerable.

In fact, the Facebook provides unique opportunities for students to display their identities (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009). User profile as well as postings, comments and shared images or videos give clues about user identity. But interestingly, it was found that in some extreme cases expressing political views in the Facebook environment may cause social problems, at least in some cultures.

A significant finding of the study is on the relation between the Facebook use and social or sporting opportunities. Some participants complained about lack of social and cultural activities and inadequacy of social or sporting facilities force them to stay at home and communicate through social networks. In fact, students may use the Facebook to engage in social activities. A recent study showed that the Facebook is a part of the 'social glue' that helps students settle into university life. It aids in communication especially about social events between the students (Madge e al., 2009). But we can say that this is not true for our case. The participating students seem that they are not communicating about social events through social networks.

For the concluding remarks, it is clear that computer mediated communication is common among young people. Throughout this study we tried to reveal effects of social networks on college students' social lives. Positive as well as negative effects of social networks have been identified. In order to minimize these negative effects, we believe that it is vitally important to educate our students on healthy use of information and communication technologies as well as providing them a healthy social environment.

On the other hand, although it was planned as a qualitative case study, the current study remained mostly descriptive. As a limitation, relations among social network use and other variables have not been examined. Research has shown us that personality is related with Facebook use. For example more extraverted individuals reported significantly less frequent use of Facebook for keeping up with others than introverts (Moore & McElroy, 2012). In order to reach richer findings, personality traits could have been considered while examining effects of social networks on social life.

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