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Facebook: Student Perceptions of Ethical Issues About Their Online Presence

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1 Facebook and other social networking sites provide university students with a method of staying in touch with their friends on campus and in their home towns. While scholarship has examined privacy and Facebook and how students maintain connections with others through social networking sites (SNSs), little or no scholarship has addressed how Facebook users perceive the ethical issues that are raised by Facebook use. For this study, 264 students at a midwestern university were surveyed over four semesters to determine their attitudes about Facebook. Results showed that students view Facebook as more like a private conversation than a public performance and most of them report that they use the privacy features offered by Facebook. Students believe that authority figures should not use Facebook to make judgments about people. They report that they primarily use Facebook to keep in touch with friends or make plans with them. Most reported that they haven’t posted questionable pictures of themselves, but they report that nearly 90 percent of their friends had. Students also listed a number of ethical issues that they perceive, such as people posting inappropriate pictures of others without the others’ permission, harassing or hurting others, or using Facebook during a class or in another inappropriate situation. They also believed that the best way to handle these ethical issues was for people
to take responsibility for their own profiles by using the privacy settings and not posting inappropriate materials.

Since Facebook’s inception in 2004, over 400 million people have created profiles and shared information with ‘friends’ around the world. In the intervening years, Facebook and its users have experienced many growing pains. Privacy is a key issue that has arisen, both for users and for the Facebook organization. As Wagner (2006) has pointed out, the indiscriminate sharing of information on profiles has left some people embarrassed, while others have suffered more serious consequences, like being dismissed from athletic teams, not being hired, or losing jobs. Because the consequences for users have sometimes been related to the way that the Facebook organization has handled its privacy policies, Facebook has had several instances in which changes in its corporate privacy policies caused profile owners to protest (boyd 2008).

The impetus for this exploratory project grew out of a controversy on campus that began when residence hall staff members (RHAs) were fired because of their behavior during a spring break trip. Other students formed a Facebook group called “Save the RHAs.” A group of student employees subsequently was disciplined, according to the administration, because the students breached their contract by joining the Facebook group and opposing the administration’s decision about the RHAs. Students were upset and angry that the university’s administration used membership in a Facebook group as a rationale for disciplining their peers (Grimm 2007).

As a communication scholar interested in ethical issues, my attention was drawn to the tension between student speech rights and the rights of the administration to discipline employees. Furthermore, I was interested in discovering how students perceived their use of Facebook. I wanted to know if Facebook seemed more private, like email, or more public, like a bulletin board.

Since its beginning in a Harvard University dorm room in 2004, Facebook has become a fruitful area of research for scholars in the social and computer sciences. Scholars have examined how people use Facebook and other social networking sites (SNSs) and have researched how personality variables are related to people’s use of Facebook. While legal, ethical, and social aspects of Facebook have been discussed by numerous authors, little or no research has been done about the ethical issues that users perceive in their use of social networking sites (see boyd and Ellison 2008 for a complete review). As with all new technologies, ethical issues arise when people use communication technology in ways that were never expected. For instance, the iPod, originally intended as a music player, has been used to cheat on tests and as a flashlight (Colman, 2007). In this chapter, I will review relevant literature about Facebook and other SNSs (particularly literature related to privacy), present my research questions, and discuss the ethical issues students perceive in the use of Facebook.

Privacy

Many scholars have examined privacy from the micro level to the macro level in relation to SNSs and have compared people’s perceptions of privacy of different SNSs (Dwyer et al. 2007). A number of authors have examined how users of SNSs use privacy settings. Privacy settings are an important aspect of Facebook and other SNSs because they allow the profile owner to control who sees his or her content. Many of the ethical issues arise from perceptions that profile owners’ privacy was invaded.

While the study of SNSs is in its infancy, there already is evidence that users have changed the way they allow access to their profiles. In 2005, Gross and Acquisti found that few people had made parts of their profiles private, while by 2008, Lewis et al. found that one-third of respondents had private profiles, and Raake and Bonds-Raacke (2008) noted that one-half of participants had private profiles. Women were more likely to have private profiles regardless of the date of the study, and the number of women with private profiles has increased (Lewis et al. 2008; Raake and Bonds-Raacke 2008). On the other hand, numerous studies have found that most users do not change their privacy settings; they let everyone in their network see their profiles (Kolek and Saunders 2008; Stern and Taylor 2007). This is consistent with Tyma’s (2007) study that examined the tensions between privacy and publicly disclosing information on SNSs. He argues, based on Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory, that “If the potential return on the exchange of information is deemed higher than the potential risk, CPM contends that the user will reveal the information, further allowing her or his identity to be observed and commented on by others within the community” (35). Thus, as people grew to perceive greater risk in sharing information about themselves, they were more likely to make their privacy settings stricter.

Related to privacy settings is the question of how willing profile owners are to disclose information about themselves. Gross and Acquisti
found that students willingly provided information about themselves, such as images, birthdates, phone numbers, or where they lived (2005, 5; see also Kolek and Saunders 2008). Acquisti and Gross (2006) asked how concerned students were about privacy, their privacy settings (on a survey), and also compared survey results to student profiles. They discovered, “in short, the majority of FB members seem to be aware of the true visibility of their profile — but a significant minority is vastly underestimating the reach and openness of their own profile” (emphasis in text, 2006, 53).

Facebook users became concerned about privacy issues directly related to the information structure of Facebook when the newsfeed feature was added in 2006. The newsfeed allowed people to know when their friends added other new friends, joined a group, or posted to their walls. Previously, people would have had to go to the profile owner’s page to view this information. In order to prevent all Facebook friends from seeing everything posted, users had to opt out by changing privacy settings. This change was significant because there are multiple levels of friendship among “friends” on Facebook. Some Facebook friends are acquaintances, others are colleagues, while others are friends with whom one is willing to share private information. Boyd (2008, 16) points out that “participants have to consider how others might interpret their actions, knowing that any action will be broadcast to everyone with whom they consented to digital Friendship” and that people may not want all of their friends to know the groups they’ve joined, such as groups related to their sexual orientation.

Legal issues related to Facebook use are also a concern. In a discussion of case law related to privacy concerns and Facebook, Brandenburg (2008) notes that there are not clear precedents about privacy that can be applied to Facebook. She states that the terms of service might be applied in such a way that employers could be sued for using Facebook to investigate current or potential employees, but that there have been no clear rulings about whether users should have an expectation of privacy when using Facebook.

At the macro level, the architecture of SNSs influences how private profiles are. Pappacharissi (2009) examined how the architecture of three social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, ASmallWorld) determined the publicness or privateness of that interaction. He found that the architecture of Facebook is more open than at LinkedIn and ASmallWorld. ASmallWorld protects users’ privacy the most because,

in order to use the site, one must be invited by another member and the ability to invite members is limited. On the other hand, Facebook is open to everyone and Facebook users simply accept or reject people’s friendship requests.

Connecting to Others

In addition to privacy issues, scholars have examined how SNS users use SNSs to maintain relationships. Acar (2008) found that network size was positively correlated with extraversion and that online friend networks were bigger than real-life social networks, as did Gross and Acquisti (2005). A curvilinear relationship was found between extraversion and network size when observers were asked to rate profile owners based on the number of friends they had (Tom Tong et al. 2008). People with too many friends were not perceived as extraverted, but rather as having some type of personality trait that made them seek an excessive number of Facebook friends.

Because the mass media have reported about inappropriate pictures posted to SNSs, a number of studies have examined profile pictures or other photos posted to users’ profiles. A profile picture is the picture used to identify the person’s page. Most people use pictures of themselves, while others may include images of scenery, their children, or cartoons. Typical of studies of profile pictures was one that examined three randomly selected Facebook profiles from the largest university in each state in the U.S. (Watson et al. 2006). The study found few socially irresponsible behaviors represented in central photos; approximately 9 percent of pictures contained references to alcohol use. The findings are consistent with Kolek and Saunders’s (2008) study at a single university at which approximately 7 percent of profile pictures showed alcohol or alcohol use.

Scholars have examined the effects of Facebook on relationships, and the reasons why people use Facebook. Sheldon (2008) found that the six most common factors that motivate Facebook use are relationship maintenance, passing time, membership in a virtual community, entertainment, coolness, and companionship. She also found that people “who were unwilling to communicate offline tended to go to Facebook to pass time when bored or to feel less lonely but not to meet new friends” (2008, 72). Mazer et al. (2009) found that students who viewed a profile of a graduate teaching assistant that included a lot of
self-disclosure were more likely to be motivated and to have higher levels of affective learning, and that the classroom climate would be warmer.

Finally, students use Facebook as a communication tool. Stern and Taylor (2007) describe how students use Facebook to learn more about potential friends or romantic partners, to see whether their romantic partners are cheating on them, to break up with their partners, to do "mean" things to others, to send messages, and look at photos.

**Ethics and Facebook Use**

While previous research helps us understand how students use Facebook and other SNSs, it does not elucidate how students perceive the ethical issues related to the use of Facebook. Ethical issues in studies of Facebook arise only tangentially. For instance, students are concerned with issues like stalking and a few admit they have gotten into trouble on Facebook (Stern and Taylor 2007). Scholars have also pointed out that users seem unaware of how visible their profiles are to those who are not their friends (Acquisti and Gross 2006; Cain 2008).

Others argue that students do not seem to know how long their profile information may be available to those outside their network. Wagner (2006) notes that "where students get into trouble with online communities is not understanding that the information they post may stick around, becoming a paperless but permanent record of their character. So such things as photos and detailed descriptions of a drunken weekend posted in one's blog and hateful or threatening comments posted in another person's blog could easily be discovered by a future employer conducting a simple background check . . .."(7).

Stern and Taylor (2007) note that many activities that students carry out on Facebook raise ethical issues. For instance, some users used "FB for 'sex,' 'to find out more about a girl I slept with the night before,' and 'get random play or friends with benefits.' Conversely, students have used FB to break up with their boyfriends or girlfriends. And others have used it to 'make people jealous,' 'be mean to someone,' or 'write mean rumors about people and defame people's characters, although sometimes the rumors are actually facts'" (Stern and Taylor 2007, 13). However, no study has specifically examined how students perceive ethical issues in their use of Facebook.

Based on the literature discussed, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: Do students view communicating on Facebook as more like a conversation with a friend or as a public performance?
RQ2: What are students' perceptions of the privacy features of Facebook, including how they and their friends use those features?
RQ3: What are students' expectations about authority figures' use of Facebook to evaluate users' behavior?
RQ4: Why do students use Facebook?
RQ5: What ethical issues do students perceive in the use of Facebook?

**Method**

Participants in this study were drawn from a convenience sample of students at a small midwestern university (N=261). Because every full-time undergraduate student has a laptop computer, a high percentage of students have Facebook profiles (over 97 percent) and most participants were frequent users of Facebook; of those who had profiles, only 4 percent rarely checked their profiles. The other 96 percent of Facebook users checked their profiles at least daily or several times per day. Participants in this study ranged in age from 18 to 26 (mean = 19.68, SD = 1.57). Significantly more participants were female, reflecting campus demographics (women = 205 (79 percent); men = 56 (21 percent); average on campus over last eight years is 61 percent female).4 Student participants were disproportionately freshmen (44.8 percent) because the surveys were distributed in the Communication Studies Department, where students take a mandatory public speaking class, primarily during their first year.

Participants responded to Likert-type scale items that asked them about their perceptions of their own Facebook use as well as their friends' use.4 Items asked: (1) how students and their friends use privacy features, (2) whether Facebook is more like a conversation with a friend or a public performance, (3) whether students or their friends have posted pictures of themselves that could get them into trouble, (4) whether authorities (police, university officials) should be able to use Facebook to look for violations of the law, (5) whether coaches and universities should ban Facebook use, (6) whether employers should be able to look at profiles when hiring, (7) how students use Facebook
to keep in touch with friends, and (8) whether students or their friends have felt “stalked” on Facebook. The survey also asked if participants had a Facebook account, how long they had had a profile, and how often they checked it.

All participants answered the closed-ended questions; a smaller sample in later groups of participants also answered open-ended questions about the ethical issues they perceive in Facebook and how they manage those issues.

Results and Discussion
This section details the survey responses that students gave, including some responses to open-ended questions about the ethical issues participants perceived in the way that they and their peers use Facebook.

Conversation or Public Performance
Perhaps the most interesting finding that related to the first research question — whether students perceive Facebook as being more like a private conversation with a friend or as a public performance — was that, over time, they were more likely to agree or strongly agree that it was both. Students hold these contradictory ideas simultaneously. Of the 264 participants who responded to these items, over 50 percent strongly agreed or agreed that Facebook is a lot like a conversation with a friend, while more than 40 percent believed that Facebook is a lot like a public performance. Participants were more likely to see Facebook as a conversation with a friend than as a public performance ($t[263] = 2.26, p < 0.025$).

Because this study was conducted over multiple academic years and with new as well as upperclass students, further analyses were done to see if, first, experience with campus norms impacted student perceptions and, second, if any trends were discernible over time. First year students were significantly more likely to view Facebook as a private conversation and significantly less likely to view it as a public performance than were upperclass students (private conversation: $t[261] = 3.84, p < .01$; public performance: $t[262] = -2.11, p < .02$). A comparison of responses between those who took the survey during the 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 academic years revealed that, over time, students increasingly saw Facebook as a conversation with a friend or as a public performance (public performance: $t[262] = -2.47, p < .01$; conversation with a friend: $t[262] = -1.95, p < .05$).

Perceptions of Privacy Features
Over 84 percent of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they use the privacy features on Facebook, and nearly 88 percent of women agreed or strongly agreed that they used the privacy features. Also, because previous literature has shown that women are more likely to use privacy features than men, a $t$ test was performed to determine if the same was true in this sample. Consistent with previous findings (Lewis et al. 2008, Raacke & Bonds-Raacke 2008), women were more likely to agree that they use privacy features than men ($t[260] = -3.02, p < .01$).

Because of the increase in concerns raised in the media about privacy over the time that participants were responding to the survey, responses from each academic year were compared. The students from 2008–2009 were more concerned with privacy settings than those from the previous academic year ($t[260] = -2.63, p < .01$). Additionally, findings suggested that women from the more recent group to be surveyed were more likely to agree that they used the privacy features than those from the earlier group ($t[172.32] = -2.81, p < .003$).

Thus, students were aware that privacy is a concern on Facebook, most students claimed that they use the privacy features available, and there appears to be a trend toward increased use of those features, especially among women. If the users actually have made their profiles private or portions of their profiles private, it is similar to the shift in usage patterns found in previous studies (Gross and Acquisti 2005; Kolek and Saunders 2008; Lewis et al. 2008; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 2008). Media coverage and discussions on college campuses of problems associated with having public profiles may have influenced more students to use privacy features.

Expectations about Authority Figures' Use of Facebook
Overall, students believed that authority figures should not use Facebook to find information about profile users. Almost two-thirds (62 percent) of students disagreed with the statement, “The police should be allowed to use Facebook to detect legal violations (underage drinking, tearing
agreed or strongly agreed that Facebook was a great resource for connecting with friends. Over 80 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that they used Facebook to make plans with friends on campus. It seems that most students use Facebook to connect with people they already know. Fewer than half of the students (48.4 percent) strongly agreed or agreed that they have made new friends through Facebook.

While this study did not examine in detail the uses that students make of Facebook or other SNSs, its finding that these university students primarily use Facebook to keep in touch with friends or make plans with others and not make new friends is consistent with Raacke and Bonds-Raacke’s (2008) conclusion that SNSs are used to keep in touch with old or new friends, post pictures, or find old friends.

Perceived Ethical Issues

Fewer than 40 percent of students reported posting pictures on Facebook that could get them into trouble, while they believe that nearly 90 percent of their friends had done so. They also reported that while they have rarely felt stalked by someone on Facebook, they have many friends who have felt stalked.

Participants who took the survey during fall semester 2008 and spring semester 2009 also answered questions about the ethical issues they saw in Facebook. Students believed that the most important issue was the posting of inappropriate pictures or materials that could get the profile owner in trouble. They also felt an ethical issue was raised when people post pictures of others that the others might not want posted. Many firmly believed that authorities should not use Facebook as a tool for evaluating job candidates. As one respondent said, “I think the issue that stands out the most to me is potential employers viewing people’s Facebook or other networking site pages to judge whether or not they should be a candidate for a job. A person should be allowed to have a personal life completely separate from work and what they do on their own time should have nothing to do with their work as long as it does not cause conflict or [a] poor work ethic.” A significant group of respondents (n = 11) felt that there were no ethical issues in the use of Facebook.

Students also were asked to describe the best way to deal with the various ethical issues they saw in the use of Facebook. Responses to this question were limited, but most students said that they thought that it was
up to individuals to be smart users of Facebook and to use the available privacy settings. Some said that Facebook should take responsibility for improving the site to eliminate the ethical issues they perceived, while others had no suggested solutions for those ethical issues.

Students were aware of many of the ethical issues that have been discussed in the news, such as stalking, use of Facebook by authority figures, and posting of inappropriate pictures or materials. They also discussed a number of ethical issues that have not been prominent in the news media or the academic literature. First, students were concerned about judging people based on what is in their profiles. One student said, “Sometimes a person can be portrayed as someone he/she is not because of certain pictures that are posted.” Surprisingly, several students were concerned about people hacking into accounts in order to get access to accounts from which they had been restricted. A final issue for participants was the use of Facebook in classes or people who used Facebook too much. One student said, “I think Facebook detracts from the educational setting. I often witness students spending the majority (if not all) their time in classes (large lecture setting, or condensed class sizes) on Facebook because they ‘can.’”

Conclusion

While this exploratory study found that many students perceive ethical issues in the use of Facebook that had not been discussed before, its major weakness is its sample. The sample includes students from only one campus and it does not follow students’ attitude changes over time. A study that examined how students’ privacy and ethical concerns changed over time would help demonstrate the influence of the media and the influence of campus campaigns to inform students about the negative sides of Facebook, on students’ perceptions of Facebook, and their use of Facebook. Since this study took place at a “laptop university,” it is possible that students are more technically savvy than students at other campuses and may have more access to computer time.

This study also relied on students’ self-reports about their use of privacy features and whether they posted inappropriate pictures or content. Because it is self-report data, social desirability might have influenced responses. A content analysis of profiles would provide data that accurately reflects the way students use their profiles on a day-to-day basis. A comparison of self-report data and students’ profiles would provide a baseline for future research that uses self-report data.

The sample group for this project was mostly female. Given that women are more likely to use privacy features than men, a gender-balanced sample would provide a more accurate representation of typical users. The sample was also predominantly first year students; again a sample that better represented all academic years would provide a more accurate reflection of how all users employ the social network.

Finally, this study’s biggest contribution is that it asked students about the ethical issues that they perceive in their use of Facebook. Many of these issues, such as students’ judging one another because of pictures that are posted, “hacking into” others’ accounts, and using Facebook too much, have not been noted in previous research.

Notes

1 Tammy Swenson Lepper is an Associate Professor in Communication Studies at Winona State University. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. Her scholarly interests are communication ethics, organizational communication, and engaged learning practices. In particular, she has looked at how sensitive people are to ethical issues related to communication in a variety of contexts, including organizations and research settings. Her research on Facebook has led her to become a dedicated Facebook user. Her scholarly work appears in the Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, Journal of Mass Media Ethics, and in the forthcoming collection Speaking of Spirituality.


5 For a copy of the survey and detailed results, please contact the author.

6 This t-test did not assume equal variances across groups.

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