Use of Social Networking by Undergraduate Psychology Majors

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Introduction

Given the ease with which people can now obtain an online presence for no- or low-cost, either through social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, or Bebo or webhosting entities such as Google, it is important to help students understand how to use such abilities responsibly. With over 150 million registered users, Facebook is one of the most widely used social networking tools with college students, but little research has been conducted on how students use the site and what type of information they reveal.

Previous research examining how undergraduate education majors (Coutts, Dawson, Boyer, & Ferdig, 2007) and medical students and residents (Thompson et al., 2008) use Facebook have found high rates of disclosure of personal information and unprofessional use, as well as a low number of people choosing to keep their information restricted and private. The current study was undertaken to examine how undergraduate psychology majors use social networking, specifically the website Facebook.com, and what information they are making publicly available.

Hypotheses for the study were that a) the majority of students would have a Facebook account; b) most students with an account would not restrict access to it; and c) a minority of students would have content of a questionable or possibly negative nature.

Method

Procedure

Prior to study onset, the Arkansas Tech University (ATU) Human Subjects Committee reviewed and gave approval for the study to proceed. Facebook, unlike other social network sites, requires users to give their first and last name, allowing searching by those parameters. In addition, profiles not made private on purpose are by default open to viewing by other members of your network, such as a university or college.

This study first obtained the names of all undergraduate psychology majors at ATU ($n = 199$) from publicly available lists of majors. Study authors (L.B. and D.H.) used personally created Facebook registrations under their ATU email addresses, automatically enrolling them in the ATU network. They then searched for the participants' profiles by first and last name, or email address if the first search returned no results. It was then determined whether the profile was "public" or "private", a setting that limits the amount of information available to be viewed at the owner's discretion. For public profiles, the following personal information, when applicable, was collected, including: hometown, street address, phone number, the presence of a profile photo, email address, and an instant messenger address. Other information included sexual orientation, relationship status, birthday, field of study, and religious and political views. The number of "friends" each participant had, meaning the number of people that they allowed into their personal network, the number of photo albums they had, and the number of social groups they joined were also collected.

Finally, those participants with publicly available profiles were then examined more qualitatively. Information on the presence of unprofessional material, subjectively defined, was then gathered from each profile. The categories for unprofessional material were display of alcohol or drug use, highly sexualized dress, or overt sexuality, and use of foul language.

Results

Use of Social Networking

Of the 199 undergraduate psychology majors, 62.3% ($n = 124$) had existing Facebook accounts at the time of the data collection. Of those, 73.4% ($n = 91$) had open profiles that were available for viewing by any member of their particular network (in this case, the Arkansas Tech network). All further information presented below was gathered only on those 91 students with open profiles (see Table 1). Of the public profiles, they were split relatively evenly between males (54.9%) and females (45.1%).

Table 1

Descriptive information obtained from public Facebook profiles.

Personal information revealed	Total ($n = 91$)	Female ($n = 41$)	Male ($n = 50$)
Birthday	95.6%	97.6%	94.0%
Hometown	70.3%	61.0%	78.0%
Relationship status	79.1%	82.9%	76.0%
Political views	59.3%	48.8%	68.0%
Religious views	54.9%	51.2%	58.0%
Sexual orientation	76.9%	68.3%	84.0%
Personal photograph	92.3%	90.2%	94.0%
Field of study	48.4%	43.9%	52.0%
Home address	15.4%	9.8%	20.0%
Email address	60.4%	53.7%	66.0%
IM address	17.6%	24.4%	12.0%
Mean # friends (Range)	359.3 (0-1330)	330.2 (0-961)	395.7 (0-1330)
Mean # photo albums (Range)	68.6 (0-975)	112.0 (0-975)	15.6 (0-178)
Mean # social groups (Range)	33.8 (0-269)	28.4 (0-180)	40.46 (0-269)

Results (cont.)

Gender Differences

To examine possible gender differences in reveal of personal information, a series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted. No statistically significant differences were found on any of the variables of interest, although reveal of political views ($p = .064$) and sexual orientation ($p = .078$) approached significance. There was a significant difference in the number of photo albums between males and females, but when the outliers were deleted, no difference was found.

Qualitative Analyses

Each of those students who had an openly accessible profile on Facebook ($n = 91$) was a participant in the qualitative analyses. Their profiles were examined in depth for content that could be viewed negatively, either by future employers, clients, or graduate schools. References to alcohol or drug use, displays of risque dress or overt sexuality, and use of foul language were all examined. Of the original 91, 10 students changed their profiles to private between collection of quantitative and qualitative data, leaving a toal sample of 81 students. Of those, 22 (27.2%) had questionable content displayed on their profiles (see Table 2).

Table 2

Presence of questionable content on public Facebook profiles.

Questionable content type	Percentage ($n = 81$)
Alcohol use	14.8
Drug use	2.4
Risqué dress	3.7
Overt sexuality	6.2
Foul language	18.5

Discussion

Today's undergraduate student has more opportunity to reveal personal information to large numbers of people than ever before, thanks to the Internet. As with past studies, the current research found that large numbers of students use the social networking site Facebook, and that a great percentage make their profiles publicly available, with the resultant reveal of personal information that entails. Both genders appear to disclose personal information at equal rates, with a large amount of information revealed by the average student.

Given the sheer number of students using such sites, and the fact that many of them choose to leave their information publicly viewable, it is not surprising that some would have questionable or potentially offensive content on their profiles. However, these students appear to be in the minority, with the use of foul language and portrayal of alcohol use only appearing on less than 20% of profiles and other content appearing at very small percentages.

Using social networking sites responsibly should be something everyone is given information about, both before and during college. Further, college professors could actually use such sites to connect with students in innovative ways or use them to help teach concepts of professionalism, through discussion of appropriate usage or mentoring.