

## **FACEBOOK: PERCEPTIONS OF PURPOSE — LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF RETAILERS**

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### **Abstract**

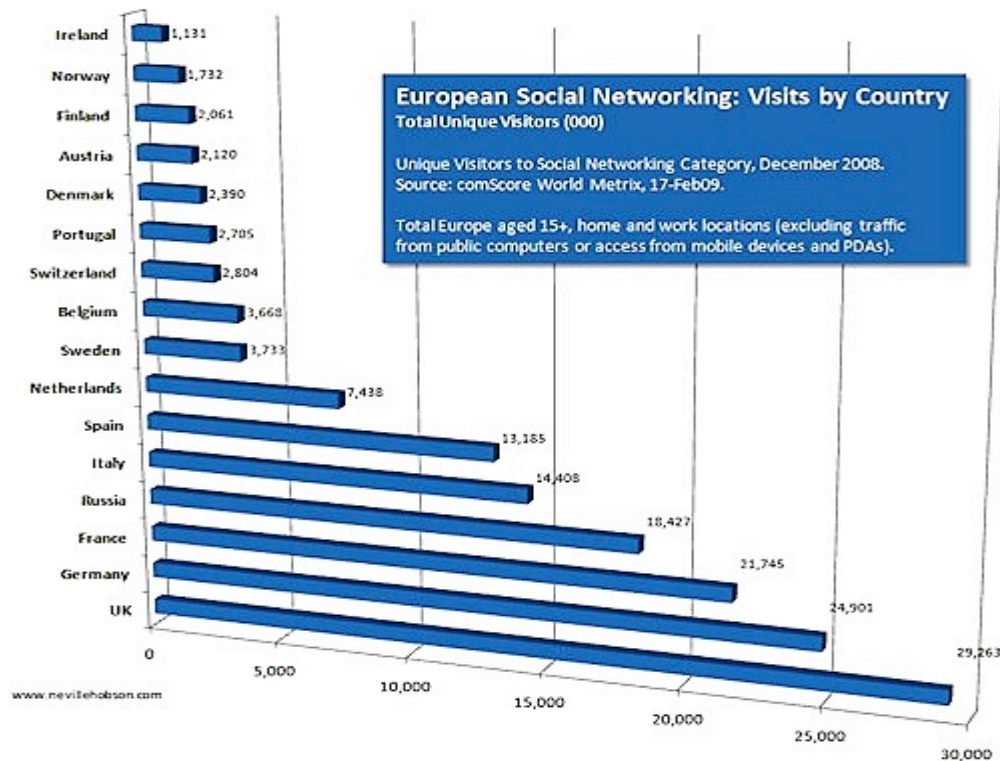
We propose to explore in this paper the idea that learners are segregating their activities and may resist the use of social media for formal learning purposes because they have a clear perception of the purpose of social media. It is not for selling and it is not for formal learning. Research which has been undertaken into the retail platform offered by Facebook (Facebook Storefronts) has shown considerable limits on the potential for the direct commercial use of this world-leading social networking site. This issue is compelling for those interested in e-learning, particularly from a Higher Education (HE) perspective, because what we are seeing here is a mirror image of the reluctance to engage in learning through social media. This poses a challenge to HE teachers who want to capture some of the energy and engagement found with social media and import this into their formal learning programmes.

### **Background Introduction**

“Social media” are applications that enable the creation of user-generated content, information which is created and exchanged between users of the internet. Some of the most commonly known examples of social media sites are blogs, social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook), video sharing (YouTube), social news (Reddit, Digg), and collaboration sites (Wikipedia). These social media sites are showing evidence of increasing participation world wide, with not only increasing numbers of users, but those users spending more time on these networks. We might see social networks such as Facebook as simply platforms for exchange where everyone with web access is enfranchised; or we might see these networks as massive commercial concerns which monetize public interaction through advertising and thus become involved in content provision to make money. Where the network also has rights over user generated content (often a default unless users change their settings to private), the content ownership sets up potential ethical issues for educational institutions who may wish to use such sites for learning and sharing purposes. Despite these worries, teachers are using social networks for learning and teaching, keen to tap into the enthusiasm and energy network users show online.

However teachers are clearly just one user category. Commercial enterprises are keen to use social networks too. According to Halligan and Dharmesh (2009) having a presence on a social networking site is becoming as important as having a website as it is a hugely effective way to reach consumers, tapping in to thousands of conversations taking place daily. Figure 1 below shows the unique visitors by country to social networking sites across Europe in 2008.

Figure 1: European Social Networking: Visits by Country



Source: comScore (2009)

While this figure (Hobson, 2009) shows that social networking is popular across Europe and, like e-commerce, is most popular in the UK, this demonstrates only a partial list of countries, giving a flavour of usage.

With consumers increasingly spending their time on social media sites, it could be argued that building a presence on these sites is one of the primary ways for businesses to adopt a consumer-oriented approach to the marketing mix and therefore differentiate their brand from others, and to incorporate relationship marketing into their strategies. Social media enables businesses to communicate with customers on a one-to-one basis and become involved in their conversations, rather than relying on brand recognition and loyalty. It enables businesses to listen to customers' opinions and ideas and therefore understand their wants and needs and tailor their products to fulfil these needs and by building a community around their brand, create lasting relationships with these customers. Research by Coon

(2010) identified that out of the 100 largest companies on the Fortune 500 list studied, 79% of them use Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or corporate blogs to communicate with customers and other stakeholders. Such results are confirmed by a McKinsey & Company Global survey of Web 2.0 usage by businesses (Bughin et al., 2009) based on surveys with 1,700 executives across the world. Businesses merging social media with e-commerce benefited from improved interaction with customers, resulting in customer satisfaction, brand loyalty and awareness and improved product innovation through idea sharing and feedback, thus deepening a company's pool of knowledge. In some cases, measurable increases in revenues were identified.

Increased business involvement on social media sites has led to a relatively new online phenomenon — social commerce. This can include ratings and reviews, recommendations and referrals, social shopping, user forums and communities, social media optimisation and social applications, and adverts. Social commerce is therefore *social e-commerce* as it provides a connected shopping experience when buying products online through applications, which allow consumers to receive recommendations from other consumers and businesses, share their favourite products with others, and shop simultaneously with friends.

## Facebook

Facebook started in 2004 as an exclusive subscription-only service for Harvard University students by Mark Zuckerberg. By 2007 there were a reported 21 million users (Ellison et al., 2007) and by 2011 there were a reported 500 million users according to Facebook's own statistics (Facebook, 2011). These are not all people in full-time education; Facebook's own statistics suggest that 61% are over 26, of whom 20% are over 45, although the largest single age group is still those between 18–25 with 29% of the users in this demographic..

Facebook is one of the most popular places online for developing personal networks — which is not to say that it is primarily used to find new friends, on the contrary, it is more often used to rediscover old connections, building an intriguing virtual sense of a relationship web over time. The application, like other social networks, encourages sharing of knowledge, ideas, friends, thoughts, favourite items of all kinds from leisure activities to places, and is an effective way to promote events from parties to conferences. Academic research into Facebook has been mainly concerned with privacy and digital identity issues (Mitrano, 2008) but there is an urgent need to explore such technologies in relation to education if teachers are not to be sidelined into a technological backwater:

If educators are to shape the future of education (and not have it shaped for them by external technical developments) it is crucial that we engage

with developments in digital technologies at the earliest stages. We need to understand what may be emerging, explore its implications for education, and understand how best we might harness these changes. Without this early engagement we risk, as always, being the Cinderella sector of the technology world — constantly receiving the hand-me-downs from the business, defence and leisure industries and then trying to repurpose them for educational goals. Without this early engagement, we also risk designing educational practices and approaches that will be rendered obsolete and anachronistic in the context of new human-technological capabilities. (Daanen & Facer, 2007)

In this paper we first look at Facebook's recent Storefronts initiative and gauge its popularity with Facebook users and then go on to look at how similar issues arise with educational uses of Facebook.

### **Facebook Storefronts**

A research project was undertaken by one of the authors to evaluate the commercial potential in Facebook becoming a retail platform with the recent creation of "Facebook Storefronts." These enable customers to make purchases from online retailers without navigating away from the social networking site. This research involved investigating the opinions of businesses and customers concerning the development of Facebook as a commercial platform.

Integrating the mechanics of online selling into its social media platform has been Facebook's most recent social commerce development, through the creation of Facebook Storefronts. The first Storefront application, developed by Payvment, allows business to create a retail store on their Facebook Fan Page, and consumers to buy products directly from the site. According to Christian Taylor, CEO of Payvment (businesswire.com, 2010),

Payvment is groundbreaking in that it instantly takes Facebook from a social network and marketing platform to a channel for direct selling. This is the first product that directly connects Facebook to a sale, delivering stronger, more tangible relationships between buyers and sellers. (www.businesswire.com, 2010)

Since then, according to Payvment, over 20,000 businesses and individuals have used the application, and over 500,000 Facebook users have shopped for products in stores using it. Payvment, the original storefront provider, is now joined by Alvenda, Wildfire and Amazon's Webstore. Proctor and Gamble is now in partnership with Amazon Webstore and having tested "Facebook Commerce" with its Max Factor UK storefront has now opened a Facebook store selling 29 of its top brands as one of its direct-to-consumer initiatives.

Sheryl Sandberg (Chief Operating Officer at Facebook at the time) reported on the site in 2010 the personal and social aims of Facebook and how the company felt they related to business advertising:

At Facebook, everything we do is about making the world more social and creating more personalized experiences. On Facebook, people do everything from remembering their friends' birthdays to reuniting with old classmates to even finding people willing to donate their organs to save their lives. We think making the world more personal and social is having a profound impact on the way we relate to the people, communities and institutions around us.

In a more connected world, advertisers are social too. This gives you the chance to connect to the companies and brands you like and learn more about their products and services. We believe that more personalized social advertising complements the ways that people use Facebook every day — to discover, share and connect with the people and the world around them. (Sandberg, 2010)

## **Research Study**

A small study was undertaken to explore the potential popularity of social commerce. An online survey was conducted with over 100 responses returned (92% response rate) in which online buying behaviour and attitudes to e-commerce such as that driven by Facebook Storefronts was investigated. Responses were explored further in a focus group interview. Respondents' age profile broadly mirrored the Facebook user profile, with the majority being in the 18–25 age group.

Of the respondents 97% had made a purchase online within the six months prior to the survey, with most shopping monthly. However, most preferred shopping in a store to shopping online, with the most common reason cited as the desire to inspect or test the product before purchase, the next most common being the inevitable wait for delivery. The most common pattern of shopping was for respondents to research online prior to visiting stores to make purchases (84% of respondents would read online product reviews), thus using the affordances of the web for the information gathering and comparing process, while making purchases in their preferred way with the immediacy and richer sensory experience available in a store.

The respondent group valued peer review over company promotion, so services such as Facebook Connect which allow individuals to “like” products or services promoted on the web may be tapping into effective drivers for consumers. Of the respondents 71% agreed that their relationship with businesses using social media was affected by this promotional activity, generally involving increases in trust or

loyalty to brand, increased purchase levels, and the opportunity to give feedback to the business. Additionally, interviews conducted with three businesses using social media suggested that engagement with customers was the primary motive:

... engagement is number one, you don't get that anywhere else. Social media allows you to engage and interact with consumers, giving them an experience with our brand that they will remember, and also that their friends will then see and the 12,000 other people following us will see. It is both personal and viral. (interviewee 1 global FMCG business)

However all three businesses interviewed saw the success of social commerce as demonstrated by customer engagement and two-way communication, not direct sales, which was the purpose of Facebook's Storefronts.

Social media is for sharing information not selling. It's about creating a community who are interested in your products, who want to actively engage with you. It should enable them to develop a relationship with you and that, in turn, will develop brand loyalty and brand advocates. It is to hear people's views and change perceptions, not drive sales. (Interview 2 global business, durable goods).

For the survey respondents the prospects for Storefronts were limited. They felt that Storefronts would be less secure for shopping than the businesses' own websites and that Storefronts would only offer a limited range of goods or services. While they were happy to share information on products via Facebook, they saw the application as primarily a communication mechanism rather than one for commercial transactions.

The conclusions of this study suggested that trying to mix commerce with social sharing and connecting was not an ideal strategy. In particular, this conclusion seemed to be based for both individual users of Facebook and for businesses on their perceptions of the purpose of Facebook as a social network.

## **Implications for Education**

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is investing \$2 million in Inigral — a company trying to build virtual college communities by creating school-based Facebook sites — in an effort to improve student retention at US colleges from acceptance at the school onwards (Abramson, 2011). But just because it is there, will students use it? Much more research is required as it clearly works for those students interested in the application, but doesn't track those who are not. A similar initiative has been tried by Gloucestershire College in the UK who, since 2009, have offered Facebook pages for courses in order to encourage students to “bond with each other, work together as a team and maintain their connection with staff” (Coughlan, 2009). A footnote to the Inigral story relates to the rest of

this paper: in 2008, Inigral had closed its Facebook “Courses” application which had allowed students to see other class members, discuss with them, and receive notification of assignments. According to Paary and Young (2010) the Inigral Chief Executive, Michael Staton, said “We found that Facebook was not a popular place to engage with course content.”

The e-learning research community in HE is hearing increasingly of case studies in which academics look at the energy and dynamism of student Facebook activity and endeavour to import it into their courses or vice versa, to take their courses, or some aspect of their formal study activity into Facebook. When compared with the often staid and static environments offered by institutional Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), this is hardly surprising. As university teachers try to engage students, the business model of social commerce seems to offer great opportunities — a mix of two-way communication, feedback and knowledge sharing seems like a perfect environment for undergraduate and postgraduate social construction of knowledge. While cases of course content exported to Facebook are still unusual, and probably problematic in view of the commercial enterprise which is Facebook which could withdraw services at any time, there are many cases of teachers who encourage students to set up Facebook private groups for ease of communication, for example around group projects, (see for example Oradini & Saunders, 2008).

A survey conducted for Pearson Education, the academic publisher, in 2010 questioned the value which academics sought in social media (Tinti-Kane et al., 2010). Most of the respondents were teaching undergraduates ( $n = 939$ ). Over 80% had a social network account, of which Facebook was by far the most popular. Singling out Facebook matters, since Coon’s study (2010) suggested that findings should not be generalised across different social networks but differentiated by context and application. In the Pearson survey, respondents used Facebook both for communicating with peers/colleagues and with students, but while they were convinced of its value for the former, they were evenly divided on the value of Facebook for communicating with students. The value which was identified by teachers was that of a “push” medium (rather than a static site or blog which waits for people to visit), and naturally the degree of familiarity and comfort which students had with Facebook. This certainly facilitates student/student communication, but what happens when teachers have their own Facebook presence and aim to communicate with students?

An American study which looked at this issue found that there were “possible negative associations between teacher use of Facebook and teacher credibility” (Mazer et al., 2007). A further study in Canada (Hewitt & Forte, 2006) had also looked into student perceptions of faculty who had a Facebook presence and similarly found that, while this was acceptable to most students, it was acceptable only for social and interpersonal communication or better understanding of teachers by students rather than for educational purposes. The study found that

one third of students did not believe that faculty should be present on Facebook at all as indicated in the four representative quotes below:

- Facebook is a more social network.
- It's a social network for students.
- They have no need to network with students for social purposes. Faculty & students should remain separate when it comes to social functions.
- . . . if they "poke" me, I might find it strange.  
(Hewitt & Forte, 2006, p. 1).

The point about students' social use of Facebook is made even more strongly by an article in *E-marketer* (E-Marketer.com, 2008) which describes the application as a favourite place for college students for "socializing and goofing off."

Jane Hart of the Centre for Learning and Performance Technologies, in her *Social Learning Handbook*, discusses the top down and bottom up use of social learning (Hart, 2011). She picks up a theme common among learning and development professionals in the workplace which suggests that a "command and control" approach to driving social learning simply will not work. Instead, she suggests that supporting learners in the workplace who are already learning and working collaboratively will work better partly because those people already have their own favourite social networking software and will resent being told to use something different, and partly because those who are not using social networking are unlikely to start doing so just because their employer makes software available. This leads us to the conclusion that there are several risks associated with teachers' use of Facebook for educational purposes.

## Concluding Thoughts

The arguments and evidence given above would suggest that Facebook is a tremendous influence on many learners in HE and cannot be ignored. However, the attempts to colonize Facebook with educational content and activity by universities is likely to be about as successful as Facebook Storefronts. Both initiatives seem to relate to perceptions of the purpose and meaning of Facebook for its users. If Facebook is a place to connect and share, not to sell, then neither is it a place to undertake formal learning or even to negotiate a learning relationship with faculty. While teachers can control the digital identity which they create on Facebook, and they may find it useful for offering a personal profile attractive to students who want to get to know what makes a teacher tick, the evidence of this brief study and literature review would suggest that the strong perception of Facebook as a social activity works against its use in formal learning.

This may be a transitional result, as new applications and initiatives are pursued by Facebook and organisations like Inigral, we could find that students become



accustomed to finding their professors mixed in with their intimate circle online. However the authors would favour the view put forward by Marko Radovan in his recent review of theories of motivational behaviour (Radovan, 2010), where he proposes that students' motivation to learn has a clear social dimension, but that the cultural situatedness of the learning process, particularly in relation to HE learning, demands a context where perceptions of purpose and meaning are clearly related to learning — unlike the current manifestation of Facebook.

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