Campus Life Online: Understanding Student Culture and Facebook

Securing the eCampus, Dartmouth College

July 27, 2009
Overview of Presentation

• History of Facebook use and specifically college student use
• What students think about their Facebook use?
• What does this mean for working with students on college campuses?
• Discussion and questions
What do we know about Facebook use?
# Top 25 Social Networks Re-Rank

(Ranked by Monthly Visits, Jan '09)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>UV</th>
<th>Monthly Visits</th>
<th>Previous Rank</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>facebook.com</td>
<td>68,557,534</td>
<td>1,191,373,339</td>
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<td>myspace.com</td>
<td>58,555,800</td>
<td>810,153,536</td>
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<td>twitter.com</td>
<td>5,979,052</td>
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<td>fixster.com</td>
<td>7,645,423</td>
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<td>linkedin.com</td>
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<td>tagged.com</td>
<td>4,448,915</td>
<td>39,630,927</td>
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<td>myyearbook.com</td>
<td>3,312,898</td>
<td>33,121,821</td>
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<td>livejournal.com</td>
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<td>25,221,354</td>
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<td>blackplanet.com</td>
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<td>bebo.com</td>
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<td>hi5.com</td>
<td>2,398,323</td>
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<td>1,499,057</td>
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<td>494,464</td>
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<td>452,090</td>
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<td>asiatown.net</td>
<td>81,245</td>
<td>1,118,245</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>tickle.com</td>
<td>96,155</td>
<td>109,492</td>
<td>18</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Top 15 Countries on Facebook (in thousands)

Source: Facebook Demographic and User Statistics
http://www.slideshare.net/EmergenceMedia/facebook-demographics-user-statistics-emergence-media
US Facebook Educational Background

Source: Facebook Demographic and User Statistics
http://www.slideshare.net/EmergenceMedia/facebook-demographics-user-statistics-emergence-media
US Facebook Users by Age Group

- 18-25: 43%
- 26-34: 23%
- 35-44: 14%
- 45-54: 5%
- 55-65: 3%
- 13-17: 12%

US Facebook Users by Age Group (2/1/09) (InsideFacebook.com)
Research: What do we know about college student Facebook use?
• *Facebook* as a “trust-based or “friendship-based” site:
  – but is simultaneously “egocentric” or about the individual user (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

• The identification with and knowledge of the social context of the *Facebook* connection seems to provide users with some level of security (boyd, 2004).

• *Facebook* is premised on
  – a range of preexisting structures including external contexts, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participant characteristics (Jones, 1998).


How does the current generation of college and university students appreciate, value, construct, and negotiate campus culture online?
Facebook’s History and Premise

Social Graphs:
The pattern of social relationships between people

Source: Dion Hinchcliffe. http://web2.socialcomputingmagazine.com
Research Rationale

• Generational performance through computer mediated communication (CMC)

• Social networking sites (SNS) as new cultural space

Semiotics

– Signification & communication
– Signs & symbols in college culture
– Individual students and groups
Jean-François Lyotard’s “postmodern condition”

Technology as meta-narrative of identity
- creating meaning
- language more central in social bonds
- challenging modernist assumptions about/constructions of
  - Self & identity
  - Group membership
  - Social capital

- CMC as diachronic

- SNS as productive; not solely consumptive
Hyper-reality as Common Ground

• Because it exists in real and online spaces, campus and generational culture enables
  – Sharing predictable signals [authenticity]
  – Tolerating unpredictable and incongruent signaling
  – Production and consumption of stable and alterable self-presentation
The Empirical Study

Online Social Networking on Campus: Understanding What Matters in Student Culture
Abridged Research Methods

- Two surveys of undergraduate students at 20 college and universities-advertised on Facebook and through snowball sampling
- Institutions mixture of public, private, co-ed and single sex, all primarily residential
- 321 respondents
- Results coded and used as basis for 20 digital synchronous/hybrid ethnographic interviews
Principle Findings: Surveys

- **Agency**: Degree to which students felt they controlled self presentation
- **Performance**: How students believe they can regulate the presentation of self online
- **Relationality**: Reconfiguration of campus community and the growth of online interdependency
Survey Findings Overview

• Students surveyed believe that through their Facebook use, they:
  – Explore new forms of self-expression/mediate self-expression through technology
  – Deepen, extend and create connections with other students at college or at home
  – Manage their self-presentation/social graph production and consumption
  – Establish and operate social networks on and off campus/”floating worlds” & “hyper-reality”
Students Speak: Synchronous, Hybrid Ethnographies

- What meaning do students make of communications on Facebook?
- How do students interpret SNS discourse?
- What significance (if any) do students give to Facebook communication?
- What significance is online social networking to college experience?
Students Speak: Synchronous, Hybrid Ethnographies

- A total of 20 student hybrid ethnographies
- A variety of residential institutions.
- Researchers also did some general observation of random Facebook profiles
- Interview data were coded using both the codes from the two exploratory surveys as well as new codes that emerged.
- Through this constant comparative approach (Creswell, 2007) we were able to saturate the primary thematic categories.
Ethnographic Findings Summary

– Campus Culture
   As essential aspect of campus life—broadly
– Use-Consciousness
   • Navigating user audiences, social roles, privacy
– Identity Factors
   • Race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class;
   • Not disjointed/fragmented; synchronic & diachronic
– Voyeurism and Impression Management
  Authenticity & counterfeiting, “stalking,” social networking
Students Speak: Portraits

Kris
Matthew
Teresa
Jordan
Student Portraits

- **Teresa**
  - Bi-racial, heterosexual female junior from Massachusetts at a suburban university

- **Kris**
  - White, lesbian senior from Massachusetts at a women’s college

- **Matthew**
  - African-American, gay male sophomore, from Texas, at an urban university

- **Jordan**
  - Bi-ethnic, heterosexual male sophomore from New York at an urban university
Student Portraits

- Campus Culture: Matthew
- Use-Consciousness: Kris
- Identity Factors: Theresa
- Voyeurism and Impression Management: Jordan
Conclusions

• Facebook use is mediated by racial and ethnic and gender identities.

• Students of color were very aware of the differences between their profile constructions and those of white students; white students were generally unaware of race/ethnicity distinctions in self-presentation.

• Student participants generally acknowledged that women are the more active users, i.e. that women take and upload more photographs and attend to online self-presentation more so than men on campus.
Conclusions

• Student leader testimonies describe a heightened consciousness about self-presentation and impression management, not unlike that of students of color.

• Facebook is the choice SNS among residential college students.

• Developmental curve that characterizes Facebook use among participants.
  – meaning and culture of Facebook use in the first two years of college life is developmentally specific.
What does this mean for institutions?
Institutional Response

Example from Cornell University: “Thoughts on Facebook”

http://www.cit.cornell.edu/policies/socialnetworking/facebook.cfm
Student Affairs Administrators

- Assisting student organizations in planning events
- Facilitating community in residence halls
- Directory to learn student information
- Useful information about student whereabouts
Other Areas Using Facebook

• Admissions- connecting to prospective students

• Alumni Relations- planning reunions and alumni events
Educating Students About Their Facebook Use

- Student leaders as cultural translators
- Trainings for student leaders (resident advisors, orientation leaders, athletes)
- Students train other students
- Impression management and privacy settings
The role of faculty on Facebook?
Questions?
For more information

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