The Reluctance to be on a Facebook Sabbatical

How Facebook Promotes Students’ Academic Life

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Abstract: Several studies indicate negative effects of Facebook usage on academic performance. This article argues that there is more to the connection between students’ Facebook usage and their academic performance. Three independent studies were carried out: one study examined the effects of a Facebook sabbatical on students; two further studies explored the Facebook usage behaviour of students who felt that a sabbatical would affect them adversely. The results indicate that Facebook plays a more central role in student’s lives than that of a mere platform for procrastination. It is a place that combines education and work with a high degree of social interaction.

1. Introduction

Facebook is a perpetual partner in most students’ life. Yet several studies indicate negative effects of Facebook usage on academic performance (Fried 2008; Kirchner/Karpinski 2010; Junco 2012; Rosen/Carrier/Cheever 2013). In particular, Kirchner/Karpinski (2010) argue that there is a connection between Facebook usage and lower grades, indicating that the more intensively students use Facebook, the lower grades they receive. Kirchner/Karpinski (2010) base their hypothesis on survey data that compares students’ grade point average with time spent on the Internet and time spent on social media sites, in particular on Facebook. This article argues that there is more to the connection between Facebook usage and academic performance than the negative relation between grades and usage time that is empathized today.

By exploring in which contexts Facebook usage takes place, this study provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between Facebook usage and students’ academic performance. It investigates the multitude of ways students use Facebook as well as how this usage affects academic performance — both negatively and positively. The term “context” in this article follows Rieh’s understanding as “information environ-
ments within which information behaviours take place” (Rieh 2004:744).

Three independent studies were carried out: first a pre- and post-survey with a group of students who agreed to take part in a one week Facebook sabbatical; a second survey with a group of students who felt that a sabbatical would affect them negatively and thus declined to participate. In a third study, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted to explore in greater depths the students’ motivations and their reasoning behind their refusing of a sabbatical. Data interpretation is based on the Use & Gratification theory (Whiting/Williams 2012), which provides a framework to elaborate how and why students use Facebook, and on Oldenburg’s (1999) and Soukup’s (2006) theory of third places.

2. Background

2.1 Facebook Use in Academia

Our society is being “mediatized”, meaning that many of our daily activities involve media, such as watching the news or shopping online. Social media, such as Facebook, mediates our communication; they alter the way in which we interact with each other (Hjarvard 2013:17). Facebook was launched in 2004 to help residential college and university students recognize fellow students in other residential halls. Despite the fact that Facebook has opened up geographically and to a non-restrictive user group, university students are still a primary user group. Today, 94% of all Danish students are active on Facebook and thus the use of the site has become normative (YouGov 2013). People expect their fellow students to have an active profile, and this heightens the site’s popularity so that it becomes a natural communication channel for students, who can be sure that people read their messages, updates or invitations.

Kirchner/Karpinski (2010) base their hypothesis of a negative relationship between Facebook usage and academic performance on multitasking research. They argue that “human beings are not really capable of multitasking (…) [they] can only multitask that which is automated, and where thinking does not play a role” (Kirchner/Karpinski 2010:1238). They postulate that the ability to switch between different digital media among students, in conjunction with the growing access to the tools given to them by the Internet and thereby also the capabilities and distractions on Facebook, has caused an incongruent curiosity. This curiosity, in turn, has caused the students to lose their concentration in relation to their academic performances. On this basis they conclude that Facebook usage is linked to bad grades.

However, this explanation might be too simplistic. Madge et al. (2009:143) argue that students’ increased but highly faceted use of Facebook is a result of the new demands that modern university life has on university students. One of the results they put forward is that 38% of British university students only create a Facebook profile right before or during the first part of their studies. The authors conclude that Facebook is an important formative factor in the social relations between the students at the university. In their opinion Facebook is important to both the social and study related aspects of student life and not just a form of procrastination from their education, such as Kirchner/Karpinski (2010) postulate.

2.2 Use & Gratification Theory

The Use & Gratification (U&G) theory derives from communication science and assists in getting a better understanding of students’ use of Facebook, and of the underlying motivations behind this use. Although the theory was developed before the digital revolution, it is still relevant because of the way the audience-centered approach is characterized and linked to the understanding of mass media. The U&G theory attempts to give an understanding of how individuals use communication, among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals. The theory focuses on “the social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations of the mass media or other sources, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in need gratifications and other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones” (Katz/Blumler/Gurevitch 1974:510).

Katz/Blumler/Gurevitch (1974:511) argue that the theory contains two different types of gratification: those that are obtained and those that are sought for. All gratifications are sought for, but the authors question if all the gratifications are obtained. Moreover they divide the gratifications that can be obtained into five categories: 1) be informed and educated, 2) identify with characters of the situation in the media environment, 3) simple entertainment, 4) enhance social interaction and 5) escape from the stresses of daily life.

In the present context this means that the usage of Facebook is contingent on the degree to which the person using it actually obtains the desired gratification. This also means that if a person’s gratification is not achieved on Facebook, dissatisfaction will intensify and the person will
either try to achieve the desired gratification elsewhere or choose to use Facebook anyway, because it provides other gratifications that are just as essential. If the gratification falls short of or surpasses the gratification sought, this will affect the future usage of Facebook either negatively or positively. Thus the consumption habits of the user become predictable (Quan-Haase/Young 2010:352).

Over the years, with major changes happening within the digital mediatization, researchers have interpreted the theory to become more appropriate for the modern world. One prominent interpretation comes from Quan-Haase/Young (2010), who redefine the original five gratifications into six. A later and more recent interpretation of the theory derives from Whiting/Williams (2012). They argue that the original five gratifications should be extended into ten gratifications and reason it by the Internet’s beneficial capabilities. The new ten gratifications are: 1) social interaction, 2) information seeking, 3) pass time, 4) entertainment, 5) relaxation, 6) expression of opinions, 7) communicatory utility, 8) convenience utility, 9) information sharing and 10) surveillance and knowledge about others. These gratifications will be used for data analysis below.

2.3 Facebook as a Third Place

Looking at Whiting/Williams’ (2012) gratifications is one way to understand why people use Facebook. This study examines if in addition to obtaining gratifications there might be an even stronger element, which motivates students’ Facebook usage. Oldenburg (1999) coined the term “third place" to describe the public space used for informal social interaction that takes place outside the home and work. He uses English pubs and French cafés as examples of such places and lists the following characteristics, which a third place should provide: 1) neutral ground, 2) leveler, 3) conversation is the main activity, 4) accessible, 5) home away from home, 6) habit by “regulars” and 7) playful mood.

The main activity that takes place in a third place is conversation, and everyone is able to participate in this conversation because of leveling. There is a casual, informal atmosphere where one feels like being home, away from home. Places, which are referred to as third places, do not meet Oldenburg’s (1999) characteristics by themselves; it is the people that gather at such a place that create the successful third place: “Third places that render the best and fullest service are those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there (…). Where they exist, such places attest to the bonds between people” (Oldenburg 1999:32).

Soukup (2006) examines whether the term can be used in an online setting and uses “virtual third place” as the parallel term. Where Oldenburg focuses on the local, community oriented aspect of third places, Soukup argues that most of the other characteristics that define a third place can be fulfilled online and states three interrelated conditions that are necessary in establishing virtual third places: localization, access and presence.

According to Soukup “localization involves explicitly situating the interaction within an existing geographic location” (2006:432), referring to local community websites as examples. Participants are required to make localization meaningful, and for this reason access plays an important role in a virtual third place. The place should be easy to access and the participants should be those constructing the third place, as originally described by Oldenburg (1999). Moreover the participants should have a feeling of belonging and of being home at the place, even though it is away from home.

When Soukup (2006) wrote his article, social media was in its early days, and did not have the form we know today. He analyzed computer-mediated communication such as chat rooms and multiplayer real-time virtual worlds, but his conditions are still relevant when analyzing whether Facebook can be seen as a third place. Facebook is in a way an extension of the media, which Soukup (2006) investigated, since it involves, among others, a chat function and constitutes a place where several people can meet.

Facebook fulfills most of Oldenburg’s (1999) and Soukup’s (2006) aforementioned characteristics. The site is free to use, it is easy to access and is frequented by many university students. Because users mostly connect with others that they know in real life, it involves a lot of regulars. Users are also able to connect with strangers when joining different groups that are topic related, but for many of these groups it is most likely that they already know some of the other members (Chai 2010).

Beyond meeting gratifications, Facebook might provide students with a feeling of being present. The assumption is that students feel in contact with peers even though they are not physically present. In this sense, Facebook is not only used for exchanging social pleasantries (which lead to procrastination), but also for handling students’ academic life. Indeed, the possibility of meeting online in a virtual third place might promote academic life, because it offers a supplementary place for learning.
3. Methodology

This research was carried out as three individual studies. All participants were recruited by a posting in the informal Facebook group belonging to students of Library and Information Science at the University of Copenhagen. The studies took place during April and the beginning of May 2013. All three studies focus on the question of how a one-week Facebook sabbatical would affect students’ behavior. Since a larger number of students refused to participate in the study, declaring that they would not be able to do without Facebook for a week, two of the three studies tried to uncover the motivation behind the refusal.

3.1 Study 1

Study 1 investigated how it would affect students to stay away from Facebook for a week. Students’ Facebook usage and experiences of a one-week Facebook sabbatical were recorded through two questionnaires: one before they started the Facebook sabbatical and one afterwards. The aim of the study was to see how it affects students to be on a Facebook sabbatical for a week and to put this in contrast to those students who were reluctant to participate in a sabbatical. The sabbatical took place at the end of April and the beginning of May. Participants were free to choose which seven consecutive days suited them best within a three-week period. The experiment took place at this time of the year, because it matched the exam period at the university.

The first questionnaire for the sabbatical group focused on how respondents use Facebook, how they believe Facebook affects their studying habits, whether they use other social media and their expectations of how the lack of Facebook will influence the time spent on studying, on paid work and leisure activities.

The second questionnaire investigated how much time respondents had spent on studying, employment and leisure activities compared with their prior expectations, how the lack of Facebook had affected their study habits and whether they had procrastinated or used other social media more than usually. They were also given the option to offer their own comments about the experience.

All six participants were females. One participant was a bachelor student and five were master students. Four students were from the University of Copenhagen and two came from other countries, but were at the University of Copenhagen as international students. The average age of the participants was 25.2 years, ranging from 22 to 31. In order to be able to analyze the answers of the two questionnaires, the answers could not be anonymous, but the respondents were given the option to use an alias if they did not want to betray their identity by stating their name.

3.2 Study 2

When asked to participate in Study 1, many students declared that they were unable to participate in a Facebook sabbatical. Study 2 used an online survey, which collected data for a better understanding about why students could not be without Facebook for a week. 26 students took the survey. 20 of these were bachelors and six were master students. 16 females and 10 males answered the questionnaire. The average age was 25.7 years, ranging between 20 and 35 years.

3.3 Study 3

The finding that many students were unwilling to participate in a sabbatical and their reasons stated in Study 2 made us want to investigate their obstacles even further. The aim of Study 3 was to use the results of Study 2 to explore further why students were unwilling to take part in a Facebook sabbatical and if the fact that Facebook can be seen as a virtual third place fosters that. Eight qualitative interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Six bachelor students and two master students from the University of Copenhagen attended. They were three male and five female students, aged between 23 and 37 years. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.

4. Limitations

This study examines a relatively small sample of students from one university and in many respects can be seen as a pilot study. However, all three studies together result in a larger pool of participants, where the three individual studies validate similar findings. It is assumed that country of residence and the university that the participants attended is of little or no importance to the overall findings. Also, bachelor and master students have been treated equally. These factors might have an impact on Facebook usage, which need to be addressed in future studies. A factor that this study did not take into account is the exam period from April to May. Further research might be conducted to see if the Facebook usage of students were influenced by the timing of the study.

Social media is under constant change, which influences the way Facebook and other social
media are used. The findings reflect the tools Facebook had to offer at the time when the study took place; the characteristics of these tools might change in the future, which might affect how Facebook is used for interaction and communication.

5. Results

Facebook is caught in a negative discourse, in which it is made responsible for students’ low academic performances. The U&G theory allows researchers to question whether this relationship is as one-dimensional as it is frequently described. In the following presentation of results, this study compares students’ purposes and motivations for using Facebook with gratifications sought for and the ones that are obtained. The analysis will clarify the purposes of Facebook use, of which some are less salient than others. This outcome is centred on the results from the interviews (Study 3) and the survey (Study 2).

5.1 Gratifications Pass Time, Relaxation and Entertainment

For many students checking regularly in on Facebook “is as natural as breathing” (male, bachelor student), a form of natural multi-tasking as described in Kirchner/Karpinski (2010:1238) in regards to digital media, and particularly in regard to Facebook. The gratifications of simply passing time, of relaxation or the entertainments students gain by using Facebook have led to the negative image of Facebook as a kind of grade killer. And these gratifications are sought, as the results show.

Students in Study 2 were asked how they log on to Facebook. Figure 1 shows that a large number of students are constantly on Facebook and thus distractions are pre-programmed. The findings suggest that students check Facebook in small breaks during their day, even while attending classes or at work. Figure 2 shows how many hours per day students are on Facebook, with the majority being there between 1-2 hours. This finding combined with the fact that students are constantly online suggests an active switching behaviour where students make frequent but brief visits to Facebook.

All participants in the three studies acknowledge that Facebook sometimes functions as a means to procrastination. None saw this as a particularly good or bad thing, because the use of Facebook was so varied. The fact that students use a lot of time on Facebook does, however, mean that most of them see Facebook as the place where everyone hangs out, as a third place.

5.2 Gratification Convenience Utility

A second gratification obtained is the gratification of convenience. Madge et al. (2009:152) emphasize the attractiveness of Facebook and argue that Facebook’s potential and utility lies in its reflective qualities and the easy interaction alongside the low response time and often instant feedback from other students. This study can support that claim by showing that the user friendliness and the constant availability was an important reason for many students to choose Facebook for a wide variety of purposes.
5.3 Gratification Surveillance and Knowledge about Others

The increased use of Facebook while attending a university course is also connected to the way in which students use Facebook. Students create routines where they either have Facebook open in a browser window behind their other primary windows, or simply check the website or mobile app frequently throughout the day. One student stated that she uses Facebook to follow up on her three teenage siblings and her family abroad: “You can follow people from the side line. And this is also the case with friends that live right across the street from you” (female, master student). The gratification of surveillance this female student receives from knowing what is going on in her peer group leads to an even more intense use of Facebook as she routinely checks Facebook for new updates. A male bachelor student expresses the gratification of surveillance in even stronger terms. He states that “there are actually didactic tools in Facebook, in the sense that you can actually see whether your messages have been received and read, which means that you have a social contract that when it has been seen it will also be answered” (male, bachelor student).

5.4 Gratification Social Interaction

A key gratification in understanding students’ use of Facebook is the gratification of social interaction. As Quan-Haase/Young (2010:352) argue, Facebook is not a place to find new friends, but primarily a tool to maintain and strengthen existing offline relationships by gratifying the needs of peers and heightening one’s own status in their eyes. Madge et al. (2009:144) consider Facebook to be a central management tool for keeping track of social relations, both with new friends and acquaintances at the university, but also to keep in touch with old friends. One student in Study 3 states that being without that gratification is like being in exile. Another interviewee sees Facebook as “an alternative to the physical socializing” (female, master student) among her friends and acquaintances. Students discussed whether the gratification of social interaction through Facebook has a stronger impact depending on where you are. One of the interviewees states that if you live in Copenhagen you have to stay connected, because of all that is going on there, while, in her opinion, Facebook becomes less important when you are in the countryside.

The event function was also put forward as an important tool. Study 2 reveals that 77.4% of participants use either the event or the calendar function “frequently” or “a lot” divided randomly between the students’ personal as well as their study related activities – also because these activities can be exported to smartphone calendar systems. This shows the importance of the social interaction gratification as the students fear that they might not get an invitation to an event – a possibility caused by not being on Facebook. This, on the other hand, means that students who do not have a Facebook profile and do not use it regularly might feel that they are “out of it” because they would not be able to follow the discussions that are carried out and the activities that are planned on the site.

![Figure 3. How is your time on Facebook used?](image)

Another result from Study 2 – illustrated in Figure 3 – supports the theory that social media represents an increasingly used, important and influential tool when students are communicating and interacting on a daily basis on campus. Figure 3 shows the variety of uses, with a large number of students who use Facebook frequently for educational purposes. The gratification of social interaction is confirmed with 66.7% using Facebook “a lot” for social purposes.

Students’ interview answers from Study 3 validate the figures from Study 2 about the demands that university and campus life today has on university students that Madge et al. (2009: 143) formulate. As one student from Study 3 expresses it: “I only used [Facebook] very sporadically before. I did not have that… I did not have the need for the educational aspect, but simply used it as a social platform” (male, bachelor stu-
Several participants in the interviews comment that their use of Facebook has switched to a more study oriented focus after starting at university. One participant pointed out that Facebook was also very important for her during the introductory phase of her education, because it had made it easier for her to socialize with fellow students.

76.6% of the participants in Study 2 state that they use Facebook in connection with their student jobs. Some of the students even use Facebook as a tool to plan their employment working hours. However, all of the students use Facebook to stay in touch with friends and family. These may be people they meet face to face every day or people they see more rarely, but whose doings they want to follow.

5.5 Gratifications Information Seeking, Information Sharing and Expression of Opinions

Participants of the studies seek the gratifications of seeking and sharing information, as well as expressing opinions in particular for academically related purposes between themselves. A majority of students in the interviews confirmed that being kept up-to-date was an important reason why Facebook had become a habit for them.

Madge et al. (2009:143) discovered that the majority of students did not use Facebook to communicate with university staff or for formal teaching purposes. Several of the participants in Study 3 confirmed this finding. They use the university group on Facebook to post casual questions regarding their courses. “It is a lot easier to use the Facebook-group to the frivolous questions about the study life. Compared to when you have a serious question, then you use the official university sites” (female, master student). This finding leaves doubt about the success of moving the classroom to Facebook as researchers suggest (e.g. Munoz/Towner 2009 or Peck 2012).

5.6 Gratification Communicatory Utility

The unified platform for different levels of communication was central for students’ choice to use Facebook as their primary communication platform. In the mediatized society in which we live today, the way Facebook facilitates the creation of and the access to various closed groups is highlighted by several of the interviewed students as a positive attribute: “I also use [Facebook] in different contexts where I need to be able to communicate with different stakeholders for instance in connection with any voluntary work or in connection with study, in the context of work, etc… the various types of small closed societies. There are different places on Facebook, so you can make a common platform for communication” (female, master student). Some of the interviewees state that they use Facebook to socialize and that conversation plays a central role in their Facebook usage: “I do feel unconnected, when unable to use the chat-function” (female, bachelor student).

Facebook is described by several of the interviewees as a natural extension of face-to-face conversation. One of the participants said that if you can see that people are online then you converse rather than text. Participants in the survey add that the conversation on Facebook is more informal compared to conversations via phone, texting and in particular e-mails. A male interviewee eloquently describes the use of Facebook, as opposed to other communication tools that students have – phone, texting, study intranet, e-mail – as sitting at the same table at a party as opposed to sitting at two different tables; one has already created a link between the people at ones’ own table, as opposed to if a person needs to make the conscious choice of moving to another table to start a conversation with a person at that table. In the latter case, one has to actively choose to create the link. Thus he succinctly describes the contrast that several other interviewees expressed. Or in other words: it is easier to make contact with fellow students through Facebook than through other communication tools.

Two of the interviewees, however, do not see communication via Facebook in purely positive terms, because they think the way students interact through media has resulted in the disappearance of some of the closeness that comes from having a conversation face to face. Facebook has become a “substitute for conversation” (female, bachelor student). Another female interviewee describes the influence of the communication form on Facebook by saying that it has affected existing friendships negatively. Since friends upload everything they would like to share with others on their wall, these friends remove the basis for conversation beyond Facebook, as the partners already know most of what happens in her friends’ lives. For this reason she thinks that one needs to be sceptical about bringing existing friendships to Facebook. However, she expresses a very positive attitude toward bringing incipient friendships to Facebook, as this may contribute to the growth of the friendship in the real world.

Participants from the non-sabbatical studies (the survey and the interviews) declared that for them it was almost impossible to take a weeklong sabbatical from Facebook, because nearly all of them consider Facebook to be the place where most social and study related activities and relations are collected and organised (see Figure 4).
Many respondents even compare being without Facebook to being without their cell phone, calendar or worse: “If you don’t have access to Facebook, then it is like living in the Stone Age. Because you no longer have people’s phone numbers... You are no longer used to use the phone without Facebook, as the primary communication tool” (male, bachelor student).

The results from Studies 2 and 3 show that students obtain multiple gratifications from using Facebook. The more gratifications that are obtained, the less Facebook can be seen as a platform mainly for procrastination. Students’ usage of Facebook has to be seen in a more holistic perspective and in the light of the given context in which it is used.

5.7 Being on a Facebook Sabbatical

The last study to be presented here is the study that examined the effects of a one-week Facebook sabbatical. This group of six students was very similar to those who participated in the other studies; they have the same patterns of Facebook usage, meaning they use it frequently and mostly for social and educational purposes.

Facebook has become an integrated part of many students’ lives and therefore it can be difficult to acknowledge how the usage affects other parts of life, such as studying habits. Before the sabbatical, two participants thought that their Facebook usage affects their studying habits negatively, whereas three were unsure how or if it affects their studying habits. None clearly rejected any link to a negative effect. One participant was unsure if she was using Facebook as a means of procrastination while five acknowledged it.

With one week off Facebook ahead, three participants stated they expected to use more time on their assignments, two expected to use equal time and one was not sure. Afterwards two participants stated they had used the expected amount of time on their studies and three that they had spent more time than expected. Along with this, four participants felt that the lack of Facebook had a positive impact on their studies. Two participants had the feeling that they procrastinated more than if they had access to Facebook, while three did not think there was any difference.

All participants with student jobs expected to use the same amount of time on their job as usual. The lack of Facebook did not affect the time used on employment activities, probably because most student jobs are restricted to a certain number of weekly hours.

Four participants expected to use an equal amount of time on their leisure activities, while one expected to use less and one expected to use more time on these. Half of the participants ended up using more time on leisure activities than expected. This indicates that if one stays off Facebook it releases time for other activities, and it can thereby be argued that some people tend to forget they are interacting with people through a virtual setting.

When asked if they felt isolated during the sabbatical, one participant answered “yes, positively”, two answered “yes, negatively” and three stated they didn’t feel isolated. The positive isolation was in regard of participants feeling less available; as one stated: “If people really wanted to contact me, they had to think about another way” (female, master student).

During their sabbatical, participants of Study 1 experienced that they did not really miss out on anything important on Facebook. Some of them actually felt a kind of relief from not checking Facebook regularly, and after the sabbatical several of the participants considered using Facebook less. One describes that she felt a bit isolated when others were talking about events and other stuff on Facebook, and she thinks the feeling would be even stronger if she chose to stay off Facebook for good.

However, two of the participants used Facebook during the sabbatical: one had to in order to get hold of an important document for her course and did not do anything else on Facebook except getting hold of the document; the other one used a different chat programme that has the Facebook-chat integrated, so she was able to chat with her Facebook friends anyway.

For most participants, staying away for one week did not cause a strong sense of isolation.

However, since students see Facebook as their primary communication tool and as a place...
to receive essential information, a longer sabbatical might have resulted in a feeling of isolation: “Normally I’m active in three [Facebook] groups and I have felt isolated from these; especially because important information is shared in these groups” (female, master student). If people were asked to stay away from their real life third place, like their local pub, people would probably experience the same. For a smaller amount of time, most people would not get the feeling of missing out on things, but in the longer run they would start feeling isolated and left out: “People have referred to events and the like on Facebook, which I didn’t have access to, but it didn’t make me feel really isolated. However, it could be the result in the long run. I really believe I would miss out on things (and feel socially cut off) if I wasn’t present on Facebook for several months” (female, master student).

In summary, participants had a positive experience staying off Facebook, and it did not make them feel isolated during the week. The study shows that students (maybe) spend too much time on Facebook and give it a greater importance than it actually deserves. Participants generally did not feel like they missed out on things during the experiment and many spent more time on their studies, which might have a positive effect on their grades, if it became a habit not to use Facebook as much as before.

5.8 Facebook as a Third Place

In this last part of the results, the students’ use of Facebook will be examined in relation to Oldenburg’s (1999) theory of the third place. According to Oldenburg (1999) the energy of the third place lies in the regular visit to the place, because you know you will meet with regulars and it is a place where you feel that you belong – it is essentially a home away from home. The place in itself, whether physical or virtual, is not so important; it is the people who gather there that gives it an important role in people’s lives. Facebook constitutes neutral ground, because it is located away from physical surroundings. One is able to dress as one pleases, as well as come and go as desired, simply by logging on and off. As one interviewee puts it: “There is something easy about being able to… be at home wearing sweat pants and talking to these people without actually having to get out of the door and get dressed first. It’s also easier leaving a conversation by just saying goodbye for now” (male, bachelor student). This assessment corresponds with the characteristic of a third place as a home away from home, along with the gratification of pass time functioning as a place to get away from responsibilities and pressures. Three of the interviewees describe Facebook as a social place, like the student’s informal room at the university, where they are able to relax and make small talk. Five of the interviewees pointed out the benefit of being able just to leave a conversation if one did not want to continue it.

One of the characteristics of a third place is that conversation should be a main activity. On Facebook, it is easy to pick a conversation with somebody through the chat function. In this way, students can easily contact fellow students. The conversation is often characterized by being informal and casual, regardless of whether the topic is related to their education (i.e. their specific assignments) or something else. On Facebook, people are able to create groups for their real life communities and to find groups for different locations. A community can be described as people with the same interests located in the same area, meaning students attending the same university can also be characterized as a community. In such a Facebook group all participants are able to enter the conversation on an equal basis, which meets the characteristic of a third place as a leveler. At the same time this condition correlates with Soukup’s (2006) requirement of the virtual third place being localized, because Facebook groups can be seen as a clearly defined location belonging to the participants of a certain social context, such as students of the same course or university. Some of the interviewees actually call Facebook a digital social space: a place where one can be updated on what is going on in other people’s lives. Facebook is used for developing and maintaining friendships through casual communication.

In Facebook groups, which participants use for study purposes, the topic of conversation will mostly relate to course work and other issues that are important to the members of the group. It can be argued that Facebook is a place for work, but that is only part of what takes place on Facebook; people at the local tavern will presumably also be talking about their jobs, but in a different way than if they actually were at work. The same applies for students. A student might ask for clarification about something related to a course, but the conversation might take a different direction afterwards.

Results from all three studies support the assumption that Facebook can be seen as a third place. Students are sure they will miss out on social events taking place in real life, because they believe they will miss out on information when not on Facebook. Moreover they are afraid to be cut off socially. Some of the respondents only have contact with some of their friends through Facebook, and will therefore be cut off from these connections if not on Facebook.
6. Conclusion

This article argues that Facebook is a vital part of student’s life in a mediatized society and functions as a virtual third place. Kirchner/Karpinski’s (2010:1244) conclusion that the use of Facebook results in inferior academic performance is flawed because of the important role Facebook plays in academic life and especially in the communication between students.

This study offers a deeper understanding about how student’s academic life is linked to Facebook. Students tend to believe they can hardly do without Facebook, because it is a place where one is kept updated on what is happening at the university. The possibility of creating groups on Facebook for academic purposes is widely used among participants. Facebook can be regarded as a third place, where peers can meet on neutral ground to socialize in an informal way. Facebook has become an integral part of both academic and social life at university, and the idea of staying off of it creates an apprehension that students will miss out on key information.

Asking students to take part in a Facebook sabbatical has shown that this apprehension is partly true. For a short duration participants did not feel that they missed out on much, but they worried it might be the case if they abandoned Facebook for a longer period of time. The short sabbatical had a positive influence on some participants because they felt like they spent less time on unnecessary things like checking other people’s updates. On the other hand, participants fear that a longer sabbatical would exclude them from essential information and communications. The results indicate that Facebook plays a more central role in student’s life than just being a platform for procrastination. It is a place that combines education and work with a high degree of social interaction.
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