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FACEBOOK COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Empirical study based on Literature review

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Abstract

The social networks have been growing steadily in recent years. Facebook, one of the most popular social networks, is a modern means of communication and socialization that has taken lately more ground in higher education becoming an important academic tool in the communication process. Many universities have their own Facebook page, being used by both students and teachers, and creating Facebook groups increasingly facilitates communication with students. Thus, this paper aims to identify the importance that Facebook holds in the academic communication process and highlights the implications it has in higher education. The results reveal that this type of communication has gained more ground in academia creating real social communities, and students use it more and more for collaboration in various activities involved in the higher education system, but also for socializing and information.

Introduction

Communication through social networks has been increasingly used in higher education in the last years, and Facebook has become an integrated part of the communication process (Lebel K., 2012) in the academic environment. This social network allows users to interact through pictures and other information referring to academic activities, exchange of ideas and messaging. Like other social sites, Facebook allows users to create their own profiles by providing certain personal information, and then to establish links with other users described as "friends" within the network as the provided profile information acts like some kind of transmitters of personal qualities. (Lampe, Ellison, Steinfield, 2007, p. 436). Moreover, Facebook is also a means of communication in the academic field, given that both the students and the academic staff have adopted it as a collaborative communication support. (Roblyer M.D. *et al.,* 2010) Based on the hypothesis that online communication leads to the development of a sense of community (Klein 2008, p.3), we have elaborated this research in two parts: the first part refers to the importance of Facebook communication in higher education whereas the second part identifies the implications of this social network in the academic environment. In the end, we have drawn the conclusions.

1. The importance of Facebook in academic communication

Nowadays, modern technology represents the core element of the major societal transformations, and the relationship between technology development and social system functioning has lately become the centre of attention (Forkosh-Baruch A., Hershkovitz A., 2012) in all fields of activity, especially in higher education. Facebook is one of the most used social sites in this field, which offers users profile space (Joinson A.N., 2008) and represents a flexible socializing tool used not only for communicating, but also for posting different materials, information and pictures. (Klein, 2008, p. 3). Considering the fact that social networks lead to an increase in interactivity and communication efficiency between the organization and the target public, we can assert that it provides a direct communication channel and information and knowledge to those who are interested. (Curtisa, L., *et al.* 2010, Waters, E., et al, 2009) At the same time, social networks offer a series of opportunities for higher education institutions by making them more visible in the community but also on the market. In other words, universities make use of their social communication potential to benefit more from a very competitive environment. (Forkosh-Baruch A., Hershkovitz A., 2012, p. 59) Higher education institutions focus on the accessible social communication and interaction

media, the online social media becomes thus extremely important to them as it enables each user to post or delete information. (Oberer B., Erkollar A., 2012, p. 1888)

CASE in partnership with mStoner and Huron Education have conducted research in the social media activities of the education institutions, and have identified Facebook as the most used social media platform, followed by Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube.(http://www.case.org/Samples_Research_and_Tools/Benchmarking_and_Research/Surveys_and_Studies/Social_Media_Survey.html) The same operators have studied 1080 respondents in the US and other countries in 2013 who represented different types of education institutions. The results show that 90% of the participants in the study have said that Facebook is seen as the most popular social network, followed by Twitter (49%) and LinkedIn (31%). (http://geniusrecruiter.com/2013/05/05/perceptions-of-social-media-schools-and-students/)

Facebook keeps attracting new users because it provides both individuals and organizations with a personalized profile, many universities having thus created their own Facebook pages. Lampe, C., Ellison, N., Steinfield, C. A., (2007) have analysed the relationship between the elements of the user's Facebook profile, the number of friends and the ways to encourage contact with other users. In the academic environment, Facebook facilitates communication - students use it to achieve their education goals (Lampe, C. *et al.,* 2011, p. 331) – through image and material posts and the creation of Facebook groups, whose purpose is to use this online social tool as a discussion forum which allows interactive communication. (Kent M., 2013, p. 549) In addition to this, it must be pointed out that Facebook communication in higher education enables users to collaborate, to create study groups, to communicate efficiently with other students for finding answers to different education-related questions and obviously to debate taught subjects. (Lampe, C. *et al*., 2011, p. 334).

2. The implications of Facebook in higher education

Online social media generates increasingly more influence in higher education. (Oberer B., Erkollar A., 2012, p. 1888) Many universities have redefined the learning process through online courses and supplying materials directly on the site. (Forkosh-Baruch A., Hershkovitz A., 2012, p. 59) Although some authors think online communication lacks emotional interaction in education (Downing, K. J. *et al.* 2007), this nevertheless influences students' retention and contributes to academic performance improvement. (Chou, C., Peng, H., Chang, C.-Y., 2010). Facebook has attracted many users among the teaching staff, trainers and especially pupils and

students, and this has led to the emergence of learning activities on the online social media. (Forkosh-Baruch A., Hershkovitz A., 2012, p. 58) Students and teachers alike significantly incorporate Facebook in the educational process. (Bateman, D.,Willems, J., 2012) Kent M. (2013, p. 551) has identified that with the development of Facebook communication in higher education the number of posts made by students and teaching staff has greatly increased. Consequently, the author emphasized that one teaching staff post gets on average 2.6 student responses. Nonetheless, in the course of time these intervals have increased, and the author believes that on average there are 3.4 student responses to one teaching staff post. (Kent M., 2013, p. 551) Lampe, C., Ellison, N., Steinfield, C. A (2006, p. 167) have explained the difference between using Facebook for socializing on the one hand, and for searching information and interacting for self-expressing actions, thoughts and interests in the affiliated community on the other hand. Falahah, Rosmala D., (2012, p. 160) have identified a series of elements which are the basis of Facebook communication in higher education: allocating activities to students, creating advertisements, sending important data and work schedules, posting and updating materials as well as using it for entertainment. Furthermore, Lampe, C. *et al.* (2011) explain the way in which students use Facebook to get involved in different collaborative activities demanded by the academic staff. Given that it facilitates communication, Facebook provides satisfaction to its users, especially in the academic environment. Joinson A.N., (2008) has investigated the usage of Facebook as a social network and the link to the satisfaction it generates to those who use it. Lampe, C. *et al.*(2011) have identified the existence of a positive relationship between students' satisfaction regarding higher education and using Facebook for collaboration, because this social network provides a lot of information about the other persons registered as "friends". Moreover, the authors have found out that teaching staff profiles have a positive influence on students, because they use this social network to collaborate, and they also become more motivated. Lam L., (2012, p. 378) identifies a series of specific variables of Facebook usage in higher education such as a motivation boost for learning due to the benefits of this social network, interaction, direct communication, social relationships and active participation. He concludes that "*inter-relating, communicating, socializing and participating greatly influence students' motivation to learn*". Beqiri G., (2014) considers that the usage of social networks in the academic environment has grown very much in the last years. That is why higher education institutions rely more and more on social networks. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are the most accessed social networks

in the academic environment, in 2014, as figure no. 1 shows.

If we analyse the figure, we can see that Facebook is the favourite social network in the academic environment with 84%, followed by YouTube with 54%, Twitter with 36% and LinkedIn with 32%. At the same time, 21% of the people from the academic environment prefer Internet forums for communicating whereas 18% like communicating through instant messages which have appeared on the university's site.

As regards the usage of social networks in higher education in 2013, universities in the UK are on top of the user charts based on the number of Facebook Likes, Twitter Followers and YouTube subscribers, as table no. 1.1. indicates:

Consequently, Oxford University holds the record with 1,109,699 Facebook likes in 2013; 85,808 Twitter followers, 15,694 YouTube subscribers and 25,595 students who use these social networks. It is followed by the University of Cambridge with a total of 504,342 Facebook likes in 2013; 69,904 Twitter followers, 26,179 YouTube subscribers and 19,945 students who use these social networks. Regarding the number of Facebook likes, the third place goes to the University of Salford with 110,970 likes in 2013 and 21,755 students who use social networks and Oxford Brookes University with 73,372 likes and 18,425 students who use social networks. It can be also noticed that the University of Birmingham has the most students who use social networks, i.e. 31,070, and 47,768 Facebook likes in 2013. Next in line is Coventry University with 31,045 students who use social networks and 50,030 Facebook likes.

In Romania most of the universities have Facebook pages. This eases communication with current and potential students, and informs about the higher education institution and different events. In addition to this, it gives the chance to see reviews of the respective faculty. Many Romanian universities offer students free Wi-Fi Internet connection, and this also fevers the usage and access of Facebook in this field, especially through the smartphones and tablets students own. As a result, access to information is facilitated and this contributes to an increase in students' satisfaction and learning motivation.

Conclusions:

In the last years Facebook has become an online communication tool increasingly used in the academic environment. This social network favours communication between students and academic staff as it allows posting materials and information, feedback and interactive communication, and it turns also into a direct communication environment. Many universities have Facebook pages and this contributes to student attraction and

retention as Facebook supports motivating them regarding the educational process and it also leads to satisfaction by facilitating communication. At the same time, using Facebook in higher education creates the starting point for adequate socializing and informing atmosphere, and this is how the members of the academic community get to know better each other. Facebook will increase more in the next years in higher education, and will become the most popular social network.

Acknowledgments:

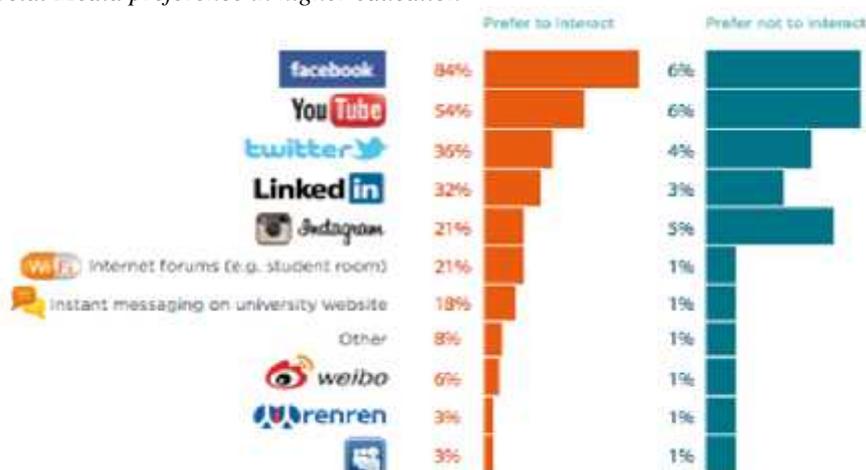**Reference list**

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ons-of-social-media-schools-and-students/

Appendices

Appendix A,
Figure No. 1
Social Media preference in higher education

Note. http://geniusrecruiter.com/2014/09/30/factors-in-international-student-decision-making/#more-2500

Appendix B
Table no. 1.1
University rankings user of social networks in the UK (2013)

Rank	University	Country	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Number of Students
1	Oxford University	England	1,109,699	8,808	15,694	25,595
2	University of Cambridge	England	504,342	69,904	26,179	19,945
3	London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)	England	90,201	10,698	16.,087	9,805
4	University of Salford	England	110,970	19,845	485	21,755
5	Oxford Brookes University	England	73,372	12,941	1,043	18,425
6	University College London (UCL)	England	69,658	18,035	4,245	25,525
7	Imperial College London	England	47,982	22,010	5,145	16,000
8	University of Edinburgh	Scotland	50,602	26,954	6,912	27,675
9	University of Glasgow	Scotland	51,948	29,815	805	26,395
10	Edinburgh Napier University	Scotland	53,315	11,367	256	14,060
11	Lancaster University	England	41,324	20,011	542	13,075
12	University of Sheffield	England	47,661	30,244	1,326	25,965
13	University of Birmingham	England	47,768	30,863	1,864	31,070
14	Cardiff University	Wales	43,768	27,110	330	30,000
15	Coventry University	England	50,030	15,030	3,032	31,045
16	University of Kent	England	42,331	16,796	765	20,310
17	University of Warwick	England	36,677	27,433	1,165	27,440
18	Robert Gordon University	Scotland	39,519	7,908	284	12,700
19	University of Southampton	England	39,248	16,674	1,189	24,135
20	Royal Holloway, University of London	England	30,335	8,794	56	9,865

*Note.*http://geniusrecruiter.com/2013/10/31/top-social-media-universities-2013/