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## Article 68

# Facebook and Social Media: Implications for Counseling College Students

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From its origins in the Harvard dorm room of Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, Facebook (FB) has become a worldwide phenomenon, with approximately 500,000,000 people around the world using FB by 2010 (Fletcher, 2010). While over 28% of the users

are older than 34, the majority of users are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Galagan, 2009). In addition, a majority of college students are active FB users (Wandel, 2009). In an analysis of FB use at a private university in the U.S., Lewis, Kaufman, and Christakis (2008) reported that out of 1,710 students, 98.3% had been located on FB within the past 2 years. Another study found that 94% of college students use FB with an average of 30 minutes per day of use and between 150-200 registered “friends” (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Given these statistics, counselors can expect that many, if not most, of young people they are working with will be active FB users, especially if they are college students. This article will review counseling implications of working with FB users as well as discuss the role of self-disclosure on FB and offer strategies users can take to minimize the risks involved in sharing personal information in social networking sites. Individuals divulge a wealth of personal information within the FB and other social media venues. The counseling professional may use this invaluable information (e.g., client drug use) to establish rapport and link the intervention directly to the situation (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy to address drug abuse).

As a social networking system, FB is built on the model of sharing personal information in order to build community (Lyons, 2010). In fact, FB employs a variety of techniques that are intended to drive users to share more and more information (Fletcher, 2010). FB encourages users to get in the habit of clicking a “like” button to show their interests and preferences. By signaling their “likes” on FB, valuable marketing information is available to FB and its paid advertisers (Fletcher, 2010). In keeping with the company’s stated mission to increase worldwide openness and connection, FB’s headquarters are designed to enhance openness and create a social microcosm of FB. Employees work in one area known as the bullpen, without cubicle walls, and each desk resembles a profile that is the worker’s status and is viewable to everyone (Fletcher, 2010). Like FB itself, the company’s headquarters create an environment where “users” will open and share the most intimate and sensitive information about themselves.

As an application that promotes a deep sharing between the individual and other FB users, FB seems to employ therapeutic variables similar to those that counselors use to promote openness. For example, according to Corsini and Wedding (1995), empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence are the key qualities that the counselor provides within session. When these variables are present, the client is more apt to open up and relay information that is related to pathology. When the counselor displays congruence (i.e., genuineness), unconditional positive regard (i.e., non-critical stance toward client), and empathy (i.e., an accurate understanding of the client), the client likely will “open” up to the counselor. FB and other social media outlets provide an outlet that allows clients to disclose rich and personal information regarding the self. In this regard, FB may be an efficient tool to gather pertinent counseling information.

### **Why Disclose on Facebook?**

Self-disclosure is personal information (e.g., likes, dislikes, interests) that one relays to another individual (Wheless & Grotz 1976), and it plays an essential role in fostering close personal relationship development (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Self-disclosure can serve two major purposes: identity development and intimacy development (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Self-disclosure fosters identity development

by giving individuals feedback from others, which shapes self-concept. It promotes intimacy development by strengthening relationships, as disclosure helps build strong cohesive relationships. Thus, with self-disclosure, relationships develop based on what individuals share about themselves to each other. This sharing, in turn, has a reciprocal effect that promotes further self-disclosure. For example, if one individual in a group shares that he likes the rock group Pink Floyd, then others will say it as well, creating a group with similar interests.

Like face-to-face social environments, FB seems to have developed its own social norms in which users must disclose information about themselves in order to share their identity with other users (Tufekci, 2008a). Within this online social environment, a certain level of self-disclosure is expected so that others will know who you are. As in face-to-face relationships, self-disclosure in an online environment is characterized by reciprocity; that is, if one individual provides a deep self-disclosure, then the other will reciprocate (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). In fact, research suggests that online partners tend to perceive that their online partners disclose at much higher levels than their face-to-face counterparts (Bruss & Hill, 2010; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). In an online setting, people may feel anonymous and less concerned about the possible social repercussions of disclosing, causing them to disclose more information about themselves than they would face-to-face. In addition, social media users may overcompensate for the lack of social cues and divulge more personal information in order to get closer or build a relationship (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Accordingly, students may divulge too much information in order to establish or maintain a relationship. On the other hand, fear of rejection and loss of privacy are two reasons individuals may avoid self-disclosure (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). For these reasons, some students may be reluctant to share online. In fact, Chandras, DeLambo, and Chandras (2007) reported that a group of students feared they would be chastised by peers and refused to use FB.

Counselors may gain an understanding of the student by examining both the content as well as the function of the individual's self-disclosure. For example, the client may post pictures involving drug and alcohol use. The function may be to gain attention from females through this interaction. The counselor and client could determine more "healthy" avenues to gain attention and establish intimate relationships. In addition, substance abuse issues may be determined based on the FB content. In this case, abuse can be determined and addressed with FB. However, counselors should be cautious regarding hypotheses based on FB content. All hypotheses should be supported by multiple anchors before making sweeping generalizations.

Many FB users report that they find it a convenient way to maintain and develop relationships (Krasnova, Spiekermann, Koroleva, & Hildebrand, 2010). For example, the user can instantly send a message to 300 "friends" with the click of a button. Consequently, more information is shared immediately throughout the network than would ever be possible with face-to-face interactions. This kind of immediate and widely shared self-disclosure raises privacy concerns, as personal information could be exploited without the use of a proper self-disclosure filter. The counselor can explore the many negative implications related to unnecessary disclosure. Other research indicates that individuals seeking a relationship may tend to disclose more sensitive and stigmatizing information, such as employer, job title, photo albums, sexual orientation, favorite music, books, and movies, and religious beliefs (Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010). That is,

individuals may engage in more self-disclosure to enhance their chances of attracting or connecting with a partner. Conversely, older individuals were less apt to disclose sensitive information, possibly due to age and culture. This is important for students to understand because posting certain kinds of information on their FB page could have negative consequences. For example, a prospective employer may not want to hire a college drinker. Likewise, pictures depicting potentially dangerous hobbies may be viewed as a hazard by some employers or potential dating partners. For example, snowmobiling or four-wheeling may be viewed in this manner.

Principles of behavior analysis may also shed light on the role of disclosure with FB. That is, when analyzing the antecedents of a behavior, one should consider the possibility that attention-seeking is an important function of that behavior (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007; Repp & Horner, 1999). In the case of self-disclosure, FB users may create a profile with the intention to seek attention from other users. For example, they may brag about nights of heavy alcohol or drug use and post photos of their partying behavior as a means of gaining attention. In this online environment, they are less likely to experience the negative repercussions that could occur in face-to-face situations (e.g., expressions of disapproval), which could otherwise lessen the reinforcing impact of this attention-seeking behavior. In this instance, counselors should explore FB content as well as function. That is, why did the client include this picture or statement within FB? According to Cooper et al. (2007), behavior is typically driven by one or any combination of the following functions: a) attention (e.g., cigarette smoking to look “cool” to the ladies; b) automatic/sensory reinforcement (e.g., cigarette smoking because it “feels” good as one draws the nicotine into the lungs); c) avoidance/escape (e.g., an individual may post a picture of drug use in order to avoid certain “straight” individuals); and d) acquire something (e.g., attract and obtain a partner). Once the behavior’s function is determined, the counselor is able to link an intervention to its function. For example, if the client posts an inappropriate drinking picture on FB for attention, the counselor could explore positive attention seeking methods. If the client is skilled in photography and music, a photograph could be taken of a favorite musician and displayed on FB as a positive form of attention.

### **Reasons for Using FB**

According to research, college students report that their key reasons for using FB are to keep in touch and reconnect with old friends, to keep in contact with new friends, to get feedback from peers, to review and post pictures, to learn about events, to post social events, and/or to feel socially connected (Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). This type of socializing allows one to be anywhere that an internet service is available. Gone are the days that socializing required the “community” to be in the same geographic proximity. Social network systems like FB allow users to feel that they are “hanging out” with their friends, even though not everyone is in the same room (Ellison et al., 2007). In one study of undergraduate students (Pempek et al., 2009), respondents admitted that the perpetual voyeuristic practice of reviewing friends’ pictures was a source of entertainment. In fact, gossip and rumors are common on FB. For example, when a relationship status changes (e.g., a couple breaks up), the gossip begins. The news feed as

well as pictures continue to support gossip and rumors. Despite its potential for spreading gossip, the convenience and gratification of FB seem to override privacy concerns for many students. This may be a valuable means of entertainment as well as a tool to establish or reconnect to friends from the past. However, if this isolates the client due to massive amounts of time spent on FB, or if the client's needs are not being fully met with FB, then more "healthy" avenues could be determined to address client needs.

### **What They Do on Facebook**

Wall posts appear to be the most frequent way of interacting with friends online (Pempek, et al., 2009). Interestingly, FB users spend the majority of time reviewing friend's profiles, rather than posting or disclosing content. After browsing friends' walls and profiles, sending and responding to messages appear to be the next in regard to time spent on task (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). In addition, by using the search function, the user can locate an endless multitude of topics (Krivak, 2008). For example, musical topics, news groups, support groups, etc. are all available on the site. The user can simply insert a topic within the search engine to receive a long list of matching responses.

According to Demby (2009), the "wall" in FB is like a community chalkboard. A user will leave a message on the wall, post a video or photograph, or insert links and videos. Users should be aware that the wall post is public, meaning that everyone can see it. A wall is basically a personal message board on a user's profile. While friends can post public messages on each others' walls, users can also send private messages. FB also offers the option of setting up groups in which group members can contact other members.

First impressions formed via social network sites appear to be similar to those developed via face-to-face interaction. Given the increased importance of social networking, students should be aware of the role of self-management when using FB and be sure to provide a positive first impression on their FB page (Weisbuch, Ivcevic, & Ambady, 2009). Counselors may need to address with their clients the long-standing implications a first impression can have upon a future employer or prospective intimate partner. Once the client "clicks" on send, either the email, instant message, or compromising picture at a fraternity party can all be dispersed in cyberspace. Counselors should emphasize that this information is not lost in cyberspace--it's basically lost from one's control. A picture of drug or alcohol use or a woman lifting her bra at a party may all come back to "haunt" the naïve FB user. The counselor should assist the client to become more self-aware and help instill a proactive and insightful approach to using FB.

### **Negative Consequences of Sharing**

Houghton and Joinson (2010) reported some negative implications of self-disclosure and social networking use. Privacy violations experienced by participants in their study included:

- A boyfriend sharing detailed relationship information (e.g., my former girlfriend is a liar and dependent) with a friend on a FB wall.

- A friend shares sensitive financial information to a group of mutual friends (e.g., information about a friend's credit card bills).
- Non-authorized user of an acquaintance on a FB account attempting to persuade the participant to move money to his/her account using the FB chat (e.g., claiming to be a cousin's friend and in need of an immediate transfer of money to repair a car).
- A former girlfriend discussed negative comments the partner made to his parents, which made her appear to be an inappropriate girlfriend.
- A group discussion board is used to gossip about previous embarrassing situations (e.g., remember when Dolene wet the bed?) and to provide intimate details of a previous relationships to a group of online individuals.

In reaction to these privacy violations, participants reporting feeling shocked, angry, and embarrassed. Others commented on feeling they had lost trust in their FB friends and felt the need to exercise more caution when using FB. When situations like the ones above occur, the counselor is in a key position to address these unfortunate circumstances. An array of emotions may result from such FB postings. The counselor can, for example, address client reactions toward peer pressure. Or a review of the client's emotional rollercoaster stemming from a "nasty" break-up could be explored. Typically feelings of anger, loss, and helplessness may accompany the above scenarios. The counselor is trained to address issues such as these.

### **Methods of Self-Protection for Facebook Users**

Although many privacy controls exist on FB, an alarming number of users do not apply these prevention tools (Tufekci, 2008b). Many college students openly accept a friend request. However, students appear to be more likely to have private profiles if their friends, and in particular, their roommates have private accounts (Lewis et al., 2008). Thus, use of prevention tools among friends and roommates appear to predict more use of privacy settings. As a first step in self-protection, individuals should review FB's privacy policies; in addition, they can be more cautious in the types of information they post on their FB page.

The counselor and client can explore the issue of self-disclosure as well as implications, that is, possible dangers that could occur from inappropriate self-disclosure. For example, this could impact prospective job possibilities or even relationship development. Counselors should inform clients that anything posted on FB could potentially "come back" and cause havoc in one's life. A brain-storming session between the counselor and client could help determine the many negative consequences that could occur from inappropriate self-disclosure. Likewise, the brainstorming session could then address the many ways the client could protect him/herself from breach of confidentiality or some other negative implication. While zero use of FB would limit these negative consequences from occurring, "abstinence", as such, is not a feasible goal for the majority of FB users. Rather, the concept of "harm reduction/health reduction" borrowed from public health and substance abuse prevention arenas may be applicable here. For example, for some IV drug users, abstinence is not a realistic goal. Therefore, a needle exchange program may be used to decrease the chances of HIV/AIDS.. Instead of abstinence, health protection is the goal (Doweiko, 2006). Therefore, the counselor and

client could determine techniques that would potentially limit the negative consequences of FB use.

Facebook's privacy page (2010) makes a number of suggestions regarding privacy, as follows:

- Be aware that every post (picture, message on wall) can contain metadata (i.e., information about data). Metadata is stored by FB and it is recommended that users delete all metadata before submitting anything to FB. Gechlik (2009) provides technical advice on methods to extract metadata that is embedded in photographs. Likewise, Komando (2006) offers technical advice on how to remove detrimental information from a Word document. Word will store metadata within a document, such as information that the user had written and decided to delete.
- Friends may provide information that FB collects about the user in a tagged picture, place, video, or other details a user's friend submits. FB uses a contact importer tool. This will upload friend's addresses and invite them to join FB. When the user requests acquaintances to join FB, an invitation will be sent requesting them to join. Information about the user's friend as well as two reminders will be sent. In addition, if users pick a favorite band page, FB may insert the picture and profile on their friend's homepage, within an advertisement. The advertisements users see on their FB page are based on their interests and site navigation history.
- Furthermore, keep in mind that FB will monitor and store the user's site activity information. FB will monitor which sites users visit and the pokes made, friends contacted, "like" categories, and connection with a FB application like Farmville.

There are a number of steps that FB users can take to protect themselves and minimize their risks, as outlined by Bradley (2009):

- Avoid posting or putting things online that you may regret at a later point. For example, a picture uploaded from a college party holding onto an alcoholic beverage, may negatively impact the user's position later. For example, this could unduly reflect on the employer's business.
- Avoid posting any inflammatory or negative statements. Someone calling himself a friend could actually be an enemy and exploit inflammatory information, turn this into a weapon against the user.
- Users should never share anything online that they would not want everyone to see and know. Users should assume that everything they post will be seen, regardless of their privacy settings.
- Users should be careful with privacy controls and note their advertisements, which are geared directly toward their interests and can be shared with others.
- Privacy settings are the most basic strategy to use to prevent others from seeing private information. However, users must realize that any posted information can be viewed by others. Users should continuously monitor their name and profile. Employers know that a FB profile can tell them more about a potential applicant than any cover letter/resume. Unfortunately, many users do not activate the most basic privacy settings (Brandenburg, 2008).

- Users should be careful with FB quizzes. Many quizzes and games are available on FB. As users compete against their friends with these games, they learn more about each other while being entertained. Before playing these games, users are shown a permission page granting access to their profile information, photos, friends and so on. This gives FB permission to gather information.

Demby (2009) offers three main strategies to protect the FB user from potential harm. These include:

- Users should remove themselves from FB search results. For example, in the privacy settings page, users can select the “only friends” privacy setting. Then, employers, clients, and others they may want to avoid, will not be able to locate their name on FB because their name will not be visible in a search. They can go even further and remove your name from public search engines such as Google. On the “search privacy settings page” of Google, they can remove the checkmark next to the “Public Search Results.”
- Users can protect their photo album within the “photo privacy settings page.” By using the “friends only” category, they can ensure that certain individuals do not see their photos. Even a picture of a group of friends at a ski resort could have a negative impact that could be difficult to predict. For example, if an investor’s client sees him/her spending “his” money on an unnecessary vacation during these hard economic times, it could adversely affect the business relationship.
- Users should make contact information private. They can do so by going to the “contact privacy settings page” and modifying this setting. Consequently, only a limited number of specific individuals will see their telephone and other contact information. Again, negative consequences could occur if everyone has a user’s personal information. Users are also advised to be careful with wall posts portraying them in an embarrassing light. For example, a friend’s wall post may detail a most recent Christmas party with specifics of heavy drinking and risqué behaviors that could damage a relationship with a potential business client. To prevent this, users should go to “options” and unselect “friends may post to my wall.” Or, they may simply click on “Who can see posts made by my friends?” It is suggested that professional contacts should not be allowed to see friend’s posts.

In addition to being an increasingly important tool for establishing and maintaining personal relationships, a significant number of employers currently review online profiles. A major online site for posting and locating job openings, CareerBuilder.com suggests the following three safety techniques (Grasz, 2006): (1) Users are advised to be careful and to avoid putting anything on either their or their friend’s page that an employer should not see, such as lewd photographs, profanity, and off-color jokes. (2) Users must be discreet and use a private profile, as well as the block comment feature. They should remember that everything is stored forever on the internet. (3) Finally, users should be prepared and check their profile to see what has been posted. They should also periodically conduct a web search on themselves by using a search engine to look for online records of themselves to see what is out there. If they find negative information, they should try to get it removed. Counselors should explore the above scenario with clients.



Other techniques FB users can employ to increase their safety include:

- Avoid pictures of drug and alcohol use. A striking proportion of college students' profiles contain references to drinking and/or partying, and some contain photographs of students drinking alcohol (Kolek & Saunders, 2008).
- Avoid posting negative online comments, especially information that can hurt or disparage others. Students may have a false sense of privacy and should be aware that nothing is private online. Students and families have been sued for slander or defamation. They need to realize that once something is posted, they no longer have control over the information (Fodeman & Monroe, 2009).
- Avoid inappropriate postings. Simmons (2008) reported that the majority of employers are reviewing FB pages and online profiles of prospective employees. First impressions can be the last impression. Impressions via a webpage are as important as first impressions via personal contact. Thus, users should provide a positive first impression with their website (Weisbuch et al., 2009). Users should remove any negative or provocative photographs or statements from their FB page.
- Children should not use FB (Fodeman & Monroe, 2009). Approximately 60 to 70% of seventh graders have a FB account, and an increasing number of younger children are setting up accounts. FB is very time-consuming and can disengage students from other social activities. Current laws may be inadequate to protect children from the risks they may encounter through social network sites.
- An inappropriate post may adversely affect a user's future. Their FB profile may still be available several years down the road when they apply for a job or internship. Users must be aware that the profile may still be viewable, even if it has been erased because caching and other technology make some information available, even after deletion.
- Remove any unflattering pictures. A picture of the user wearing Power Ranger underwear may be seen by prospective employers as evidence of bad judgment. Users should also be aware that their friends may post a picture of them online, putting the photograph out of their hands (Simmons, 2008).
- Edit what's on your wall and profile; don't write anything that can come back and haunt you in someone else's wall and avoid inappropriate e-mail.
- Users should Google themselves and continually monitor their online presence. Services such as Reputation Defender exist to search the web for unflattering material on clients. These services will conduct online searches for any negative material (Simmons, 2008).
- Avoid settling scores by attacking others on FB (Simmons, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

The vast majority of college students are avid Facebook (FB) users. Users are quite comfortable disclosing large amounts of personal information, which could put them at risk if they do not exercise caution in using strategies to protect their privacy and reputation. Fortunately, an array of techniques and suggestions are available to help FB users be safe in their cyber community. Lastly, the counselor is in a key position to

address client issues and concerns. The advent of FB has allowed outsiders to peer deep within another's soul. The deepest and most intimate details of one's life are now being disclosed to an array of individuals outside of one's immediate social sphere. FB creates a venue, or a therapeutic environment that fosters in-depth self-disclosure by the client. Feelings such as anger, love, astonishment, and hopelessness, as well as self-destructive behaviors such as serious drug and alcohol use may be displayed, openly, on FB. Client emotions and behaviors such as these are vital information for the therapist. FB can be a valuable tool and the counseling intervention can be directly linked to the client's behavior as well as its function.

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