

A PICTURE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND FACEBOOK: PERSPECTIVES FOR ACADEMIC LEARNING

UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution we will focus on the results of a survey on the use of Facebook by students of the University of Milano-Bicocca, which is part of a more generic survey on “media diet” and ICTs usage conducted by the Observatory on New Media (NuMediaBiOs) of the University of Milano Bicocca. Afterwards we will propose some reflections on the use of Facebook in education in light of the results of the survey and the international scientific literature.

KEYWORDS: Facebook, Academic Learning, University Students, Survey.

This article has been developed jointly by the authors.

Arianna Maiardi and **Marina Micheli** wrote the Introduction; **Andrea Pozzali** wrote the section 1. The survey; **Andrea Mangiatordi** e **Francesca Scenini** wrote the section 2. The sample; **Michelle Pieri** wrote the section 4. Activities on Facebook; **Nicola Cavalli** wrote the section 5. Opinions about Facebook; **Paolo Ferri** wrote the Conclusions.

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Introduction

Social networking sites are a popular communication tool, in particular amongst the younger generations (Jones & Fox, 2009), and Facebook is the most popular social networking sites with 800 million active users worldwide (Facebook, 2012). In this paper we will present and discuss the results of a survey on the use of Facebook by students of the University of Milano-Bicocca, which is part of a more generic survey on “media diet” and ICTs usage conducted by the Observatory on New Media (NuMediaBiOs) of the University of Milano-Bicocca. Afterwards we will propose some reflections on the use of Facebook in education in light of the results of the survey and the international scientific literature.

1. The survey

This survey is in its third edition (Ferri *et al.*, 2010; 2012) and was carried out in the 2011-2012 academic year. This survey, in line with its two previous editions (*ibid.*), was based on a quantitative investigation on the population of students enrolled in the Bachelor’s degree program at the University of Milano-Bicocca. A questionnaire was used, consisting of 33 questions, divided into 6 parts: personal data, general relationship with technology, cultural consumption, the role of the Internet in everyday life, the use of Web 2.0 platforms and services and the use of Facebook. The introduction of a section of questions concerning Facebook in the survey is a novelty compared to previous years and is due to the growing popularity of this social networks not only within the population of university students, but as a phenomenon that affects the whole society; therefore it deserves to be focused on. On one hand, we have analyzed the use practices, namely the frequency with which students carry out various activities on Facebook; on the other hand, we have tried to explore the meaning that Facebook assumes in students’ everyday life, in particular investigating the degree of agreement or disagreement regarding specific claims about Facebook.

This kind of survey is very useful as a basis to explore and try possible applications of new technologies as learning tools. We believe that in order to integrate new technologies in education it is important to know in as much detail as possible how the users (in this case university students, mainly young people aged 18 to 21) are using media and ICTs, in order to be able to develop, adapt and improve services and existing learning tools and initiatives. We believe that this type of analysis can be useful in different contexts, primarily in the institutional and public context, namely the University.

While in the literature there are already several surveys on the use of Facebook (e.g., Facebook, 2012; Prescott, Wilson & Becket, 2013) we think it is important to investigate specifically the students who attend our University, to identify the pedagogical potential of Facebook in our specific context.

2. The sample

The survey polled 2,433 students enrolled in the Bachelor's degree program at the University of Milano-Bicocca (24.5% Education, 21.9% Mathematical, Physical and Natural Sciences, 21.4% Economics, 13.5 % Sociology, 8.9% Psychology, 2.7% Medicine and Surgery and 7.1% Law). Regarding gender distribution, in the sample there are more women than men (71% versus 28.9%), reflecting the distribution of the total number of students of our University, which is composed of 62.2 % female and 37.8% male. Finally, regarding the year of birth, students born between 1986 and 1992 make up more than 90% of the sample. Our participants, also considering the relative delay in the introduction and spread of personal computers and Internet in Italy, belong to a generation that can be called "of transition/transitional" between the generation of digital immigrants, fully placed within the "Gutenberg Galaxy", and that one of digital natives (i.e., Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005); since birth they are used to living in an environment in which information and communication technologies are an integral part of daily life (Ferri *et al.*, 2010).

3. Main results

Within our sample, Facebook users account for 86.1% of the total; of these, 9.2% use it rarely, while 76.9% use it often. This corresponds to a sharp increase compared to the data of previous surveys. In 2008, in fact, only 36% of the sample was registered to a generic social network site; while in 2009 the users registered in Facebook already reached 69.1%: overall, this growth trend is consistent with the popularity explosion that this social network has undergone over the years. In the recent years of information and communication technologies, the proliferation of social networking sites is one of the most relevant phenomena. Of the various online social networking sites, Facebook is now the most popular one, with 1 billion active users per month (Facebook, 2012). For some users, it can be said that Facebook has become synonymous with the Internet, and it is used in an all-encompassing way, even as a primary source of information, bringing to reality the advocated merger between public media and private media (Pedemonte, 1998). Facebook manages to bring together public and private information within the same interface, as evidenced by Clay Shirky (2010):

Media is how you know when and where your friend's birthday party is. Media is how you know what's happening in Tehran, who's in charge in Tegucigalpa, or the price of tea in China. Media is how you know why Kierkegaard disagreed with Hegel. Media is how you know about anything more than ten yards away. All these things used to be separated into public media ... and personal media. Now those two modes have fused (ivi, p. 54).

If we examine the answers to the question about privacy settings, i.e. who is allowed to see your profile, we see that different levels of access are granted, with a large predominance (68.2%) of users that enable the vision of the their profile to friends only and therefore tend to use the social network in a private manner

(or at least they think they do), while 31.8% use it in a public manner, allowing the vision to everyone or to their extended network (friends of friends).

The data confirm the presence of a certain deviation between real identities and virtual identities, a phenomenon already noted in the literature (Turkle, 1996; 2011). Although by now it is clear that we can no longer speak of two totally distinct and split aspects, it is evident how the construction of identity that occurs through the media, and in this specific case through a public media, cannot but suffer from the typical characteristics mechanisms of self-representation (Goffman, 1969). If even then most of the students in our sample declared to show their profile only to a private network of friends, the fact remains that a high percentage of subjects (60.4%) offer a self-representation that is considered not entirely corresponding to their real identities. It is also necessary to point out how often the network of Facebook friends is in fact to be considered together in a tension between the public and private sectors, given the strong presence of weak links within this circle. It should also be pointed out that a small percentage (3.1%), tends to still be playing with the identity on the net (maybe pretending to be a woman when you are a man or vice versa), in the style of the “old” avatar typical of reflection on the theme of the 90s and early 2000s.

4. Activities on Facebook

Regarding students’ activities on Facebook (Table 1), the survey essentially indicates that this social network has “swallowed” the instant messaging systems (such as MSN Messenger). The use of chat and private messaging features are by far the most popular among our sample. Facebook seems to be used in a particularly intense way for private conversations. The “public communications”, such as participation in a group or status updating are less common. We find content sharing being the next most popular activity. Most often they share something already available on Facebook, then retrieved from other sites (such as online newspapers or YouTube), or uploaded by them directly from their computer. Sharing of content found on Facebook is the most frequently used activity among the three (carried out every day by 21% of students, weekly from 38%). They are usually links or videos posted by other users (perhaps from external sites) or other existing pieces of content, already available in other groups or profiles (such as photographs, pictures, and comments). This indicates perhaps a certain degree of “laziness” on the part of students who are more reluctant to seek out content from Facebook. However, our survey shows that only a small number of respondents have never shared “content from Facebook” (8.2%) or shared “news or videos from the Web” (11.4%) or added content (7.1%); therefore it can be deduced that the skills to carry out this type of activity are widely distributed.

	Every day	At least once a week	Rarely	Never
Chat	39,6	30,7	20,7	9
Private messaging	32,8	47,9	17,5	1,8
Participation in a group	23,3	30,8	36,5	9,4
Posting on the wall	21,7	41,7	31,7	4,9
Sharing content (from Facebook)	21,4	38,2	32,3	8,2
Sharing videos or news (from the web)	16,5	36,7	35,4	11,4
Adding contents (photos / links / videos)	11,2	35,9	45,9	7,1

Table 1. Frequency of activities on Facebook

The activities just discussed are conducted with a different frequency depending on the gender (in the literature there are several studies exploring the communicative differences among males and females who may take them to more masculine and/or feminine approach to communication e.g. Beck, 1988; Fishman, 1978; Johnson, 1996; Lewis & McCarthy, 1988; Saurer & Eisler, 1990) or on the Faculty attended by students (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Concerning the differences between the Faculties, we observe in particular that Facebook is used less by the students of the Faculty of Mathematics, Physics and Natural Sciences than by those of Economics. In particular, the more relevant difference is connected to the communication functions, while the difference concerning the sharing content is less relevant. We can assume that this depends on a number of factors that are associated to the field of studies. It can be assumed that the Faculties of Education, Psychology and Sociology are associated with a greater propensity for interpersonal communication and to a minor burden of study in terms of time to devote to exam preparation, compared to Scientific or Economic Faculties – these latter, in fact, have a greater number of hours of laboratory and practical exercises that could limit the amount of free time of their students. This point will be deepened by subsequent research. Concerning the gender differences, we observe that female students are using most of the functionality of Facebook in a more intense way than male students. Male students are more active than female students only in sharing news or videos from other websites.

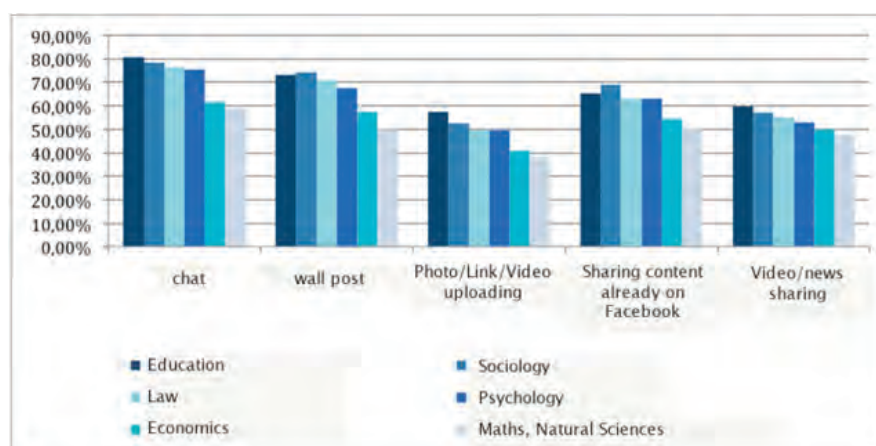


Figure 1. Activity on Facebook at least once a week by Faculty

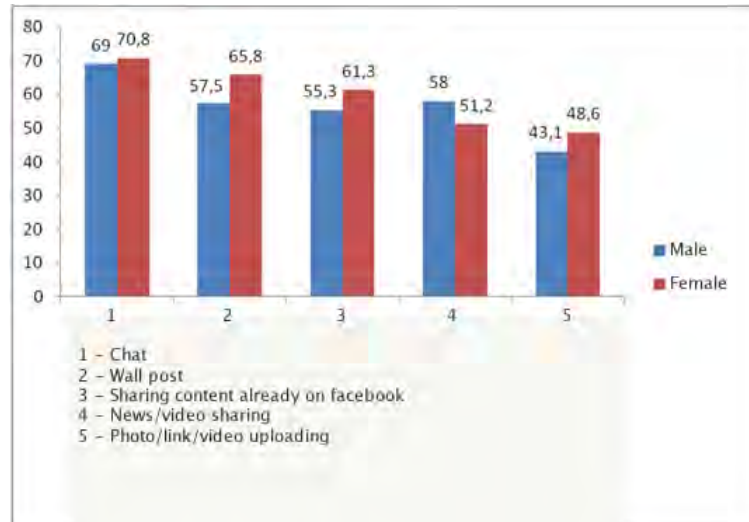


Figure 2. Activity on Facebook at least once a week by gender

5. Opinions about Facebook

It is crucial to understand opinions about Facebook within our population, if we want to explore the opportunity of using it as a learning tool. Using Facebook is primarily an activity done during free time, for leisure, or at least it is primarily associated to leisure activities and not to working, so we need to understand more deeply what the student thinks about it in order to explore the chances of using it for educational purposes. On the other hand, this analysis allows to highlight some empirical evidence that seems to contradict common myths about the usage of this social network. First, the students say they do not perceive the use of Facebook as crucial in order to stay abreast with what is happening in the peer group: the majority of respondents (55%) in fact disagree with the statement “Using Facebook to not be excluded from my circle of friends” and only 15% of students somewhat “agree” with this opinion. A similar attitude is found when you ask students if they agree on the fact that Facebook is a useful tool, in some way, to weave relationships: only 10.6% in fact states that they agree with this statement. These results tell us something on the “emotional” distance that students perceive with respect to their use of Facebook. Although they make intensive use to maintain friendships through private messages and chat, from the answers to these two we can say that they do not attribute too much importance to Facebook in their private lives, especially with friends or romantic relationships. And we can also say that, in a first instance, this can be good news for educators.

In spite of this emotional distance Facebook is very present in the daily lives of students, often at the expense of other activities, such as, probably studying and learning. 65.4% of the sample agrees with the statement that “Facebook distracts me and makes me waste time” only 13.5% said that this does not correspond to reality. It is a very interesting result, which is well worth further investigation. We also note how Facebook is now considered by many students as a very important tool for sharing interests with friends. 63% of the sample

agreed with the statement “On Facebook, I share my passions with friends (e.g., music, sports, politics, cinema)”, while only 13% do not agree at all. In addition, the social network is essentially the website to which many of the students access most: 62% agree with the statement “I use Facebook as often as all the other websites” and only 19% does not agree. Finally, some students say they use Facebook as a substitute of the phone (instead of SMS or phone calls), but 33% disagreed with that statement.

Conclusions

The high (83% of our sample is using Facebook) and growing (in 2008 only 36% of the sample was registered to a generic social network site, while in 2009 the user registered to Facebook already reached 69.1%) adoption rate of Facebook by our students could provide an opportunity for the introduction of this tool in the learning process (for example as a unique, or at least as one, learning management system tool or as a platform for educational goals) in as much as our students would already be familiar with the features of this tool. The high familiarity of students with the tool reduces the risk of technological frustration which often undermines the success of the introduction of new technologies in the learning processes.

Regardless of the fact that Facebook is the most popular social network site in the world, in the scientific literature, its value for educational purposes is still questioned (Manca & Ranieri, 2013; Prescott, Wilson & Becket, 2013).

From one side, as reported by Manca and Ranieri (2013), «scholars have cautioned against using Facebook for educational purposes (e.g., Selwyn, 2009). As students seem to be reluctant to use it for academic purposes, it is suggested that the focus should move away from its educational uses and consider Facebook as a place for socialization (Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley, 2009)» (ivi, p. 2).

From the other side, scholars suggest that usually social network sites are mainly used in education as tools supporting existing social relationships and supporting the maintenance of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2011). Facebook in education is viewed as potentially beneficial for: interaction, collaboration, information, resource sharing, active participation and critical thinking (Mason 2006; Maloney, 2007; Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Mazman & Usluel, 2010). Several researches suggest that Facebook is a good tool for encouraging peer support and informal learning between students, such as increased communication and support about course content, and assessments (see Mason, 2006; Selwyn, 2007; Goodband *et al.*, 2012).

In light of the results of our survey, which can be used as a basis for theoretical study and practical applications related to Facebook and education, along with the different views of the role of Facebook in education, we think that for the next steps it is important to:

- gain an understanding into the opinions and attitudes of our students and our professors towards the use of Facebook in the university setting (see Ismail, 2010; Espuny, González, Lleixà & Gisbert, 2011; Junco, 2012; Fewkes & McCabe, 2012);

- implement some pilot projects using Facebook for educational purposes in our University and then eventually to plan projects on a large scale.

We believe that, as underlined by Elgort (2005), the adoption of a new technology in the university context will be influenced by organizational, socio-cultural, and intra and interpersonal factors, inter alia, so we highly value the effort to better understand usage and perception of Facebook, in order to evaluate possible strategies to use it in our educational environment, or in general educational environments.

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