



Facebook as virtual classroom – Social networking in learning and teaching among Serbian students



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ABSTRACT

Since Facebook is the most popular social network among students, the purpose of this study is to examine the attitude of students towards Facebook as virtual classroom, through consideration of its acceptability level, purpose and education in using. 238 students from the University of Belgrade, Technical Faculty in Bor (Serbia), took part in this study. We used SEM methodology (Structural Equation Modeling), which includes the assessment of the measurement model and on the basis of an adequate fitting indices, the structural model was tested. With the use of current empiric researches, in which sociological facts are interpreted, and conflicting attitudes are cited, this paper shows how students use Facebook in order to improve education.

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1. Introduction

The goal of this study is to identify factors that may motivate students to adopt and use the tools of social networks, especially Facebook (FB), for educational purposes.

Enhanced influence of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn brought significant changes in the distribution of information, moving the borders of cultural norms and enabled the presentation of individuals in a completely different way. Such an explosion of social media and possibilities of networking brought new ways of learning for students in academic institutions (Chen and Bryer, 2012).

Today's students globally can be described as 'natives of digital era' or 'members of the Internet generation' (Sanchez et al., 2014; Niculović et al., 2012, 2014). They were born in the digital age and interacted with digital technology from their early age (Tapscott and Williams, 2008, 2010; Thompson, 2013). For this reason, the modern professors who want to establish stronger relationships with their students, must, besides communication also improve the process of knowledge transfer by adjusting teaching strategies to the modern way of life that students live. Therefore, it is necessary to overcome the traditional way of learning which has been present so far (Sanchez et al., 2014), by introducing and implementing virtual classrooms as innovative support to the education process in future. Virtual classroom often employ multiple synchronous technologies, to provide remote students with the ability to collaborate in real time using different software applications and/or social networks. I.e., FB, as widely applicable social network, may also provide students with asynchronous communication tools, such as message boards and chat capabilities, to enhance the educational process.

Such a transformation in the educational process, where internet technology plays a key role, has already taken place. According to Brown and Adler (2008), the Internet has promoted the culture of content that was crucial in the development of social learning. While Web 1.0 has significantly expanded access to information, Web 2.0 has enabled new kinds of online

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resources (social networking sites, blogs, virtual communities), which allow users with common interests to share ideas and work together (Brown and Adler, 2008; Maloney, 2007). Several studies have shown how social network applications can significantly improve student learning and knowledge acquisition, enabling them mutual interaction, cooperation, active participation, sharing resources and critical thinking (Mason, 2006; Selwyn, 2009; Tapscott and Williams, 2010).

Facebook was created in February 2004 as a social network for students at Harvard by Mark Elliot Zuckerberg. This social network quickly gained popularity, and in 2006, Facebook became available to everyone over the age of 13 with a valid e-mail address (Sheldon, 2008; Urista et al., 2009). In December 2006, Facebook had over 12 million users, and only three years later in December 2009, the number of active Facebook users totaled over 350 million. Facebook is the most popular commercial social network that has over a billion users. On average, 50% of Facebook users are active daily, each user has 137 friends and spends up to 740 billion of minutes per month using Facebook (<http://www.howmanyarethere.org/how-many-facebook-users-are-there-2012/>).

Facebook users use Facebook to publish their photos, personal opinions and views, join groups with whom they have common interests as well as to keep in touch with people who they do not see often due to the distance (Buckman, 2005). There are also other online sites such as MySpace and Friedster used for connecting people, but Facebook is regarded as the leading social network of the greatest benefit for students (Golder et al., 2007; Stutzman, 2006). Thus, for example, the use of Facebook in the United States for academic purposes is a daily activity. Some studies show that over 90% of students use this social network on college as an aid to learning (Ellison et al., 2007; Stutzman, 2006). Supporters of Facebook (e.g. Munoz and Towner, 2009) argue that Facebook can have a positive influence on student's life. For example, students use Facebook to contact other students in order to solve common tasks better, to participate in joint projects, but the professors can also join by forwarding links useful to students related to lessons they need to learn. On the other hand, critics have expressed their concerns on the possibility of negative effects of Facebook use. Students can post inappropriate pictures of themselves on their profiles, which later may cause rejection by potential employers. Others wonder whether the students who spend a lot of time on Facebook devote less time to active learning, and whether this can negatively affect their success in college (Kirschner and Karpinski, 2010).

This paper focuses on the use of Facebook by Serbian students at BU example, the Technical Faculty in Bor (Serbia). However, the aim of this paper is not just to discuss the usefulness of Facebook, the manner of its acceptance or the educational value of the Facebook, but to introduce the use of Facebook as a virtual classroom, where the users-students will be engaged in activities in creating task execution and improving communication with colleagues and professors.

2. Literature review

There has been, recently, a significant increase in the number of articles about sites whose primary purpose is to connect people through social networks. Some of these studies have researched the influence of psychological factors in the use of social networks (Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzky, 2010; Correa et al., 2010; Ryan and Xenos, 2011; Ross et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2010).

Earlier researches on the social networks were mainly focused on issues such as user's privacy, technology development, social networks' structure (Debatin et al., 2009; Fogel and Nehmad, 2009). Some authors have expressed the need to conduct a study which would analyze the use of social networks for educational purposes (Kabilan et al., 2010; Lockyer and Patterson, 2008; Mazman and Usluel, 2010; Roblyer et al., 2010). Consequently, researches on the use of Facebook by students for educational purposes have increased significantly in recent years. A large number of studies have shown that students generally find Facebook as a social network that helps in faster adaptation to college life (Cheung et al., 2011; Greenhow et al., 2009; Madge et al., 2009; Selwyn, 2009).

Madge et al. (2009) describes Facebook as "social glue" that helps students to adapt quickly to college life. A sentence that often accompanies the generation of young people is "if you're not online you do not exist." Despite the fact that many authors have recognized the educational potential of Facebook, they still do not consider it as a formal tool for learning, but only as a means of informal assistance to learning through mutual communication and students' interaction. (Madge et al., 2009). In addition, the authors recommend that professors should be wary of the big invasion of social networking (Selwyn, 2009).

Some studies have examined the influence of engaging social network Facebook from a pedagogical point of view. They came to the conclusion that "online social network has a positive influence on student learning," because it helps students to be accepted by others more easily, and thus more quickly adapt to the university culture which is here presented.

Mazer et al. (2007) have analyzed the influence of professors who are using Facebook profiles for cooperation with the students. Researches have led them to the conclusion that students who cooperate with their professors in this way have greater motivation for learning and spread a positive climate in the classroom which can lead to better results in learning. Bowers-Campbell (2008) explains how teachers can use Facebook as a pedagogical tool for communication related to the interests and concerns of students. The author claims that it can increase self-efficacy in learning through increased communication with professors and other students through Facebook social network. However, professors should be cautious when posting content on a social network, because it can cause damage to their personal credibility (Mazer et al., 2007).

Other papers examine the influence Facebook can have on the learning process of other things that can be of great benefit to students. Kabilan et al. (2010) argue that Facebook provides a great help to students in learning English language. Yang

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