



## Full Length Article

# Understanding students' reasons and gender differences in adding faculty as Facebook friends



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## ABSTRACT

Social network sites could be used to promote learning inside and outside of the classroom. The current study examines students' reasons and gender differences in adding faculty as Facebook friends. Participants were undergraduate students who completed a survey consisting of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Correlation analysis revealed that students intend to add their professors as Facebook friends in order to get to know them better on a personal level. Despite previous research showing that men find student–teacher interactions on Facebook more appropriate than women, the results of this study found no such difference. Male students, however, were significantly more likely to be friends with their professors for clarification and efficiency reasons. Traditional gender role and social exchange theory could explain some of the findings.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media challenge the existing preconceptions of school, teachers, students, and learning (Bartow, 2014; Condie & Livingston, 2007). Bartow (2014) argued that social technologies present educational, ethical, economic, and revolutionary changes in the organization and structure of schools. Although social media platforms are not specifically designed for classroom use (Helvie-Mason, 2011), professors are using them to communicate with their students out of class as well as to create learning opportunities. Many students use social media to reach out for mentoring or to stay in touch with professors once the course has ended (Helvie-Mason, 2011).

Previous studies have found that informal or out-of-classroom communication between students and teachers results in positive outcomes, including greater academic achievements (Pascarella, 1985) and a greater sense of well-being of both teachers and students (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). However, in general, students have seemed more willing than faculty to engage in communication through social network sites (SNSs) (DiVerniero & Hosek, 2011; Draskovic, Caic, & Kustrak, 2013). Sturgeon and Walker (2009) found that those students who add professors as friends appear to be more willing to communicate with them face-to-face if they already know them through the use of social network site. Their study focused on Facebook, the most popular SNS. Another group of researchers (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds,

2007) found that students who accessed the Facebook page of an instructor high in self-disclosure anticipated higher levels of motivation, affective learning, and a more positive classroom climate.

Despite the benefits of informal student–teacher relationships on SNSs, the idea of faculty members being Facebook “friends” with their students remains a controversial issue. The major dissuading factor in communicating via SNSs for both students and faculty is that they feel that the relationship should remain professional (Draskovic et al., 2013). The overexposure to each other's private lives may have negative results for either the student or the faculty member (Cain & Fink, 2010). In a 2006 study, one-third of the students believed that faculty should not be present on Facebook at all (Hewitt & Forte, 2006). Similarly, a third of students in Cain, Scott, and Akers' (2009) study indicated that they have posted information that they would not want their professors to see. Interestingly, students approve faculty's use of SNSs when students benefit directly (e.g., being notified about extra credit) (Malesky & Peters, 2012).

While students add or intend to add their university professors as Facebook friends, it is unknown what their reasons are. Understanding them might help faculty grasp why students like to be their “friends” in a setting outside of class. In addition, we do not know much about gender differences in out-of-class behavior. Who is more willing to add faculty as Facebook friends: male or female students? This study explores students' reasons, as well as the gender difference in intentions to be a Facebook friend with a professor.

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### 1.1. Reasons for adding professors as Facebook friends

College students use social media for a variety of reasons, but the most important one is the maintenance of pre-existing social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Similarly, students may employ Facebook to maintain relationships with their former and current professors. Unlike traditional forms of teaching tools (e.g., Blackboard), Facebook may be seen as a less formal and less threatening platform where students can ask questions about the class, without worrying about their face-to-face appearance or even rejection.

Research done outside of the United States (Baran, 2010; Draskovic et al., 2013) indicates that students might be interested in both the social and teaching dimension of Facebook friendships with faculty. For example, Draskovic et al. (2013) conducted interviews with Croatian lecturers and teachers about their current practices and behaviors related to the use of social media in higher education. While only a few professors saw Facebook as a positive way to interact with students, students had a more positive attitude. Typical positive responses included using Facebook to get a fast response from lecturers and graduate assistants, as well as discussing the course content and answering questions that students might have. In Baran's (2010) study conducted in Turkey, all students believed that it was quite appropriate for instructors and students to socialize through Facebook. Most felt excited when the teacher commented on their postings. Only a few students expressed negative opinions about faculty sharing too much private information online.

DiVerniero and Hosek (2011) interviewed American students to learn how they perceive and communicate with instructors before and after viewing their instructors' online profiles. In their interviews with students, most participants agreed that viewing instructors' online profiles allows them to see instructors as "human beings" and "friends" that are engaged in life outside of academia. However, students still expressed the need for instructors to have a professional profile. In fact, some felt confused when trying to negotiate the definition of such a friendship. Most said that they would discontinue communication with the instructor on Facebook once the semester was over.

In all forms of relationships, there are expectations how individuals should behave (Expectancy Violations Theory, EVT; Burgoon, 1978). Three factors influence expectations: individual communicator factors (gender, personality, age, appearance), relational factors (prior relational history, status differences, levels of attraction and liking), and context factors (formality/informality, social/task function, environmental restrictions, cultural norms) (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Expectations for human behavior are learned. People learn their expectations from the culture in which they were born. For example, the expectations about a student–teacher relationship in the U.S. are that teachers are knowledgeable about subject matter and available to students who need help. When expectations are violated, the violation is judged as either positive or negative, depending on the reward potential of others. Several studies have warned faculty to be careful when adding students as Facebook friends. Both Karl and Peluchette (2011) and Schwartz (2009) argued for faculty being open to new technology but also taking a passive stance by not initiating friendships with students themselves, but only responding to their requests. As Karl and Peluchette (2011) found, some students still get irritated by requests from their professors. In the Malesky and Peters (2012) study, nearly 40% of students and 30% of the faculty believed that it is inappropriate for professors to even have an account on SNSs. Students viewed the professors' actions as being more appropriate only when they are trying to assist their students (e.g., learn their names or offer extra credit).

Most previous studies have used interviews to understand the student–teacher relationship on Facebook. This study uses a

mixed-methods approach (a combination of open-ended and closed-ended survey questions) to understand the main reasons for adding faculty as Facebook friends. The following question has been asked:

Research Question 1: What reasons do college students report for adding their professors as Facebook friends?

### 1.2. Gender differences in Facebook friendships

Classroom interactions between teachers and students are influenced by teachers' attitude and gender expectations. Research shows that teachers change their behavior, expectations, and teaching style according to students' genders (e.g., Dabiri, 2006). For example, Hassaskhah and Zamir (2013) found that within teacher-initiated interactions in Iran, three out of four categories of evaluative contacts (acceptance, praise, and criticism) were directed significantly more to males than females. Female students have been the victims of a hidden bias in teacher interactions and the curriculum (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Female students have been praised for being neat, quiet, and calm, while male students have been encouraged to be active and speak up (Reay, 2001). Female students also received higher grades for conforming to classroom norms (Sadker, Sadker, & Klein, 1991). In general, males got more speaking opportunities and more feedback in class (Hassaskhah & Zamir, 2013; Jones & Dindia, 2004).

Little research exists relating to gender differences in reasons for adding faculty as Facebook friends. With student–teacher relationships moving to an online venue, it is important to understand if male students are at an advantage over female students. Although women spend more time on Facebook than men (Sheldon, 2008), research (e.g., Hewitt & Forte, 2006; Teclehaimanot & Hickman, 2011) suggests that male students find student–teacher interactions on Facebook to be more appropriate than female students. Previous studies do not provide the rationale for why these gender differences would exist. However, it is possible that men worry less about what other people will say about them. Historically, men are less likely to conform to explicit or implicit societal norms, unlike women who feel guilty for violating procedural or moral norms – both in their daily lives and in an educational setting (Eccles & Blumenfeld, 1985).

It is also important to note that Teclehaimanot and Hickman (2011) asked their study participants to simply imagine a male professor in his forties that has a Facebook account. Results might be different if students were told to imagine a female instructor. In addition, Malesky and Peters (2012) argued that students at different schools may see things differently, depending on the size of the school and the scope of its curriculum. Therefore, this study explores if gender differences exist in the reasons, as well as the perception of the appropriateness of adding professors as Facebook friends. The following research questions have been asked:

Research Question 2: Are there gender differences in reasons for adding faculty as Facebook friends?

Research Question 3: Do male and female students differ in how appropriate they find student–teacher interactions on Facebook?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were undergraduate students ( $N = 249$ ), including 158 female and 91 male students. They ranged in age from 19 to 53 years old ( $M = 22.23$ ,  $SD = 4.71$ ). Approximately 67% of the participants were self-identified as Caucasian, 17% African-American,

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