

MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Cura Personalis: Understanding Students' Use of Online Social Networks to Enhance Learning

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As an educator in a Jesuit institution, one of the major features of Jesuit spirituality that I have come to value through the Ignatian Mentoring Program is the concept of *cura personalis*. When teaching my courses, especially the INFO 200: Managing Information Technology course, I know that building a personal relationship with each student, providing individualized attention to their needs and by having a distinct respect for his or her unique wants and concerns, I am better able to help them learn. In so doing, I believe I am able to more effectively communicate and help them understand the value and use of information technology.

As an instructor in management information systems, it is important to understand how students use technology to enhance their lives. At present, online social networking is rapidly growing in popularity across the world; especially among college students. Currently research indicates that college students have incorporated online social networks to almost every aspect of their lives.

Given the interest and growing use of online social networking by undergraduates, the goal of my Ignatian mentoring program study was to understand what influences students use of social networking websites. By so doing, as an instructor, I could better understand their motivation for the use of this new technological phenomenon and be able to incorporate it into the class room to enhance learning. In addition, as a researcher, this study would help me investigate the use of a popular new phenomenon in information systems, online social networking. I am grateful for this rewarding opportunity to think about and work collaboratively with my IMP mentor, economist Nancy Bertaux, on an interdisciplinary research topic that is both related strongly to my discipline and that relates to the care and concern (*cura personalis*) I have for my students.

Online social networking

The growth in Internet usage in the past 8 years has been a phenomenal 305.5 percent leading to the creation of a new and improved Web, Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is in the forefront of a revolution of greater user collaboration and sharing online that enhances almost all aspects of life to every demographic in the population. It has created a sophisticated user base that thrives on the new functionality and tools now accessible online such as online social networking.

An online social networking site is described as online space that an individual can create a profile to establish or maintain connections with others. These Web sites are often seen as relationship facilitators. In the past five years, these sites have grown from catering to activities of college students into a phenomenon that engages tens of millions of Internet users. While there are many social networking Web sites, the most common ones are facebook.com and myspace.com. Since February 2007, Facebook was the sixth most visited Web site in the United States as measured by average visits. These online social networking sites are still especially popular among the 18 to 25 year old age group who are mostly college students.

According to a study on Facebook users, the average user spends around 45 minutes on the site each day. Photos, diaries, and music are the preferred content to put on user's own pages, and personal experiences, movies, family, and travel are what people want to see most on their friends' profiles. Recent research also indicates educational benefits as the reason for logging on to social networking sites.

Factors that Influence Social Networking

Although offline social networking behavior has been extensively studied, online social networking, as a relatively recent phenomenon, is much less understood. Most of the popular press concerning social networking sites has been negative in focus. Controversy surrounds the use of these sites, specifically in terms of privacy, safety, and attitudes toward revealing personal information to the world. Given the popular media hype on privacy invasion and social networking, news releases describing criminal liability as well as college suspensions resulting from usage and behavior on social networks, privacy and trust may have a distinct influence on social networking usage.

In addition to perceived privacy and trust, previous studies have also examined the impact of basic demographic data on social networking usage. A recent survey revealed that age and year in school were significant predictors of usage and membership, with younger students and undergraduate students being more likely to belong to social networking sites such as Facebook. Gender is another factor that has received some attention in the past. The academic literature is rich with studies that look at the impact of gender on Internet use. It is widely asserted that female usage of the Internet is limited by their negative attitudes towards computers and new technology due to their less overall experience with the Internet when compared to men. Much less is known of the impact of gender and Internet experience on online social network usage and behavior.

Based on the past literature, perceived privacy, trust, gender and Web experience were chosen as the four major factors that influence social networking usage. Consequently, the main hypothesis investigated in this exploratory study was that gender, perceived privacy, trust, and Web experience influence online social network usage.

Data Analysis

In order to understand what influences social network usage and behavior, an online survey was created and administered to the students. The participants were queried on their social network usage patterns, as well as on what influences their usage. A total of 111 responses were collected and analyzed.

The characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 1. Overall, about 38% of the respondents were female and 62% male. When asked the major reasons for using online social networks, the overwhelming answer was to keep in touch with friends (see Table 2). The respondents spent an average of almost 6 hours per week on social networking Websites (with Facebook as the most common site used), and they logged on 3.35 times on average each day to a social network. The unidimensionality of the items and constructs used were assessed through factor analysis and cronbach alpha values were used to assess the reliability of the items associated with the latent constructs. Regression analysis was conducted to examine the main hypothesis of the research study in which use of online social network, measured as time spent on online social networks per week, serve as the dependent variable. The predictor variables are gender, perceived privacy, trust, and Web experience.

Trust was the only statistically significant variable that had an impact on usage of online social networks in this sample. The regression suggested that the use of social networks changes by .298 with a standard deviation unit change in trust in online social networks. This sample therefore implies that users' use of online social networks is related in a statistically significant way to their level of trust in online social networks. In order to further analyze the question of what influences time spent on social networking each week, both MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) and ANOVA (analysis of variance) were conducted.

Specifically, MANOVA was conducted to examine if gender helps differentiate perceptions of trust, privacy or Web experience with regard to social networking. The overall multivariate test of the MANOVA indicated that there is a difference in the means of the factors that influence online social networking for gender. The ANOVA (univariate analysis of variance) tests assessing the impact of gender on each of the factors that influence online social network use indicate that gender significantly influenced perceived privacy, Web experience and trust.

Conclusion

Web 2.0 and the growing use of social networking sites such as Facebook constitute one of the latest developments in the growing impact of the Internet and IT on students' daily lives, learning and work. The remarkable growth in the number of users of online social networking means that many constituencies are interested in finding out more about this phenomenon, as it affects the individuals, learning, business/commerce, and society.

As an instructor trying to understand and improve student learning in the class room and attempting to figure out student needs, concerns and challenges with regard to technology, investigating student usage of social networks helps me provide more personalized attention to my students. For instance, the knowledge that students use social networks to collaborate with other students, discuss assignments, get help outside of class helps me customize student projects and assignments in a manner that will enable the effective use online social networks to enhance their learning. Given their trust issues in social networking as well as gender differences, I can educate them on the various aspects of social networking as it pertains to trust and gender. In addition, by incorporating news on social networks and discussion of the technology underlying social networks I can present information technology concepts in a context that would be both entertaining and of interest to my students.

This study has enabled me to better understand the use of information technology by undergraduate students. It has helped me appreciate the challenges students face due to differences in their Web experience, gender and other factors. It has provided me with knowledge that would enable me to care for their individual needs and help enhance their learning. From a research perspective, the study results shed light on the importance of trust during online social interaction and collaborations. It further indicates the need for further research on factors influencing social network usage, especially in light of the increasing importance of online social networking in society as a whole, to individual users' lives, and to businesses and entrepreneurs seeking new customer bases and new ventures.

Table 1: Characteristics of Respondent Students

Characteristic		Percent	Average
Gender	Male	62.0	N/A
	Female	38.0	
Age	<20	33.3	20.02
	20-25	64.8	
	>25	1.8	
Work experience	Yes	78.4	N/A
	No	21.6	
Years of web experience	<6	16.5	8.66
	6-10	59.5	
	>10	24	
Membership social networking sites	Facebook	95.5	N/A
	MySpace	15.2	
	LinkedIn	1.8	

	Other	1.8	
Hours per week social networking	<5	51.3	5.98
	5-10	29.7	
	>10	18.9	
Times per day social networking	1-3	64	3.35
	4-6	28	
	>7	8	
Introduced to social networking site by	Friends	82.6	N/A
	Family	10.1	
	Web Ad	4.6	
	Faculty	2.7	
Use of social networking for school work	Yes	55	N/A
	No	45	

Table 2: Respondents' answers to "what are the major reason(s) for using online social networking"

Reason	Frequency
Stay in touch with friends that you don't meet regularly	81.1%
To interact with friends on campus	53.2%
To keep in touch with new friends	18.0%
To look and share pictures	8.1%
Convenience to communicate with friends	7.2%
Because of pressure as all my friends are online	4.5%
Meet new people	4.5%
To find out what others are doing	4.5%
For school work, assignments and projects	4.5%
To find out more about social events	0.9%
To share music	0.9%
To be more social	0.9%