

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Facebook and learning: students' perspective on a course

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ABSTRACT

Touted as a “technological powerhouse with unprecedented influence across modern life, both public and private” (Kirkpatrick, ²⁰¹⁰, p. ¹⁵), Facebook has not only become a big part in the social lives of college students (Junco, ²⁰¹¹), but also in corporations (Shih, ²⁰¹¹) and academic institutions (Wankel, ²⁰¹⁰). However, what does it really mean to students who are on the receiving end of the use of social media for learning? Do the students learn from these Facebook interactions? Or are they merely a fad and a social entertainment tool? What do the students really get out of these social media tools when evaluated against the learning and teaching goals of education? This paper looks at the relationship between learning and social media. It begins with the research question on the Singaporean undergraduates' social networking profile and how they compare with the rest of the world. Two research questions were asked: How do they rate their learning experience when using the Facebook component of their Business Communication course and why do students use Facebook for learning. A total of ⁴⁸ students were surveyed for this purpose. The results include the social networking profiling of the students, their ratings, feedback and reasons on the use of Facebook in their course. Other key issues such as its ease of use, its use as a communication tool and its social factor together with the “push” notion of learning are discussed. This includes discussion on some concerns about its use.

INTRODUCTION

As a social phenomenon, Facebook has not only taken over as the social networking site of choice for young adults (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr, ²⁰¹⁰), it has also attracted considerable adoption by corporations (Shih, ²⁰¹¹) and academic institutions (Wankel, ²⁰¹¹). Facebook also boasts of a global rank of having the second highest traffic on the Internet (after Google) as well as the second highest in countries such as the United States and Singapore (alexa.com). With these overwhelming statistics staring at educators who interact with young adults five times a week, Facebook presents an irresistible inclusion to the repertoire of teacher and student communication. Recent research reported that ^{77%} of faculty engaged in social media, with ^{60%} using social media in class (Moran, Seaman, and Tintinkane, ²⁰¹¹).

Having a Facebook page may be popular among the more social media savvy teachers, but what do they really do for the students? Do the students learn from

these Facebook interactions? Or are they merely a fad and a social entertainment tool? More importantly, how is and what do these Facebook pages mean to the students accessing them, particularly for academic purposes? What does learning with social media mean to students? How do you use social media to help your students learn? What can we learn from their experience to inform and design social media for learning? A Business Communication course in the National University of Singapore (NUS) adopted Facebook as one of its communication media for one semester of teaching. This paper investigates the students' social networking profile, preferences and perspective of their learning experience on Facebook.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

This paper focuses on the perspectives of the students in their understanding and experience of learning with the use of social media in their course. We understand social networking sites as web-based services that allow individuals to create a public profile within the service, connect with other users' view, contribute and share information within the system (Boyd and Ellison, ²⁰⁰⁷). This paper looks at these research questions:

RQ¹. What is the social networking profile of a Business university student in Singapore?

RQ². How do they rate their learning experience when using the Facebook component of their Business Communication course?

RQ³. Why do students use Facebook in school and for learning?

RQ¹ seeks to profile a Business university student's social networking behaviour. I was interested to find out how my student compares with their counterparts in this social media behaviour in the background of the popularity of Facebook adoption around the world. In understanding RQ² and RQ³, the notion of learning will not be explored in its specifics but rather in general i.e. as the students perceive learning to be. In other words, this research is to look at students' perception on whether they felt that they had learned any course-related content from the Facebook interactions. Thus, there is no assessment of their learning (via Facebook) in any particular aspect of the course. However, as the course covers specific forms of communication skills such as letter writing, report writing, etc., the survey sought to gather their general perceptions on their learning in these specific forms. In asking the survey questions on learning, this research seeks to ascertain the notion as to whether students perceive they have learned anything or not.

METHODOLOGY

This was a small scale study of ⁴⁸ students, aged between ¹⁸ and ²³ years. A survey was conducted on their social networking profiles and perspective of their

learning experience on Facebook. The survey had ¹⁵ questions with one open-ended question asking for participants' written comments on their experience in using Facebook in a Business Communication course. The data was analysed using SPSS for frequency count and the Pearson co-efficient for significant correlations. The written comments were coded into categories of reasons for RQ³. Both the quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated.

These students were either in their first, second and third year of their studies (Table ¹) in the three-year Bachelor of Business course at the National University of Singapore.

The male-to-female ratio was ^{4:6}. Not all of the study subjects were Singaporeans. There were also Chinese, Indians, Indonesians, Vietnamese, a Thai and a Filipino (Table ²).

Table ¹. Year of study

Year of study	Number
1	17 (35.40%)
2	19 (39.60%)
3	12 (25.00%)
Total	48 (100%)

Table ². Nationality

Nationality	Number
Singaporean	28 (58.30%)
Malaysian	4 (8.30%)
People's Republic of China	8 (16.70%)
Others	8 (16.70%)
Total	48 (100%)

THE FACEBOOK COURSE ACCOUNT SETUP

The Facebook course account was set up during the first week of the course with students befriending a separately created account bearing the label, "Jeffrey Biz Comm". Using the group feature on Facebook, the ⁴⁸ students were grouped into four groups that corresponded to their face-to-face classes. Participation was on a voluntary basis with no grades or credits promised for involvement. The instructions for the students were to treat Facebook as an optional communication media with each other and with the tutor for the course. The students were told that Facebook was an extension of the social classroom space where they could continue their questions, discussions and sharing after class. Besides this Facebook connection, the students can communicate with the tutor through email and the University's main web-based learning platform known as Integrated Virtual Learning Environment (IVLE). The IVLE also housed the Business Communication course materials with a discussion forum feature as well as an assignment depository.

The Facebook course account afforded all the Facebook features that the students and the tutor can use to connect, share and communicate with each other. In the course of using Facebook, students asked questions about the course and discussed what was taught in the classroom, shared documents and videos as well as posted comments on issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports and discusses the findings for the research questions.

Social Networking Profile

What is the social networking profile of a Business university student in Singapore (RQ¹)?

With ^{91.7%} of students going online daily, as high as ^{41.7%} spent at least more than ¹⁶ hours a week online, with ^{25.0%} between ⁸⁻¹⁶ hours and ^{27.2%} between ¹⁻⁸ hours. And this is compared to the ^{22.9%} who spent more than ¹⁶ hours, ^{16.7%} between ⁸⁻¹⁶ hours and ^{43.7%} between ¹⁻⁸ hours. There was a significant correlation between spending time online and on Facebook (Pearson's $r = .716$, $p < .001$). ^{97%} of American students who used Facebook were reported to be actively engaged on the site daily (Smith and Caruso, ²⁰¹⁰).

All ⁴⁸ students owned a Facebook account alongside with other social media accounts such as Twitter (^{39.6%}), YouTube (^{72.9%}), Google Plus (^{25.5%}), Tumblr (^{20.8%}) and others (Figure 1).

Of the ¹⁹ different types of social networking sites surveyed, it was remarkable to note that every student had an average of ^{4.2} social media accounts with one student having as many as ¹³ accounts; the minimum was one. It is also interesting to note that my students follow the Twitter (^{39.6%}) as much as their American counterparts (^{37%}), as reported in the Pew report (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr, ²⁰¹⁰).

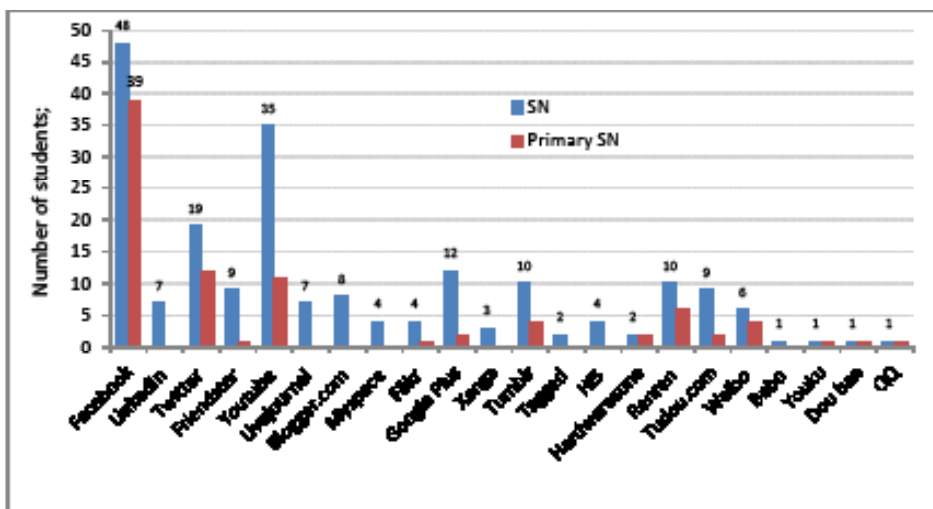


Fig. 1. Social networking profile.

Eighty-three percent (³⁹) used Facebook as their primary social networking site (Figure ¹). This is comparable with the ⁹⁰% of students who used social networking websites, of whom ⁹⁷% said they used Facebook, in the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research's (ECAR) sample of ^{36,950} students from ¹²⁶ US universities (Smith and Caruso, ²⁰¹⁰). While my students' profile mirror the west (particularly the Americans) in having Facebook as their primary social networking site, it is interesting to note that it contrasts with other Asian undergraduates such as the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans, which place Facebook as the third preferred social networking site (alexa.com).

The Facebook Course Account Experience

How do students rate their learning experience when using the Facebook component of their Business Communication course?

Like

There were ^{93.7}% that (N = ⁴⁸) liked the experience, with ^{18.8}% who liked it only a little (Figure ², a). Importantly, one out of every three students (^{35.4}%) liked it a lot, showing its popularity.

This corresponded with the number of positive written remarks given for the open-ended question (Table ³). Qualitative data included: ²¹ who wrote “good”, with ³ “great” and six remarked that it was “good addition to the course”. Five specifically wrote it was “better than IVLE”, the University's main web-based learning platform. Eleven used the words, “useful” and “helpful”. There were seven comments that complimented the use of Facebook, but with caveats. We will discuss this in more detail under the subheading of “Did not like”.

Like and social factor: There were high and significant correlations between “liking the Facebook addition” and “looking at photos” (Pearson's $r = .495$, $p < .001$) and “comments posted” (Pearson's $r = .457$, $p < .001$). Most students liked to view photos (^{91.7}%, c), comments (^{97.9}%, e) and videos (^{77.1}%, d) posted by others (Figure ³). Written comments that supported these numbers included: “Interesting video and comments posted by group mates”, “photos gave a fun element to the module”, and “I felt like I was in a group, and that I was involved”.

The participation rates were comparable for the tutor and the students. The tutor posted an average of ^{2.8} times per week compared to ^{2.4} for the students. The tutor initiated an average of ^{1.34} times compared to ^{1.0} for the students. This shows that the tutor needs to put in slightly more effort in engaging the students on Facebook.

Two out of every three students said that the ability to view photos (^{64.6}%) and comments (^{68.8}%) posted by others as reasons they logged onto the Facebook course account (Figure ², a & b). Other reasons included being tagged (^{25.0}%, b) or alerted by an email notification (^{22.9}%, k). I found this social factor as a key reason why my students want to log onto the Facebook course account.

Table 3. How students felt about using Facebook in the course

Nature of comments	Students (n = 48)
Good	36 (75%)
Good with a “but”	7 (14%)
Neutral	3 (6%)
Opposed to use	1 (2%)
No comments	1 (2%)

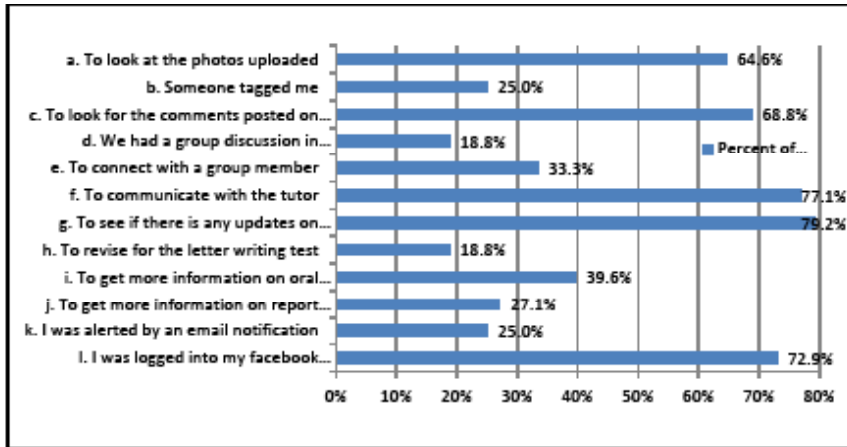


Fig. 2. Reasons for logging onto the “Biz Comm” Facebook account.

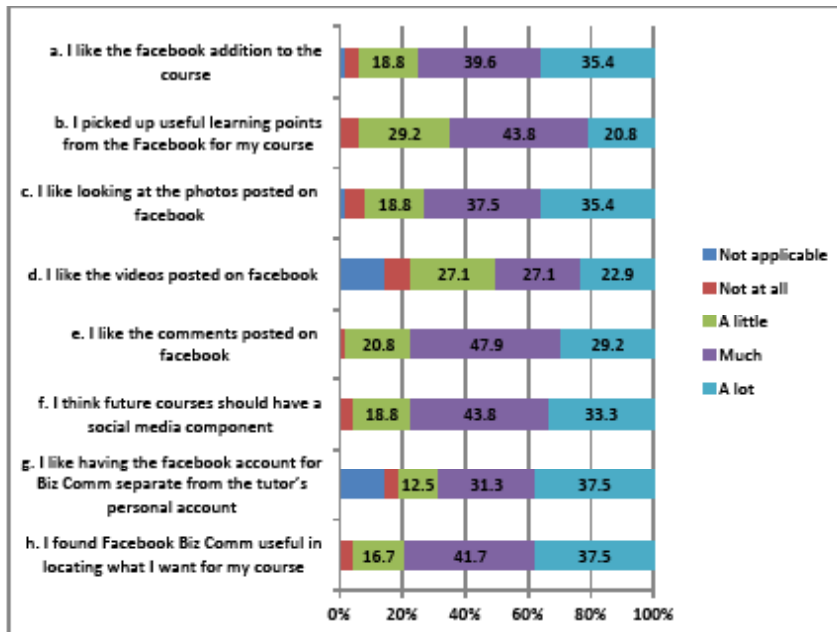


Fig. 3. Students' rating on their Facebook Biz Comm experience.

This social factor – being able to view photos and read postings – increases the “like” factor for the course. The written reasons, such as: *“it connected to us as youths”, “innovative addition to the classroom experience”, “great way to keep up with the social media trend”, “fun, cool, accessible”*, further showed that the Facebook experience was seen as associated with the social trend. The social factor, cited by Brandtzæg and Heim (2009), is an important factor why people use social networking sites.

Ease of use

The ease of use was cited as one of the key reasons for the experience as being “good” and “useful”. In the written comments, there were a total of 16 words that described the experience as “easier”, “convenient”, “accessible”, “efficient”, “faster” and “24/7”. Comments included *“I spend much time on Facebook anyway”, “actively engaging in social media which is a big part of our lives”, “almost everyone uses Facebook”, “useful and convenient for me since I am a frequent Facebook user”* and *“helps students to address their concern quickly”*. 72.9% cited “logged into my Facebook account anyway” as one of their reasons (Figure 2, l). Usability was cited as another key factor why people remain with a social networking site (Brandtzæg and Heim, 2008). Clearly, my students found Facebook highly convenient.

Good communication tool: 77.1% of the students said that they accessed the Facebook course account to communicate with the tutor (Figure 2, f). These figures concurred with their written comments: 17 students wrote in favour for communication with tutors compared to 8 for classmates. Comments on communication with tutor included: *“I could get in touch with my tutor whenever I had problems”, “helpful to build up personal relationship between the students and the tutor”, “24/7 platform for contacting the tutor”* and *“easier and faster way, greater interaction with tutors”*. Comments on communication with group mates and classmates were: *“enable us to connect with the other classmates other than our group mates”, “Good platform for the whole class to connect with each other”,* and *“makes the communication within the group a lot easier”*.

Additionally, one in five students (18.8%, d) used Facebook to hold discussion with group members, with 33.3% using it to connect with group members (e). This was cited as a key factor why people use a social networking site (Brandtzæg and Heim, 2008). As intended in my goal, to extend the social space onto Facebook, students not only used it to communicate but found it easy and convenient to use.

Good place to be updated and learn: There was a somewhat significant correlation between “liking the Facebook addition” and “picked up useful learning points” (Pearson’s $r = .626$, $p < .001$). 79.2% logged onto the Facebook course account to be updated with the latest information on the course (Figure 2, g). Written comments included: *“helpful to connect to tutors and classmates for updates and comments conveniently”* and *“helps us get connected or updated about the modules, i.e. things to take note of; change of location etc. it’s more dynamic and is up-to-date”*.

Most students (93.7%) felt they picked up useful learning points from the Facebook course account (Figure 3, b); 64.6% felt they learn “much” to “a lot”. In fact, when asked for the reasons whether they logged on for specific learning content, one out of every three students logged on to learn: 39.6% for oral presentation, 27.1% for report writing and 18.8% for letter writing (Figure 2, h-j). 79.2% of the students found the content very useful, with 37.5% indicating “a lot” (Figure 2, h). Qualitative comments such as “*gives learning a casual feel*” and “*I like the way of teaching and the additional information and knowledge from the module*” supported these statistics. It appears that students did learn content and felt it was useful to their development of Business Communication skills. While Facebook was set up as a communication tool, it shows in the discussion and sharing that content was learned. Interestingly, content was cited as another important factor why people use social networking site (Brandtzæg and Heim, 2008).

Did not like

While the Facebook component was generally liked by most students, it is interesting to note that there were also negative responses to the experience (Table 3). There was one response that opposed to its use: “*I think it is not very useful, since there is not much use of it*”. There were three neutral comments: “*utilized only moderately...*”, “*Ok... I prefer IVLE though. I don't really access Facebook...*” and “*not an awful experience*”. There was a small majority (3) who did not favour this mode of communication for their learning.

However, it was the positive comments that had caveats lodged that offered insights into the possibly why a minority of students did not enjoy the use of Facebook for learning. Take this comment for example:

“Quite good, but not very essential to learning, more for communication, updates and announcements. I learnt most, if not all, during class and my personal time.”

Three students used the same phrase, “*not essential to learning*”, suggesting that they did not consider Facebook to be the main place for learning. Facebook was seen as either complementary or supplementary to the face-to-face classes and preferred as a communication tool. This also suggests that they wanted a clear separation between learning and social media.

Another two had references to personalities:

“I appreciate the application to some extent, but I'm the type of person who cares not too much about the communication tool. I prefer face-to-face communication most.” and

“I don't really access FB and thus was not aware of some of the info post...I am old fashioned.”

This suggests that students' personal inclinations or avoidance of the medium of

using social media is a factor in their dispassionate experience when compared to the rest.

Another three comments revealed what was to be expected:

“A good pioneering initiative but it could have been better supplemented with information.”

“A good platform to channel ideas, but still Facebook requires people to present at the same time to be able to check. However, the benefits outweigh the difficulty.” and

“Very convenient platform since I spend much time on Facebook anyway. More effort however could be made by everyone in the class to make Facebook more meaningful for learning.”

Three students provided what they expected of the Facebook component: more information and people to be more involved. This corresponded with other comments that highlighted these expectations: *“useful if everyone use it actively to share information”*, *“enables active sharing of information”*, and *“allows the tutor and students to share pictures, videos and other useful information”*. While this may be in line with Nielsen’s (2006) ⁹⁰⁻⁹⁻¹ rule for social networking user pattern; whereby for every ¹⁰⁰ users, there are ⁹⁰ mere observers, ⁹ intermittent contributors and ¹ active one, there is a certain expectation of a high rate of participation for Facebook to work with teaching.

It has emerged that there were three reasons why these few students did not take to Facebook for learning: a) clear separation between learning and social media, b) personal learning preference and c) disappointment with regards to the content and activity on Facebook. Though few in numbers, this feedback provided insight in revealing what students expect in their perception towards Facebook engagement in education. The clear separation between learning and social media and personal non-preference strongly suggests that a social media tool should never replace the conventional face-to-face learning mode. The expressed disappointment with the content and activity also supports the need for a high participation and initiative from the tutor.

Befriending Tutor and Having a Facebook Account

Social network and teaching

Most (^{83.30%}) expected tutors to use Facebook, with one in three students (^{35.40%}) expected “much”. It is useful to note that ^{16.7%} have no such expectations. This corresponded with another question that saw ^{93.70%} expecting the Business Communication course to have a Facebook component, with ^{43.80%} expecting “much” and ^{33.30%} expecting “a lot” (Figure 3, f). However, most (^{81.30%}) expected the Facebook course component to be separate from the tutor’s personal Facebook account, with ^{12.5%} expecting “a little” (Figure 3, g). This complements a study’s

finding that only 15% of students felt their privacy was being invaded when faculty uses Facebook for teaching (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, and Witty, ²⁰¹⁰). While this suggests that some students prefer a clear separation between the tutor and the Facebook course account as a friend, there is a clear preference and expectation for some form of usage of Facebook in education at NUS. In fact, 29.4% of the ECAR's sample of ^{36,950} students from ¹²⁶ US universities (Smith and Caruso, ²⁰¹⁰) are already experiencing the use of social networking sites in their courses.

Befriending your tutor: There were mixed responses as to whether students like to "friend" their tutor on Facebook. 50% preferred "little" to "not at all", with 12.5% preferring not to. Only 8.3% strongly preferred to. This suggests that some students prefer a clear distinction between learning and social activity. Therefore, while students do expect some form of usage of social networking in their courses, they still see them as separate entities.

CONCLUSION

What we have learned from the positive feedback is that students do enjoy, do not mind and expect Facebook addition to the existing range of communication tools that are afforded in their learning environment in the university. This enjoyment or like factor can be linked with key reasons such as: social factor and ease of use in terms of accessibility and usability. The ease of use, cited as one of the top ten principles of successful e-learning (Anderson and McCormick, ²⁰⁰⁵), and usability, cited as one of the top reasons why social networking users stay loyal (Brandtzæg and Heim, ²⁰⁰⁸), are perhaps the reasons why students take to learning on social networking sites. Perhaps, also, the strong preference and ease of use has to do with the varying degrees of privacy and interactivity that the students are afforded behind the digital device or computer (Tervakari, ²⁰⁰⁹). This ease of participation or non-participation makes the experience very attractive indeed, unlike a face-to-face encounter.

Social, Communication and Learning Rolled into One

The social factor was a powerful draw to the Facebook course account. This connection with friends and, in this case, the Facebook course account, acted as a friend that posted information, photos and comments. This "push" notion of learning, where information is being pushed by a friend, is a social phenomenon all too familiar with the students and is welcomed. Information on the course is being pushed or distributed as social bits of information. Knowledge is being delivered on a social platform and when shared as a social activity, makes learning a social activity rather than in a dry academic setting. Another key reason why students accessed the Facebook course account deliberately was to communicate with the tutor, which suggests that this additional communication is certainly a viable alternative on top of the existing email and the University's IVLE. This has certainly met my intention of setting up a Facebook account as an extended social space for my course. It is noteworthy to realise that students who "friend" the

Facebook course account see it as befriending the tutor with a very specific frame of mind: for academic purposes. Facebook is certainly a powerful addition to the existing range of communication methods available for both teachers and students.

Another significant discovery is that the students felt they have learned from the content posted on Facebook. They not only picked up useful materials from the contents posted by the tutor, but also from their course mates. Students also logged onto the Facebook course account to target and learn specific content for the course. This clearly shows that not only is there a good correlation between learning and social media, but that teachers also can leverage on social media to share content and lengthen the active engagement with the subject matter.

Not for Everyone

While there is certainly a happy feel to the learning via a social networking site, this research cannot ignore the few that had concerns with the mix between learning and social media, and had little personal learning preference using Facebook. Then there are those who like to keep a clear line of distinction between what is social and personal to what is learning and academic. Students are divided when it comes to befriending tutors in a personal capacity. And this is perhaps more pertinent in the Asian context, where the distance between teachers and students is more pronounced. As such, any social networking addition to an educational course must stay either strictly supplementary or at best complementary, but not as a substitution.

Learning is Social

The results from this study are dependent on the way the social media component was designed into the course and the degree of tutor engagement on Facebook. Frequent postings and uploading of links and photos go a long way to sustain and create interest in the students' engagement on Facebook. The success and effectiveness of using Facebook or any social media tool lies essentially in the nature of the tool: social engagement. The tutor needs to be active in engaging the students. By becoming an additional communication tool for the students, Facebook can increase the social factor to the learning of a course. Still, further studies are needed to determine if high social factor correlates to higher learning attainment.

Finally, this study has investigated and studied how students take to Facebook and learning and how these two can be designed to a good effect. Learning is a social activity and as long as Facebook continues to take up the majority of our students' time, it will continue to stay relevant to teaching especially one that relies on social engagement.

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