ABSTRACT

With over 1 billion active users, Facebook is the most popular and widely used social networking site. The purpose of this review is to highlight empirical findings on the use of Facebook as an educational resource and environment. It is organized around three major questions: 1) How has Facebook been used in educational contexts? 2) What are the effects of using Facebook in educational contexts? 3) What are the current issues and concerns of using Facebook in educational contexts? Future directions will be discussed.

Keywords: Educational Resource, Educational Environment, Facebook, Learning, Social Networking

INTRODUCTION

With over one billion users worldwide, Facebook is easily the most popular social network site. It has a variety of characteristics that contribute to its widespread popularity including personalized profiles, easy navigation, attractive layouts and visual newsfeeds, synchronous and asynchronous text and video communication features, built-in apps, and the creation of groups, events, and fan pages, allowing for multiple pathways of information exchange and individual as well as collective identity building for its users. Since its creation in 2004, Facebook has become an integral part of common college culture. For example, students check their Facebook accounts up to five times a day (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010). Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley (2009) found that some students prefer using the Facebook messaging system over regular university email for informal communication and have described Facebook as the “social glue” that keeps students connected. It provides a source of social capital as it helps people maintain existing relationships as well as form new ones (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Furthermore, Selwyn (2009) concludes that Facebook is an important technology of twenty-first century higher education as it allows for the “informal, cultural learning of ‘being’ a student” (pp. 171).
The Facebook phenomenon has inspired many researchers to investigate its effects on human development. Major contributions to the field have focused on the psychological and social aspects of using Facebook and the characteristics of its members. For example, in the first major review of Facebook research in the social sciences, Wilson, Gosling, and Graham (2012) identified five major areas of research and found that a majority of the empirical articles investigated the role of Facebook in social interactions or descriptively analyzed its users. Their comprehensive review provides an excellent overview of Facebook research including an analysis of the various methodological approaches to studying social networking sites. It also acknowledges the fluidity of Facebook research, attesting to the ever changing nature of Facebook and its continuous development as a social networking site. As such, new areas of research are constantly emerging.

The purpose of this review is to address a gap in the Facebook literature on psychological and social effects. More specifically, it focuses on a less researched area – the use of Facebook in educational contexts. Facebook use is so pervasive among students that it is worth examining if the social networking site can actually be used as an educational resource instead of just for social purposes. If it can be used as a viable learning environment with positive outcomes, it could potentially change how educators deliver course content, potentially saving institutions money previously spent on costly learning management licenses and transforming education as the social and learning spaces become blended. However, the research in this area is still emerging as Facebook has only recently started to gain popularity in educational settings. In the first comprehensive review of Facebook and education, Aydin (2012) stated that much more research in this area is warranted as only a few studies specifically addressed Facebook’s role within pedagogy. His review provides compelling evidence that Facebook can be used as an educational environment with several benefits including improving classroom practices, student involvement, motivation and self-efficacy. Still, the potential of Facebook as an educational resource or learning environment has yet to be fully realized. The current review builds on previous reviews by including more recent research pertaining to Facebook use specifically in educational contexts. It is organized around the following three questions: 1) How has Facebook been used in educational contexts? 2) What are the effects of using Facebook in educational contexts? 3) What are the current issues and concerns of using Facebook in educational contexts?

METHOD

Literature Search

Several methods were used to find articles for this review. Both bottom-up and top-down approaches helped identify the core extant research related to Facebook and education. The initial search consisted of utilizing databases such as EBSCO: Academic Search Complete, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Education Full Text, PubMed, ScienceDirect, ERIC [via EBSCO], Education Research Complete, and Google Scholar. The main keyword used in these database searches was “Facebook” along with other keywords: “education”, “instruction”, “research”, “learning”, “technology”, “psychology”, “privacy”, “credibility”, “student engagement” “self-disclosure”, and “teachers” in various combinations. A top-down approach was used after identifying two review articles related to Facebook research in the social sciences (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012) and education (Aydin, 2012). The reference sections of these articles were used to identify relevant articles for the current review. Similarly, reference sections were examined from chapters in the Encyclopedia of Cyber Behavior (Yan, 2012) to identify additional useful articles, authors, and journals. All of these were further investigated, creating a snowball effect to find the most frequently cited, and most relevant articles to represent the core knowledge in this review.
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