FACEBOOK’S EFFECTS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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This qualitative research study is significant and noteworthy because it explores the interpersonal communication dynamics that occur among teens and young adults that get themselves involved with e-social networking field practices of Facebook. The research findings show that Facebook networking is mainly done to connect and keep contact with acquaintances, mutual friends and strangers; however, it is rarely used to keep ties with intimate family and friends because a strong bonding network is already present there. Therefore, the finding is significant because it shows that adolescents’ and adults’ need for networking and social engagement encourages them to consider facebooking as a tool which allows them to keep a loose-tie with people that are distant from them. Another interesting finding that makes this research significant is the fact that Facebookers do field networking to keep themselves up to date about other users’ social life. This is an important finding because it shows that its users consider the Facebook field as a narrative, personal drama posting board. This, of course, can be a source of pop-culture entertainment for added-on viewers to read about others’ life stories, get engaged with them (dramatically) and offer their subject-related, personal comments. Therefore, in addition to being a field of networking; Facebook is also a field (or a channel) of dramatic entertainment. Finally, the study indicates that logging on and off from Facebook did not have a significant affect (positive or negative) on the Facebook users’ emotional status. Therefore, Facebook usage does not have a significant effect on the users’ mood, feelings and emotions.
INTRODUCTION

The way one communicates in the 21st century has been vastly influenced by social media outlets. This paper will explore how Facebook impacts interpersonal communication among teens and young adults. Social media are a relatively new form of interpersonal communication, which is why it needs to be studied. Facebook has been the main focus amongst researchers when examining the topic of online social networks effects. Greg Mode uses Facebook over other Social networking sites (SNS) not because it is unique but because its popularity cannot be matched (2010:61). With so many users on Facebook (one billion and growing), there must be an impact on interpersonal communication. This new medium presents society with new possibilities to communicate (make and maintain relationships) but new risks as well (possibility in ending relationships, jealousy, narcissism). There has been much speculation about the meaningfulness of human interaction created by social media. Social media’s focus on relationships, networking and how we build and maintain relationships. But if these relationships are built upon meaningless interactions, then the strength of these bonds we formed and sustained over social media outlets come into question.

FACEBOOK AND INTERPERSONAL IDENTITY

Mode’s qualitative research (2010) compares how certain rituals on Facebook can impact a couples’ intimate relationship offline. These rituals include the relationship status option and public displays of affection. When a person changed their relationship status to “in a relationship”, this had the ability to affect how one perceived their relationship. By making it “official” on Facebook one felt a sense of certainty in their relationship (67). However, the study also found that this public statement suggests ownership and possession. Also not every participant felt positive about the status change. Some people thought that it was too much public commitment and wanted their privacy (68). Public displays of affection include, “putting up photographs, saying ‘I love you’, ‘I miss you’, and making in-jokes that no one else would get…” (69). The meaning behind online PDA was again to signal possession. By showing PDA it is a public statement to all the couples Facebook friends, and anyone else who views their profiles, that they are in a relationship. Also because it is so public, they strive to present their relationship in the best light. Interviewers admitted that they did not like to see PDA online but admitted to doing it themselves. Others that viewed online PDA (typically ones that were single) saw the relationship as unnatural and fake but were also jealous because they longed for a relationship. However there is something else that evokes more jealousy in partners than these rituals and that’s photographs. Photographs of past relationships, and
photographs taken with women/men the partner does not know all cause jealousy.

Other researchers also examined how Facebook impacts intimate relationships (Gershon, 2011). Even though Mode (2012) and Llana Gershons (2011) qualitative research show the hazards of Facebook to intimate relationships, Gershons’ leads the audience to believe that Facebook is so destructive to intimate relationships that users decide to deactivate their accounts because it brings added stress to the relationship. When a person becomes jealous that their partner is talking to, in pictures with or receiving gifts from other people that they think their partner finds desirable, the former deletes their profile in hopes of alleviating the stress from the jealousy they are feeling. Findings suggested that deleting ones profile stopped the strain on the relationship. Outside forces, such as friends had the potential to reel them back into viewing their partners Facebook (886). Photographs, like Modes’ research, also sparked jealousy in Gershon’s interviewers. Conversely, this jealousy led some interviewers to delete their accounts. This research also suggests that people try to collect vast numbers of friends to appear popular and more social. Gershon also argues that many people have more friends on Facebook that they met once or twice or they don’t know them but added them because they have mutual friends and interest. “Sometimes to be a Facebook friend is a virtually meaningless relationship” (2011:874).

Mode and Gershon work focuses on teenagers and young adults, but other research (Young, 2011) has examined adults as well. Kirsty Young’s qualitative research surveyed 758 and interviewed 18 adults between the ages of 21 and 57. Only a few of the interviewees were undergraduate students and the rest were all employed. Young argues that the role of Facebook is helping build adult users’ offline social networks and possibly extending their social capital. The data indicates that adults use Facebook to participate socially by making and maintaining contact with people they know offline and that users valued this medium for its convenience and economic benefits (2011:25). Young claims that adults use Facebook to preserve existing friendships and adolescents use it to acquire more friends. Activities that adults use to socialize on Facebook are ‘facestalking’, posting wall comments, statues updates, creating events, and/or uploading photographs. The term facestalking refers to when a user views another’s profile but does not engage in any form of communication. Mode and Gershon touch on this subject but do not explore it as well as Young. Young maintains throughout her research that the Facebook experience for adults is a positive one that aids in strengthening “existing friendships by supplementing traditional forms of communication” (2011:20). While previous research (Mode,2010;Gershon,2011;Young,2011) indicates the effect of Facebook on interpersonal communication this next research explores how Facebook effects personality traits and identity (Gentile, Twange, Freeman, and Campbell, 2012), (Skus, William, and Wise, 2012).
FACEBOOK’S EFFECT ON PERSONALITY AND IDENTITY

Gentile et al. quantitative research found that spending time on one’s social networking sites profile (Facebook and Myspace) causes teens and young adults to support more positive self-views (narcissism and self-esteem) but the specific self-view depends on the site. They claim that spending time editing one’s Myspace profile will increase narcissism, while spending time on Facebook increases self-esteem but not increase narcissism. The reason these sites produce different results is because they create different functions for the users. Myspace offers the users more self-expression and self-promotion whereas Facebook offers users a chance to connect and communicate. The research also claims that narcissism was linked to having more friends on both sites (2012:1932)

Skus et al. quantitative research sets out to claim that there is a correlation between neuroticism, extraversion, openness, narcissism, loneliness, self-esteem and Facebook use (2012:2414). However, the date indicates that only openness and loneliness have a significant relationship to Facebook use, but that narcissism and self-esteem were close to becoming significant. High openness and high loneliness scores were related to having more friends on Facebook. Participants who spent more time on Facebook scored higher openness levels. High narcissism and high self-esteem was almost significantly linked to spending more time on Facebook. Participants who scored high and low were shown to have spent the same amount of time online but for different reasons. Lastly Extraverts share information with others and voice their opinions rather than gather more online friends.

All the empirical studies were gender biased, with more women than men being examined. Also all the studies except for Young’s (2011) focused mainly on university students, particularly undergraduates, and teens and young adults. The couples in Mode and Gershon’s research were all heterosexual couples. Also all research excluding Gentilea et al. and Skus et al. were qualitative studies. Skus et al. and Young’s research both attempted to prove that Facebook usage had an impact on narcissism and self-esteem. Unlike Young’s research, that showed a correlation, Skus et al. research did not present a correlation. This might be because of the different methods they used, qualitative and quantitative or because Young’s was conducted in United States and Skus et al. was done in Australia.

Research has claimed that social networking sites such as Facebook have significantly impacted our interpersonal communication as well as our self-views but not our personality traits. The research is not without its flaws, gender, education, heterosexual bias”, but has managed to answer the question ‘Has Facebook effected interpersonal communication’ and also shows us how communication is effected as well. One research (Young, 2011) reveals that people use Facebook to maintain weak ties or relationships that might have been
let go if it was not for this site. But what are the effects on friendships and relationships if users are hanging on to connections they might otherwise let go? How strong are these bonds that are created and fostered online? None of the research seems to answer this question. ‘Facestalking’ a term coined by Young (2011) is a function of Facebook that will be explored further. What are the emotional outcomes for regular users who facestalk?

**METHODOLOGY**

To explore the experience of Facebook users this qualitative research conducted in-depth interviews with 10 participants. The interviews were semi-structured that lasted around an hour. Participants ranged from ages 19-21. All interviewees were undergraduates but half were from community colleges around the Los Angeles area and the other half were students at California State University, Los Angeles. There were six females and four males; the majority of the sample identified as multiracial, while a few identified as white. The Qualitative method was used to capture each individual perspective. By using in-depth interviews, participants could explain their answers rather than answer yes or no and/or pick a multiple choice answers. All participants names were changed to keep identity private.

**RESULTS**

Interviewees friend count on Facebook ranged from 27-800. There was a change in attitude toward Facebook when one had a low friend count but this was not significant. All Facebook users admitted to “facestalking” at one point and even though the reasons were different, the relationship to those that they facestalked were similar. Facebook users used this site mostly to connect and keep in contact with acquaintances, mutual friends, and strangers rather than close friends, family. They also used it as a way to be “updated” with other users social lives. Also once they logged off of the site they felt the same as before but a few felt a range of negative emotions as well.

**FACESTALKING**

“I facestalk mostly to be nosey” (Francisco, 21). His statement was one of the first uttered when asking why these Facebook users go on to others profile without communicating with them. When asked who they facestalk almost all answered weak ties. The reason they did not facestalk strong ties was because they claimed they already knew what was going on in their close friends and families lives. Another reason was because when they went on their close friends/family members profile they would communicate with them in the form of likes, comments or messages. One participant used facestalking to catch-up if she hadn’t seen other users “stuff” (status updates, pictures, comments) in a while.
COMMUNICATING

All users used the many different aspects of communicating on Facebook, except one participant who only used the event option. A surprising find was that the messaging tool was used to communicate with weak ties rather than strong ties. “When I was younger I used it more to talk but now that I’m older it’s more of a way to gain knowledge” (Francisco, 21). This participant viewed messaging as a way of networking and less of a social tool. Messaging is used as a quick way to receive an answer from a question. It is the equivalent of a text message rather than a phone call. For another participant the constant communication she had no control over was so overwhelming she deactivated her Facebook account. “I was getting too many messages from people I didn’t like, which was one of the reasons why I deleted my Facebook” (Sonia, 19). “Liking” other users status updates was mostly about the content of the status rather than who posted it. However one interviewee liked his family members’ status as a way of showing them that he cared about their life no matter the content. When the content did matter, participants stated that they “liked” something because it was relevant, relatable, witty, funny, or agreed with what was being said.

 LOSING WEAK TIES

All participants felt indifferent when asked how they would feel if they were no longer Facebook friends with strangers, mutual friends, and acquaintances. “If I was no longer friends with those people it wouldn’t affect me. I could just make more” (Michael, 21). So why have these friends if they are not that important to one’s life? The reason is because they are important to one’s Facebook social life. Weak ties make up the majority of friends one has. The more friends the participants had on Facebook the more of these “friends” were weak ties. If they no longer had these “friends” they would have less information to “look at”.

FEELING AFTER LOGGING OFF

“After signing off Facebook I don’t feel satisfied, like I wanted more information and that’s why I go back on later” (Rose, 21). Most Participants felt that they had not received enough information when they signed on Facebook. When another participant went back on she felt frustrated that her Facebook friends did not post more for her to read. I asked all interviewees if they felt positive, negative or the same feelings after they logged off. All said they felt the same, but a few that felt the same also felt negative afterwards. The negative feelings ranged from sad, insecure to unfulfilled.

CONCLUSION

The research suggest that Facebook users are communicating (messaging and likes) and facestalking more with weak ties than they are with strong ties. In Gershon’s research she also argues that many people have more friends on Facebook that are weak ties.
Surprisingly, since weak ties make up the majority of one’s Facebook friends, participants often felt indifferent if they were no longer Facebook friends with them. However, they did feel as if their online social life would be lacking if they were not friends with this group of people. This study also suggests that when “liking” a status update most participants did so for the content and not because of the actual person who posted the status. Also once they logged off of the site all felt the same as before but a few felt a range of negative emotions as well. These negative emotions ranged from sad, insecure to unfulfilled. Results from all ten participants were similar but each gave different reasons for communicating the way they did with certain users. When these motives for communicating are unknown, it is likely that the receiver of the communication may interpret them their own way. Meaning, they may think that they both communicate for the same reasons. Future research should explore a bigger sample size but should keep a qualitative method. The qualitative method captures each subjects subjective experience and interpretations when using Facebook. Future studies should also research other social networking sites. By doing so, we can compare how each sites communication style and purpose varies from one another.

REFERENCES


