



## Faculty and Facebook friending: Instructor–student online social communication from the professor's perspective



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### ABSTRACT

U.S. college faculty with Facebook profiles ( $N = 308$ ) were surveyed about their expectations of students' perceptions of their credibility, professionalism, and approachability in the classroom, as well as mutual connectedness with their instructors, resulting from out-of-classroom socializing with them and teacher self-disclosure on Facebook. Consistent with uses and gratifications theory, these teacher attributes made up the Professors' Expected Relationship Compensation scale (PERC), which was correlated to professors' frequency of Facebook interaction with students ( $r = 0.41, p < 0.001$ ). Multiple regression confirmed the persistence of this large-sized effect after accounting for the influence of six other variables, including instructors' level of self-disclosure. These characteristics have been shown to relate positively to student-reported enhancements of academic outcomes and satisfaction. Faculty participation in non-academic, online interaction through Facebook shows great promise for augmenting student perceptions of their college experience and academic performance because it aligns professors' uses with students' expectations.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Facebook friend requests from students to instructors

About 90% of undergraduate college students use Facebook (Dahlstrom, de Boor, Grunwald, & Vockley, 2011; Hewitt & Forte, 2006) and at least 60% of those log in daily (Hewitt & Forte, 2006). Presumably, the receipt of a Facebook “friend request” from a student is something college educators are dealing with more frequently in this increasingly wired environment. Of course, this sort of event might give some instructors pause for thought about the appropriateness of responding favorably to such an invitation and then engaging in this social activity, or even raise questions about whether this social networking site (SNS), Facebook, has a place in the academic realm. Currently, however, we can only speculate about the average instructor's reaction to such an overture because we know so very little about instructor attitudes toward communicating socially with their students on Facebook and other SNSs. This exploratory study is initiated with the purpose of partially filling the void in this area.

### 1.2. Instructors' embrace of mediated technologies

College educators today teach, advise, and mentor students who have never known a world without online connectivity. For at least a

decade, college teachers have focused much effort on integrating a variety of mediated technologies into lessons in the attempt to enhance participation in classroom discussions, engage students in more active learning, and attract and maintain their attention (Schmid, 2008; Shrand, 2008). College instructors have experimented with and reported on a variety of mediated techniques and processes (Teelehaيمانوت & Hickman, 2011), including Twitter (Johnson, 2011; Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011), YouTube.com (Berk, 2009; Burke & Snyder, 2008), Google Earth (Lund & Macklin, 2007; Patterson, 2007), Facebook (Muñoz & Towner, 2009), wikis (Ferris & Wilder, 2006; Ruth & Houghton, 2009), Second Life (Conklin, 2007), blogs (Kennedy, 2003; Richardson, 2003) and more, all geared toward improving the learning outcomes of a generation of students, so-called “digital natives”, by “speaking their language”.

### 1.3. Can instructors and students benefit from “social talk” with each other on Facebook?

While tailoring the educational environment to play to students' presumptive strengths and preferences by, for example, providing them with a digital comfort zone in the classroom, another crucial aspect of their academic experience has been examined as well—that of their digital socialization. As Siemens and Weller (2011) noted, “If one views learning as a largely social enterprise, as many do, then the new forms of socialization that social networks afford seem ready-made for adoption into higher education” (p. 165). Social media use creates for students bonding opportunities with other students and, ostensibly,

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with their professors. On the basis of voluminous empirical data on the value of out-of-class communication (OCC) between instructors and students spanning four decades, it is reasonable to assume that the most consequential and optimistic expectation instructors would have for purely social contact with students is an improved learning outcome for students as a result of greater relatability to the instructor (Cuseo, 2008; DiVerniero & Hosek, 2011). Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007) remarked that Facebook “can offer teachers and students a unique method to nurture the student–teacher relationship, which can ultimately create a positive learning experience for both parties” (p. 15).

Although there is considerably less evidence of actual than of perceived academic rewards of social online OCC, studies have shown at least two significant predictors of student participation in class discussion (Schmid, 2008; Shrand, 2008): (a) student-perceived teacher caring and character (credibility, connectedness) (Myers, 2004), and (b) teacher self-disclosure (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). Pogue and Ahyun (2006) showed that another predictor of student academic success, affective learning, is significantly positively influenced by high levels of perceived teacher credibility, asserting that what is seen as effective teaching emerges from a combination of instructor–student personal interaction and perceived instructor credibility. Social interaction with students on Facebook may be an effective way instructors can capture these positive effects on student learning.

#### 1.4. Instructor expectations of out-of-classroom, social use of Facebook with students

Of course, not all OCC interactions are beneficial for all parties involved, particularly for female instructors (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Nadler & Nadler, 2000; Zikmund, 1988), but in his review of the extant literature on OCC, Cuseo (2008) concluded, “One would be hard-pressed to find any other college-experience variable with as much empirical support for as many positive educational outcomes” (n.p.). Long before Facebook’s arrival, Endo and Harpel (1982) found that informal, as opposed to formal, student–teacher interaction outside the classroom had a significant positive effect on six out of seven intellectual outcomes and on students’ satisfaction with their education. Formal student–teacher interaction, on the other hand, had a significantly negative effect on students’ satisfaction with education. Both of these results indicate potential for discovering beneficial effects of social, informal interaction between instructors and students through a medium like Facebook.

The literature provides a substantial body of data from the student’s point of view yet little peer-reviewed scholarship regarding the instructor side of this equation. It is important to begin to fill this gap in knowledge because college educators across the nation struggle with setting the professional–personal boundaries for out-of-class communication with their students (Halic, 2011; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009; Sturgeon & Walker, 2009; Vinson, 2010), including communication afforded by social media. This point was corroborated by one of our respondents:

Facebook is nothing new in the world of student/faculty interactions. There have always been possibilities for “friendship”. However, without maintaining that professional distance between a teacher and a student, it’s too easy for the teacher to become biased in evaluation of the student.

In addition to the need to inform instructors grappling with the challenges social media communication presents to maintaining adequate teacher–student relationship boundaries, there is a need to uncover where these two groups of Facebook users diverge and converge and thereby enlighten college instructors about clear advantages and disadvantages of its use. If instructors are engaging in this activity as a non-academic one, perhaps they are finding it to be effective in realizing

improvement in students’ learning outcomes. If they are not communicating socially with their students on Facebook, conceivably they are missing out on a form of OCC that could optimize student academic performance.

We augment the current body of knowledge on this topic by exploring, through the purview of uses and gratifications theory, whether college instructors believe that communicating socially with their students on Facebook renders higher student ratings of in-person approachability (Fusani, 1994; Sturgeon & Walker, 2009), connectedness to students (Helvie-Mason, 2011; Myers, 2004), teacher professionalism (Mortelmans & Spooen, 2009; Spooen & Mortelmans, 2006), and instructor credibility in the classroom (Myers, 2004; Pogue & Ahyun, 2006). These four attributes make up our proposed Professors’ Expected Relationship Compensation (PERC) scale (see 3.2). Additionally, we inquire into the relationship between actual amount of self-disclosure and these attributes and identify the instructor-users of OCC on Facebook through a variety of demographic variables. First, we will review uses and gratifications, the theory, which guided this exploratory study and then, second, the most relevant literature on online OCC between only instructors and students.

#### 1.5. Theoretical foundations

##### 1.5.1. The mechanisms of uses and gratifications theory

Uses and gratifications theory (U & G) proposes that individuals use mass media and other forms of communication to fulfill needs and wants (Rubin, 2002). The theory attempts to make sense of the choices people make about media use by postulating that people deliberately use media for particular purposes; the driving mechanism of the theory is need gratification. By understanding the needs of media consumers, the reasons for media consumption are uncovered, and inform resulting media effects or lack thereof. Unlike other media theory of its time, U & G describes media consumers as active, rather than passive; they are able to choose to use certain media to satisfy needs and can articulate these decisions. In other words, the selection and use of media, whether a paperback novel or a video on YouTube.com, are goal-directed, purposive, and motivated activities (Rosengren, 1974). Joines, Scherer, and Scheufele (2003) explained further that the repeated use of a medium assumes that underlying motivations are driving its use; that is, if audiences do not receive rewards or gratifications from a medium, they would stop using it.

Rubin (1994) wrote that according to this theory, media use is determined by key elements, such as “people’s needs and motives to communicate, the psychological and social environment, the mass media, functional alternatives to media use, communication behavior, and the consequences of such behavior” (p. 419). The theory focuses on individuals, stipulating that the effects of a single medium or mediated message are different because different people use it for different purposes. Katz (1959) added:

[T]he message of even the most potent of the media cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no “use” for it in the social and psychological context in which he lives. The ‘uses’ approach assumes that people’s values, their interests, their associations, their social roles, are pre-potent and that people selectively “fashion” what they see and hear to these interests. (p. 2)

U & G research has looked at needs, such as personal identity, escape, and self-presentation (Rubin, 2002). It is important to note that some of these needs are now met by mediated versions of face-to-face human communication (Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009). So, although the theory has been around for more than 50 years, it is still used in contemporary media research, in particular by those looking at computer and information technology. Newhagen and Rafaeli (1996) suggested that U & G should be applied to the study of the Internet. In response, a number of authors have investigated the motivations for Internet use (Charney

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