ADDICTED TO FACEBOOK?

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CHRISTIAN STUDENTS

When Justin Ellis asks his high school youth group members how they spend their time and money, the answers almost always involve technology. Some want a new iPod, others the latest iPhone app; or many simply are doing what all teens do: shopping and socializing. Only now the Internet—specifically Facebook—is the mall of choice.

In a recent study conducted among evangelical college students, one in every three said he or she spends one to two hours a day on Facebook; 12 percent report using it two to four hours each day; and 2.8 percent report usage at four to seven hours a day. That’s in addition to other forms of social media and electronic usage such as video games, blogs, e-mail and Internet browsing.

Digital World GPS Needed

Ellis, a youth leader at Free Christian Church in North Andover, Mass., and his colleagues say their experiences confirm the data from a recent, unprecedented study by two Gordon College faculty members, Bryan C. Auday, professor of psychology, and Sybil Coleman, professor of social work.

Puling off the Mask: The Impact of Social Networking Activities on Evangelical Christian College Students, A Self-Reported Study surveyed 1,342 students ages 18-27 on four evangelical Christian college campuses. The results suggest that youth workers and parents need to think strategically about how to help young people navigate their way through this new digital world.

“The Internet is neither good nor bad in and of itself; it’s how we use it that can be harmful,” said Mark Cannister, a YWJ contributor and professor of Christian ministries at Gordon College. “The downside of adolescents using social networking is that they can lose the ability to learn how to build healthy relationships in person when they isolate themselves with technology.”

In fact, more than half (54 percent) of Facebook users surveyed said they were neglecting important areas of their lives due to spending too much time using the Web site. More than 70 percent chose “socializing” as the number one reason for using Facebook, while 15.3 percent use it to “fill time.” Almost half the students surveyed said that engaging in social networking activities actually helped alleviate stress in their lives.

For Coleman and Auday, such responses worry them, especially because they say that during the critical years of young adulthood, students need to be mindful of their social and academic development. “Evidence (from this study) raises a red flag for us about their time management skills, possible neglect of important areas in students’ lives and psychological and spiritual health,” Coleman said.

Drawbacks of Facebook

It’s no surprise that of the social networking products within North America, not including e-mail, the most frequently visited site was Facebook, with approximately 93 percent reporting they had used it compared to only 27 percent for MySpace and 4 percent for Twitter. Blogs were read regularly by 26 percent of the students. Rarely do students stick to using just one social networking service; 42 percent report spending at least one to two hours texting messages.

Cannister also is concerned that young people aren’t learning delayed gratification because everything on the Web is designed to be immediate. “As a result, kids learn to expect instant gratification in every area of their lives,” he said. “This can be dangerous in areas such as relationships, academics or sports.”

The study also revealed the amount of time students devote to electronic activities can significantly impact their
“The amount of time students devote to electronic activities can impact significantly their academic performance, personal relationships, self-esteem and emotional well-being.”

Academic performance, personal relationships, self-esteem and emotional well-being. The use of social networking services enables participants to organize into groups that are allowed to share personal information via the Web.

“One of my youth told me the Internet is a place where he can redefine himself,” said Ellis. “Some kids are forming their identities based on how they socialize online and how they are perceived—through things such as Facebook profiles, chat rooms and Twitter pages.”

“Hello. My name is Bob, and I Use Facebook.”

According to Auday, it isn’t clear yet whether over-zealous use of computer activities will be accepted as a distinctive form of addiction. However, research shows that a surprisingly high percentage of Christian students who frequently engage in electronic usage report several negative consequences, but also mention many positive outcomes from Facebooking.

Many of the students surveyed offered a host of helpful and practical solutions themselves. One student, for instance, said that when she needs to spend time away from her electronic devices, she unplugs her computer and turns it off. She also will let her cell phone battery die and not recharge it until she needs to have it or until she “has time to waste.”

Barry Loy, vice president for Student Development and dean of students at Gordon College, suggests younger generations need mentoring in how to spend their time “especially in a culture that has so much free time available to them. The Internet is like anything—it can be evil, harmful or wonderful, depending on the time constraints placed on it.”

Still, Coleman and Auday’s data indicate the majority of students might not think they need such constraints, because they don’t necessarily believe their personal relationships have suffered as a result of spending significant time on social networking sites. In fact, one in three reports the time spent networking has improved the quality of his or her social relationships.

“I use Facebook to stay in contact with friends I have met who are living all over the world. Facebook helps me keep and enrich those relationships,” said Suzanne Hoafangale, a communication arts major from Peabody, Massachusetts. “Facebook also is bridging the gap between generations as all different age groups are joining social networking sites.”

**Fake Friends**

The fact that more than one-third of students surveyed said they believe social networking technology fosters relationships is interesting, particularly because more than 35 percent agreed their usage decreases time spent socializing face to face. So, either today’s students are not very self-aware, or the disconnect between virtual versus real time spent with others is blurry.

“As parents and youth leaders, we need to set limits. We need to have technology-free zones, and we need to provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction,” said Cannyter. “By incorporating physical activity into our lives, as well as theological discussions—live and in person—we can demonstrate the many benefits there are for not always being online.”

Ellis makes it a point to remind his youth who is boss. “You own technology, technology doesn’t own you.”

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