

THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF FACEBOOK AMONG STUDENTS IN TIMIȘOARA

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Abstract: With more than 1 billion users on the planet and more than 7.8 million users in Romania, the social network Facebook enjoys great popularity, mainly among people under the age of 35. This paper presents the results of a study conducted among students in Timișoara regarding the place, importance and role Facebook has in everyday life.

Keywords: social network, Facebook, reasons for using Facebook

1. Introduction

In the course of time, the major technological breakthroughs have led to radical changes in the way people communicate and interact. The new forms of communication that have emerged over time have influenced human society significantly. The development of information technologies, redoubled by the extremely rapid growth of computing and communication techniques, creates a new vision of the way society evolves, the way in which its needs are identified and its directions of development are decided. Facebook navigation generates habits, and the behaviours and reasons for accessing this social platform are becoming more and more diverse. If in 2011, in Romania, there were 5.6 million Facebook users, every year the percentage has increased significantly, so that, in 2015, it reached 8 million users¹. Young people under the age of 35 years constitute almost 50% of the Facebook users in our country. Students represent the category less studied, as far as their behaviour of accessing and using this platform are concerned.

2. Methodological aspects

In conducting this study, we have chosen to use one of the fundamental methods in sociology, namely the sociological survey (quantitative research). The sociological survey, considered not to have a high degree of representativeness for the population studied, but rather significant results for the target population (the students in Timișoara), was carried on by applying online (Google docs) an anonymous questionnaire to 348 subjects coming from the existing universities in the city, the registered margin of error being of 5%.

The objectives of the study were:

1. Identification of the social platforms used by the students in Timișoara and their frequency of access;
2. Identification of the information users provide in their personal profile, of their behaviour of accessing and using Facebook;
3. Determination of the role played by Facebook in maintaining social relations.

A first issue aimed at by this study was to identify the main social platforms on which students hold accounts and establish their frequency of access. The question gave respondents a predefined list of answers, selected from a ranking of social networks in Romaniaⁱⁱ, and the possibility to include, where needed, an alternative response. As can be seen from the table below, the results confirm that, also for the students in Timișoara, Facebook remains the leader among social platforms, followed by YouTube and Google+. At the same time, Facebook ranks first also in the frequency of access, 85.6% of respondents stating that they access their accounts several times a day; YouTube being accessed 61.6% and Google+ 22.2%. Skype has also a large number of accounts, but its frequency of access is lower in comparison to the platforms mentioned above. It is surprising that a large number of respondents do not have accounts on Vimeo, Blogger, WordPress, Pinterest, LinkedIn etc.

	several times a day	once/day	3-5 times/week	1-2 times/week	3-4 times/month	less than once per month	do not have an account
1. Academia.edu	2.8%	0%	5.1%	0.5%	1.9%	9.7%	80.1%
2. Blogger	1.4%	0%	5.6%	1.4%	1.4%	6.5%	83.8%
3. Facebook	85.6%	7.4%	2.8%	0.5%	0%	0.5%	3.2%
4. Google+	22.2%	7.4%	8.3%	9.3%	7.4%	21.8%	23.6%
5. Instagram	13.4%	6.5%	6%	4.2%	2.3%	1.9%	65.7%
6. LinkedIn	1.9%	6%	7.4%	4.6%	2.3%	8.8%	69%
7. Pinterest	4.2%	4.2%	6.9%	2.3%	2.8%	6%	73.6%
8. Skype	11.6%	9.7%	9.7%	7.9%	12.5%	24.1%	24.5%
9. Trilulilu	1.4%	0.5%	5.6%	1.9%	3.7%	10.6%	76.4%
10. Twitter	3.7%	2.3%	5.6%	3.2%	2.8%	12.5%	69.9%
11. WordPress	1.9%	1.4%	5.6%	2.3%	2.3%	8.8%	77.8%
12. Vimeo	1.4%	0.5%	0.5%	1.4%	2.3%	3.2%	85.6%
13. YouTube	61.1%	13%	8.8%	1.9%	1.4%	1.4%	12.5%
Other, which?	WhatsApp, Tumblr, We heart it, Odnoklassniki, h5, yahoo messenger						

Table 1. Social platforms and their frequency of access

Most of the students included in the study have been using Facebook for about 3-5 years (32.9%), followed by those who have been using the social network for 2-3 years and by those who have been using it for more than 5 years (27.9% for each of these categories). Regarding the information provided in their Facebook user profile, most of the subjects give details about themselves, photo (91.7%), real name (87.6%), city (84.8%) and date of birth (82.9%), these representing the entries with the highest percentages. Low scores are encountered in the entries related to phone number (16.1%), hobbies (35.9%), religion (36.4%) and marital status (38.2%), as indicated in Figure 1.

The most important reasons for using Facebook are, as stated by the respondents (Figure 2), *to keep in touch with relatives, friends, acquaintances (92.2%), to keep in touch with classmates (90.3%) and for instant messaging (82%)*. It is important to note that the high number of respondents using Facebook to maintain relationships with classmates, associated with the relatively average number of those using it to maintain relationships with teachers, provide new perspectives on the use of Facebook in the academic environment. A possible solution would be to use Facebook as an e-learning platform.

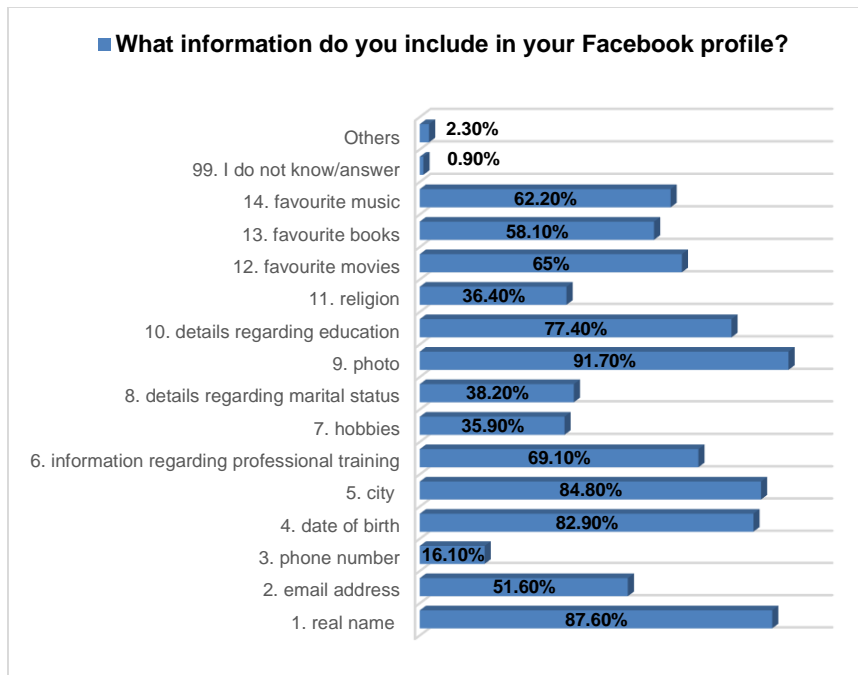


Figure 1. Information included in the Facebook user profile

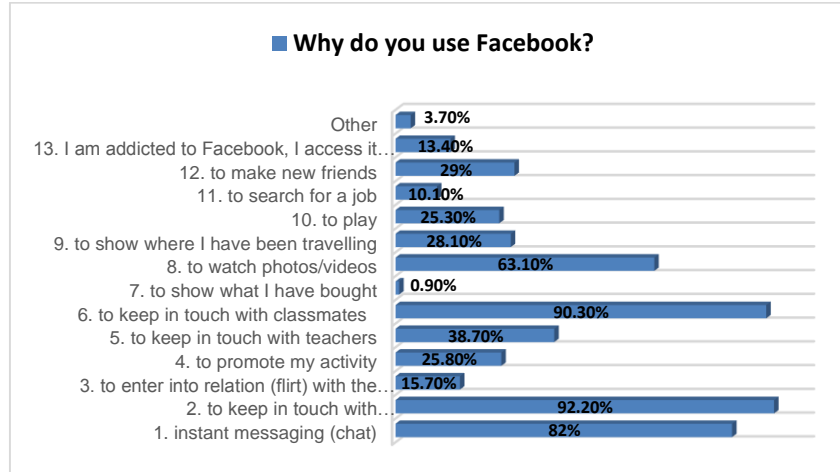


Figure 2. Facebook uses

As far as the behaviour of accessing is concerned, 73% of respondents declared they access their Facebook profile several times a day, followed by those who claim to be permanently connected (18%) and by those who access it once a day (4%). Most of the interviewed subjects spend daily on Facebook, on average, 1-2 hours (23%) or 2-4 hours (22%). These categories are followed by those who spend, on average, from 30

minutes to 1 hour (17%), from 4 to 6 hours (11%), less than 30 minutes (11%), and more than 6 hours (9%).

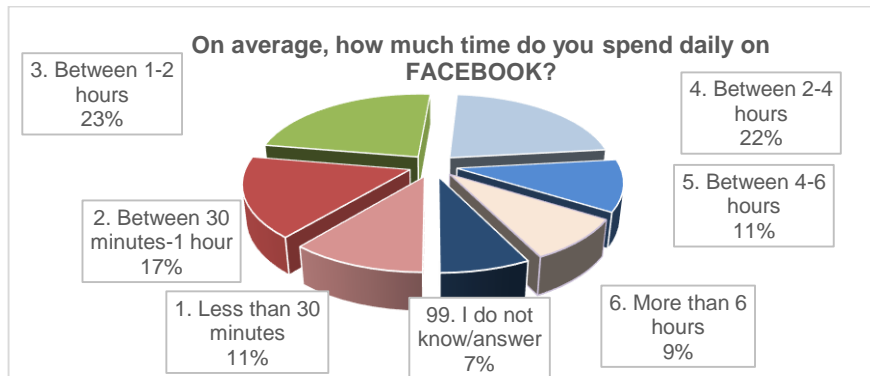


Figure 3. Time spent on Facebook

Most of Facebook users post information several times per week (36%) or several times per month (36%). Those who post daily represent about 10%. As can be seen in Figure 4, both during the week and on weekends, users access their Facebook account mostly during 8 p.m. and 10 p.m., 69.6% and 69.1%. Similar percentages have also those that access their Facebook account during 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. and during 10 p.m. and 12 p.m. During 8 a.m. and 10 a.m., weekdays, 3 times more users access their account, compared to those during weekends. There are significant differences also on weekends when, during 0 a.m. and 2 a.m., almost 2 times more persons access their account, compared to those during the week.

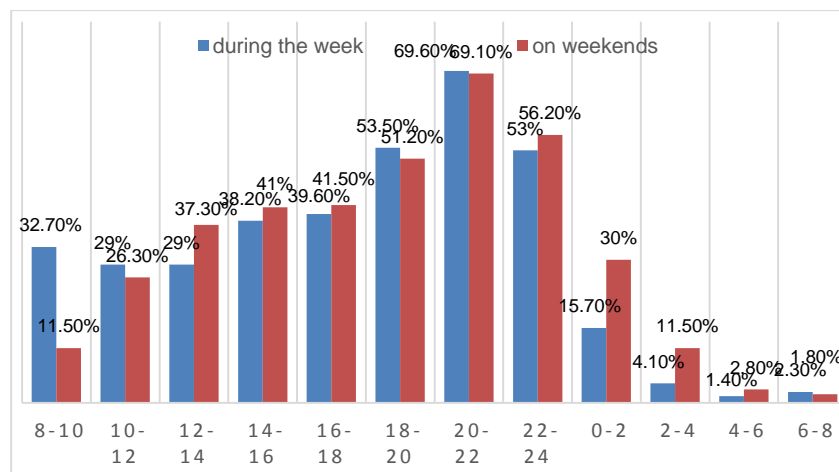


Figure 4. Time intervals of Facebook access

The number of persons with whom one can have sincere and solid relations is around 150, but the total number of friends and acquaintances that we have during lifetime is much higher. According to Robin Dunbar, in a study published in the early 2016ⁱⁱⁱ, "people can have even 500 or 1,000 friends on Facebook, but this number includes people that we would normally consider acquaintances, or people we know by

sight". Also in the case of the students included in this study, the largest number is represented by those whose list contains between 1000-2000 acquaintances (21%). High numbers have been found also in the case of those who have in their lists between 251-500 persons and between 501-750 persons, with 17% each. These are followed by those who have in their list between 751-1000 persons (14%). At the opposite edge, there are those who have in their personal list less than 100 persons on Facebook (4%) or between 101-150 persons (3%).

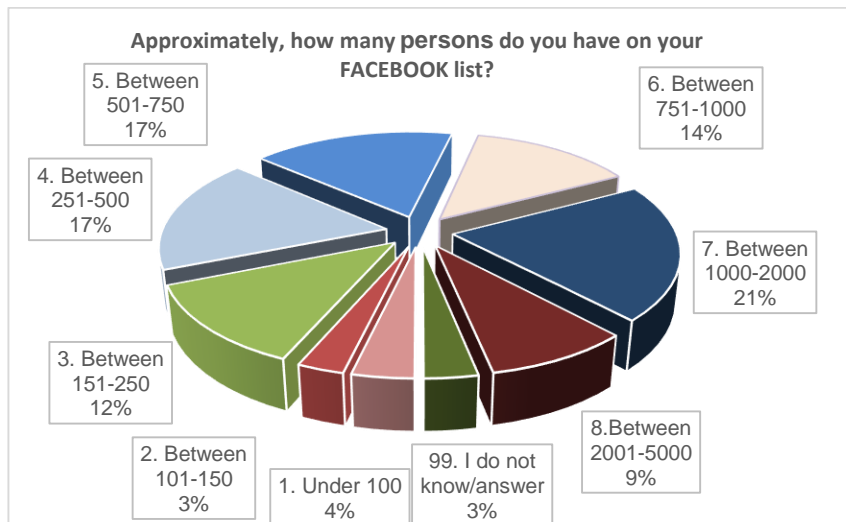


Figure 5. Average number of persons in the Facebook list

In the case of 62% of respondents, these include in their list also persons they have never met in real life, 29% answer they do not have such persons in their Facebook list, the difference to 100% being represented by non-answers. The communication with people respondents never met in real life, but only through Facebook, is relatively reduced (a few times a month for 27%). Only 6% of respondents communicate daily and 7% of them state they interact with unknown persons from their Facebook list 2-3 times per week. The scores regarding the number of persons with whom the respondents are friends in real life do nothing else but confirm Dunbar's theories on the number of people with whom one can establish strong social relationships.

3. Conclusions

Our research shows that the students in Timișoara are constant users of social platforms, especially Facebook, which still remains a tool *to keep in touch with relatives, friends, acquaintances, to keep in touch with classmates and for instant messaging*. It is also very important that students use Facebook to maintain relations with teachers, hence the need for future studies to observe the educational potential of this platform.

The personal profile of Facebook users is not always completed; there are many categories filled in to a small extent (phone number, hobbies, marital status, etc.).

Almost 10% of respondents do not have a profile picture and almost 14% do not use their real name. It would be useful to do a future analysis of these users in order to study the attitudes and motivations that lead to the access to this social network.

The highest frequency of accessing Facebook (several times per day) associated with the time spent on this platform (accumulated, almost half of the respondents spend on Facebook from 1 to 4 hours/day) lead us to the conclusion that there is a certain addiction to this social platform. The time interval when the students in Timișoara access Facebook during the week is in the evening, from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. As such, in order to make the most out of the posts, this interval is recommended for posting.

Even if the friends list includes people never met in real life, but only via the Internet, the interaction with this group is rather reduced. Whether Facebook is a support for maintaining or for building social relationships is another question that we intend to answer in future studies.

The present study has some methodological limitations. Sociological investigation of virtual spaces through well-known research methods and techniques involves taking into account several features specific to the new object of study. The lack of control over the respondent, the fact that there is no real contact between the operator and interviewed, makes the interrogative techniques more sensitive, with the risk of distortions in data recording, including the factual one.

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ⁱ <http://www.facebrands.ro/demografice.html>, accessed on February 10th, 2014.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.manafu.ro/2014/12/social-media-in-romania-decembrie-2014/>, accessed on February 10th, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dunbar, R. I. M. 2016, Do online social media cut through the constraints that limit the size of offline social networks?, Royal Society Open Science, January, 2016, available at <http://rsos.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/3/1/150292>, accessed on January 20th, 2016.