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To Facebook, or not to Facebook?

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To Facebook, or not to Facebook

John Hilton III and Kenneth Plummer

Abstract

A significant shift in computer-mediated communication has taken place, in which in some cases, social media is becoming the dominant form of communication. Organisations who wish to communicate effectively are turning to social media; however, there are challenges associated with using it. This article chronicles the attempts of one educational institution to implement the use of social media in their organisation.

Keywords: e-culture, Facebook, higher education, social media

Introduction

The use of social networks has exploded in the past few years. Social networks have been 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” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). There are several social media sites, most of which are based on a common underlying purpose of digitally connecting people. Some are work-related (LinkedIn.com) and others got started by promoting music bands (MySpace).

At the time of the present study, Facebook is the largest social networking site in the world. Facebook started as a social media site in 2004 oriented towards college students. (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Over the next year they gradually expanded to allow high school students, professionals, and eventually everyone to create a Facebook account. Over the past few years, Facebook has become a powerful communication medium. Facebook (2011) reports having more than 600 million users, over half of whom log in on any given day. And while some estimate that over half of all U.S. Internet users log into Facebook at least monthly (eMarketer, 2011) Facebook is not solely a U.S. sensation. Over 350,000,000 of its users are outside the United States. Globally, people spend more than 700,000,000,000 (seven hundred billion) minutes on Facebook per month. (Facebook, 2011a).

While reports as recent as June 2011 have shown a slight drop in the number of users, Facebook continues to be described “as one of the new titans of the Internet, challenging even Google” (Schwartz, 2011). It facilitates user interconnectivity through personal relationships and recommendations through such features as *like* and *comment*. As of March 2011 the average number of friends per user was slightly over 120 (Facebook, 2011). Globally, slightly more males (51.2%) than females (48.8%) use Facebook. The largest Facebook user age group worldwide are those between 26-34 years of age (26.6%) followed by 18-25 year olds (26.4%) and then 13-17 year olds

(20.5%). In the United States the order differs as follows: The largest Facebook user age group is 18-25 year olds (35%) followed by 26-34 year olds (20%) and then 35-44 year olds (16%) (Burbary, 2011). 30% of Facebook user pairs interact consistently from one month to the next (Viswanath et al., 2009).

Many companies, educational institutions, non-profits and others are seeking to leverage Facebook to increase exposure to their organisations. The ability to attract a younger demographic is particularly attractive. But although there are benefits associated with using Facebook as a communication medium, it also has inherent risks. The purpose of this article is to discuss some of the benefits and risks, and examine how a private educational institution responded to the opportunities and challenges presented by Facebook.

Review of literature

Corporations and other organisations interested in attracting attention have started noticing the marketing power of Facebook. Brands such as Visa, Bank of America, Wal-Mart and even Skittles all have Facebook pages. Fifty-six percent of 2010 Fortune 500 companies are on Facebook (Barnes, 2010). Unlike the dot com era when many companies scrambled to have an online presence minus a coherent game plan, companies today though aware of Facebook's capabilities, manifest an uncertainty as to how these can be leveraged to benefit their overall organisational strategy (McCorkindale, 2010). That being said, as these organisations find the right entry point into social media channels like Facebook, they may be able to unlock the power of social networks to further their objectives.

Businesses aren't the only ones noticing the importance of social media in attracting attention. Colleges are starting to look more to social media to communicate with students, particularly as some studies show that email usage is decreasing in favour of social media use among their target audience. In fact, one study showed that high school students (whom colleges are trying to recruit) are more likely to use social media than email (Alexander, 2008). A study investigating Facebook usage of 92 undergraduate students found that on average this sample were on Facebook 30 minutes throughout the day with the majority of the time dedicated to viewing the posts of others and to a much lesser extent posting themselves (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Moulaisons (2010) noted that Facebook has been used as a medium of communication in parts of the world where university online communication systems are simply not available. They provide a global reach that is not paralleled by any learning management system. Barnes and Mattson (2010), report that "admissions officers have clearly embraced Facebook and other social networking sites as viable forms of communication with their constituency" (p. 2). Madge et al. (2009) investigated the impact of using Facebook as a pre-registration tool and its impact on students' post-registration social networks. One key finding was that first year undergraduate "Students reported that they specifically joined Facebook pre-registration as a means of making new friends at University" (Madge et al, 2009, p. 141). Their survey results further evidenced that Facebook has the potential of assisting students in settling into University life.

While student recruitment constitutes one avenue of Facebook's potential use, another potential lies in its use as a course management system, posting links to course materials. Loving and Ochoa (2011) note that "Instructors realised that asking college students to visit online university course sites differs greatly from bringing the course site to them"

(p. 123). Selwyn (2009) analysed 68,169 student wall posts for evidence of academic-related communication and classified these in categories such as reflection on University experience, the exchanging of practical and academic information as well as expressions of disengagement and pleas for assistance. Loving and Ochoa (2011) noted in a case study they conducted that even though the costs or drawbacks of appropriating technologies such as Facebook for academic purposes are many, their value over conventional course management systems in many ways are “worth the necessary work arrounds” (p. 129).

Often when businesses and educational institutions use Facebook they take advantage of Facebook’s option to have “Groups” or “Pages.” As late as 2010 there was extensive discussion about whether organisations should use “Groups” or “Pages” to connect with constituents (O’Neill, 2010). However, in 2011 Facebook made changes to their “Groups” that made it clear that organisations should use “Pages” rather than groups. Facebook (2011b) states, “Pages are for organisations, businesses, celebrities, and bands to broadcast great information in an official, public manner to people who choose to connect with them.”

When organisations begin using social networks, individuals associated with those organisations also will be using them. In some cases this could create additional benefits (or drawbacks) for the organisations. For example, when students use social networking to engage faculty and personnel, those faculty and personnel may seem more accessible to students. When faculty form appropriate informal connections with students, their instructional effectiveness is enhanced (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1991). Sturgeon and Walker (2010) conducted a small study at a southern university with 120 faculty members, of which 90% mentioned that Facebook provides an open line of communication between them and their students. This openness it was perceived could make the classroom experience seem less daunting and more inviting. In a study examining what happens when students connect with teachers on Facebook, Mazer, Murphy and Simonds (2007), state that:

Student perceptions of a teacher's credibility and their reports of motivation and affective learning may also be affected by what the teacher discloses on Facebook. The number of photographs and the amount of information provided on the virtual social network may positively or negatively alter student perceptions. Much like when a teacher self-discloses face to face in the classroom, the comments made by the teacher's Facebook friends, the special interest groups the teacher is affiliated with on Facebook, and the personal information the teacher discloses in his or her Facebook biography all may affect students' perceptions of the teacher. (p4)

Overall, their study found that students generally perceived teachers as more open and friendly when they visited their Facebook pages. However, not all students appreciated having this kind of connection with their teachers. Hewitt and Forte (2006) observed that people use Facebook as a medium to manage their image. They note that such control becomes onerous when tending to a variety of audiences with a myriad of tastes and crossing multiple generations and professional and educational boundaries. They also found that 33% of 136 students surveyed felt a discomfort with faculty accessing student Facebook accounts, because of what they called “Identity Management” as well

as privacy issues. It is interesting to note that in this study males were more likely to condone faculty presence than females.

In a similar vein, privacy (or the lack thereof) has been a key area in which Facebook has been criticised. Boyd and Hargittai (2010) report that “Far from being nonchalant and unconcerned about privacy matters, the majority of young adult users of Facebook are engaged with managing their privacy settings on the site at least to some extent.” Concerns about privacy can work both ways. For example, in an educational setting some students would be aghast if they knew the kinds of information that their instructors could collect about them on Facebook. At the same time, teachers may not want their students to know about their private lives.

Not all of the concerns about professor-student Facebook interactions come from the students. In fact, some studies have shown that students are more amenable than faculty members to using social networking sites to enhance their academic experience (Roblyer et al., 2010). This reluctance on the part of professors may stem from a concern that they would be perceived as uninvited guests to a party where the rules of engagement are only vaguely familiar to them (Lipka, 2007). Some may fear that an entry into the informal cyber world of their students may undermine their credibility as qualified professors (Hartshorn and Ajjan, 2008). Some faculty members have expressed concern that the act of friending students may create in the students an inappropriate expectation in terms of grading and accountability (Lipka, 2007).

In any sector of society, the use of social media can create conflicting opportunities where the line between professional and client becomes blurred. For example, Jain (2009) reported on an awkward situation that arose when he (as a medical intern) accepted a Facebook friend request from a former patient. Jain said:

Confirming this patient as my “friend” on Facebook, I was merging my professional and personal lives. From my Facebook page, Ms. Baxter could identify and reach anyone in my network of friends, view an extensive collection of personal photographs, read my personal blog, and review notations that others had left on my “wall.” The anxiety I felt about crossing boundaries is an old problem in clinical medicine, but it has taken a different shape as it has migrated to this new medium.

In addition to awkward situations faced by individuals, from an institutional perspective, damage to an institution could occur should individuals associated with the institution make inappropriate posts on Facebook.

Chretien et. al., (2009) reported that according to their survey, 60% of medical schools “reported incidents of students posting unprofessional online content. Violations of patient confidentiality were reported by 13%.” Similar challenges were reported by Greysen et. al. (2010). These types of incidents could reflect very poorly both on the medical school or sponsoring hospital.

In the field of education, much has been written about teachers who have been fired or reprimanded for posts on Facebook that were deemed to be inappropriate (Shapira, 2009, Knight, 2011, Heussner, 2010). In one case, a New York City public school teacher was fired for making comments like “This is sexy” on photos of female students

at his school (Chiaromonte & Gonen, 2010). In another case, a teacher was fired for stating on Facebook that students were “snobby” and “arrogant” (Heussner, 2010). Individuals need to make their own decisions about how they should interact with others on Facebook. However, in some cases organisations can dictate what their employees should or should not do on Facebook, particularly in connection with the organisations. For example, some organisations have prohibited employees from using Facebook to connect with clients.

From an organisational perspective, one wonders if the damage that can potentially be caused by inappropriate posts on Facebook is worth the potential benefits of increased exposure that the medium allows. Obviously institutions cannot control whether or not their employees use Facebook on their own time. The question is, do benefits accrue to institutions who encourage their employees to use Facebook for the purposes of the organisations? The present study seeks to document the efforts of one educational institution to answer that question.

The present study

Administrators at a large private educational institution considered the possibility of using Facebook as a tool to recruit students to enroll in classes and participate in programme activities. This institution has several hundred satellite campuses across the world, and over 350,000 participants. At the time of the present study these local campuses offered classes and activities to both instruct and bring together groups of individuals. One of the potential benefits seen by the organisations of using Facebook was that since many of their constituents were on Facebook it could be a potentially good way to get the word out. In addition, several of the local organisations had unofficial Facebook Groups that had been created by students – many local leaders felt that making these Groups official would make them more effective. A simple study was commissioned to answer the following questions:

1. What are the benefits of using Facebook as a recruitment tool at these programmes?
2. What are the costs of using Facebook as a recruitment tool at these programmes?

Twelve programme directors spanning four states (Texas, California, Florida and Utah) and two countries (United States and Perú) participated in this study. The sample was purposeful in terms of geographical spread, but not large enough to produce statistically significant results. Students attending these programmes consist mostly of young adults in their twenties. A few were married, most were single. The directors of these programmes ranged from ages 30 to 60. A few of them had earned doctoral degrees and the remainder attained at least a master’s degree. These participants were invited to use Facebook to encourage student enrolment and participation in their programmes for 3 months.

These directors participated in Facebook in two major ways. First they created their own personal profiles on Facebook and were given the option of becoming Facebook friends with students if they felt it was appropriate. Second, they formed Facebook Groups for their local educational institutions. At that time Groups had different features that made them more appropriate for this organisations. Based on recent

changes made by Facebook if this study were to be replicated, the organisations would have used “Pages.” However, this difference is not important in terms of the present study, as the functionality of “Groups” at that time was similar to the current functionality of “Pages.”

A brief orientation was held to help introduce the directors as to how Facebook could be used as a recruitment tool; in addition, they were provided with some brief documentation that explained how to setup Facebook. This included statements such as, “Remember that everything you post on Facebook is public. Please be very careful and follow all the guidelines put in place by the organisations so that nothing on your Facebook page would detract from its mission and purpose.”

Many of the participants had never used Facebook at all, and needed basic orientation to the programme. Selecting such participants was done purposefully, as it was determined that a large number of members in the organisations had never used Facebook, and in order to determine the true benefits and costs, individuals with a broad range of experience with Facebook were selected for participation. After their brief orientation, directors were largely left to their own devices in determining how to use Facebook most effectively. They were able to contact a member of the organisations in charge of technology if they had questions that they were not able to figure out on their own.

An eleven item survey (Appendix A) was administered to participants at the conclusion of the trial period. Items directed respondents to self-assess their familiarity and comfort level with Facebook, the average amount of time spent using it each week for work purposes, and specifically how they used it as a communication tool. In terms of benefits, respondents were directed to indicate the degree to which students were better informed about activities and class information. They also responded to items regarding the degree to which class and activity attendance increased. At the end of the survey they were invited to share both positive and negative experiences about using Facebook for the purposes targeted by the study.

Results

Four of the twelve participants indicated that before this study was initiated they were very familiar with using Facebook. The other eight were mostly to very unfamiliar with using it. At the conclusion of the study, all but one participant reported feeling either a “high” or “medium” level of comfort using Facebook. This seems to indicate that Facebook is a relatively easy tool to learn, and that extensive training in how to use it may not be needed.

In terms of how they used Facebook, the majority of the directors (10/12) posted information on their Facebook wall and created events. Half of the participants used Facebook to communicate with individual students and groups of students as well as to post pictures.

On a scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, half of the respondents strongly agreed that students were better informed about activities/classes because of their programme Facebook group. The other half slightly or mostly agreed that students were better informed. No one disagreed. One respondent shared that students in his classes were sending their friends to Facebook to check out the

programme's scheduled classes and activities. Another indicated that based on his experience, Facebook was a superior communication tool to other more traditional forms of communication stating:

In the past, whenever I have sent emails to groups of students advertising events or classes, they tended not to respond or even get the emails. Using Facebook, however, I noticed a marked increase in the number of those who not only received the announcement but also responded. I have found that if I post something on someone's wall, they will usually respond.

In some cases, students would use the Facebook page as a way to directly contact programme administrators. In one instance, a student wanted to attend some make up classes in order to receive a special recognition offered by the institution. The director was able to publicly respond to the question, thus addressing the needs of one individual, and hopefully passing on the information to others.

Several students in one programme expressed their appreciation to the programme director for using Facebook to communicate with them. In the one of the programmes in Perú the director reported greater interest in their activities than they have seen before. Another director found that posting information on student's walls generated a much higher response rate from the student than an email would.

In terms of class and activity attendance, eleven respondents felt that class attendance slightly to dramatically increased through the use of Facebook (See Figure 1). All twelve felt that programme activity attendance increased as a result of its use with almost half strongly feeling that this was the case. One director reported a specific increase of additional students, stating "At our last activity we had close to 15 additional people that came as a direct result of the Facebook posting (announcement). We have seen a few of them more involved now with [our classes as well]. Anne [a new participant in the programme] volunteered to make our weekly breakfast Her connection and comfortableness came because of the Facebook friends and connection."

One other director reported tripling of the number of students enrolled in class. For the other programme directors class and activity attendance had increased more modestly, where they reported small but noticeable increases. A third of the respondents stated that over the course of the study, momentum for its use as a programme communication tool among students did and they projected would continue to increase.

A negatively phrased item was crafted to encourage the respondents to really think about the benefit of this medium in terms of increasing class attendance. It read "Overall, Facebook is nice but does not really make a difference in getting more young people to attend programme classes". Ten of the twelve slightly-to-strongly disagreed with this statement with only one slightly agreeing with it (see Figure 2). The respondent who slightly agreed felt that asking students to go somewhere online to find out information about the classes/activities was less effective than sending the information directly to them via email. On the whole though, respondents commented that Facebook is a medium where students they cater to communicate and express themselves. By going directly to where they "hang out" to promote programme classes

and activities they are able to enter a place where the free flow of communication among their target audience is most prevalent.

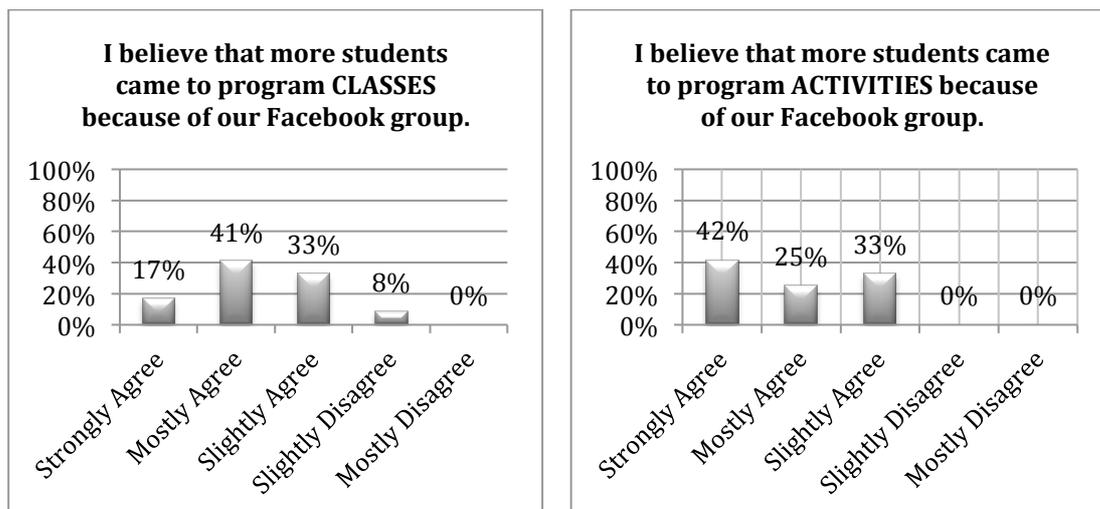


Figure 1. Class and Activity Attendance

One programme administrator put it this way: “I feel that Facebook is more than nice in that it is a major way in which young adults communicate and express themselves. I've had a far higher rate of accountability for absences than before.” Another stated, “Ultimately, the real difference maker is the principle of personal contact, be that via Facebook, email, text, phone call, personal visit, etc. I feel that Facebook has assisted me as a teacher and administrator better facilitate that personal contact.”

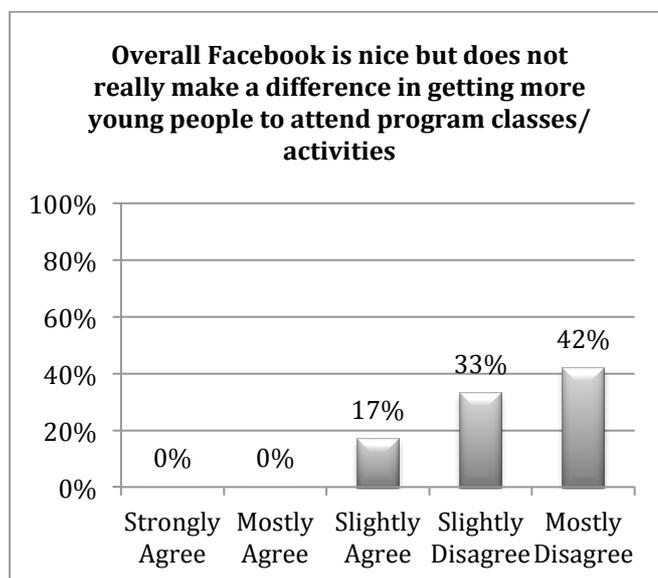


Figure 2. Facebook not critical

Another area in which respondents were surveyed concerned the amount of time that was spent using Facebook. Obviously, even if there were an increase in participation in programme activity, if this came at the cost of multiple hours spent on Facebook, the use of Facebook would need to be more carefully considered. Nine of the twelve reported spending on average 15 minutes to one hour a week using Facebook for programme purposes. Two reported an average use of two hours and one reported four hours. Thus it was determined that for the most part, Facebook would not be such

a time-consuming issue as to detract from other responsibilities of programme administrators.

One of the concerns from an institutional perspective was that being on Facebook would have unintended consequences for the programme, such as the inappropriate posts described in the review of literature. In addition, a concern was that spammers would make posts on these pages and cause damage to the online reputation of the organisations.

To see if this was the case, researchers observed the various groups that were set up. They found that spammers did make posts on 3 of the walls, but these were quickly taken down by the local institutions. In general, spam did not appear to be a problem. The directors as a whole did not seem to consider taking down spam or inappropriate comments to be a problem. One of the directors from Peru said, “No considero mayor problema, siempre que se pueda quitar los comentarios inadecuados” (“I don’t consider it to be a big problem, one can always take down inappropriate comments”).

Another concern shared by administrators of the programme was the possibility of inappropriate postings being made that would reflect poorly on the organisations. For example, if a programme director were to post something like, “I hate it when people worry so much about the environment” or “I loved what President Obama said yesterday!” there was a potential for people with different political views to be offended by such a posting, and as a result stop their participation in the programme. Over the course of the study, no inappropriate postings were observed.

Respondents were directed to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following statement “I feel uncomfortable using Facebook because of the potential of being exposed to inappropriate images, sites, or relationships”. One fourth of the respondents slightly agreed, almost half mostly disagreed and the other fourth strongly disagreed with this statement. One respondent expressed concern because he had people he did not know “friending” him, and these people were often scantily-clad women who would then provide links to online pornography, something this programme director did not want to participate in.

While to some it might seem like common sense to not befriend total strangers on Facebook (especially if they appear from their profile picture to be promoting something that you do not want to participate in), it was not common sense to this director. This experience demonstrated that more training may be needed to help some have a greater understanding of how to effectively use Facebook, and avoid certain areas that might be problematic.

Another respondent indicated that because the Facebook site is for institutional purposes it functions like a virtual public setting where an air of professionalism must be maintained. He believed that an individual bent on inappropriate activities will do so regardless of the venue. In other words, the telephone, email and other technologies could be used to give the organisations a bad image. Facebook is no different, and employees of an organisations should be expected to use Facebook in a professional manner, just as they would any other technology.

Discussion and Conclusion

Facebook clearly is an important method of communication, particularly for students in their twenties. Organisations that wish to reach this age group are increasingly turning to Facebook to help convey their messages (See Barnes and Mattson, 2010; Roblyer et al., 2010; Madge et al., 2009; Mazer, Murphy and Simonds, 2007). This study showed that the administrators of the twelve programmes, who were directed to use Facebook as a recruitment and communication tool, felt that the resulting benefits outweighed any associated costs.

The overarching benefit observed in this study included students being better informed about class assignments and activities. The very fact that educators went to where their students virtually “hang out” seems to have facilitated these outcomes. However, being on Facebook does not automatically ensure that students will be better informed, nor more likely to attend class activities. While some students could have perceived this as an intrusion on their privacy or an inappropriate mixing of their academic and social lives (See Lipka, 2007; Hewitt & Forte (2006), in the present study as well, it did not appear to have a negative effect in the aggregate in terms of increased attendance and students being better informed. There were, as noted, instances of students sharing with their friends’ class-related information. While such an occurrence could be more or less likely to happen depending on the nature of the course, it would be interesting for some educators to consider this possibility if their objective is to generate greater interest in their courses.

While more robust studies could be conducted to more fully flesh out and quantify the related costs associated with using Facebook in this manner, these costs appear to be relatively minimal when compared to the overall benefit. Only a minimal effort was expended to deal with spam, and the potential for inappropriate comments or interactions was not realised during the duration of this study. As noted, the directors had latitude to create personal pages and friend students; however, in terms of communicating with students as an institution, they used the group created for that purpose.

This study had several limitations. First, its scope was small. Only a handful of institutions were chosen to participate in the study, largely because the organisations wanted to be cautious as it began exploring the use of Facebook. Another limitation of this study is that only members of one educational institution participated. Future studies could expand on this one by examining larger groups of people across several different institutions.

Another limitation was that it may have been too focused on the short-term. Although directors reported seeing improvement in their communication with students, was this an effect of Facebook being a “new thing” that would eventually wear off? On the other hand, is it possible that the communication impact associated with Facebook would have been even higher had the duration of the study been longer? Another issue that would have benefitted from a longer study period is the issue of inappropriate contact occurring because of Facebook. Just because nothing inappropriate happened in three months, does not mean nothing inappropriate would happen over the course of three years.

Overall, we believe this study should provide encouragement to educational institutions considering the use of Facebook to move forward in their efforts to recruit and interact with students in ways that further their institutional objectives. If steps are taken to

minimise costs, the benefits garnered are more likely to surface. Naturally, Facebook is not a “silver bullet” for educational or any other kind of organisations efforts to recruit and communicate with students. The question at hand was not whether Facebook should replace email or other ways of communicating with students, but rather should it be added to the toolbox of those reaching out to young adults. Our tentative conclusion is that Facebook can be used as an additional way of connecting with students. Although there is much to learn about social media in general, and Facebook in particular, it is clearly a tool that cannot be overlooked in terms of its potential.

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Biographical Statements

JohnHilton III

John Hilton III received his M.Ed. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and his Ph.D. in Instructional Psychology and Technology at Brigham Young University. He is interested in researching open-access issues, particularly the creation and use of open educational resources, and looking at how free digital distribution affects learning and teaching. He can be reached via <http://johnhiltoniii.org>

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Appendix A

1. Before this pilot programme how familiar were you with using Facebook?
 - Very Familiar
 - Mostly Familiar
 - Mostly unfamiliar
 - Very unfamiliar

2. Currently, what is your comfort level with Facebook?
 - High
 - Medium
 - Low

3. Which of the following ways did you communicate using Facebook for programme purposes?
 - Posts on the Facebook wall
 - Facebook emails to individual students
 - Facebook emails to groups of students
 - Creating events
 - Posting pictures

- Other (please specify)
4. I believe that students were better informed about activities/class because of your programme Facebook group.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Mostly Agree
 - Slightly Agree
 - Slightly Disagree
 - Mostly Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 5. I believe that more students came to CLASSES because of your programme Facebook group.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Mostly Agree
 - Slightly Agree
 - Slightly Disagree
 - Mostly Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 6. I believe that more students came to programme ACTIVITIES because of our programme Facebook group.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Mostly Agree
 - Slightly Agree
 - Slightly Disagree
 - Mostly Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 7. Overall, Facebook is nice but does not really make a difference in getting more young people to attend programme activity/classes.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Mostly Agree
 - Slightly Agree
 - Slightly Disagree
 - Mostly Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 8. On average, how much time each week did you spend using Facebook for programme purposes? *Options – 15 to 6 hour frequency scale with 15 minute increments*
 9. “I feel uncomfortable using Facebook because of the potential of being exposed to inappropriate images, sites, or relationships.”
 - Strongly Agree
 - Mostly Agree

- Slightly Agree
 - Slightly Disagree
 - Mostly Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
10. Please share any concrete positive stories (you have not already shared in previous responses) that have resulted from your use of Facebook?
11. Please share any concrete negative stories (you have not already shared in previous responses) that have resulted from your use of Facebook?
12. Please share any other insights you have about using Facebook