



No Social Issues, Sex or Politics on Facebook: Young Adults' Views of Inappropriate Facebook Posts

Loreen Wolfer

University of Scranton, Dept. of Sociology / Criminal Justice

Abstract: *A sample of 406 college students from a private liberal arts college in Northeastern Pennsylvania completed an on-line survey about their witnessed and perceived inappropriate Facebook posts. Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses identified eighteen themes of inappropriateness. The three most common themes identified involved commentary on social issues, sex / nudity, and political discourse, none of which are addressed in the existing research. More traditionally studied topics such as meanness and too much personal information were also deemed inappropriate; however, they were mentioned less frequently. Alcohol and drug use were generally viewed as acceptable posts. Demographic factors were relatively unrelated to perceptions of inappropriate Facebook communication. Implications for college students' presentation of self from a social exchange perspective are discussed*

INTRODUCTION

College students are at a stage of life bridging two different worlds – the world of older adolescents and the world of young adults. As older adolescents, college aged individuals are still figuring out their individual identities (Moshman, 2005). They are figuring out who they are, what they stand for, and how to express themselves. As young adults, they have increasing freedom to act without the direct supervision of parents and their choices, for better or for worse, are now likely to follow them into the adult world (Brechtwald and Prinstein, 2011). Consequently, college has always been a time when many individuals experiment with possible adult social identities and behaviors and social media creates an avenue to do so that did not exist in previous generations (Brechtwald and Prinstein, 2011; Park and Lee, 2014; Williams and Merten, 2009). In fact, in addition to using Facebook for socializing and voyeuristic observation of others (Back, et al., 2010; McAndrew and Jeong, 2012; Yang and Brown, 2013), self-expression, sharing of information, and testing different identities are also common motivations for young adult use of social networks such as Facebook, MySpace and Instagram (Shoenberger and Tandoc, 2014; Yang

and Brown, 2013). Through interaction with on-line “friends”, college students experiment with ways to explore their own views as well as trying to influence the perspectives of others (Shoenberger and Tandoc, 2014).

Traditionally peer input was mainly face-to-face. Input from a wider group frequently took time for “word of mouth” to spread and was more easily disputed due to limited hard evidence like photographs taken at the time of an action. All this has changed with the proliferation of cell phones and social media. With the popularity of texting among adolescents, now a mistake can be easily captured on a cell phone or malignant gossip can be texted to a large group of peers in a matter of minutes (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, and Purcell, 2010). This is magnified with the widespread use of social media. Now more than 90% of teens and young adults in the United States use Facebook alone and the median number of Facebook friends for college students is approximately 300, with the number of friends for some students exceeding 1,000 (Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe, 2011; Perrin, 2015). Taken together, poor decisions or malignant gossip can be easily captured via a cell phone picture, immediately shared on a social media site, and quickly

disseminated to hundreds of individuals of varying degrees of social connectedness. To put it succinctly, poor choices are harder to ignore and forget now than ever before (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008; Mesch, 2009).

Because of this, many adolescents today are aware that they are being “watched” online and use impression management to consciously experiment with presenting an image of themselves that they think will make others think positively of them (Birnbaum, 2013; Marwick, 2012; Park and Lee, 2014; Shoenberger and Tandoc, 2014). Furthermore, some researchers have found that adolescents, including late adolescents such as college students, are socialized not only by what they think they should do, but also by what they think their peers are doing, regardless of any evidence for or against this presumption (Brechtwald and Prinstein, 2011; Ehrenreich, Underwood and Ackerman, 2014). Therefore, many adolescents and young adults may post behaviors that involve alcohol, sex, or nudity because they think that this is what their friends are doing or that it is part of college life and, therefore, expected in order to fit in (Ehrenreich Underwood, and Ackerman, 2014; Goodmon, Smith, Ivancevich, and Lundberg, 2014; Peluchette and Karl, 2007). However, many college students are Facebook friends with a broad social network that also includes parents, other older relatives, and possible professional contacts (Hilsen and Helvik, 2014; Miller, Parsons, and Lifer, 2010; Yang and Brown, 2013). These other Facebook friends may have different views of appropriate on-line disclosures. Consequently, young adults need to learn how to navigate diverse friend networks. Posts that may be seen favorably among college students may be seen negatively among other age cohorts and the norms for Facebook expressions are still evolving (Holmes, 2011).

Therefore, while it is clear that college aged individuals may behave in ways that older individuals do not, and that they may share this behavior on-line in an attempt to impress their peers even though they know they may risk the negative perception of others, it is unclear what members of this age group find to be the most inappropriate posts among themselves. Some

researchers are beginning to explore this. Bazarova (2012) found that on-line disclosures deemed by others as highly intimate were seen by those viewing the posts to be inappropriate. Roche, Jenkins, Aguerrevere, Kietlinski, and Pritchard (2015) furthered this study by examining 150 college students asking them to react to mock Facebook feeds regarding the feed's level of appropriateness. Their feeds focused on romantic relationship drama (which is the measure most closely related to Bazarova's intimate posts), negative emotion, passive aggression, and frequent status updates. They decided upon these areas after an informal poll of 20 college students regarding what these students felt was inappropriate for Facebook. Their findings revealed that posts involving relationship drama was perceived as the most inappropriate, followed by passive aggressive posts. According to their findings, negative emotion posts, frequent status updates and neutral posts were all deemed as relatively appropriate for Facebook.

This is definitely an important step in assessing what college students deem to be appropriate Facebook sharing, especially since other researchers have found that even a small amount of negatively perceived on-line content can result in a negative perception of the on-line discloser (Bazarova, 2012; Goodmon et al., 2014).

Many researchers have applied social exchange theory to Facebook use (Brandtzaeg, Liiders, and Skjetnew, 2010; Ellison et al., 2011; Roche et al., 2015). According to social exchange theory, people are rational and behave in ways that will maximize their rewards or social capital and avoid behaviors that do the opposite. Therefore, college students will share material on Facebook that they think will gain peer acceptance, a perceived social reward (Shoenberger and Tandoc, 2014; Yang and Brown, 2013). If they post material, on the other hand, that involves romantic drama, too much personal information, or other so far unmeasured behaviors, that will be negatively perceived, such material will decrease their social capital (Shoenberger and Tandoc, 2014). Therefore, from a social exchange perspective, it is important to what types of disclosures risk a negative perception.

This study builds upon these previous studies by asking what young adults, in their own subjective meaning, as opposed to a researcher-driven scenario, identify as the most inappropriate posts seen on Facebook. Given Facebook's popularity, its ability to reach a wide array of social network, and its ability to cross cultural barriers, understanding what types of posts hinder, as opposed to foster social relations is important knowledge in an increasing mediated world.

I. METHODS

A. Design

This study is part of a broader study of college students' experiences with Facebook. An on-line survey via a Survey Monkey link was administered to all undergraduate students (n=3,713) at a small liberal arts college in northeastern Pennsylvania. The part of the survey relevant here asked students about their Facebook usage, some brief demographic variables, and for them to describe the three most offensive posts that they have seen on Facebook. This qualitative open ended wording allowed the respondents to identify both their experiences and their perceptions of Facebook posts. This allows individuals to provide a rich description of their subjective, unrestricted understanding of a phenomena, which in this is case generally absent in the literature (Birnbaum, 2013). IRB approval was obtained and the students were offered a chance to win an Kindle Fire for study participation. Surveys and respondents were tracked separately by unique identifiers which enabled the researcher to know what students responded to the study, but did not allow the researcher to link respondents to individual survey responses.

For all comments, this research utilizes open coding where descriptive labels were written for every reference of inappropriate post seen on Facebook. First the author read through all responses and color coded like statements into themes. Then the author made a code sheet illustrating what types of statements corresponded to each theme. Variables were then created for each theme and individual respondents received a "1" if a comment related to a particular theme and a "0" if they did not mention a theme. Sometimes two or more comments received only one code.

For example, when listing the top three offensive posts seen, if an individual put "comments about gays" as one comment and "comments about transgender individuals" as a second comment, they both apply to lesbian / gay / bisexual / transgender individuals (LGBT) so even though there are two comments, they can only receive one code of "1" for the theme "LGBT issues". Similarly, some comments may have received more than one code. For example, a response of "racist comments against President Obama" would receive both a "1" for the theme of "racism" and a "1" for the theme of "politics" (since there is a specific reference to the President). Based on this, 17 different themes emerged in the data and some examples (not exhaustive) of comments that are coded for particular themes appear in Table 1.

A second independent evaluator coded the same data using the coding themes developed. Inter-rater reliability was established via Cohen's kappa since the themes were categorical in nature. Originally 10 of the 20 items had a Cohen's kappa of .8 or higher indicating very strong inter-rater reliability (McHugh, 2012; Viera and Garrett, 2005). For the remaining 10 categories, the raters discussed the individual areas of discrepancy for each respondent until agreement in coding was reached and changed accordingly on the master data set. These themes have a Cohen's kappa of 1 since they were discussed until agreement was reached. The respective Cohen's kappa for each theme also appears in Table 1.

Table 1. Coded Themes, Content and Cohen's Kappa Values

Theme	Example	Kappa	Theme	Example	Kappa
Violence: Children	Bullying Child abuse Children in pain	1.0	Other social issues	Gun control Terrorism Immigrants	1.0
Alcohol / Drugs	Alcohol Drugs Intoxication Partying	.86	Politics	Political debates / opinions Left / right	.94
Anima	Abused /	.95	Too	Personal	1.0

l Cruelty	Dead / Violence Animals		personal	drama / info	
Foul / Obscene Language	Profanity Cursing Expletives	.89	Racism	Racism / racist / bashing	.92
Hate (general)	General use of "hate" / "discrimination"	1.0	Religion	Hate / comments against [insert religion]	.86
Ignorance / Lies	Ignorant Mis-informed	1.0	Sex / Nudity	Sexual / sex Nude/naked	.92
Intolerant of Opinion	Judgmental Intolerance Offensive	1.0	Sexism	Sexism / sexist / harassment	.83
LGBT issues	Anti-gay	.86	Violence (general)	Physical cruelty Abuse / Violent	1.0
Offensive visuals	Picture Meme/ Video	.80			

B. Sample

The student response rate was 14.1% (n=572), which was less than desirable. The majority of the sample is female (66.7%) and white (81.9%). One third of the sample are freshmen (35.3%), followed most commonly by seniors (22.5%), sophomores (22%), and juniors (19.5%). While the sample is statistically representative of the university population for race and academic year (with the exception of freshmen, who are over-represented in this sample, p<.05), women are over-represented in the sample relative to their university representation (p<.05). More than three quarters of the responding students had a Facebook account at the time of the study (78.7%, n=450) and over half of these students report being on Facebook multiple times a day (54.4%, n=245).

Among 409 college students who made some type of comment describing the three most offensive things they have seen on Facebook, only 5 (1.2%) claim that they have never seen any offensive Facebook posts. Among the remaining individuals, not all people noted 3 areas and some people combined two issues within one listing. Therefore, the numbers of responses do not equal the commenting sample size times three.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results suggest that while there is a wide variety in what college students consider to be inappropriate posts, many topics that did not appear in previous studies emerge here. As shown in Table 2, college students frequently are offended by social issues on Facebook. For example, the most identified inappropriate post is those that expressed racist views (35.9%, n=147) and three more of the top 10 identified themes also involve social issues: "general social issues" (16.4%, n=67), sexism (13.7%, n=56), and LGBT issues (10.3%, n=42). While broad comments that are perceived as "mean" (the category "general meanness") may be akin to Roche and colleague's (2015) concept of "negative emotion", no other studies really recognize that college students do not perceive Facebook at the appropriate venue to discuss social issues.

Furthermore, while some researchers suggest that college students may post sexually suggestive material or posts about drinking alcohol because they think that this is expected from them by their peers and they want to conform (Ehrenreich Underwood, and Ackerman, 2014; Goodmon, et al., 2014; Peluchette and Karl, 2007), these findings suggest that some presumed "typical" college behaviors are unacceptable on Facebook.

Table 2: College Students' Perceptions of Inappropriate Facebook Posts

Inappropriate Topic	% (n)
Specific references to racism	35.9% (147)
Sexuality / nudity	25.9% (106)
Politics / political opinions	18.3% (75)
Offending visuals	16.6% (68)
Other general social issues	16.4% (67)

Table 2 con.

Inappropriate Topic	% (n)
Harm to children	16.1% (66)
Specific references to sexism	13.7% (56)
Foul / obscene language	11.5% (47)
Posts of violent acts or threats	10.5% (43)
LGBT issues	10.3% (42)
Animal cruelty	7.6% (31)
Hate in general	6.1% (25)
Intolerance of other's opinions	5.9% (24)
Too much personal information	5.2% (22)
Posts involving religion (pro or con)	5.1% (21)
Alcohol or drug use	5.1% (21)
Post viewer feels illustrates ignorance or lies	4.9% (20)

A noticeable amount of students in this sample found posts about sexuality / nudity (25.9%, n=106) to be inappropriate, which was the second most common inappropriate post (Table 2). However, drinking alcohol is another commonly perceived college activity; and, like Roche and colleague's findings (2015), these students generally did not feel that posts about alcohol or drug use were inappropriate (5.1%, n=21), even though they interestingly were against posts that involved foul language (11.5%, n=47), a theme which also has not appeared in other research. Therefore, there is mixed messages. College students may think that they need to post references to drinking and risky sexual behavior for acceptance among their peers; however, these findings suggest that posts about sexuality work against that goal.

A third previously unexplored theme that these respondents identified involves political discourse. Posts that express political opinions or discuss politics were the third cited most inappropriate post (18.3%,n=75) in this sample. These findings contradict those of James and colleagues (2010) who argue that, if used properly, the Internet can help promote social responsibility. The offense taken for political posts and the observation that four of the top ten identified inappropriate posts

involve social issues suggest that, at least among this sample, college students do not see Facebook as that tool.

Last, unlike Roche and colleagues (2015) and Bazarova's (2012) findings that intimate or romantic drama posts were inappropriate, these students were relatively unoffended by posts sharing private issues in public (5.2%, n=22). In fact, sharing private issues in public was almost as acceptable as posts about drug / alcohol use (5.1%, n=21). This difference may be an issue of measurement, however, as clearly these three studies do not approach personal intimacy the same way.

III. CONCLUSION

Like with most social media sites, norms develop for on-line use of Facebook. While the motivations for Facebook use among young adults vary between voyeuristic observation (McAndrew and Jeong, 2012), gossip (McAndrew, 2008), impression management (James, et al., 2010, Mehdizadeh, 2010; Yang and Brown, 2013), and social interaction (Back et al, 2010; Buss, 2012; Yang and Brown, 2013), Facebook is undeniably a durable component of many young adult lives. Consequently, researchers are now looking at what young adults, such as college students, deem appropriate and inappropriate Facebook use (Roche, et al., 2015; Bazarova, 2012). However, the existing studies of Facebook inappropriateness involve college students' reactions to scenarios selected by the researcher. This study expands on existing research by asking college students, based on their own Facebook experiences and in their own words, what they perceive as inappropriate posts on Facebook.

This approach yielded some interesting results. Most interestingly, these college students claim that the discussion of social issues, sex / nudity, and political discussions are inappropriate on Facebook. These themes are previously unexplored in other research where the researchers, as opposed to respondents, identified themes (Bazarova, 2012; Roche et al., 2015). This is not to say that the themes covered by previous studies were absent when respondents subjectively identified their own issues. These findings did support those of Bazarova (2012) that

personal issues were inappropriate for Facebook; personal issues were just not near the top of the themes mentioned by these students. Furthermore, as found in other research, depictions of behaviors such as the consumption of alcohol or use of drugs was seen as relatively accepted on Facebook by this sample, as indicated by the relatively low percentage of respondents who identified this as inappropriate (Ehrenreich Underwood, and Ackerman, 2014; Goodman, et al., 2014; Peluchette and Karl, 2007)

Consequently, in accordance with social exchange theory, if college students do use Facebook as a means of self-expression and impression management to maximize their social capital via favorable opinions from peers (James, et al., 2010, Mehdizadeh, 2010; Yang and Brown, 2013), then it is important for them to understand what is making a negative, as opposed to positive, impression on their peers. Based on the findings from this study, college students who discuss social issues, present images of sexuality / nudity or discuss political issues will earn negative reactions from their peers and, therefore such behavior will hinder their achievement of social capital. Likewise, they are unlikely to promote social responsibility as well.

While this study suggests new, previously unexplored topics of inappropriateness on Facebook, it has its limitations. The most notable limitation is the poor response rate. While the study attempted to reach a population of students, the response rate was low and some groups (women and freshmen) were over-represented in the sample relative to the population of interest. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings may be suspect. Furthermore, this study focuses in American students. Examining the views of young adults from other geographical regions regarding Facebook inappropriateness may also be important since, as stated, Facebook users have geographically broad on-line social networks. Another limitation is also a possible direction for future research. While some research has suggested that college students generally ignore posts that they find to be inappropriate (Roche, et al., 2015), this topic is relatively new; and, as stated, no other research has noted that college students consider social issues, sex / nudity, and politics to be inappropriate for Facebook, so we

do not know how students react to these types of posts. Do they ignore them, comment on them, or delete the individuals making the posts? The limitation of this study is that it did not explore the consequences of these types of posts, however, that may be a fruitful direction for future research.

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