

**PULLING OFF THE MASK: THE IMPACT OF
SOCIAL NETWORKING ACTIVITIES ON EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN
COLLEGE STUDENTS**

A SELF-REPORTED STUDY
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Bryan C. Auday, Ph.D. and Sybil W. Coleman, M.S.W., M.Ed.
Gordon College

Brief Abstract

The amount of time college students devote to electronic social network activities (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, text messaging, etc.) has increased in recent years with technological advancement. This study used an online questionnaire to assess how much time evangelical Christian college students spend using Facebook along with similar electronic products. The authors were interested in exploring self reported detrimental consequences that could arise with excessive usage. In addition, an attempt was made to uncover any possible positive outcomes or benefits as a result of using the relatively new and popular social networking technology. 1,342 students who attended one of four Evangelical Christian Colleges within the U.S., during the spring of this year, participated in the study. Evidence was found that raises several concerns for individual users concerning time management, possible neglect of important areas of life, psychological and spiritual health.

Bryan C. Auday, Ph.D.
Professor & Chair
Department of Psychology
bryan.auday@gordon.edu
978.867.4824

Sybil W. Coleman, M.S.W., M.ed.
Professor
Department of Sociology and Social Work
sybil.coleman@gordon.edu
978.867.4734

Research Project Summary

The amount of time students devote to electronic activities (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, video games, etc.) can significantly impact students' academic performance, personal relationships, self-esteem, emotional well-being and spiritual health. One popular form of electronic activity involves the use of social networking services. Social networking enables participants to organize into groups that are allowed to share personal information via the web (e.g., blogs) or cell phones (e.g., text messaging). It is believed by some within the professional therapeutic community that individuals can develop a compulsion to continue to engage in electronic activities which mimics behaviors associated with other kinds of addictions (Griffiths, 1997, 1998). Although, at this time, it is unclear whether over-zealous use of computer-based activities will be formally accepted in the U.S. as a distinctive, unique form of addiction; what is clear from the study we have just completed is that a surprisingly high percentage of people who frequently engage in electronic activities report a plethora of troubling negative consequences. Ironically, our study also reveals that a sizable minority mention several positive outcomes related to the time that is spent on Facebook or text messaging their friends.

It was *not* the purpose of this research project to determine whether or not excessive engagement in social networking activities qualifies as a formal addiction. Some professionals believe social networking addiction should be included in future revisions of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual, which is the definitive book of psychiatric diagnoses. Instead, this study was intended to collect reliable, self-reported data from Christian college students on the amount of time spent using social network products such as Facebook. More importantly, we wanted to learn more about both the negative and positive outcomes and consequences associated with using these products.

Much of the early research regarding computer usage reported anecdotal information gleaned from unsystematic methods. Research in the 1990s preceded the exponential growth of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. This study reports data collected in the spring of this year which is intended to more accurately reflect current trends in college student behavior.

Research Methodology

Students enrolled in four private, Christian liberal arts colleges, located in different areas of the U.S. were sent an email inviting them to participate in a study regarding their usage of various electronic activities. The email contained a link to an online site that contained an anonymous questionnaire. In order to encourage students to participate, they were given the option of entering his/her name into a drawing for a gift. To protect participant anonymity, the process of entering a name into the drawing was not linked with the questionnaire. Thus, it was not possible to match a participant's name with any data he/she might have contributed.

1,342 students participated in the study. Of the four Christian colleges represented, at least twenty-five percent of their overall enrollment completed the questionnaire. Seventy

percent of all participants were women. There is an equal representation from the four classes of undergraduates (freshmen, sophomores, etc.). Nearly all of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 27 years of age.

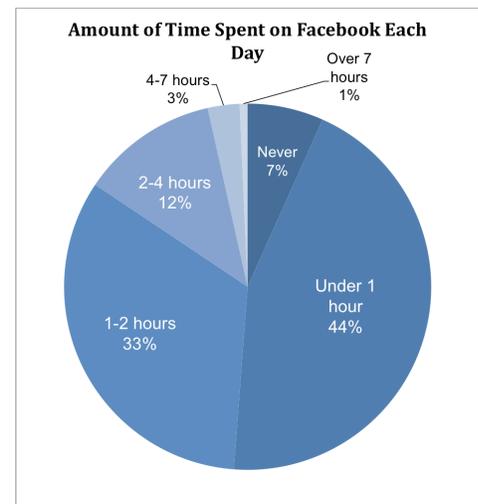
An 83 item electronic questionnaire was developed and made available to participants using SurveyMonkey. On average, the instrument could be completed in 15 minutes. Questions were designed to address the following areas:

- The amount of time participants engage in a specific electronic activity during an average day
- The number of years participants have used a specific electronic product
- The number one reason for using a specific electronic product
- The impact (both positive and negative) of using electronic products on areas of personal life and relationships
- The ability or inability to stop usage
- The possible conflict of usage with personal values

Study Results & Conclusions

Overall Usage:

What might come as a surprise to some people is the sheer amount of time that students spend engaged in social networking activities. Students spend significant time just using Facebook. When asked how much total time is spent using Facebook, during an average day, over one third (33.2%) of the students report between 1 – 2 hours. Added to this is another group (12.1%) who report using Facebook daily between 2 – 4 hours. Two additional groups of compulsive users report between 4 – 7 hours of use (2.8%) and a group of 9 students (.7%) who reported more than 7 hours of daily usage (see Figure 1). One must keep in mind that these daily totals do not reflect additional time students might be sending text messages, reading each others blogs, and using MySpace or Twitter.



In terms of the big players in social networking products—not counting email—within North America (MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and reading blogs), the most frequently visited site was Facebook with approximately 93% reporting they had used it compared to only 27% for MySpace and 4% for Twitter. Blogs were read regularly by 26% of the students. One must keep in mind that Twitter has received a lot of attention in recent months from various media outlets after this study was completed. It is our suspicion that Twitter has rapidly gained greater acceptance among college students and that our data might not reflect current trends for this particular product.

A close look at the data reveals that students regularly engage in several social networking activities. Rarely do they just stick to using just one product such as

Facebook. After partitioning those respondents who indicated that they spent at least 1 – 2 hours a day on Facebook, we found that nearly 42% of them reported spending at least 1 – 2 hours text messaging. These results are striking in that we have not included time students spend with other electronic activities such as talking on the phone, playing video games, watch videos on YouTube etc.

Based on our data, an estimate of the overall time students spend on a weekly basis engaged in social networking activities was an average of 18.6 hours—the equivalent of a part-time job. An average score does not give us insight into the variability that exist among individual users. Our data indicates there is a group of students (14%) who spend between 21-28 hours each week engaged in social networking. There is another group which makes up about 11% of the sample we tested who spend approximately 31.5 – 49 hours each week networking. Lastly, there is a hardcore group of users who account for five percent of the sample who appear to be engaged in social networking for 50 hours a week or more. These results are surprising in that we have not included any time that students are reporting they are talking on the phone.

When testing for gender differences our data revealed that women report higher levels of usage with Facebook, text messaging and talking on the phone than their male counterparts. Men report spending more time playing video games than women.

In response to the question: “What is your #1 reason for using MySpace, Facebook, blogs, and/or Twitter?” Over 70% selected “socializing” as their top choice. It is interesting to note that 15.3% selected “to fill time.” This might indicate that some Christian students have not developed a theology of time which would amount to a biblical understanding of how our day should be spent and how much time should be devoted to self-satisfying activities or entertainment.

Some Perceived Negative Outcomes

Students reported that they felt their engagement with several kinds of electronic activities led to detrimental consequences. Over half (54%) of Facebook users reported that they were neglecting important areas in their life due to spending too much time using the product. In contrast, only 14.1% of those who engage in text messaging believed they were neglecting important areas in their life. Approximately one in five students either agreed or strongly agreed with the question: “I find social networking with others so stimulating and rewarding that I find it hard to stop.” After a student has stopped using an electronic activity, 12.3% reported agreement with a statement that they feel a need to return to it as soon as possible. If one were to define addiction as “any behavior you cannot stop, regardless of the consequences,” 12.7% answered “yes” affirming that they believe they are addicted to some form of electronic activity; another 8.7% report that they are “unsure.”

In response to the question: “Sometimes I feel guilty or anxious about the amount of time I am spending using electronic devices,” over 50% chose “agree” or “strongly agree.” When asked if their level of engagement with electronic activities, at times, caused a conflict with their Christian values, over 21% were in agreement.

- *Electronic devices often leave me stressed and wondering where my time went.*
- *Throughout college, Facebook has become a procrastination tool, both purposefully and subconsciously. I would have saved myself a LOT of stress in completing assignments if I didn't facebook as much...*
- *Sometimes it makes me antisocial in real life situations.*
- *I have found that Facebook and YouTube can be distracting from more important tasks, like homework and face-to-face interactions.*
- *There are times when I feel like it eats up my time.*
- *Some things can be misunderstood when they are not communicated face to face. In that sense, yes I think they have caused some problems.*
- *Occasionally social networking devices such as Facebook make face to face interactions a little difficult. People interact differently through electronics than they do when actually with each other and sometimes this can be hard to adjust to when you're not certain what the social rules are.*
- *I spend time that I could be spending outside, with people, or with God, instead [I'm]staring at a computer screen having conversations that much of the time mean little.*

Some Perceived Positive Outcomes

College students did report several positive consequences from engaging in social networking activities. Over 43% believe that it has helped alleviate stress in their lives. Overall, the data indicates that the vast majority of students do not believe that their personal relationships have suffered as a result—even in instances of significant time usage. In fact, over 35% report that their time using networking activities has improved the quality of their social relationships, whereas only 25% believe that it has not (the remainder are “neutral”). These results which speak to the benefits to maintaining and fostering relationships are interesting in light of another question where over 35% agreed that their usage decreases time spent socializing face-to-face.

Approximately one out of ten students reported that engagement in all types of electronic activities (not just social networking products) helps them refrain from possible harmful or destructive activities.

For an open-ended question that asked students how these activities enhance their life, here are some common quotes:

- *I am able to connect with friends and family for free. If I call them and go over my limits, I get hit with huge charges.*
- *My electronic activities allow me to keep in touch with friends who are far away, as well as allowing me to be in constant communication with friends who are close, but busy. We all have such busy lives.*
- *I use them mostly to stay in contact with friends I have had that are living all over the world. So in that aspect, I get to keep and enrich those relationships.*
- *I am able to talk to someone online without being nervous. I am a shy girl, so talking to someone online first helps me open up a little. I am glad for that.*

Measures Taken to Cut Back on Use

One impetus for this study was to gather data that would either confirm or disconfirm numerous anecdotal reports we had heard from our students about how the internet had changed their life. We anticipated that some of the change would be perceived to be positive and some detrimental. Since we frequently heard from students that they were finding it difficult to pull themselves away from the computer or cell phone, we thought it might be wise to ask them what measures they had tried to help them cut back on the amount of time spent using electronic devices. Here are some quotes that express themes that emerged countless times.

- *I usually won't go on the computer/internet/phone more than two times a day, unless I'm doing homework and/or need to relay a message to someone.*
- *I chose to fast [from] Facebook for a month and realized that I could easily live without it. Now the amount of time I am online is much decreased, including how often I check emails and the amount of time that I am on instant messaging.*
- *I try to keep my computer off, or stay out of my apartment if I have work to do. Not having it in front of me helps me to stay off of social networking websites (Facebook).*
- *If I really need to spend time away from my electronic devices, I will unplug my computer and turn it off and let my cell phone die and not recharge it until I need it or have time to waste.*
- *I remind myself that the people around me are much more important than the cell phone in my pocket or the message on my Facebook wall. When I have time to respond to these things without isolating myself from friends and peers, then I will respond.*
- *Having my friends be accountability partners. Every time I want to go on Facebook, I stop myself and do something else.*
- *I have Facebook "fasts" for a week regularly.*
- *Trying to personally devote my time to not looking at my phone but at the person or people I'm with. Realizing that it's rude in a sense to be ignoring the people I'm around. I try to not look at my phone or engage in texting or phone contact if it's not appropriate at the time.*
- *I TRY to only check my Facebook once a day.*
- *Go to the library and leave my computer behind.*
- *Don't turn my computer on until after I have spent time with the Lord*
- *I am trying to limit myself to only going on the computer three times a day, and then only spending 20 minutes at the most each time.*
- *I go to places where I won't have a wireless internet connection available so I can't be online*
- *I have deleted my Facebook a couple times - and now turn my phone off if I am with friends and don't NEED my phone.*
- *Getting out more with friends, leaving campus and going to the mall suppressing my shyness and making new friends and making an effort to be with them and maintain a healthy and nourished relationship.*
- *I used to use e-mail incessantly, but now I only check it twice a day.*

- *I turn my internet off when I am doing homework on my computer.*
- *I have self-limited myself and have tried to stick to these limits by talking about it with others and keeping accountable to those people*
- *got a girlfriend*

Study Implications

Academics. It appears that a high percentage of students who attend Christian colleges spend a significant amount of time engaged in social networking activities. These results indicate that they could be running into problems with properly allocating time for studying, writing up research papers, reviewing notes, reading their texts, as well as other academic responsibilities. Students commonly report that it is difficult to terminate social networking behaviors. Just like the rest of us, students have a limited number of hours in a day. Four-year undergraduate private colleges can be quite challenging and place high demands on students' time in order for them to be successful. One important implication of this study is that excessive usage of electronic products could undermine their academics while in college.

Psychological issues.

Students often report that it is difficult for them to stop using specific social networking products. When they do manage to pull themselves away, many feel an urgency to immediately go back to using it. After reading a definition for addiction, nearly 13% of students reported they believe they could be addicted. Along with the compulsion to use electronic products comes the guilt associated with areas of life that are being neglected. Guilt can lead to several additional forms of psychological distress. Students need to be aware that spending excessive time engaged in social networking activities could bring about psychological maladies. At the same time, it needs to be reported that some students use social networking as a means to escape reality and to reduce stress. We believe that it future research should explore the short-term and long-term consequences associated with social networking behaviors.

Social/relational issues.

Students overwhelmingly expressed the positive benefits of having access to social networking products. The convenience of being able to quickly communicate with family members and friends with a relatively low cost to one's budget makes it very attractive. Students repeated over and over that it is easy for them to stay in contact with people who have very busy schedules and would be difficult to contact by phone as well as friends who live great distances away. It is interesting to us that very few students reported that maintaining a relationship online could compromise or diminish the quality of the relationship. We also see the overall benefits of being able to communicate with people within an online environment. However, we have questions regarding the skill set that is needed to maintain and nurture relationships. Might relational skill sets be different for online and offline relationships? Will wide use of social networking sites alter a generation's ability to effectively communicate with people face-to-face? These are issues that we would like to see explored further.

An additional positive outcome includes the observation that some individuals find social networking actually facilitates conflict resolution in relationships characterized by disparate power dynamics and/or shyness. Thoughts and feelings are expressed more clearly in the absence of the emotional stress generated in the presence of the other person(s). Beginning steps to boundary setting are made possible without interruption.

Spiritual issues.

There are two concerns that flow out of this study that could have significant implications for the spiritual development of young adults. First, with high academic demands placed on students in private Christian colleges, time can quickly become a scarce resource. As significant numbers of students become drawn into the cyber-world of social networking, some will fall victim to a deleterious side-effect—the inability to turn it off or shut it down. As made clear earlier, there are sizable groups of students who will end up spending the equivalent of a full-time job, while in school, engaged in networking activities during an average week. During the critical years of young adulthood, Christian college students need to be mindful that academic and social development are important, yet incomplete in terms of nurturing the whole person. The spiritual condition also needs attention. One implication of this study concerns the allocation of time to the development of all three areas. Will the behaviors that are associated with spiritual development, such as prayer, Bible reading and study, attending religious services, serving others, impacting society in areas of peace and justice, etc. become short-changed due to the lack of time and discipline on the part of busy college students?

A second concern involves the apparent conflict with Christian values that have been acknowledged by students. Since over twenty-one percent identify with the conflict, this is something that needs to be addressed. Whether the conflict with Christian values arises due to important areas of life that are getting neglected or the lure of visiting pornographic websites, or the wasting of one's valuable time, the impact of engaging electronic activities could have an impact on spiritual development.

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Note:

This research project, which employed a confidential, anonymous questionnaire, received approval from an Institutional Review Board and was found to be in compliance with APA ethical guidelines.