



Higher Education Students' Perceptions Towards Using Facebook as a Learning Platform

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Abstract. Given the ongoing debate among educators regarding the effect of social networks on education, our aim in this article is to explore the perceptions of students towards using Facebook as a learning environment. In this vein, on the basis of the survey we carried out among university students, it was revealed that 87.4% of the informants resort to this Web-based community to improve their learning. Facebook has, actually, been reported to provide students with an ideal opportunity to access a plethora of learning resources and all class-related information and activities. It also allows them to discuss different topics with classmates and peers and enables them to seek help on learning problems they encounter. Despite the significant role that Facebook plays in boosting students' learning experience, 72.3% of the subjects noted that no interaction occurs with teachers on this platform. Facebook might, thus, be considered to be more useful for informal rather than formal learning.

Keywords: Higher education · Facebook · Students · Survey · Perceptions

1 Introduction

Given the rapid advances in information and communication technologies over the past couple of years, the Internet has become a participatory and collaborative platform where users can interact and collaborate with each other as well as an open space where they create and share digital content. This evolution of the Web from a set of simple static pages to a more dynamic and collaborative web has been accelerated by the emergence and proliferation of a wide range of Web 2.0 applications, commonly known as social media. The latter includes a variety of applications, namely social networks, media sharing websites and discussion forums.

Today, these web-based communities are widely used by millions of people around the world for a variety of purposes. Given their ubiquity, they have influenced both our personal and professional lives. These online services and tools have impacted how people communicate and interact with each other. More importantly, they affected the way many processes and activities are carried out in diverse fields. The effect of social media is already felt in a variety of domains. Nevertheless, one of the fields in which

their use is likely to be beneficial is education [1–4]. This is primarily due to the fact that a large number of social media users are teenagers, most of whom are undoubtedly students. The latter are deeply immersed in these virtual spaces and have recourse to them not only for communication and entertainment, but for educational purposes as well [5–8]. Our purpose in this work is, therefore, to examine the usefulness of these digital tools in education. Nonetheless, analysis in the present work will be confined to examining the role that social networks (namely, Facebook) potentially play in enhancing students' learning.

2 Students' Views on Using Facebook as an Educational Platform

Given the students' immersion in social networks, there is an ongoing debate regarding the potential impact of these technologies on the learning experience and academic performance of students [9–11]. In fact, despite the numerous opportunities that these social media platforms offer to both students and teachers, many educators still question the usefulness and value of incorporating these web-based platforms in education. Concrete evidence that confirms or refutes these arguments are, thus, needed [12, 13]. The aim of the present section is, therefore, to examine the students' views on using Facebook as an educational tool.

2.1 Research Methodology

To investigate the potential effect of Facebook on education, a research study was undertaken to examine how students use this social network and how they view its role in fostering their learning experience. For this purpose, a web-based questionnaire was administered to students at Mohammed V University, Morocco. The target population for the present study was mainly engineering and master students, specialized in information and communications technologies. Their age varies between 20 and 25. The questionnaire was sent to both male and female students. However, no gender-based analysis is carried out in this work. The adoption of an online rather than a classical paper-based questionnaire was driven by the fact that online surveys enable us to reach the great majority of the participants and that data retrieval and analysis in such questionnaires is much easier and faster. The tool that was used for data collection and analysis is Google Forms.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from all the subjects before the study. In fact, all the prospective participants were informed (via email and on the online form) about the purpose of the research study and were also notified that all their responses would be anonymous and that their participation is entirely voluntary.

The survey that was administered to the students was based on closed-ended questions, which can only be answered by selecting from a limited number of options. It consisted of two major parts. The first part was concerned with the subjects' usage patterns of Facebook while the second was devoted to collecting data about the informants' perceptions towards the use of this online network as a learning platform.

2.2 Data Processing

Analysis of the data that was retrieved from the survey showed that most of the interviewed students are deeply immersed in this social network. In fact, more than 94% of the surveyed 420 students are active members of Facebook. The students' immersion in this social networking site is clearly demonstrated by the usage frequency of this platform. The findings of the present study, actually, show that a considerable number of students who answered the questionnaire spend a huge amount of their time browsing this online network. Consult the illustration below.

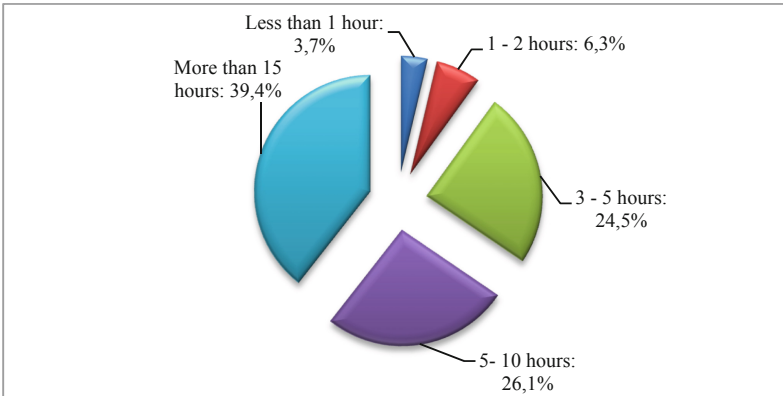


Fig. 1. Number of hours that students spend on Facebook per week.

As Fig. 1 explicitly exhibits, the great majority of respondents (90%) spend at least 3 h a week on Facebook while only 10% of these students get connected for no more than 2 h. This obviously demonstrates that using Facebook is a priority among higher education students.

When inquired about the main reasons for using Facebook, the informants noted that they resort to this social network for different reasons. Results of this study showed that the informants use Facebook to interact with friends and family, meet new people, be entertained as well as follow trends. But in addition to these purposes, the participants in the survey were found out to use Facebook more importantly for educational reasons. Indeed, 87.4% of the students who participated in the survey reported that they use this online community essentially to enrich their learning experience in different topics and subjects. In this respect, the subjects claimed that Facebook allows them to have access to a plethora of valuable learning materials (i.e. links to tutorials, assignments and other useful resources). It also enables to discuss distinct topics with classmates, seek feedback or help on problems that are having as well as check for class exercises and homework.

To get more concrete evidence on the reasons of using Facebook as a learning platform, the respondents were asked to indicate the people that they interact most with on this social networking website. The subjects were asked to rank three options (i.e. friends, classmates/peers and new people) from most to least important. The results are illustrated in the figure given below (Fig. 2).

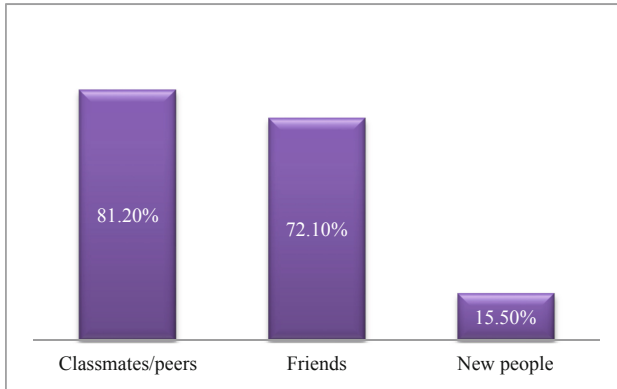


Fig. 2. Individuals with whom students interact on Facebook.

As the figure clearly displays, the people that the surveyed students communicate mostly with are classmates or peers (81.20%). As such, discussion on this online platform is likely to be around educational issues. This confirms the idea that Facebook can serve as a learning environment.

To back up more the assumption or idea that Facebook can be used for educational purposes, the subjects were particularly asked about their typical activities and contributions on this social media platform. In this context, the findings of the survey revealed that a considerable number of respondents are actively engaged in creating and publishing educational content. Among the most common contributions of students are making comments or providing feedback (53.3%), proposing links to learning resources (39.9%), making announcements of academic activities or events (35.3%). Nonetheless, about 30% of the informants admitted that they make no contributions on Facebook. Their use of this social is merely limited to following what other students or peers post.

Furthermore, since some educators have been questioning the validity of using Facebook in education settings and its effect on students' learning, the participants in the survey were also inquired about the impact that this online network might have on their academic performance. To this end, the informants were asked to select one of the following five options, namely "very positive", "positive", "neutral", "negative" or "very negative". The answers of the respondents are summarized in the figure given below (Fig. 3).

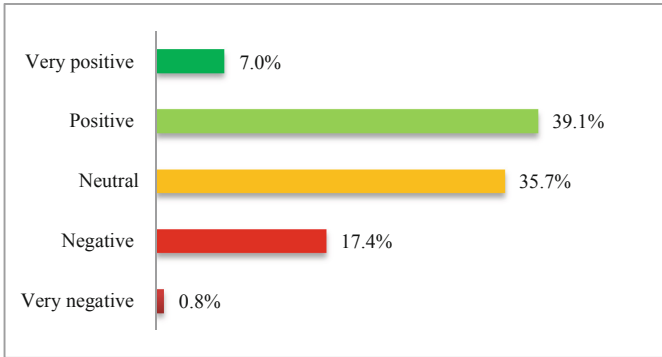


Fig. 3. Students' views on the impact of Facebook on their academic achievement.

Even if the informants diverge as to the kind of impact that Facebook has on their learning outcomes, almost half of the informants (i.e. 46.1%) converge on the fact that this social media platform positively impacts their learning experience. By contrast, 35.7% of the participants are still confused as they are not able to decide whether the effect is negative or positive.

Despite the fact that only the minority of the informants (i.e. 18.2%) believe that Facebook could have a negative impact on students' learning and despite the great educational opportunities of Facebook as a communication tool, it has been noted that interaction between students and teachers on this platform is minimal. In actual fact, when the respondents were asked whether they interact with faculty on this social platform, the great majority (72.3%) stipulated that no interaction seems to take place between them and instructors on Facebook. Moreover, of all those subjects who claimed to communicate with teachers (27.7%), only 13% stated they interact only with one single faculty member on this platform.

To get more information regarding the lack or scarcity of interaction between students and teachers on Facebook, the informants were further asked if they would accept teachers as members of their Facebook groups. In this context, it was found out that 58.3% of the subjects were for teacher-student interaction. However, 5.2% were against while the rest (i.e. 36.5%) were neutral. The absence of mutual interaction between students and teachers on social Facebook is, thus, likely to be due to the reluctance of faculty members to embrace such tools in education. Many studies have, actually, shown that many instructors tend to avoid using such platforms for fear that the boundary between teachers and students might quickly get blurred [14].

Bearing in mind the findings outlined above, it is clearly evident that Facebook supports education thanks to the advantages it offers to the major educational actors, namely end users and learning providers. Therefore, in contrast to the belief that this social network can have a negative effect on students' academic achievement, it has become clear that, via this online platform, students can interact with classmates and peers, easily access valuable learning materials and learn in social ways. On the other hand, teachers can use this social network to instantly interact and communicate in an efficient way with students and with the learning community. Furthermore, they can gain

insights into what and how these students are learning. These findings are consistent with those of many preceding research works, namely [15–21], which all confirm the positive impact that Facebook can have on the learning experience of higher education students.

3 Conclusion

The main objective of this work was to examine the potential impact of using Facebook in education. For this purpose, a questionnaire was submitted to a group of Moroccan university students to identify their perceptions on the use this online social network as a learning/teaching platform. The findings of the present research work demonstrated that the majority of the surveyed students are greatly immersed in Facebook as they use it not only as a source of entrainment or as a communication channel but as learning tool as well. In this respect, they noted that this virtual community gives them easy access to a wide range of learning resources and to class-related information and activities. Moreover, it enables them to interact with their classmates and peers and to get feedback and help on problems that they encounter while learning. In spite of the considerable educational benefits that Facebook has, it was noticed that the number of faculty members who use this online community to interact with students is still insignificant. Nevertheless, given the growing popularity of Facebook and of many other social media platforms over the years, these social networking websites should be incorporated in education settings to support learning and teaching practices.

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