Social Ties, Social Networks and the Facebook Experience

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Abstract

This paper reports a study which investigated adult social activity on Facebook. The data was drawn from an online survey (N = 758) and 18 in-depth research sessions (semi-structured interviews and verbal protocols). The research explored the function of Facebook in making contact, maintaining contact and facilitating extended contact with online friends and the concept of 'facestalking'. It also examined how the specific tools of Facebook (wall postings, status updates, events and photos) are used to communicate and socialise. The research concludes that Facebook strengthens existing friendships by supplementing traditional forms of communication (face to face, telephone). Also, participation in the Facebook community enables efficient and convenient contact to be maintained with a larger and more diverse group of acquaintances, thus extending potential social capital.

Keywords: Facebook – Adults – Social Ties – Social Networks

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Introduction

> If the web was once an enormous library, it is now a vast conversation (Gefter 2007:178).

The phenomenal growth of Web 2.0 technologies has given a voice to the masses. One particularly successful site has been Facebook. Facebook was launched in February 2004 enabling students of Harvard University to communicate online. In September 2006 the site was made publicly available to any person (over the age of 13) with an email address. In the period since, Facebook membership has grown above 500 million globally (Facebook 2010). The site is free to join and, although controlled by the Facebook management, many of the features of the site have evolved primarily as a result of Facebook members' actions.

This study explores the social experiences of adult Facebook users and the tools used online to communicate and interact with others. As a consequence the research explores the role of Facebook in helping build adult users' social networks and potentially extend their social capital.

Online Social Networking Research

Research examining online social networking is diverse. Primarily research has been directed toward the online social networking experiences of adolescents and young adults (see, for example, boyd 2006; Lenhart & Madden 2007; Livingstone 2008; Valkenburg, Peter & Schouten 2006).

At a pragmatic level are reports on the functional use of online social networking sites (see for example, Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) 2008; Caverlee & Webb 2008; Hargittai 2007; Nazir, Raza & Chuah 2008; Watkins & Lee 2010; Young 2009). These studies provide detail on the specific tools and features utilised by online social network users and explore practical issues such as time spent engaged online.

Online social networking sites have also been prominent in studies of online security. Commentators suspected users posting identifying information online would compromise personal safety. However, studies into trust and privacy have since demonstrated that the majority of online social network users are making responsible choices regarding the amount of personal information made publicly available (see, for example Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini 2007; Gross & Acquisiti 2005; Stutzman 2006).

Although adolescents and young adults make up the majority of online social networkers, older populations are increasingly using sites such as Facebook and so have become the subject of research interest (see for example, Hogenboom et al. 2010; Pfeil & Zaphiris 2009; Sum et al. 2008). These studies highlight the potential for cross-generational analysis through online social networking websites, such as in the work of Pfeil, Arjan and Zahiris (2009).

The current study set out to build upon this body of knowledge by focusing on experiences of adult Facebook users, rather than adolescent users. Taking a primarily qualitative approach the study provides a descriptive account of the tools used on Facebook to examine ways in which social ties and networks are affected by the use of these online tools.

Social Ties, Social Networks and the Internet

A social network is a structure made up of individuals with a commonality, be it friendship, an interest, relationship, knowledge, experience or belief system. In the past, social networks have been limited to one's geographical location, social standing or ethnicity. Today, with the global, intercultural and intergenerational composition of sites such as Facebook, social networks have become far more diverse and dynamic (Ofcom 2008). A social network can be seen as a positive resource that can influence activity and productivity of the individual or the collective. The positive consequence of effective social networks is the building of social capital.

Social capital is a sociological concept related to the connections between social networks. Putnam (2001) defined social capital as the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other. Putnam (2001) believed that social capital could be measured by the amount of trust and reciprocity in a community or between individuals. Other researchers have found that social capital increases self-esteem and improves psychological well-being (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe 2007). Ofcom (2008) also suggests that individuals gain emotional benefits in feeling part of a group and gaining attention.

The potential of social networks to enhance one's well-being and the collaborative nature of online social networking has seen these elements fast become of interest to researchers. Studies have emerged which examine the management of different social groups online (DiMicco & Millen 2007; West, Lewis & Currie 2009) and other studies have specifically focused on social networks and social capital (Burke, Kraut & Marlow 2011; Donath 2007; Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe 2007, 2011; Fono & Raynes-Goldie 2006; Hampton et al. 2009; Hsu et al. 2007; Lewis & West 2009; Subrahmanyam et al. 2008; Wang & Wellman 2010; Yoder & Stutman 2010). Overall, a positive correlation has generally been found between directed communication activities on Facebook and the strength of social ties and users' perceived social capital.

The study presented in this paper contributes to this literature by giving the perspective of Australian adults and detailing their experiences through qualitative analysis.

Research Design

The research questions specifically addressed in this paper are:

1. How do adults engage socially on Facebook?
2. What tools do adults use on Facebook to socialise?

Initially, an online survey was distributed via email to students in two Faculties at a Sydney metropolitan University. Email recipients were asked to forward the survey link to others who might be interested in responding. The survey questions and results of this survey have been reported in detail in Young (2009). There were 752 respondents and a breakdown of demographics is presented in Table 1.

To investigate issues arising from the survey and more thoroughly explore the experiences of adult Facebook users, face-to-face research sessions were conducted with 18 active Facebook participants who self-selected after completion of the initial survey. Human research ethics clearance was granted and informed consent was obtained from each participant. Pseudonyms were used to refer to the 18 participants. The face-to-face sessions were conducted in Sydney and incorporated semi-structured interviews and verbal protocols (where each participant viewed their online profile while talking aloud to the researcher about

its construction and contents). Further detail of the verbal protocol method (also known as 'think-alouds') can be found in Young (2005). The sessions were captured using video/audio/screen capture software. Demographic details of these participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Survey Respondents' Demographic Overview

Male	N=183
Female	N=569
<17	N=167
18-25	N=272
26-35	N=189
36+	N=124
University student	N=354
Student (other)	N=4
Full-time employment	N=268
Part-time employment	N=100
Not working	N=8
Homemaker	N=14
Retired	N=4

Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data (Miles & Huberman 1994). Each of the research questions is addressed throughout the data, followed by discussion on issues which arise from adult's Facebook experiences, particularly in relation to social ties and networks.

Table 2. Ethnography Participants' Demographic Overview

Alias	Gender	Age	Occupation
Doug	M	57	P/T Self-employed economist
Christine	F	37	F/T (not stated)
Eleanor	F	37	P/T Personal Assistant
Mia	F	37	F/T Homemaker
Alison	F	36	F/T Homemaker
Jason	M	35	F/T Information technology
Leroy	M	35	F/T Graphic design
Olivia	F	35	P/T Journalist / mother
Linda	F	35	F/T Home-maker
Anna	F	33	F/T Lawyer
Nathan	M	29	F/T Lift mechanic
Natalie	F	28	F/T (not stated)
Ivan	M	28	F/T Mining
Gail	F	28	F/T Admin assistant
Thomas	M	25	P/T Various jobs
Amy	F	23	F/T University student
Elizabeth	F	21	F/T University student
Amanda	F	21	F/T University student

Results

How do Adults Engage Socially on Facebook?

Data revealed that Facebook is used to engage socially by making and maintaining contact with known persons and is particularly valued for its economic value and convenience.

Making and maintaining contact

Young (2009) previously reported from the survey data that 98% of respondents' online friends are people who are known from face-to-face interactions. Interview participants concurred that Facebook's value is in making and maintaining contact with people from both their past and present. By engaging with these people through Facebook the participants suggest that offline social activity is actually enhanced.

For instance, Facebook facilitates connections with people met recently or only know casually offline:

> …random people you meet while you're travelling or through Uni, you normally wouldn't stay in touch. It's a way to keep in touch with those people, even if it's only a little bit, you still feel like you're kind of connected with them…It just seems like a shame to go through life and make connections with people as you go and the connections just disappear….it's just kind of a way of hanging on to some of those connections, even if they might not be worthwhile, it just kind of feels like you're not losing them entirely (Amy 23)

Participants highlighted the usefulness of being able to connect with people who they are interested in keeping in their life but do not necessarily have the time to invest more informal types of communication:

> Facebook is extraordinarily good for that kind of slightly distanced relationship (Doug, 57)

> It makes it easy to contact people you may be thinking of but don't necessarily have an extended amount of time to meet or talk with at any one point in time. I guess it can be like having a friend without a huge commitment (Christine, 35)

Contact through Facebook is not necessary limited to online interactions it can also facilitate face to face communication:

> I found a girl through Facebook who I hadn't seen for about 13 years, and we were good friends and we'd just sort of drifted apart, like our lives went different ways. But we caught up and it's like we were never apart…I love catching up with old friends, and I have definitely caught up with heaps of them…and I actually went and met up with them and have stayed in contact (Anna 33)

> It can definitely help strengthen the social ties with people you have something in common with. It helped me get back in touch and now we hold regular get togethers. Without Facebook that wouldn't have happened because we didn't have a means of getting in touch. The actual bond we share, was already established, so I think Facebook helps to strengthen what is already there (Olivia, 35)

While research into adolescents' online social networking experiences suggests a desire to accumulate masses of friends, adult participants focused instead on using Facebook as a tool to keep existing relationships alive:

> I think you keep in contact with people more…..I guess you could still do it with email but this [Facebook] feels a little bit more alive…there are little titbits of information on there as well, email is just words. I guess it makes you feel a bit closer… I just think it's a good thing. I look at this and I think ultimately I'm catching up with people, I'm staying in contact with people, it's a way of sharing my life with people (Anna, 33)

> I now have more of an insight into friends' lives than I did previously and can interact with them, where previously there was little interaction (Jason, 35)

Survey data supported participants' enthusiasm for the value of Facebook in making and maintaining social contact.   Sixty-nine percent of respondents believe online social networking activity is 'somewhat important' to 'very important' to enable communication with others and 79% report online social networking activity is 'somewhat important' to 'very important' to enable them to keep in touch with family/friends/colleagues. When asked how they would feel if their profile ceased to exist, anonymous survey respondents demonstrate extreme attachment to Facebook as part of their regular social activity:

> "very lonely, not socialised"; "Worry that I miss a chance to "see" my friends"; "Like my link to the world no longer existed.   My primary form of getting information no longer exists"; "...it's like catching up for a coffee all at once, and yes, without that I would be very lonely, depressed, empty"; " not part of the social 'loop'"; "Left out and socially disadvantaged"; "I would certainly feel out of touch….it is, in effect, your social life/diary"; "Left out and detached from what is happening within my virtual social network".

The emotive language of these statements suggests that significant value is placed on Facebook to facilitate communication and social engagement.

Convenience

Particularly predominant from the survey and interview data was the value of Facebook as a convenient way to engage in social activity. It is viewed as a time-efficient, economical and unobtrusive means of bulk communication.

Facebook facilitates time-efficient communications:

> The beauty of Facebook is that it doesn't take a lot of time. You can sort of type a one-liner and that's done (Doug, 57)

> Easier to keep in touch with family and friend's social activities when you are too busy… you have the ability to comment when you may not have the time to actually phone the person or meet up as regularly as you would like to (Elanor, 37)

> …if I had to rely on email, it'd be more tedious, it's just a lot faster on Facebook….It's so efficient (Amanda, 21)

> You can show you care with a simple comment "thumbs up" with the tap of the keyboard.   More effective sometimes than just an email…an easy way to organise group activities in real life (Linda, 35)

The economical nature of Facebook is also valued.   Predominantly respondents see Facebook as a free or cheap service (participants did not appear to take into account the underlying cost of owning a computer and maintaining Internet access):

"because it's free on the Internet, when you're out of [phone] credit, because all your friends are just as addicted you know that if you put a message on Facebook they will read it (Amanda, 21); "a new free way to keep in touch with close friends and family who live overseas" (anonymous survey); "[without Facebook] I've lost a very important tool to keep in contact with family and friends, I'm not financially able to call or visit them very often so Facebook is a good way to keep in contact at little cost" (anonymous survey); "[without Facebook] I've lost a cheap way to communicate with those overseas"; (anonymous survey); "annoyed I would have to spend money calling and texting people instead of contacting them for free" (anonymous survey).

Also, the types of communication facilitated by Facebook are viewed as less intrusive than traditional forms of communication:

"…less obtrusive to put it on their Facebook than call them or message them…" (Elizabeth, 21); "… and it's good to know I have an informal communication with people who I would not normally ring or email" (anonymous survey); "SNS give me a sense of informal communication which I often prefer to phone conversation" (anonymous survey).

A further benefit is communication with large numbers of people at one time, using more features than email:

"In one sense it is easier to make contact with friends now from one central…there is very much a call to action now, for friends to direct their 'friend' traffic to their Facebook page" (Alison, 35) and "Used as a way of getting information out like if people don't necessarily look at their emails, they might hop on to Facebook" (Gail, 28) and "When I was living on the other side of the world I had a way of sharing photos or other little pieces of information without having to send individual emails to my friends or family" (Nathan, 29); "I am overseas and it is a way to connect with family and friends at home, adds an extra dimension to email" (anonymous survey).

The convenience of Facebook interactions clearly supports these participants in their efforts to make contact and remain in contact with old friends and new acquaintances.

What Tools do Adults Use on Facebook to Socialise?

Survey respondents and participants of this study undoubtedly valued Facebook and would be disgruntled if this economic, informal and efficient means of communication ceased to exist. The paper now moves to examine the specific tools which are being used by adults to engage in social activity. The specific activities: 'facestalking', posting wall comments, status updates, creating events or posting photographs.

Facestalking

In addition to creating a new platform for getting in contact and maintaining quick, economical contact with larger numbers of people the process has resulted in a new form of social activity – "Facestalk, that's what my friends call it" (Elizabeth, 21). Facestalking is the act of reviewing in detail another person's Facebook page to follow their activity without necessarily engaging in any form of communication with the person.

The practice was acknowledged in one form or another by participants:

> "There are some people that I've taken on [Facebook] just to know what's going on in their lives, you know, it's interesting for me to see, so that's my own little voyeuristic kind of reason for having them here" (Thomas, 25); "I shouldn't say stalking, but yeah, I definitely use it to look up old school friends, old boyfriends…" (Linda, 35); "…like going through other people's photos and just having a bit of a stickybeak…." (Gail, 29) and "I thoroughly enjoy it, and I love finding out about other people's lives as well. It's not just about me showing people things, I love to stalk people's pages for ages looking at every little thing, looking at their photos and, you know, just finding out all about them. It's interesting" (Anna, 33).

The popularity of facestalking is further evidenced with 67% of survey respondents in this research claiming their use of online social networking was to "follow what is happening in the lives of others".

Overwhelmingly facestalking was viewed positively, except in a small minority of cases, as highlighted by a survey respondent when asked how s/he would feel if his/her profile ceased to exist: "relieved that my ability to stalk other people and look at their lives (eg. ex-boyfriends, etc) is over because that part of Facebook I have issues with and felt slightly guilty about doing". Given the common practice of Facestalking this guilt appears unwarranted.

Posting wall comments on friends profiles

Survey respondents revealed that "a wall post serves as an affectionate 'thinking of you'" and "its very easy to quickly type hello or 'see you Friday' to someone to let them know you have thought of them that week", again highlighting the convenience of Facebook to communicate. There was consensus between participants that posting quick comments to let someone know you are thinking of them, particularly at times of birthdays and other special occasions was valuable and worthwhile.

It was apparent adult participants were aware that communicating with a friend by writing on their wall it is not a private conversation:

> It's the equivalent to if you really want to talk to your friend alone about something but then all these people came into the room, so you would tone it down, it's like a lot of people listening to your conversation (Amanda, 21)

> …you're also conscious of the fact when your writing on someone's wall, interacting with their profile, that it's going to be seen by all of your mutual friends, so that does make a difference between whether your write something and the kind of information that you send to someone privately (Amy, 23).

Others expressed frustration when online friends used the wall to comment publically: People asking private and direct questions in public rather than via private message. Some things ARE private" (Linda, 35). There was a sense of annoyance when poor judgements on confidentiality were made.

Status Updates

As previously reported (Young 2009: 48) survey data revealed that 40% of respondents make status updates. Primarily they do this:

i.   to be 'witty';
ii.   to keep alignment with 'real' self feelings/experiences;

    iii.   from a belief that others want to know what they are thinking/doing/experiencing;

and, most relevant to the focus of this paper:

    iv.   to engage their friends. Survey respondents suggested status updates are "a stimulus for online conversation"; "constant way to communicate with your friends"; "to invite comments on my wall"; "a conversation starter"

Participants supported the use of status updates as a way to start a conversation:

> the status is a good way of letting people know what you're up to….and then if they're a close friend they might comment on your status and you get into a conversation with them (Amy, 23).

Status updates can also be used to strengthen a bond between individuals or small groups:

> I will put random quotes [understood by few close people] …it's kind of like a shared culture, if you write something in your status that only two or three people, understand, it's something special between those people (Amy, 23).

> I don't live in the same place as many of my Facebook friends. A bunch of us recently had a reunion catch-up at a pub in Sydney and had the best time ever. Our Facebook updates give us points of interest to talk about (Olivia, 35).

A two-way conversation is not always necessary. Some participants said they enjoyed putting up status updates that would cause online friends to think:

> …I think you do express yourself [using status updates] to get a reaction from other people. Not even to get a reaction, just to think that you might, you know, cause a reaction…it's frivolous but at the same time it's really engaging (Amy, 23)

> Sometimes I put cryptic things on there [status updates]. Every time I put something on there I expect that someone's looking at it and think something about it… (Anna, 33).

The participants provided unexpected insights about the social nature of status updates which, without explanation, could be inferred as self-indulgent acts.

Events

The hype in popular media surrounding online social networking suggested that it would be the demise of face-to-face communication and social activity. Evidently this is not the case. Indeed, many of the features of Facebook facilitate people socialising in person. One such tool is the events feature which is seen as "…one of the applications that is functional" (Doug, 57) and benefits users by reminding of "events that are coming up, I like that there are reminders. So it's almost like an online diary" (Amanda, 21).

It can be useful "…in terms of having event invitations like school reunions" (Gail, 28) and can also assist "I can see who is coming, you can see it's just a birthday and like 20 people are invited, you kind of know what to wear. If like 100 people are invited, I'm like oh 100 people, big thing, okay, I probably need to buy a new dress" (Amanda, 21).

The photos that are taken at events subsequently become an important aspect of social interaction both online and offline.

Photographs

When Facebook users post a profile picture the picture is more likely to reflect online identity. However, posting photos from events is used as a form of social action as photos can be used to strengthen connections with close offline friends:

> …if I go to an event I'll take lots of pictures. Usually with friends and just to show what a good time we had" (Elizabeth, 21)

> I put lots of photos up, especially when I go out on the town and have a good night out, I guess usually I put them up for the benefit of the people that are in them (Anna, 33).

The posting of photos is also important for people who have not been present at the event:

> …especially with the photos and the tagging, I don't know, you're actually engaging with the people….If you haven't actually been, you weren't actually there, if they're a close friend sometimes they'll tag you as a random object, that's kind of funny (Amy, 23)

> But one thing I do think is really about Facebook, how people are using it, this thing about the cameras and how every single event is documented, really every single event….because when I am sick and I miss an event, like the next day, or some people even that night, upload photos…it's like instant news, really up to date (Amanda, 21).

Similar to Facebook status updates, photos can also be used to start a conversation:

My daughter, for example, she often puts up, she puts up a lot of photos. So I often have a discussion with her about her photos (Doug 57).The participants consistently expressed their use of photographs to signal group interactions, rather than as a means of showcasing themselves as individuals.

Discussion

As stated from the outset there is a considerable body of research that has examined the experiences of adolescents' use of online social networking. Many of the reported experiences of adolescents are reflected in this study of adult online social network use. Similar to adolescents, Facebook is used by the participants of this study as an economical way to get in contact and stay in contact with people met casually or to communicate regularly with people whom they already have well-established relationships. Facebook is used by the participants to engage with their friends and strengthen pre-existing bonds. An online social life does not detract from offline relationships, as Gefter (2007) notes they are simply different manifestations of the same network of friends.

The Internet has not replaced traditional forms of communication instead social networking sites amplify offline relationships (Wang & Wellman 2010). Online social networking is just an extension of the kind of interactions that people have daily by phone, text message and email, so the line between what is real and what is virtual is beginning to fade. Facebook is therefore a social tool but not an alternative to social activities (Gefter 2007; Ross et al. 2009).

Studies of adolescents' social activity have found that adolescents who engage in online social networking feel closer to their friends as a result of this online activity compared with those adolescents who do not participate on social networking websites (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield 2008; Willett & Ringrose 2008). Valkenburg and Peter (2007) investigated

adolescent well-being and concluded that time spent online was positively related to the time spent with existing friends offline. The adult Facebook users of the current study appear to achieve similar, positive social benefits as their adolescent counterparts.

This study supports the view that Facebook provides an additional form of contact which is convenient when face-to-face or telephone is not possible or not desirable because the person is only a casual acquaintance. The notion of touching base without a huge commitment was similarly found in Lewis & West's (2009) study of University students using Facebook. Online social networking is also particularly valuable when users live in different geographic locations from family and friends (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe 2007; Farnham 2007). For instance, many of the survey respondents in this study concurred that one of the most valuable aspects of Facebook was for economical and easy communication when living overseas.

Facestalking is a new phenomenon to emerge as a result of sites such as Facebook. The participants of the current study all alluded to engaging in this activity to varying degrees. This is not unique. Bobkoff (2007) claims:

> Today I think many people are surprised if someone hasn't looked them up. It's not quite socially acceptable to admit you've been researching the person. There is a disconnect between the acceptability of online snooping and the permissibility of using that information (Bobkoff 2007: 96).

As Fono & Raynes-Goldie (2006) suggest, the accumulation of some online friends is specifically based on 'someone you like to read'. There is a sense that while Facestalking is inevitable most people would not admit publicly to engaging in the activity. Lewis & West (2009) report two of their respondents admitted to stalking rather guiltily, but suggested everybody did it under the cover of their electronic cloaks. As a courtesy, Facestalking should not be one-sided. It is suggested that if people stalk the profiles of their 'friends' they should then post some information online so that their online friends might also learn things about them.

It is well established that adolescents use photographs as a way of engaging with their friends (boyd & Heer 2006; Sharples et al. 2009; Ofcom 2008). The results of the current study concur with this finding. When adult users post photos and make status updates it is not necessarily about promoting themselves, rather they are used as conversation starters. Photos and status updates are also important tools for strengthening bonds with offline friends, by publicly displaying offline interactions or posting an abstract comment or picture which only has meaning to a person or select group of friends.

Social Ties, Networks and Facebook

It is apparent from existing literature and the findings of this study that social ties are strengthened and social networks are expanded on Facebook. The adult Facebook users who participated in the research variously describe an environment built on trust and reciprocity. It is conceivable that these online social networks have the potential to increase users' social capital through consistent exposure to the activities of members of the 'friend' network.

Continued research is needed to evaluate the quality of social capital built online and to understand how individuals in an online community may work cooperatively to achieve shared goals and to deal with difficulties. Analysis of Facebook profiles and online friendship networks provides an authentic context through which the potential of online social networking to facilitate positive social and community engagement can be assessed.

It is concluded in this study, and has been found elsewhere, that online social networking strengthens existing relationships through action on the site and maintaining links (no matter how weak) with acquaintances and other contacts (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe 2007; Lewis & West 2009). Facebook keeps relationships alive which would otherwise have faded from existence. Importantly, none of this is done at the expense of damaging strong ties; instead one of the most valuable contributions of social networking sites is their potential to add trust to weak ties (Donath 2007)

Hampton et al. (2009) also acknowledge the value of Facebook in maintaining core social networks. Core ties have the potential to be highly influential in decision-making and exposure to ideas, issues, and opinions, being an important source of information (Donath 2007). Future research is needed to examine the extent to which online social networking promotes ideas and collaboration, which positively impact on the user's well-being and the possible transference of experiences across the person's online and offline networks.

Conclusion

Gefter (2007) asserts the distinction between real life and online is no longer clear-cut as the people making up online and offline interactions are largely the same. Divisions between online and offline social activity are not necessarily evident in contexts such as Facebook.

Key issues to emerge from this study include the value of the Facebook site to enable users to connect with people from both their past and their present and to maintain contact with close friends through to even the most distant of acquaintances. In this respect, Facebook is used as a supplementary tool to communicate, it does not replace face-to-face or telephone activity. It enables cheap, casual communication with people who would otherwise have lost contact, particularly those without the time or inclination to engage in more formal, traditional forms of communication.

The research set out to examine the specific online tools that are used by adults to socialise on Facebook. Data revealed that participants appreciated the convenience of posting a quick comment on another's wall to let them know they are thought of, but were also well aware that they were not actually writing to a single friend but instead making a statement to a whole network of people. Also, the adults in the current study did not use status updates to promote themselves, instead they were used as a way to engage friends, in effect, to start a conversation with them.

The use of the event function highlighted the nature of Facebook to facilitate face-to-face interactions, rather than detract from them. This was further evidenced in the posting of photos from events, which adults used as a bonding tool with other attendees at an event or with close friends who were absent from the event. Also, facestalking was viewed in a positive light, as it had the potential to strengthen ties between people, because individuals tended to learn more about each others interests and experiences through wall posts, status updates, events and photos, than they could ever have learned pre-Facebook era.

Overall participants in this study evidenced very positive experiences using Facebook and demonstrated strong commitment to their online social networking activity. Social ties were strengthened and social networks were expanded and more diverse as a result of Facebook activity.

Acknowledgements

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