

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS SOCIAL NETWORKS AND LEARNING MODALITIES

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ABSTRACT

Social networks such as Facebook, MySpace and others have become an integral part of student life. This paper examines how the use of social networks affects student attitudes towards learning modalities in the classroom, based on results from a survey of over 480 students. Issues surveyed include preferences towards specific pedagogical tools, attitudes towards the use of social networking tools in the classroom, and the use of social networks for rating classes and faculty members.

INTRODUCTION

The continued growth of the cyberspace era has brought with it a permanent change in the way that students interact and socialize. A major part of this change is the advent of so-called *social networking* sites on the Internet, which have evolved to become virtual communities where people communicate, share information, and perhaps most important, build and maintain ongoing relationships. On-line social networking communities such as Facebook and MySpace have become part of the daily life of a majority of college-level students, with a potentially far-reaching impact on the way that they study and learn.

This major social trend has brought with it a number of questions for marketing educators, such as:

- Do our pedagogical tools and teaching approaches need to change for students who live in an increasingly wired world?
- Do we need to start bringing social networking tools into the classroom experience?
- Do student learning experiences get shared with the broader on-line community as part of the social networking process?

Marketing educators have seen a tremendous increase in the types and numbers of new information technologies used in, and potentially as a replacement for, the classroom (Atwong and Hugstad 1997, Benbunan-Fich et al. 2001, Celsi and Wolfmberger 2002, Karns and Pharr 2001, and Lincoln 2001). The Internet has expanded exponentially over the past several years and as a result the wealth of information available to students and professors alike is never been greater (Kaynama and Keesling 2000; Strauss and Frost 2001). Among marketing educators, Internet technology is seen as a means to further numerous objectives including enhanced learning through improved technological expertise, up-to-date materials, global perspectives and strong linkage to business, as well as improved job market skills like communication, leadership and team-building (Atwong and Hugstad 1997, Benbunan-Fich et al. 2001, Ives and Jarvenpaa 1996; Lamont and Friedman 1997; Ueltschy 2001).

One such interactive web-learning concept is the virtual community, a broad concept whose specifics can be found in many of today's on-line social networks. The literature has focused special attention to the understanding of the role of virtual communities play in enhancing student-to-instructor and student-to-student relationships (Mathwick 2000, Maharg 2001, Long et al. 2000). According to the 2006 Horizon Report, "social computing and personal broadcasting have exploded over the last year, and solid educational uses and examples can easily be found on many campuses" (New Media Consortium et al 2006). Hagel and Armstrong (1997) also emphasize the relationship building aspects of virtual communities, providing an opportunity to bring together people with similar interests unrestrained by time and space. Through such community relationships, information content and intra-community communications are exchanged and members learn from each other.

In this paper, we seek to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this section by examining student usage of social networking sites – ranging from personal environments such as Facebook and MySpace to educational networks and faculty rating sites – and correlate this with their attitudes towards the learning experience at the college level. The objectives of this study were both to assess the scope and breadth of on-line social networking among the current student population, and examine how such usage affects the needs, perceptions and learning styles of these students in the classroom environment. By understanding these factors, we can design and develop appropriate pedagogical strategies for the future of marketing education, within a student body whose approach to learning is continuing to evolve alongside broader technological changes in society.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was administered to students at a liberal arts college on the East Coast shortly at the beginning of the Fall term, containing 12 questions designed to explore student use of social networks, attitudes towards different learning modalities, and demographic information. A total of **485** responses were received, with roughly equivalent representation of each class year from freshman through senior level (122, 107, 122 and 130 respondents, respectively, plus 4 graduates), and approximately a 3 to 2 ratio of females to males (308 versus 177). The survey questions were as follows:

I. Demographic information

The following questions were asked to classify the demographics of the respondents:

1. What year did or do you expect to graduate from college?
2. What is your major and/or specialization?
3. What is your gender?

II. Use of social networks

4. How many different social networks* have you used in the past year? (*A definition of social networks was provided with the survey, including examples of popular sites.)
5. Do you have social network accounts, such as Facebook or MySpace accounts?
6. Please list the top three social networks accounts you use.
7. What are your attitudes towards our school's (proprietary) educational social network? (Response choices include positive, negative, or neutral.)
8. How often do you use our school's (proprietary) educational social network for your classes? (Response choices include never, once a month, two to four times per month, once a week, two to six times per week, or daily)
9. Do you agree with the following statement: "Because students are online all the time and messaging through other means, there is little need for personal, school-based email accounts. Everybody simply uses the built-in tools in the virtual spaces they inhabit."?
10.
 - a. Have you ever heard of the social network, "ratemyprofessors.com"?
 - b. How many times have you used the social network, "ratemyprofessors.com"?
 - c. How have used ratemyprofessors.com? (Response choices include research a faculty member, submit a rating, use the site to determine to enroll in a class, or other.)
11.
 - a. Do you believe social networks such as Facebook and MySpace could be used in a classroom setting?
 - b. If yes, can you give an example of how it could be used?

III. Ratings of learning modalities

12. Students were asked to rate the following descriptions as Poor, Average, Good, or Excellent, to indicate how they felt about the following learning modalities:
 1. Instructor writing notes on chalkboard with lecture
 2. Instructor using PowerPoint/Internet with lecture
 3. Instructors and students in a class uses an on-line education network
 4. Lecture (no notes) with Q&A from students
 5. Instructor and students in a class uses email as a teaching and communication tool
 6. Instructor and students uses FaceBook or MySpace as a communication/learning tool for a class
 7. Debates
 8. Case videos with discussion
 9. Group discussions

10. Group Activities
11. Guest Speakers
12. Other (Student comment):

Results from the survey questions listed above were then coded as followed for further analysis:

- Major and specialization values were grouped into one of the following overall categories: Business, Education, Social Science, Science, and Liberal Arts and Other Areas.
- A content analysis was performed on responses to question 11b, on possibilities for using social networking in the classroom, with answers grouped into one of the following categories: Interacting with Students, Information Resource, Interacting with Faculty, Interacting with Others, and Other.
- Other survey responses were coded as quantitative values as specified by respondents.

This data was then analyzed for trends relating social network usage to both demographics and educational preferences. The usage level of social networks was correlated with class year, major, and gender, responses to question 12 regarding learning modalities were correlated with the level of social network usage, and responses to other questions were compiled and analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this survey indicated that an overwhelming majority of students make use of social networks in their daily life, and that there are indeed differences in learning preferences between students who use them and students who do not. These results show a very clear and consistent pattern of social networking usage across every significant demographic subgroup within the student population:

- Over 90 per cent of respondents currently use social networking sites, with nearly one-third using multiple sites.
- Use of these networks was heavily weighted towards a few highly popular sites, including Facebook (82.7% of respondents surveyed), MySpace (41.8%), and America Online's AIM system (37.4%). Most of the thirteen other social networking sites listed were used by three percent or less of the respondents.
- There is minimal correlation between gender, class year, or major and the use of social networking. Table 1 shows a consistent usage rate around the 90% range across each of these demographic subgroups.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The results from the analysis of these survey responses provide an overall picture of what should – and should not – change as students increasingly interact with each other in an on-line world. We will examine these results in light of the questions raised at the beginning of this paper.

1. Do our pedagogical tools and teaching approaches need to change for students who live in an increasingly wired world?

There appear to be differences between the learning preferences of students who actively use social networking tools and those who do not, particularly for the leading indicators of items rated “excellent”. Figures 1 and 2, which outline learning modalities rated “excellent” and “good” normalized as a percentage of each group's responses, show that social networking users prefer interactive classroom experiences such as discussions and activities, particularly among “excellent” ratings, while non-users have higher “excellent” ratings than users for more passive modalities such as lectures with notes, lectures with Q&A, and guest speakers.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Similarly, learning modalities rated “average” or “poor”, shown in Figures 3 and 4, show lower overall ratings for more passive modalities among social networking users. In particular, social networking users gave higher levels of “average” ratings to all three lecture modalities versus non-users, as well as higher levels of “poor” ratings to two of these three modalities. While respondents using 5 or more social networks also rated activities more poorly, this was

relative to a small sample size of 17 such users; hence these four responses, involving less than one percent of the overall survey sample, do not appear to be significant.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Notably, most students rate social networking tools themselves as a poor learning modality – yet at the same time, social networking users give a greater number of “excellent” ratings to a networking tool designed specifically for educational purposes at this school. This trend is further borne out by survey results that over 90% of students currently use this school’s educational network tool, with less than 10% having negative opinions about it. As discussed further in the following section, this indicates that students would appreciate having the *capabilities* of social networking in the classroom, such as interactive access to information and study partners, while still not wishing to bring the social networking tools of their leisure time and social life into the classroom setting.

2. Do we need to start bringing social networking tools into the classroom experience?

At an informal level, faculty who are observing trends in student life are starting to ask questions such as, “Should we start using tools such as MySpace as part of our classes?” The survey results make it clear that the answer to this question is *no* – but at the same time, the lessons of social networking must continue to inform the design of the classroom experience and content delivery.

When asked about whether existing social networks such as Facebook and MySpace should be brought into the classroom, over 85% of respondents say “no”. Similarly, over 80% of respondents do not see such tools replacing the more traditional communications medium of electronic mail. Among the minority (61 of the 481 total participants) who say “yes” and offer suggestions for how these tools could be used, their responses break down into the following categories, as shown in Figure 5:

Interacting with Students: The largest category of responses (39%) propose using these tools as an extension of their current on-line social interactions, to meet, interact with, and study in groups with fellow students.

Information Resource: Another substantial group of responses (30%) sees these tools being used as a “bulletin board” to post classroom and examination information, in much the same manner as course web sites on the Internet.

Interacting with Faculty: A much smaller group (13%) sees social networking tools as potential areas for faculty to participate and interact with students.

Interacting with Others: Some respondents discussed imaginative ideas such as using social networking tools to meet people from other countries or outside the classroom community, to further their learning goals.

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

3. Do student learning experiences get shared with the broader on-line community as part of the social networking process?

One issue of interest to marketing educators is how the growing use of social networks could lead to environments where students can freely share and post opinions on-line about their classes and professors, thereby expressing their learning preferences in a very direct and real-time way. To explore this issue, the survey contained questions about the student’s use of RateMyProfessors.com, a national web site with ratings of professors posted anonymously by students. Findings from the survey included the following:

- Over half of all respondents (53.8% of all respondents, and 54.8% of social networking users) had heard of RateMyProfessors.com.
- Nearly a third of all respondents (29.3%) had used this site at least once, with over half of this group returning multiple times.
- 11.8 per cent of those who had used the site submitted ratings of faculty members.
- The majority of these users (60%) used the site to research specific faculty members, while a much smaller number (3.5%) used the site to help them determine their class enrollment.

These findings indicate that social networks have the potential to help students self-select faculty whose teaching modalities best fit their own learning style, while having a minimal overall impact of selection of courses and programs themselves. While concerns remain about this public yet anonymous means of rating faculty, ranging from false or vindictive ratings to selection bias, tools like this also represent part of a growing trend for public rating information being made available through social networks in many areas of life, such as ratings of physicians or consumer products. This underscores the need for marketing faculty to remain aware of trends in student learning preferences, as well as feedback about their own pedagogical skills, and be prepared to adapt to both.

SUMMARY

The results of this survey demonstrate the need for the classroom experience to keep pace with the growing interactivity of life itself, particularly in areas such as increased levels of positive interaction within the classroom, as well as on-line access to information and people. Social networking tools are now used overwhelmingly by students today, and these in turn appear to correlate with broader changes in the overall learning culture. At the same time, social networking tools themselves currently shows no signs of supplanting existing instructional or communications mediums at present, and there remains a clear boundary in the minds of students between the on-line tools of social life versus academic life.

While popular social networking tools have clearly become intertwined with the personal and social lives of students – a world that students are not necessarily anxious to share with adult figures such as their college faculty – it is clear that many of the underlying capabilities behind these tools have a future role in learning. Tools such as real-time access to instructional media, the potential to share opinions and ratings, and the ability to communicate interactively within peer groups are likely to have a continued growing impact on the classroom experience. More important, the use of these tools is changing student attitudes towards learning itself, from a one-way transfer of knowledge to a much more interactive and group-oriented environment. These survey results open up a broad range of areas for further study, such as the role of individual social networking tools within the classroom, while at the same time showing clear trends towards an increasingly interactive environment for marketing education.

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FIGURES AND TABLES

Table 1. Demographic distribution of social network users

A. Social network usage by class year

	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
Percentage	86.89%	94.39%	93.44%	90.77%

B. Social network usage by major

	Business	Education	Social Science	Science	Liberal Arts/Other
Percentage	90.00%	88.89%	92.22%	85.71%	95.35%

C. Social network usage by gender

	Female	Male
Percentage	92.21%	90.96%

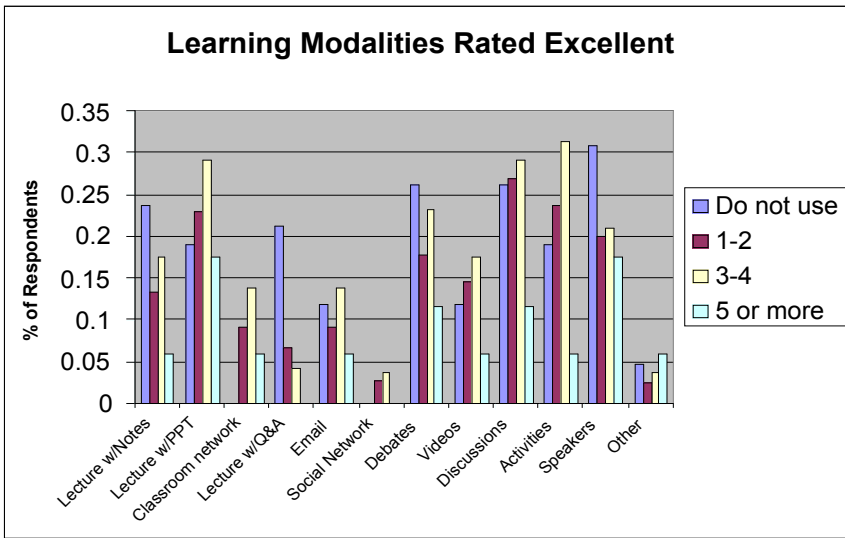


Figure 1. Learning modalities rated “excellent” across different levels of social network usage.

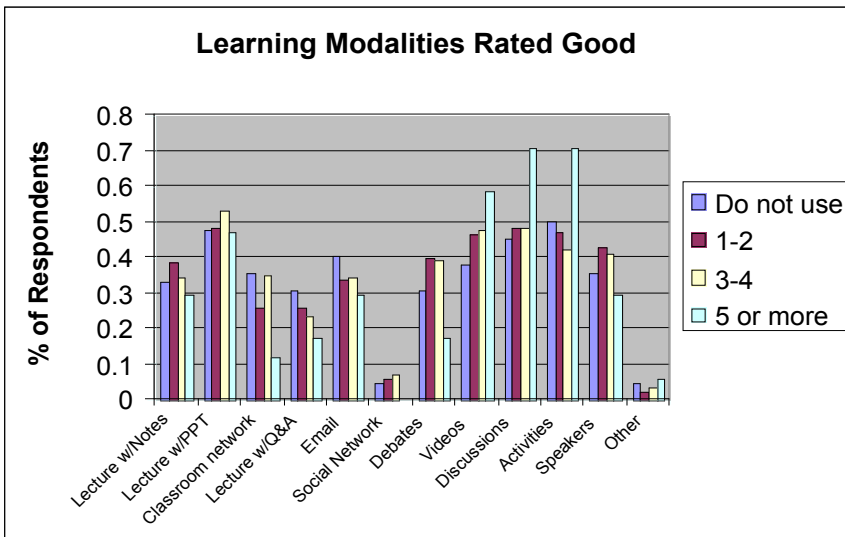


Figure 2. Learning modalities rated “good” across different levels of social network usage.

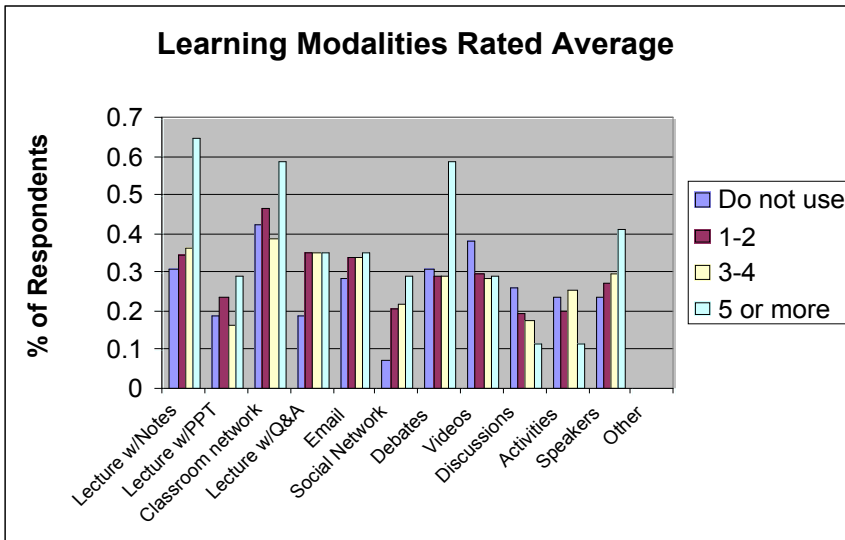


Figure 3. Learning modalities rated “average” across different levels of social network usage.

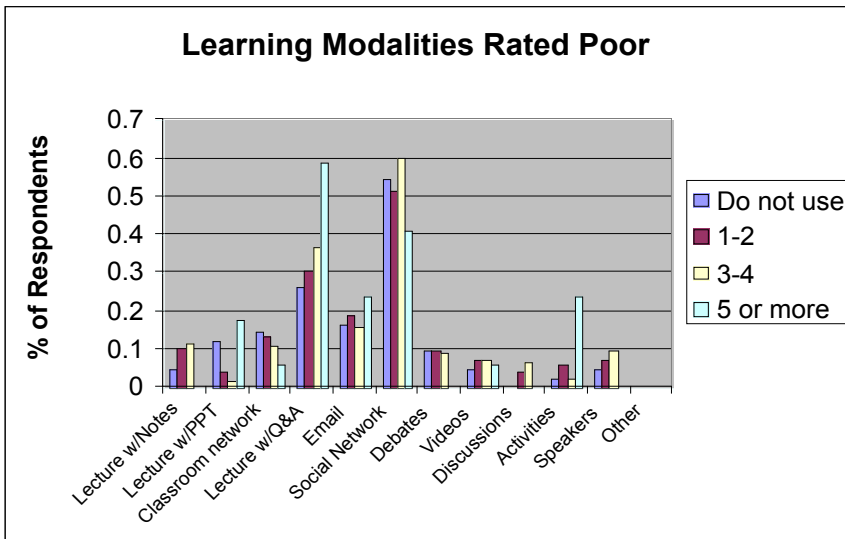


Figure 4. Learning modalities rated “poor” across different levels of social network usage.

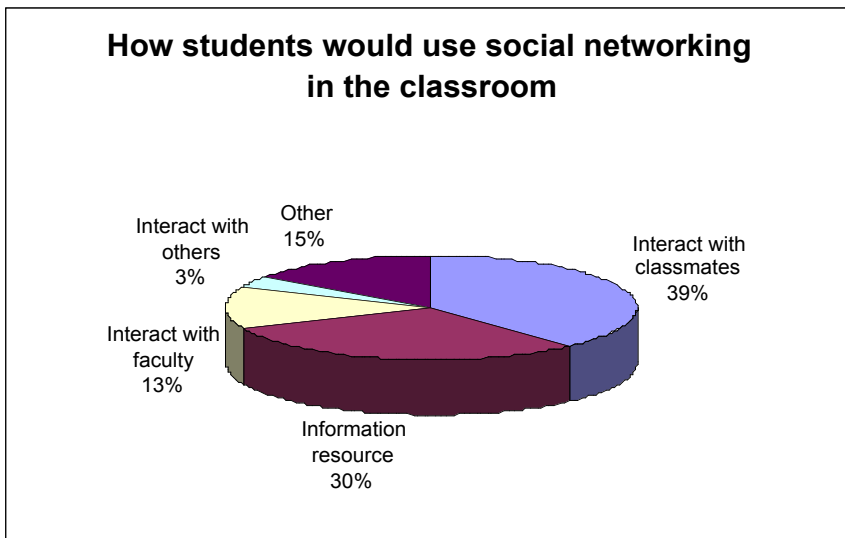


Figure 5. Student responses for how social networking could be used in the classroom.