

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

The Facebook Generation

By: Stephanie Tardieu

Posted: 12/15/08

It's safe to say that the college experience today has come a long way from that of our parents and even older siblings. The college experience has often been regarded as "the best four years of your life," the place where you go to expand your mind and boundaries through Academia; the place where great ideas are born and the sky is the limit as to the potential you can achieve. You may have been preached old adages from your parents encouraging carpe diem and enforcing that knowledge (and education) is power; but in today's quick-paced society, the reality is that college has lost much of this idealistic appeal to students. Instead, college has become synonymous to all-nighters, Adderall, spring break, and Facebook.

It's no surprise that in today's Y-generation of quick-fixes over delayed gratification, students prefer quick and easy solutions to, well, everything. Even the face of keeping in touch with friends has drastically changed in college. Way back when (oh, four years ago), students used to keep address books, email addresses and even practiced the archaic ritual of sending hand written letters to keep in touch with their social circle. Well, all that will soon be extinct with the online social-network explosion of Facebook.

With social circles evolving into social-mega-networks, college students are only a click away from all their closest friends (whether 40 or all 500 of them), their personal information, contact information, and virtually all other details they could possibly desire. Facebook seems to have revolutionized college socializing at an astonishing rate and has even become a rite of passage to freshman college students dying to join the club. According to ComScore, an internet marketing research company, some 62 million people around the world surf the website for an average of 20 minutes per day, making Facebook the 7th most visited website in the world (trailing powerhouses such as Yahoo, Google, and YouTube). But amidst all the hype surrounding Facebook, little has been done to question the short and long term effects of spending so much time in a virtual world of uninhibited communication filled with limitless personal information about the people in your community and more importantly, yourself.

To gain insight into exactly what the effects of Facebook were on my life, I decided to do some investigating and cut myself off completely from the network by deleting my account. This of course, I learned, was not possible (thanks Mark), so I did the next best thing; I deactivated, which allows you to reactivate anytime you want. At first, like any break-up, I felt relieved and liberated from my previous relationship. For the first day, I was actually able to sit at my computer and work quite productively. I checked my emails, finished a seven page history paper, and even got a head start on reading some English Lit. The next day, however, was not so easy. As I struggled through my Bio lab report, I found myself increasingly preoccupied with needless questions: Did that cute guy from Saturday poke me back yet? Did Anna post those pictures from last weekend's party? Like any addict, I tried to stay focused, but the harder I tried, the more I felt the need to just take a one little peek. So I reactivated my account, put an end to my curiosity, took some application quizzes, then deactivated, again. This process repeated itself painfully for a week or so before I decided to just throw in the towel and reactivate my account for good.

Short of being addictive, another effect I noticed from my short break-up with Facebook is that a good number of my friends seemed distressed and confused by my absence from the site. Many of them wondered if I had 'unfriended' them from my page or if anything was wrong. I reassured them that we were still friends and that I was simply taking a break from the site, an idea that seemed to confuse them even more. This sense of confusion, I found out, is not isolated to my case alone. When I asked Yonavel Capellan, a 4th year CCNY student psychology major, who happens to not use Facebook, what the general responses are to her M.I.A. status from the website, she shared: "People always ask if I have Facebook and they tend to react weirdly and surprised when I tell them I don't use it. I think it's because so many people have one [account]. I've lost contact with some friends and sometimes people I've just met because I don't use the website."

Although my leave of absence opened my eyes to the addictive potential Facebook has, it also left me with more questions. What makes Facebook so fascinating and potentially addictive to college students? And if Facebook has been powerful enough to change how we make new friends and the way we qualify those friendships, what are the greater long-term effects of Facebook on our mental health, the college experience, and our future? The college experience being quite broad, I settled to find out if and how Facebook affects students' social lives and academic records.

On the site's "About" page, Facebook describes itself as being: "A social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them; a place to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and

learn more about the people they meet." According to Helen Birtwhistle, press officer for the Institute of Ideas, the average Facebook user has roughly 150 friends. Suffice it to say, college students are taking in a lot more stimuli than just the information from their textbooks. But what are the consequences of the mind being stimulated by so much information about so many persons' lives on a daily basis?

In an informal survey of various colleges across the nation and abroad, 100 students were polled on the effect of Facebook on their social lives, and in particular whether using Facebook had facilitated social interactions with their fellow peers within the college community.

62 percent admitted that Facebook has been the source of some negative drama in their social lives. Anecdotally, many students reported that the spreading of rumors often started with Facebook. Lauren Mitchell, a 4th year student from U. of Rhode Island, related that suggestive photos and wall posts led to a break up with her boyfriend of four years: "Facebook has brought unwanted drama into my life and was one of the main reasons my ex-boyfriend and I, of four years, broke up. These websites make cheating a reality and an unwanted reminder [of what you don't want to know]."

39 percent of students felt that the overwhelming use of Facebook by college students could potentially perpetuate some peer pressure. Clothilde Breillout, a 3rd year student at Concordia University, said "Facebook is great to keep in touch with friends. But it can definitely promote peer pressure depending on your state of mind (especially if you're feeling lonely). Facebook can make you think the grass is greener elsewhere. You start to think people are having more fun, and partying more than you. It feels like a lot of people use it to show how popular they are; who really has 700 friends right? But I think that's why so many people spend so much time on Facebook; to see who has 'the best life', 'the most fun'... I think that Facebook goes with the trend of our generation's constant need to socialize."

Among the respondents, a reported 67 percent felt that Facebook was addictive, checking the site anywhere from five to 20 times a day. One student, who wished to remain anonymous, claims to have spent 10 hours on the site in one day.

Ironically the same 67 percent felt that they probably would not be able to go through college without the website, despite some of its effects. Clothilde explained: "We live in a time where networking is so important. It [networking] is essential to success in so many careers, and Facebook really facilitates networking with people. It's always good to keep that kind of contact, even with people who may not be your greatest friends, because they can still give you a hand and open opportunities in the future."

Phillip Hodson, a fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), stated "Building a Facebook profile is one way that individuals can identify themselves, making them feel important and accepted, but this can lead to disappointment

once people realize how insignificant their online existence really is. Not only are online friends not necessarily real friends, they can turn out to be people you don't wish to know at all."

Carolyn Axtell, a senior researcher at the Institute of Work Psychology and Management School at Sheffield University in northern England, concurred: "There are a limited set of cues available on sites like this," Axtell explained. "You don't get the subtleties of voice tone, facial expressions or body language you usually have when interacting with others, and that can make interpreting the meaning of messages difficult. You can write something flippantly (jokingly), which others take seriously, or come across as aggressive when that's not your intention at all." She added, "I can see how relationships can be damaged as a result, and when that happens, people will want to leave to put things right."

On the same informal survey, students were also polled on the effect of Facebook with regards to academic performance. 57 percent of students admitted to Facebook being either a big distraction or a tool of procrastination when studying or doing homework. Currently, Facebook has over 6700 students who are members of over 60 groups about excessive Facebook usage lowering their GPAs. The group "Facebook is lowering my G.P.A" states: "This group is for those of us who spend time on Facebook instead of doing homework or studying. I'm sure grades would be a whole lot better if not for the invention of the addicting and information overload on the Facebook website." Another group, "Facebook has lowered my GPA," claims: "[This group is] for all of you who have found yourselves blowing off schoolwork and other responsibilities too due to the obscene amount of time you spend on Facebook."

Although unaffected academically by the website, Jake Molko, a 2nd year at Nebraska Wesleyan, felt: "I do believe Facebook has the potential to affect academic performances because of the amount of time some users spend on the site. I do know certain people that check their Facebook every single chance they get, and spend extensive amounts of time browsing through Facebook pages, perhaps hours at a time!"

Thus, it is undisputed that Facebook is a powerful tool to promote social networking and in facilitating contact with friends. The college experience is deeply seeded in the community a student builds for him or herself and with the help of Facebook; those bonds may never be "unfriended." But the fact remains that with its ever growing popularity, Facebook does raise certain questions about its addictive potential. Furthermore, how this affects students' social lives and academic performances remains a big question mark. However, since Facebook is fairly new to the scope of college life, one cannot draw any valid conclusions as to its effect on those parameters, yet. So, it would behoove those of us who use the website regularly (or a little more) to login with caution and moderation, since the verdict is not out on the Zuckerberg empire. Clearly

Facebook is changing the way we view friendships, how we shape our communities and quite possibly our mental frame of mind, which could have great social ramifications on our future. Just make sure the next time you login, you consider how it is affecting you and yours.

Cheers!

© Copyright 2009 The Campus