Student interactions on Facebook: how Facebook student groups can enrich student's university experience

Lyudmila Boykova[1]

Abstract

The article explores the possibilities that Facebook student groups (FSG) offer as complementary educational tool for expanding student's curricular and extracurricular activities and their overall academic involvement. Furthermore we examine the nature and dynamics of communication and interactions in six FSGs in order to outline the main topics of discussion depending on the type and the size of the group. The results show that the online communication varies in intensity and type of generated content according to the type of FSG (a group for a single course or for the whole faculty etc.). However the online interactions are strongly related to academic matters and thus could support students learning experiences.

Keywords: ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), Social Networks, Facebook Student Groups, Education

[1] PhD student, School of Advanced Social Sciences, Nova Gorica, Slovenia, l_boykova@abv.bg.

Introduction

Researchers from different areas of science explore the various possibilities offered by the online groups and communities especially in the processes of transforming online participation into offline real life activities. Users participate in diverse types of online groups such as online support groups for patients (White and Dorman 2001, Eysenbach et al. 2004, Bartlett and Neil 2011, Greene et al. 2011), online learning by individuals and groups (Salmon 2013, Lim et al. 2014, Kaye 2012, Lampe & al. 2011), online communities based on brands (McWilliam 2012, Laroche et al. 2012, Brodie et al. 2013) etc. Some online social groups resemble street corner settings or park squares where practically anyone may show up and there is little expectation of personal commitment or sustained interaction (Butler et al. 2007). Social interaction may occur in both private online activities like communication between people with preexisting social ties (in order to sustain relationships) or in corporate setting where employees use corporate networks to organize work, ask for help or exchange advice (Butler et al. 2007).

In regards to their genesis and as a result from our empirical work we defined three main types of online groups:

- Groups born offline that later create an online group (many of the online student groups).

- Groups born online that later have meetings offline (local groups created to preserve a local historical artifact that later organize many offline activities).

- Groups born online that keep all their activities mainly online (illness groups and fan groups where the participants discuss issues and exchange information but rarely engage in offline interactions with other members of the same online group. This is often due to geographic distance between the members, desire to maintain certain degree of anonymity, privacy concerns etc.)

Many larger online groups have a complex internal structure, roles, and explicit conventions, whereas others seem more ad-hoc and informal but all groups are faced with the communal challenge of developing and maintaining their existence as an identifiable social entity (Butler et al. 2007). They all face the challenge not only of acquiring new members but also of engaging the existing user base in the mission and purposes of the online group. In some cases online groups could be supported by commercial ventures using paid employees although even in this cases volunteers do much of the community work (Butler et al. 2007). This principle is close to offline charity and political campaigns where a larger portion of the work is carried out by volunteers. An important difference is that in the offline campaigns the volunteers should gather at a given place at a given time which could prove to be an obstacle for people

who would like to volunteer but don't have time in the designated time slots or are unable to travel to the location of the activities. The online groups allow group work in asynchronous environment where all volunteers could contribute at a convenient time and from great distances. The possibility of online social interaction is provided by variety of technical tools and mechanisms to support online social interaction in groups: centralized mailing lists, allow members to send email messages to all group members, electronic bulletin boards such as Freenets and Usenet allow anyone with Internet access to post to a designated group location where others can read and comment on those messages, commercial service providers like AOL support forums for their members, other tools support real-time chat, group message archives, and links to related groups and members' individual web pages (Butler et al. 2007). The cloud platforms and Social Network Sites offer vast possibilities for the creation of open and closed groups for joined work on projects both with private and corporate purposes. Some corporate and NGO actors prefer to develop specific and unique online spaces for group work, other take advantage of the free possibilities offered by the existing public online networking platforms. Although tools and technical infrastructure make online group communication possible and support the group's interactions with the outside world its social behavior sustains these groups over time (Butler et al. 2007).

According to Butler (2007) for the successful development of online groups four kinds of social behavior are necessary:

- people must tend the tools themselves by managing software versions, keeping address files up to date, and so on.

- People also must recruit members to replace those who leave.

- They must manage social dynamics.

- They must participate.

Without these group maintenance activities, even sophisticated tools and infrastructure will not sustain viable online groups (Butler et al. 2007).

But who are the people ready to invest time and effort needed to perform community maintenance activities? "Members who regularly read messages or provide content for others expend real time and attention doing so. People who seek to mange group interaction find that controlling and encouraging members' behavior takes time, demands attention, and, in some cases, exacts an emotional toll. Promoting the community and maintaining its infrastructure also require that people take time from other activities. Thus, a key challenge in developing viable online community involves inducing people to perform these activities." (Butler et al. 2007:8).

Micro economic theory considers as an important question how society may benefit from unintended individual actions. When postulating his famous principle of the "invisible hand of the market" Adam Smith

clarifies that the mechanisms behind this free auto-regulation of the markets is related to the fact that individuals in their efforts and desires to maximize their own gains in a free market economy may provide beneficial effects for the society as a whole even when the individuals have no benevolent intentions. In a similar way the people who are formally-designated leaders or not, presumably do community building work because they expect to derive benefits from it directly or indirectly (Butler et al. 2007) and as a result the whole group benefits. As Butler (2007) points out the desired benefits could be purely non-material in nature such as seeking escape, sociable interaction, boosting self-esteem, seeking future employment etc. or purely altruistic (help a group or cause).

Facebook groups

There are myriads of Facebook groups that range from strictly business oriented groups to purely leisure related groups:
• Facebook illness groups
  ➢ Diabetes Macedonia
    https://www.facebook.com/groups/106160818612/

  ➢ Parents of Children With Type 1 Diabetes In The UK
    https://www.facebook.com/groups/18414742527/

• Facebook student groups

➢ International Economic Relations - University of Plovdiv`08 *https://www.facebook.com/groups/73784933714/*

➢ Студентски Клуб на Политолога (Students Club of Political Science) *https://www.facebook.com/politology?fref=ts*

• Facebook fan groups
➢ Game of Thrones Macedonia *https://www.facebook.com/groups/gotmacedonia/*

• Facebook local community groups
➢ Plovdiv / Пловдив *https://www.facebook.com/groups/mdkbg/*

➢ "Да спасим нашата улица "Цар Иван Асен II" ! ("Save our street" Tsar Ivan Asen II!) *https://www.facebook.com/groups/297040417092736/?fref=ts*

• Facebook company groups
➢ MCDONALDS CREW *https://www.facebook.com/groups/iroquoismcdonalds/*

• Facebook brand related groups
➢ Coca Cola Aluminum Bottles *https://www.facebook.com/groups/124202907618368/*

• Facebook hobby groups
➢ Photography and Fine Art Community *https://www.facebook.com/groups/361196370669495/*

Many of the groups are closed and have administrators in order to preserve the information shared between the members of the group. All groups have different number of participants (from 3-4 to hundreds and thousands of members). Although Facebook facilitates the communication within the group some users share the opinion that they are exchanging views with people they regularly speak to already, as well as a particular demographic group, such as students/social activists/social media people, etc. rather than a wide spectrum of the affected population (when using Facebook groups for activism) (Zhang 2013:265).

Researchers from different areas of science try to explore the nature and implications of Facebook groups like   Facebook illness groups (Greene et al. 2011, Bender, Jimenez-Marroquin & Jadad 2011, Zhang, He & Sang 2013, De la Torre-Díez, Díaz-Pernas & Antón-Rodríguez 2012) Facebook brand-related group participation (Chu 2011, Gummerus, Liljander, Weman & Pihlström 2012, Jahn & Kunz 2012) Facebook groups supporting political campaigns (Fernandes et al. 2010, Vitak et al. 2011, Conroy, Feezell & Guerrero 2012). Those groups have both positive and negative outcomes for the participants and eventually influence the offline life of the users.

Facebook student groups (FSGs)

Facebook is widely-adopted by students having the potential to support their academic life (Lampe & al. 2011, Roblyer et al. 2010, Dabbagh & Kitsantas 2011, Junco 2012). Students integrate social media in their academic experience both formally and informally (Dabbagh & Kitsantas 2011:4). What is the real life impact of SNS activities on student's academic life? Facebook activities support collaborations between students and collaborative sensemaking on academic projects and stimulate student's co-curricular activities (Lampe & al. 2011, Junco 2012). These positive outcomes are related to the fact that "Facebook provides multiple communication opportunities, both public and private, broadcast and targeted, lightweight and more substantive" (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2011:17).

The article presents a conducted examination not on the overall online activities of students but on the importance of activities related to participation in FSGs. Facebook encourages individuals to convert latent to weak ties and enables them to broadcast requests for support or information bringing together those with shared interests (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2011). This phenomenon is supported by the fact that Facebook also provides a rich collection of social context cues, such as mutual friends or shared interests, which can guide conversations to socially relevant topics and enable participants to find commonground (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2011). Previous research suggests that students who use FSGs in their academic experience are better engaged in the learning process and perform better at examinations (Cheston,

Flickinger and Chisolm 2013,L. Boykova 2015, Bowman and Akcaoglu 2014).

Students tend to participate in Facebook groups when they realize a similarity of their values and the group values (Cheung, Chiu and Lee 2011). Individuals high on the trait of Extraversion were found to belong to significantly more Facebook groups and this could be explained by the fact that extraverts are more likely to engage in social activities (Ross et al. 2009:582). In the case of political participation Vitak et al. (2011) found that "Facebook is not inspiring non-active people to run suddenly for political office, but at the same time, it is not replacing other types of political participation. Instead, it serves an additive role to other forms of participation by providing users with another outlet through which they can engage in these activities or develop the skills necessary to do so in the future" (Vitak et al. 2011:7). Thus we consider that Facebook's main role is not the recruitment of new members for the student groups, but more - a tool for empowerment of the already recruited members who need consistent support and motivation to participate in the real life activities of the group.

Purpose of the study: Previous studies report positive outcomes of using Facebook in academic environment. However few researches address the question how the type of Facebook student group affects its influence on students' academic experience. In our previous work we found out that participation in FSGs is common for students in Bulgaria

(L. Boykova 2015). In this paper we try to identify how students use different types of FSGs to support their academic life? How students respond to different type of content on the FSG pages? Who maintains the communication on the FSG pages?

Method

Sampling process

The main purpose of the research was to investigate in depth the phenomenon of participation in different types of FSGs. For this reason the researcher tried to identify as many as possible FSGs in two Faculties at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" (it was not possible to be sure of the definitive number of existing groups as some of the FSGs are hidden), then the researcher requested to be admitted as a member of the identified FSGs. Finally the researcher was included in six FSGs and was able to examine thorough Web content analysis (WebCA) the content of the FSG pages for the period October 2013-September 2014 (1 academic year).

Web content analysis (WebCA) of FSG pages

In order to outline the tendencies in the communication practices in the FSGs and the power relations within the groups a qualitative research method (Web Content Analysis) was applied to study the six FSGs pages.

14

Content analysis can be defined as "the study of recorded human communications, such as books, websites, paintings and laws." (Babbie 2010:530). It is largely used in the process of analyzing content from media publications such as journals, magazines, etc. Quantitative content analysis measures quantitative indicators like word frequencies, key word frequencies, space measurements in an attempt to make valid inferences about the intended purpose of the messages. Qualitative content analysis consists in the application of qualitative approach towards the classification and analysis of different types of content (speech, written text, videos, interviews, images). In order to draw valid inferences from the content the classification procedure has to be consistent: "Different people should code the same text in the same way" (Weber 1990:1). The validity, inter-coder reliability and intra-coder reliability are subject to intense methodological research efforts over long years (Krippendorff 2004). When is content analysis appropriate? Krippendorff (1980:51) notes that "[m]uch content analysis research is motivated by the search for techniques to infer from symbolic data what would be either too costly, no longer possible, or too obtrusive by the use of other techniques". Moreover modern content analysis targets both formal aspects and latent meaning content (Mayring 2004:266)

But is content analysis suitable for web material such as Facebook profile pages? The nature of web materials poses certain questions for the researcher as they are permanently editable. "They may be remixed, migrated into new contexts and meanings, processes which are often

also the offset of the development of new genres, such as the migration of texting into status updates on Facebook and into tweets." (Brügger & Finnemann 2013:73) Having in mind that "[a]ll sorts of digital materials are in principle permanently editable and reproducible in ways distinct from former media" (Brügger & Finnemann 2013:73) we recorded all the available data for the time range 01.10.2013-30.06.2014 as it was displayed at the point of time of the gathering of data (01.07.2014-31.07.2014). While examining Web materials we also had in mind that they are born with a particular interface which comes with the materials, even if it is separated and modifiable, but still a part of the materials (Brügger & Finnemann 2013:73). On the other hand digitized materials (ex. online databases of articles that are originally created offline) are on their side only accessible through interfaces, which are not part of the source, but defined by researchers and archivists as part of the chosen digitization strategy (Brügger & Finnemann 2013:73). That is why we had to collect the whole body of information on the FSGs profiles for a period of one year and then code the materials using appropriate computer software (ATLAS) without any prior indication what themes we could expect to arise from those texts and the other Facebook materials.

Content analysis could be considered appropriate for the research of online communication practices because it allows inferences from the whole profile and all the activities of young people that are "recorded" in the online world through different types of content. At the same time

the SNS offer to their users a plethora of opportunities to express themselves through text, video, images, links, likes, etc. that are relatively new and specific to the Information Age. For that reason a broader definition of content analyses is needed in order to process correctly the new types of content generated by users. Web Content Analysis (WebCA) is a pluralistic paradigm proposed by Herring (2010) in which insights from paradigms such as discourse analysis and social network analysis are operationalized and implemented within a general content analytic framework. Web content analysis considers content to be various types of information "contained" in new media documents, including themes, features, links, and exchanges, all of which can communicate meaning.

Figure 1: Web Content Analysis Framework
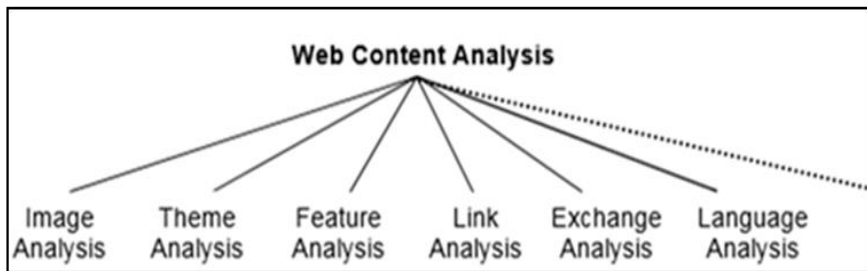
Source: Herring (2010:12). Web content analysis: Expanding the paradigm

WebCA is not strictly defined but it suggests an approach exceeding some limitations of classical content analyses. For the purposes of the investigations of communication in online environment where hyperlinks and exchanges are new forms of content that requires new methods of exploration.

In the paper we developed a research framework for web content analysis based on Herrings paradigm as follows:

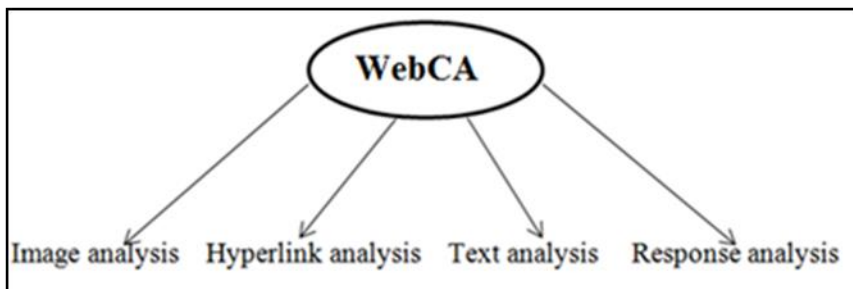Figure 2: Expanded Web Content Analysis Framework

Image analysis studies the nature of the image content- pictures from real life events or digitally created image content (what kind of images they used, how often they upload/change them etc.), overall observations on the FSG page theme and profile photo etc. In this section we analyzed also video content.

Hyperlink analysis includes how many likes the FSG page has, are there links to other pages on the Facebook profile, how many participants the group has and other types of hyperlinks that exist on the page and could provide meaningful data for the researched topics. The study of hyperlinks is essential as they are the fundamental glut of theWeb, because it connects the visual present with the immense array of hidden materials both within a given site and between sites (Brügger & Finnemann 2013). The hypertextual relations may vary due to the timescale (new links can always be added) and due to authorship relations (existing links and nodes may be modified and new connections and nodes may be added over the years by different authors) (Brügger & Finnemann 2013:71). "Digitized and digital born materials are normally embedded in hypertextual, interactive, and multimodal contexts, defined on the level of the interface and characterizing both standalone machines and networked machines. Digital born materials also include these features in the grammatical repertoire. Hypertext, interactivity, and multimodality are potentially present in all media, but in forms which are particular for each medium." (Brügger & Finnemann 2013:70) When searching for hyperlinks we searched for trans-site and in-site applications, such as the organization of a site due to a particular menu structure, and for establishing a multiplicity of routes and passages between elements within any given site and between elements on other sites (Brügger & Finnemann 2013:71).

19

Hyperlinks also differ in their semantic nature as they can establish a relation within a work, between works, or between elements in different works, they can be used for associative browsing or goal-oriented navigation, they may be part of a lexical relation, part of the menu structure of a site, or part of fictional relations, thus, they can be motivated due to different criteria for consistency and overarching ideas (Brügger & Finnemann 2013:71). Hyperlink relations may also be motivated as more or less strong author-defined suggestions or as optional choices due to the individual user's motivations, closely related to the variety of possible forms of interactivity. In the end any kind of search due to any kind of search criterion is hypertextual in nature (Brügger & Finnemann 2013:71). That is why when we use hyperlink analysis we will not only count the number of hyperlinks but also their nature and the information they provide for the readers.

Text analysis – all types of written texts in forms of posts, comments, messages, discussions that are viewable on the group profile. Due to the particularities of the platform some messages that are exchanged in the form of private chat will stay hidden from us and won't be part of the data for the content analysis. We consider that the number of those messages is fairly low as the group engages more in open for everyone debates than for private messaging hence we consider that they are not a challenge for the reliability of our analysis.

Response analysis - after the content analysis of the posts and images on the Facebook group pages we measured the number of responses that different types of posts accumulate in time by measuring three important variables: the number of Likes, the number of Shares and the number of Comments every post acquires. We measure those three variables as they help a post to become noticeable and diffused on a larger scale. Furthermore the number of likes every post gathers could be considered to suggest support of the audience towards its content, the number of shares shows how this post is spreading in the social network and the number of comments indicates the debate that it initiates. The most conventional form of interactivity is when a reader is allowed to comment on a text on a given Web page (Brügger & Finnemann 2013:71). Each one of these three indicators is measured and analyzed separately as they measure different aspects of the online popularity of a post.The response rate of every post on Facebook and the daily creation of self-generated content is important as the network algorithm prioritizes newer items on each individual's "news feed" in order to show up-to-date content (Manjoo 2011). Furthermore when one item is "shared" and "liked" by many people it becomes more noticeable and diffuses on a larger scale.

For the content analysis of the recorded data was used content analysis software (ATLAS). We consider that computer-supported qualitative data analysis is not an independent qualitative method, but rather includes data organization techniques that depend on the particular

research issue and may be integrated into a variety of models for hermeneutic work with texts (Kelle 2004:278).

Results

Profile of the FSG pages

- A Student Interest Group (~ 340 members at the period of the analysis) is formed by students (current and already graduated) and lecturers interested in the science of language. Their work is related to promoting the science of language among young people in Bulgaria, they organize meetings, debates etc.

- Course group 1 (~ 130 members at the period of the analysis) and Course group 2 (~ 120 members at the period of the analysis) are from the Faculty of Philology. They try to tackle issues related to the student's curricula and extracurricular activities regarding their course of studies.

- Faculty Student Group 1 (~ 630 members at the period of the analysis), Faculty Student Group 2 (~ 1200 members at the period of the analysis) are from the Faculty of Economic and Social Studies. They try to tackle issues related to the student's curricula and extracurricular activities on a faculty level.

- Student Council Group (~ 1300 members at the period of the analysis) is composed of students from the whole university. They try to tackle issues related to the student's overall university experience.

Faculty Student Group 1 and the Student Interest Group were created by created by a faculty member. All other groups are created by students.

Through web content analysis 6 unique categories of content were defined according the purposes of our research:

- Offline meetings and events - Content related to the arranging of offline meetings with academic and non-academic purposes. It includes arranging meetings of the student council, arranging leisure activities (coffee, student parties, dancing lessons), invitation for conferences, seminars etc. the guiding theme of this theme is the content that tries to translate online activities into offline such.

Example: *Come to the seminar "How to present oneself on an interview!" Everyone is invited!* and a picture in the post containing all the details of the event.
Example: *Party at Infi (local discotheque) tonight! Who is in???!?* and a promotional picture of the event.

- Academic related content - includes all collaboration on academic related issues such as information about

examinations, lectures, study schedule/program and joined work on academic projects/questions).

Example: *Who has lectures from the lectures from last Thursday. I couldn't come.*

Example: *Do you know if the examination with (name of the lecturer) is a test or we should write on two questions?*

Example: *Next Tuesday the lecture with (name of the lecturer) will be from 10.00.*

- Online interactions - communication not related directly to academic matters such as engaging in exchange of songs, interesting articles not directly related to the study curricula, humorous picture or text posts, sharing of personal thoughts, holiday greetings etc.)

Example: *Here is something interesting!* A picture post with the map of language families in Europe and a link to the article (in English).

Example: *Good luck to all for the examinations tomorrow!* And a youtube clip of a song from Bulgarian artist.

Example: *i just can't take it anymore…i don't understand anything from those lectures…*

- Political/Activist content - includes news about ongoing protests, fostering of civic participation, fostering participation in NGO projects, donation campaigns, volunteering activities etc.

Example: *(Name of a person) needs our help! A picture post containing all details of the person in need, what the money are needed for, where and how to donate.*

Example: *Let's join our colleagues in Sofia!*[2] A picture and a link from student protests in Sofia.

- Surveys - include different types of online surveys posted on the group wall.

Example: *This is a quick survey about the quality of education in Bulgaria. Please complete it when you have the time and help us improve our educational system!* A link to the survey and a picture.

- Job/Internship related content - includes all types of job/internship related content as well as information about available scholarships.

Example: *Do you have friends who speak French? Major international company offers jobs for students with French language.* A picture with more details where and how to apply.

Example: *Now you can apply for European scholarships. For more information click here*. A picture with more information about the apply process.

---

[2] In 2013 there were mass protests in Bulgaria against the former government. All the posts about protests are related to this same wave of protest activities.

25

Table 1: Main themes co-occurrence table

	Faculty Student Group 2	Student Council Group	Course group 1	Faculty Student Group 1	Course group 2	Student Interest Group
Offline meetings and events	24	**68**	15	**67**	28	28
Academic related content	12	2	**234**	**29**	**26**	**27**
Online interactions	22	41	**72**	37	20	**64**
Political/Activist content	**17**	**26**	0	11	0	0
Surveys	2	**7**	3	3	**6**	0
Job related content	**14**	**19**	6	12	6	0
Total number of posts	91	163	330	159	86	119

For all the groups the communication is more active during the study year and less active during holidays (although there are several publications per month even during summer break). For the Course groups the communication intensifies during the periods before and during examinations. For the other groups the communication is more intense during the semester.

26

Course group 1 is the most active group in posting content on the FSG wall and have generated most content of all the groups. The communication is realized almost on a daily basis. This finding is not surprising having in mind the nature of the group as there the students try to tackle their everyday academic issues and discuss courses content which is consistent with previous research of similar FSGs (Bowman and Akcaoglu 2014). The response to the different types of information has different intensity. Students tend to "like" the personalized content and the humorous content (personal thoughts, songs, humorous pictures and text posts). The posts regarding changes in study program/schedule, the posts regarding examinations and the posts regarding homework are usually "seen[3]" by all the members of the groups.

The content posted by Faculty Student Group 2, Student Council Group and Faculty Student Group 1 has mostly informative nature – the users post invitations for conferences and extracurricular events, interesting articles of scientific nature but not directly related to the study program of any course/group.

The Interest Student group engages in online interactions on scientific matters, invitations for extracurricular events and sharing of interesting articles of scientific nature. The communication of this group is

---

[3] Facebook option that shows how many people have "seen" a given post (example: "Seen by 137 people")

predominated by the themes regarding extracurricular events and materials, also joint work on academic issues. Some of the members of this group have already left the university, they have started their work life and they still use the group to solve some work related tasks that are close to the interests of the FSG. Such an example is:

Dear colleagues how to write correctly (word)? or *Dear colleagues how would you translate in English (word)?*

Table 2: Online response to content by post type and FSG type (average number of *likes*)

Post type Group type	Faculty Student Group 2	Student Council Group	Course group 1	Faculty Student Group 1	Course group 2	Student Interest Group
Offline meetings and events	0,25	1,65	2,00	1,63	2,62	**10,50**
Academic related content	0,00	0,00	2,62	1,07	1,00	**13,46**
Online interactions	0,20	3,38	**13,50**	4,56	4,35	9,46
Political/Activist content	0,00	**1,79**	n/a	0,33	n/a	n/a
Surveys	0,00	**2,50**	1,00	1,50	0,00	n/a
Job related content	0,00	0,00	n/a	0,00	**1,00**	n/a

The communication in the six groups is different in intensity and nature. Over 55 % [4] of the content in each group has been generated by less than 6 users. Also the number of people who publish comments after different posts is limited with some serious deviations of the number of comments after the different types of posts. The difference in student's involvement in the online group interactions is consistent with previous research (Bowman and Akcaoglu 2014). Data from previous research suggests that that membership in the group is beneficial for all the members of the group either they are passively involved (only reading the posted information and comments) or if they are actively involved in the online interactions like posting information, comments etc. (Bowman and Akcaoglu 2014:5).

A previous research in Bulgaria revealed that a large part of the students use both Latin and Cyrillic alphabet when they communicate in Bulgarian language on their personal Facebook profiles (L. Boykova 2013). In comparison the communication in Bulgarian on the FSG walls was carried mainly in Cyrillic alphabet with very minor exceptions in Latin alphabet. At the same time in all groups the text posts contained to a different degree misspellings and punctuation mistakes. Many of the posts did not respect the rules for capital/small letters use and proper punctuation. Emoticons were used in the communication, especially for

---

[4] Faculty Student Group 2 (62,64%), Student Council Group (58,28%), Course group 1 (64,55%), Faculty Student Group 1(74,21%), Course group 2 (70,79%), Student Interest Group   (69,17%)

the Facebook Course groups. Some of the groups included communication and single posts in foreign languages.

Discussion and conclusions

With the growing importance of embedding the principles of lifelong learning in education ((Institute for Lifelong Learning, UNESCO) scientists place equal importance on the formal, non-formal and informal learning. FSG could be considered as a tool for informal way of learning like the role playing games. While the role playing games allow the learners to develop practical skills the FSG allow the students to study in depth the curricula- to participate in discussions on the study material and compare knowledge and study techniques. The formal educational process should be oriented towards the social needs of the students aiming to develop sociocultural competences that are adequate to the ongoing processes of integration and globalization (F. Boykova 2014). At the same time the learning process in the FSGs is often spontaneous and guided by the students rather than by lecturers. Furthermore users randomly include extracurricular activities information that in fact could broader student's academic perspective and knowledge. As proven by previous research the Course FSG provides an online space for meaningful academic interactions and support collaborations between students, collaborative sensemaking on academic projects and stimulates student's co-curricular activities (Lampe & al. 2011, Junco 2012). Also FSG prove to be especially important for the students who

are not able to attend all lectures or seminars. In the shared online space the students receive study materials, information about homework and examinations. Furthermore students also request help in reaching specific lecturers, faculty administrators or transmitting messages to specific lecturers. A closer examination of the posts related to the requests for help on the above mentioned matters showed that the majority of the cases receive an answer within 24 hours of the request and some of the comments suggest that even the unanswered on the group wall questions receive an answer via the private chat option.

We consider that being part of young people everyday life Facebook offers a familiar online space for curricular and extra-curricular activities that could engage students on a deeper level in the university life. The use of ICT creates the conditions for engaging students as active participants in the educational process (F. Boykova 2005). The communication via Facebook student groups could complement their already established online activities with useful academic information and additional study materials and keep them informed about academic related events in an unobtrusive way. Further analyses are needed to determine the different models of integration of social networks in the learning environment and the degree of lecturer involvement in the FSG communication that could generate sustainable improvement in the university learning experiences.

References

Babbie, Earl. 2010. *The Practice of Social Research*. 12th ed. Wadsworth: Cengage Learning 530.

Bartlett, Yvonne Kiera, and Neil S. Coulson. 2011. "An investigation into the empowerment effects of using online support groups and how this affects health professional/patient communication." *Patient education and counseling* 83(1): 113-119.

Bender, Jacqueline L., Maria-Carolina Jimenez-Marroquin, and Alejandro R. Jadad. 2011. "Seeking support on facebook: a content analysis of breast cancer groups." *Journal of medical Internet research* 13(1) Available at http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov /pmc/articles/PMC3221337/ Accessed on 25.03.2014.

Bowman, Nicholas David, and Mete Akcaoglu. 2014. ""I see smart people!": Using Facebook to supplement cognitive and affective learning in the university mass lecture." *The Internet and Higher Education* 23: 1-8. Available at http://www.researchgate.net/profile /Mete_Akcaoglu/publication/262569657_I_see_smart_people!_Using_F acebook_to_ Supplement_Cognitive_and_Affective_Learning_in_the_University_Mas s_Lecture/links/53dfe3060cf2a768e49c6c9d.pdf Accessed on 27.05.2015.

Boykova, Lyudmila. 2013. "Identity Display on Facebook: How Students Create and Perceive Their Online Profiles" *Proceedings of the Jubilee International Scientific Conference "Eastern European Transition and Socio-Economic Stratification"*, Plovdiv, 107-111.

Boykova, Lyudmila. 2015. "Social Networks As an Innovative Tool for Educational Practices" - in press.

Boykova, Fani. 2005. "Обучението по български език и информационните технологии ". *Езикът и литературата. Методически парадигми и образователни политики*. София: Млада гвардия, 2-6.

Boykova, Fani. 2014. "Communicative competency – practices in the education in Bulgarian language" *Сборник "Езиковата политика в европейски и национален контекст"* УИ Паисий хелендарски, 155-165.

Brodie, Roderick J., Ana Ilic, Biljana Juric, and Linda Hollebeek. 2013. "Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community: An exploratory analysis." *Journal of Business Research* 66(1): 105-114.

33

Brügger, Niels, and Niels Ole Finneman. 2013. "The Web and Digital Humanities: Theoretical and Methodological Concerns", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 57(1):66–80.

Butler Brian, Sproull Lee, Kiesler Sara, Kraut Robert. 2007. "Community Effort in Online Groups: Who Does the Work and Why?" *School of Computer Science at Research Showcase @ CMU* http://repository.cmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1089 &context=hcii&seiredir=1&referer=http%3A%2F%2Fscholar.google.si%2 Fscholar%3Fhl%3Den%26q%3Donline%2Bgroups%26btnG%3D%26as_sd t%3D1%252C5%26as_sdtp%3D#search=%22online%20groups%22 Cheston, Christine C., Tabor E. Flickinger, and Margaret S. Chisolm. 2013. "Social media use in medical education: a systematic review." *Academic Medicine* 88(6): 893-901.

Cheung, Christy MK, Pui-Yee Chiu, and Matthew KO Lee. 2011. "Online social networks: Why do students use facebook?" *Social and Humanistic Computing for the Knowledge Chu, Shu-Chuan. 2011. "Viral advertising in social media: Participation in Facebook groups and responses among college-aged users." Journal of Interactive Advertising 12(1): 30-43.*

Conroy, Meredith, Jessica T. Feezell, and Mario Guerrero. 2012. "Facebook and political engagement: A study of online political group membership and offline political engagement." Computers in Human Behavior 28(5): 1535-1546.

Craig Ross , Emily S. Orr , Mia Sisic , Jaime M. Arseneault , Mary G. Simmering , R. Robert Orr. 2009. Personality and motivations associated with Facebook use, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 25(2): 578-586.

Dabbagh, Nada, and Anastasia Kitsantas. 2011. "Personal Learning Environments, social media, and self-regulated learning: A natural formula for connecting formal and informal learning." *Internet and Higher Education* 15 (1): 3-8.

De la Torre-Díez, Isabel, Francisco Javier Díaz-Pernas, and Míriam Antón-Rodríguez. 2012. "A content analysis of chronic diseases social groups on Facebook and Twitter." *Telemedicine and e-Health* 18(6): 404-408.

Ellison, Nicole B., Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe. 2011. "Connection strategies: Social capital implications of Facebook-enabled communication practices." *New media & society*: 1461444810385389.

Eysenbach, Gunther, John Powell, Marina Englesakis, Carlos Rizo, and Anita Stern. 2004. "Health related virtual communities and electronic support groups: systematic review of the effects of online peer to peer interactions." *Bmj* 328(7449): 1166.

Fernandes, Juliana, Magda Giurcanu, Kevin W. Bowers, and Jeffrey C. Neely. 2010. "The writing on the wall: A content analysis of college

students' Facebook groups for the 2008 presidential election." *Mass Communication and Society* 13(5): 653-675.

Greene, J.A., Choudhry, N.K., Kilabuk, E., Shrank, W.H. 2011. "Online Social Networking by Patients with Diabetes: A Qualitative Evaluation of Communication with Facebook", J Gen Intern Med 26(3): 287-292.

Gummerus, Johanna, Veronica Liljander, Emil Weman, and Minna Pihlström. 2012. "Customer engagement in a Facebook brand community." Management Research Review 35(9): 857-877.

Herring, S. C. 2010. Web content analysis: Expanding the paradigm. In J. Hunsinger, M. Allen, & L. Klastrup (Eds.), The International Handbook of Internet Research 233-249. Berlin: Springer Verlag. Available at:https://www.sfu.ca/cmns/courses/2012/801/1-Readings/Herring%20WebCA%202009.pdf Accessed on 23.07.2014.

Jahn, Benedikt, and Werner Kunz. 2012. "How to transform consumers into fans of your brand." Journal of Service Management 23(3): 344-361.

Junco, R. 2012. The relationship between frequency of Facebook use, participation in Facebook activities, and student engagement. Computers & Education, 58(1): 162-171.

Kaye, Anthony R. 2012. Collaborative learning through computer conferencing: the Najaden papers. Springer Publishing Company, Incorporated.

Kelle, Udo. 2004. "Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis." Qualitative research practice: 473-489.

Krippendorff, Klaus. 1980. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Krippendorff, Klaus. 2004. Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 413.

Lampe, C., Wohn, D.Y., Vitak, J., Ellison, N.B., Wash,R. 2011. "Student use of Facebook for organizing collaborative classroom activities", *International Journal of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, 6(3): 329-347.

Laroche, Michel, Mohammad Reza Habibi, Marie-Odile Richard, and Ramesh Sankaranarayanan. 2012. "The effects of social media based brand communities on brand community markers, value creation practices, brand trust and brand loyalty." Computers in Human Behavior 28(5): 1755-1767.

Lim, Doo Hun, Michael L. Morris, and Virginia W. Kupritz. 2014. "Online vs. blended learning: Differences in instructional outcomes and learner satisfaction."

Manjoo, F. 2011. *It's Not Just For Baby Photos Anymore: Why Your Facebook Feed is Crammed with Visual Gags*. Slate

Mayring, Philipp. 2004. Qualitative content analysis. In U. Flick, E.v. Kardorf & I. Steinke (Eds.), A companion to qualitative research 266 - 269. London: Sage.

McWilliam, Gil. 2012. "Building stronger brands through online communities." Sloan management review 41(3).

Robert Philip Weber, ed. 1990. Basic content analysis. No. 49. Sage.

Roblyer, M. D., McDaniel, M., Webb, M., Herman, J., Witty, J.V. 2010. Findings on Facebook in Higher Education: A Comparison of College Faculty and Student Uses and Perceptions of Social Networking Sites, Internet and Higher Education 13(3): 134-140.

Salmon, Gilly. 2013. E-tivities: The key to active online learning. Routledge.

UNESCO. 2015. Institute for Lifelong Learning http://uil.unesco.org/home/programme-areas/lifelong-learning-policies-and-strategies/news-target/lifelong-learning/9bf043146eaa0985e05daa9e12135f5b/ Accessed on 01.06.2015.

Vitak, Jessica, Paul Zube, Andrew Smock, Caleb T. Carr, Nicole Ellison, and Cliff Lampe. 2011. "It's complicated: Facebook users' political participation in the 2008 election." CyberPsychology, behavior, and social networking 14(3): 107-114. Available at http://vitak.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/vitak_etal-2010.pdf Accessed on 26.03.2014.

White, Marsha, and Steve M. Dorman. 2001. "Receiving social support online: implications for health education." Health education research 16(6): 693-707.

Zhang, Yan, Dan He, and Yoonmo Sang. 2013. "Facebook as a platform for health information and communication: a case study of a diabetes group." Journal of medical systems 37(3): 1-12.

Zhang, Weiyu. 2013. "Redefining youth activism through digital technology in Singapore." International Communication Gazette 75(3): 253-270.