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## Students' perceptions of Facebook for academic purposes

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## ABSTRACT

Facebook is the most popular Social Network Site (SNS) among college students. Despite the popularity and extensive use of Facebook by students, its use has not made significant inroads into classroom usage. In this study, we seek to examine why this is the case and whether it would be worthwhile for faculty to invest the time to integrate Facebook into their teaching. To this end, we decided to undertake a study with a sample of 214 undergraduate students at the University of Huelva (Spain). We applied the structural equation model specifically designed by Mazman and Usluel (2010) to identify the factors that may motivate these students to adopt and use social network tools, specifically Facebook, for educational purposes.

According to our results, Social Influence is the most important factor in predicting the adoption of Facebook; students are influenced to adopt it to establish or maintain contact with other people with whom they share interests. Regarding the purposes of Facebook usage, Social Relations is perceived as the most important factor among all of the purposes collected. Our findings also revealed that the educational use of Facebook is explained directly by its purposes of usage and indirectly by its adoption.

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## 1. Introduction

Today's students can be described as digital natives or members of the Net Generation; they were born in the digital age and have been interacting with digital technology from an early age (Prensky, 2001, 2010; Tapscott & Williams, 2008, 2010; Thompson, 2013). If we, as professors, want to make strong connections with our students and engage them with the materials we want them to learn, we need to adapt our teaching strategies to their lifestyles. It is necessary to move from a traditional teacher-centered approach to learning, where the teacher imparts knowledge to students, to a learner-centered approach, where the student, instead of absorbing material transmitted by the instructor, learns how to learn (Hartman, Moskal, & Dziuban, 2005).

Part of this transformation has already taken place and Internet technologies have played a key role. According to Brown and Adler (2008), Internet has promoted a culture of content sharing that has been instrumental in the development of social learning. While the Web 1.0 vastly expanded access to information, the Web 2.0 provides new kinds of online resources (social network sites, blogs, wikis, folksonomies, virtual communities, ...) that allow users with common interests to meet, share ideas, and collaborate (Brown & Adler, 2008; Maloney, 2007). Several studies show how social network tools can improve the learning experience by enabling interaction, collaboration, active participation, information & resource sharing, and critical thinking (Mason, 2006; Selwyn, 2009; Tapscott & Williams, 2010).

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social network sites (SNSs) can be defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system".

Currently, there are many different SNSs that support a wide range of interests and practices. Due to the increasing popularity of Facebook among the undergraduate student population (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Hargittai, 2007; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Selwyn, 2009), we decided to focus our study on this particular social networking tool.

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According to the Media Research Center (AIMC, March 2013), in February/March 2013, there were over 24.8 million internet users in Spain representing 63.1% of the population. The majority of these users (24.7%) are aged 35 to 44, which in other words is the age group that dominates the online sphere, followed by the age group 25–34 (24.1%).

Regarding social media, the study conducted by IAB & Elogia (2012) reports that Facebook is the most heavily adopted social networking site, with 85% of social media users. Tuenti (36%) and Twitter (32%) are far behind Facebook although Twitter has made impressive gains over the last year. Along these lines, the SocialBaker Report (2013) states that there were 17 million of Spanish users on Facebook. Internet users under 45 are particularly likely to use Facebook, and those aged 25–34 are the most likely of any demographic cohort to do so, followed by the age group 35–44. The distribution of Facebook users is fairly equal between male and female.

Although Facebook has been considered by students as a social technology rather than a formal teaching tool (Madge et al., 2009; Mazman & Usluel, 2009; Selwyn, 2009), it can have a significant impact on student's performance. Facebook can help students settle into university life, leading them to a higher level of self-esteem, social acceptance and adaptation to university culture, which can improve their learning outcomes (Madge et al., 2009; Wang & Wu, 2008; Yu, Tian, Vogel, & Kwok, 2010).

Despite Facebook's potential to enhance the learning process, several studies conclude that faculty members are reluctant to incorporate this technology into their teaching strategies (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Cloete, de Villiers, & Roodt, 2009; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010). Surprisingly, the ECAR Survey of Undergraduate Students & Information Technology (Smith & Caruso, 2010) along with other studies (Garcia & Qin, 2007; Jones & Shao, 2011; Lohnes & Kinzer, 2007; Schulmeister, 2008) show how students have persistently reported that, although they increasingly use technology in their personal lives, they feel comfortable with traditional learning models and prefer moderate use of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) in their courses. However, Jones and Shao (2011) recommend being cautious about this finding because the interpretation of what "moderate use of ICT" means may change as new technologies emerge and become embedded in society.

The contradictory nature of these findings clearly shows that there is no evidence of the existence of a single generation of young students equipped with sophisticated technology skills and with learning preferences for which education is not prepared (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Jones & Shao, 2011). In this sense, Hargittai (2007) demonstrates that SNS usage among young people depends on the individual's gender, race and ethnicity, and parental education background. Therefore, before making radical changes to the current education system, it is necessary to undertake rigorous and empirical studies that investigate students' perceptions of SNSs as academic tools.

In order to shed some light about this topic, we decided to undertake a study with a sample of undergraduate students at the University of Huelva (Spain). The objective of our research is to identify the factors that may motivate these students to adopt and use social network tools, specifically Facebook, for educational purposes. To perform our research, we will administer the survey developed by Mazman and Usluel (2010) to a sample of business students, from different courses and different majors. Conclusions of this study will help us to understand and improve our use of social network tools in educational contexts. Our final goal is to adapt our teaching strategies to the educational needs of our students.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section provides a literature review on the main models and theories that have been historically used to explain the diffusion, acceptance and adoption of technological innovations. In addition, we will review the previous research on the use of social networking tools in educational contexts. The second section details the structural model used and the hypothesis to be tested. The third section describes our data compilation method. We then present and discuss the results of our analysis. To conclude the paper, we identify the limitations of our study as well as the future directions of this research.

## 2. Literature review

Although previous research on social networks has mainly focused on issues such as privacy, technology, identity, and network structures (Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Fogel & Nehmad, 2009), several authors have admitted the need to conduct studies that analyze the use of social networking tools in educational contexts (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010; Lockyer & Patterson, 2008; Mazman & Usluel, 2010; Roblyer et al., 2010). Accordingly, research on Facebook usage by college students has significantly increased during the last years.

A large number of studies concluded that undergraduates generally consider Facebook as a social tool that can ultimately help them transition into college life (Cheung et al., 2011; Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Madge et al., 2009; Selwyn, 2009).

Madge et al. (2009) describe Facebook as the "social glue" that helps students settle into university life. Although these authors recognize Facebook's educational potential, it is not usually considered by undergraduates as a formal learning tool, but as a means that can potentially support informal learning through communication and interaction (Madge et al., 2009). In addition, the authors recommend professors to be cautious about invading a social networking space that students believe is theirs. Along the same line, Selwyn (2009) concludes that Facebook has become an important site for the informal, cultural learning of "being a student".

Yuh et al. (2010) investigate the impacts of individual online social networking engagement (on Facebook) from a pedagogical standpoint. They conclude that undergraduates' online social networking has a positive impact on university students' learning because helps students attain acceptance from others and adapt to university culture.

Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007) analyze the effect of teacher self disclosure through Facebook. They concluded that students who accessed the Facebook website of a teacher high in self disclosure anticipated higher levels of motivation, affective learning, and a more positive classroom climate, which can lead to better student outcomes. However, participants noted in their responses that professors should be careful in their disclosures because they may damage their credibility (Mazer et al., 2007).

In this sense, Bowers-Campbell (2008) explains how educators can use Facebook as a pedagogical tool to communicate interest and concern for their students. The author argues that Facebook may contribute to improve low self-efficacy and self-regulated learning by increasing communication with instructors and classmates.

Other papers study the impact of Facebook on the learning process of specific subjects. Kabilan et al. (2010) find that university students consider Facebook as a useful and meaningful online environment that can support and improve their learning of English. Schroeder and Greenbowe (2009) explore the effectiveness of Facebook as a communication and discussion tool by creating a Facebook group that

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