

Richard Benjamin Memorial Social and Occupational Research Trust

Facebook as a means of managing stress associated with life transitions: can social networking help new university students?

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Introduction

There is considerable evidence within psychology that key life events – such as moving house, changing jobs, or getting married – invariably cause an individual experiencing them high levels of stress (e.g. Moyle & Parkes, 1999). Social support has been documented as a key variable in ameliorating this stress (Cohen & Williamson, 1991). However, many transitional life events involve physical relocation and as such, traditional forms of social support - such as socialising with friends - are not available to those who experience them (e.g. Williams & Clark, 1998).

The aim of this work was to examine the transitional event of leaving home to attend University. This transition is often difficult for new students, as their relocation places them outside their traditional social support network. Because of this, it is common for new students to feel lonely, homesick, and ill at ease; and these feelings may undermine their University experience both socially and academically. (Flett, Endler, & Besser, 2009)

Although a new student may be *physically* removed from their support network, they are still able to communicate with others through increasingly sophisticated forms of technology. In particular, it was the investigator's aim to examine to what extent *Internet-based* forms of social support through the popular social networking site Facebook may act in the same fashion as more proximal methods, and reduce the level of stress found amongst new students. Can these Web 2.0 technologies assist students in their life transitions, and act as a facilitative mechanism for social support?

Methods

The primary method of data collection for this project was via a web-based survey, distributed through surveymonkey.com. Participants were recruited via: 1) Email to first

years within the School of Psychology at Keele; 2) Posting on the Keele Forum, a web message board accessible only to Keele students; 3) Publicity via members of the Students' Union; and 4) Postings on Keele and the School of Psychology Facebook pages

In all of these methods, potential participants were asked to email the research assistant on the project who in turn provided them with further information and a web-link wherein they could complete the survey in their own time.

Survey structure

The survey participants took part in contained several sections. Section 1 contained measures of personality traits; self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1989), homesickness (Archer et al. 1998), well-being (Stewart-Brown et al. 2009), depression, anxiety, and stress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

Section 2 asked students about their Facebook behaviour. Participants were asked to rate the importance of Facebook to them, and the reasons they used Facebook, again using items from previous research. They were also asked for more information about their Facebook presence, giving the number of friends, photo albums, number of messages received and sent per day, number of comments on their posts received and sent per day, and length of time on Facebook. Finally, they were asked for some demographic information, giving the distance from their home time, age, and gender.

Distribution of survey

As detailed previously, the survey was initially advertised in a variety of outlets in October 2010. Participants email addresses were recorded onto a mailing list, and then were approached again in January of 2011. The survey was re-advertised at this in the same

outlets so that students who had not taken part in October could also participate. This approach was repeated in June 2011 and then September 2011. Thus, we had access to longitudinal data for those participants who completed the survey on all four occasions, and “acute” data from participants who had completed the survey on less than four occasions.

Analysis

October 2010 (161 participants)

A linear regression model suggested that self-esteem, well-being, and stress could be predicted by Facebook usage. First, participants’ communications with others were predictive of their negative affect. Participants who *received* a high volume of private messages or comments on their own posts showed markedly higher levels of self-esteem and well-being, and lower levels of stress. By contrast, participants who *sent* a high volume of messages or made large amount of posts on others’ Facebook profiles seemed to experience the reverse. At best, these activities were not predictive of negative affect, and at worst they seemed to increase it. That is, students’ initiating contact with their support network could be detrimental to their University experience.

Interestingly, on this occasion the number of Facebook-friends reported was *not* predictive of any of our outcome variables. Presumably this is because regardless of the number of friends a participant has, they are still geographical isolated from them and cannot interact with this support network in the usual fashion. Even if that network is very large, it is still inaccessible.

January 2011 (171 participants)

Analysis of participants on this occasion was markedly different from those on the previous occasion. None of our previously used variables were significant at this junction.

Communications made and received did not influence levels of self-esteem, well-being, or stress. However, number of Facebook-friends *was* a significant predictor for these outcomes, indicating that a large number of friends increased levels of self-esteem and well-being.

Future analysis

There a number of additional analysis which are planned over the coming weeks. First, we aim to examine data from the latter two data collection periods to examine whether Facebook usage continues to be non-predictive of welfare once students have comfortably transitioned to University. As this relationship is already faltering by January, we believe this is likely.

Second, we will look at data from participants who responded to the survey at all four occasions to see what longitudinal developments occur over this period.

Third, we aim to produce a more complex regression model incorporating other variables such as distance from home to see if we can create a more valid predictive model of student welfare.

Fourth, qualitative interviews were recorded from small sub-sample of the survey-population. The processing of this data is still ongoing, and it is hoped that this will shed further light on Facebook as an adjustment tool for new students at University.

Summary of findings

The examination of the data from our first two collection periods offers compelling evidence that Facebook usage is an effective means of managing stress caused by the transition to University, at least in the short term. Several aspects of Facebook use relating to communication with others clearly influence participants' emotion and attitudes. Receiving input from one's support network appeared to be beneficial, whereas initiating contact was not.

This effect was not apparent however, after four months at University. Here, Facebook usage was not predictive of negative affect; rather, it was participants' number of friends that appeared to predict their welfare. Our explanation for this is that during their first term at University, students will acquire new Facebook-friends through their social interactions. Thus, the increase in number of friends is correlated with the expansion of their new, proximal support network at University. This in turn leads to a decreased reliance on the pre-existing support network. Facebook becomes less of a communicative tool to engage with friends at home, and more a method of organising new social interactions at University. As a consequence, communication aspects of Facebook use become less predictive of welfare, and network expansion aspects become more predictive. This is supported by the finding that students' ratings of the importance of Facebook in their lives diminished to a significant degree between October 2010 and January 2011.

Implications of findings

The results of this research suggest that Facebook can be highly beneficial to new students and can ease their transition into higher education considerably. Universities would be advised to capitalise on this, and to publicise the ways in which Facebook can be used to

both keep in touch with old support networks, and create new ones. Keele University already has a considerable Facebook presence, which could be used for this purpose.

Counselling services at Higher Education institutes may also find these results useful. Facebook is a relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use tool available to counteract negative affect in new students. Counsellors may wish to encourage students to use it to its fullest effect in order to counteract any of the detrimental effects caused by the move to University.

Outside of higher education, the findings here would no doubt be of great interest to anyone who has a close relative or friend who will soon be embarking on University. These results clearly indicate that maintaining communication with new students during their first term is highly beneficial. Urging new students to embrace social networking once at University may alleviate any feelings that occur that would be detrimental to their higher education experience.

Dissemination of findings

The preliminary findings from this project have already been reported at the British Psychological Society Social Section conference in September this year. They were extremely well received and garnered a large amount of interest from attendees. In addition, the press representative of the BPS also showed a keen interest and requested a press release summarising the talk for distribution to media outlets.

We are currently writing up the findings from the first two phases of data collection for publication in the *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* as a short report. Given the contemporary relevance of the contents, the chances of publication are high. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* is a high impact factor journal (estimated

at 1.803 in 2010); thus successful publication would be give a great deal of exposure to this research.

When analysis of the longitudinal data from all four data collection points is completed, we are planning to submit the findings as a separate, longer article to an educational journal, most likely the *Journal of Educational Psychology*.

Future research projects

We are currently in negotiation with the Richard Benjamin Trust to use surplus funds from this project to conduct a similar analysis on the 2011-2012 intake of students. This should increase the validity and reliability of our findings.

This project was also intended to be a foundation project for larger grant applications. Thus, we also aim to produce a proposal for an expand research agenda for submission as a British Academy fellowship, or ESRC research grant.

Conclusion

The aim of this project was to examine to what extent the social networking site Facebook could assist students with their transitions University, and to examine whether it was a useful tool increasing student welfare during the traditionally stressful move to Higher Education.

The data collected indicates thus far that Facebook can indeed ameliorate the negative affect associated with this key life event through the maintenance of contact with a student's existing support network. However, this effect primarily operates during the first few months of a student's first year. Subsequent to this, Facebook's influence on the student experience dissipates, as does its importance in a student's life.

With this preliminary work completed, we now hope to expand on our findings with a larger grant proposal, and to continue our dissemination of the key findings in order to better our understanding of students' transition to University and to increase students' quality of life when they begin Higher Education.

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