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GETTING TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS WITH FACEBOOK

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Abstract: *Thousands of preadolescents and adolescents use social networking sites, and especially Facebook, on a daily basis. Owing the public nature of most user profiles, as well as the wealth of social connections established online by these categories of users, the integration of the richness of information provided online with the off-line counselling practices becomes compulsory. Thus, this study examines current psychological research addressing students behaviour on social networking sites and discuss the relevance of such findings in the area of educational counselling.*

Keywords: *Facebook, networking, student, identity, personality, counselling*

I. INTRODUCTION

Could Facebook allow a better understanding of the development of young people, specially adolescents? Could such understanding provide adequate support for the design of appropriate psychological support and specific educational interventions? And moreover, could it provide us with the conceptual and methodological support in order to revise some of the classical concepts of developmental psychology?

Recent psychological research addressing these issue seems to provides a positive answer to the above questions. The public "walls" of Facebook can allow parents, teachers or counsellors to develop further awareness on the evolution of an individual student or of a group of students. The richness of information provided by social networking sites allows a better understanding of students' thinking and behaviour: on Facebook, adolescent students feel free to openly express specific attitudes and beliefs, to use their own words, or rather to label the object, idea or person with "like" or "dislike"; in the same time, their special interests and concerns became apparent by the content they create and communicate through the network.

Recent statistics provided by www.facebook.com indicate a number of 845 million monthly active users at the end of December 2011, and more than 20 % of the global users population are teenagers (13-17 years old). An average user spends about 15 hours and 33 minutes on Facebook per month, and more than 23 minutes on each visit. He or she creates at least 90 pieces of content monthly and share information with more than 130 friends on the site. Hence, Facebook virtual "walls" provide a wealth of information on students skills (technical, artistic), personality characteristics (sociability, narcissism, extraversion, openness to experience, lack of taboos, agreeability), or creativity (as demonstrated by the original web contend they generate). The involvement of adolescent students in volunteering activities (social activism), their skills in developing relationships with peers (that can be estimated, for instance, by looking at the size of their personal social networks), or the strategies they use in exchanging information (i.e., sharing photos with friends) provide important data that may support the educational and counselling work.

Representations of youth identity, in the post-modern sense of social identity construction, can be assessed based on the self-presentations available on Facebook, by observing the types of

photographs made public, or the frequency of updates in their profile information. Nevertheless, protecting the integrity of students' personal and social spaces, disregarding they are real or virtual, denouncing any "invasion" of unwanted or dangerous friends, establishing rules of ethics in teacher-student communication, and detection of particular problems in youth life (depression, anxiety, irritability or other kind of adolescentin "emergencies") are important lines of action for the educational counsellor. Moreover, the concept of "educational web" shows that the special relationship that teenagers develop with new social media can be further capitalize on in the educational and/or counselling process in order to support a harmonious personality development of students today.

II. BETWEEN STUDENT PERSONALITY AND FACEBOOK IDENTITY

Nowadays youngsters are an important category of users of social networking sites, which increasingly contribute in the development and affirmation of their social identity. This finding may have direct implications in planning and implementing of educational interventions. However, by examining studies and research approaching this issues, one can notice that it is still missing a well-defined psychological theory explaining the behaviour of individuals involved in social networks, which could further provide a solid conceptual basis for educational sciences. Although researchers have already identified the requested for a review of some classic concepts in developmental psychology, the studies already investigating this subject are focused mainly on limited personality dimensions of specific user groups, and mostly on the negative effects of an excessing Facebook use.

2.1. Personality characteristics and students' activity on Facebook

The processes of personality construction and self-affirmation should be also discussed in the context of new computer-mediated social interactions. As also happens in real life, certain personality characteristics are reflected in users' behaviour in the network, concerning both social interactions and information exchanges engaging network members. The way personality specific traits impacts on Facebook use or non-use was investigated by Ryan and Xenos (2011) on a sample of 1158 Facebook users and 166 non-users, by specific using personality questionnaires and inventories, including Big Five. This study reveals that Facebook users tend to be more extroverted, more narcissistic and exhibit a lower level of conscientiousness than non-users, and in the same time, they seem to experience a higher level of social loneliness.

It is only recently when, a well-known personality assessment model like the "Big Five" factors (Costa & McRae, 1992), started to be employed also in order to better understand the behaviour of individuals accessing social networks and other types of technological platforms (Moore și Mc Elroy, 2012). For instance, studies like the one mentioned above, are keen to determine why some young people are more involved in Facebook activities and post more content than others? Why some users easily establish "friendship" relationships and, by doing so, they open access to the information posted on their profiles for a large number of people, while others have few friends and carefully control the information they disclose for others? Why some users easily accept inappropriate content from the network, while others disclaims such content? Etc. Some of the above-mentioned results have confirmed the hypothesised positive correlation between extraversion, openness to experience, and an intense Facebook activity,. However, some authors are still rather cautious regarding the Big Five model applicability in the context of Facebook use, focusing more on the different types of motivations that urge people on communication, which can decisively influence also the use of social networking tools (Craig Ross et. al, 2009).

2.2. Incentives for Facebook activity

Following a motivation hypothesis, the studies conducted by Special & Li-Barber (2012) shows that the most common reasons that urge people in using Facebook are: preserving relationships and entertainment. In the same time, Nadkarni & Hofmann (2012) propose a model of Facebook user's motivation supported by two basic needs: (1) the need of affiliation and belongingness, and (2) the

need of self-presentation. It seems that demographic and cultural factors are mostly related to the need of affiliation, while personality traits like neuroticism, narcissism, timidity and self-esteem are highly correlated with the need of self-presentation. In turn, the relationship between traits like narcissism and extraversion exhibited by certain Facebook users and the self-presentations available in their profiles has been explored by Ong et al (2011). In order to assess the level of narcissism and extraversion, the aforementioned authors took into account some features of the Facebook profile, including profile pictures, status updates and social network size. It turns out that young people displaying such profile traits have many friends in the network, and update their photos and status quite frequently. The relationship between personality characteristics and the use of social networking tools was also examined in a study with 300 subjects (Hughes et al, 2012). In this case, the results also show that extraversion and openness to experience is positively correlated with online socialization and search / exchange of information.

On one hand, social networking sites provide valuable opportunities for interactions with peers and further development of peer-to-peer relationships; on the other hand, they create the framework for expression of some classical markers of social identity development, such as religion, political ideology, employment, attitudes toward media content (Pempek et al., 2009). For instance, the most popular social networking site, Facebook (which seem to enjoy user preferences preferred just because it allows “self-presentation”), is accessed by students for a minimum of 30 minutes in 24 hours as part of their daily routine. Students use this tool for social interactions with the same friends with whom they already have previously established relationships, but most of their time online is used for checking the already existing content, and less for generating new content on Facebook (idem).

III. PEDAGOGICAL CONCERNS

Without a solid theoretical and methodological foundation that could provide parents, teachers and counsellors valid ways of knowing the students involved in social networks, pedagogy has refer to some empirical ways of action. The first is proposed by parents' associations (Lontie, 2011), that are calling for a “pedagogy adapted to the world”. In other words, in order to find out more about their interests and aspirations, close observation of children and adolescents behaviour in their natural contexts (that, in this case refers to Facebook), represents a real opportunity for the adults responsible for their education and guidance.

3.1. Danger alerts on Facebook

By knowing the daily reality of the individuals that are subjects to education, adults can promptly react and help them to develop the necessary critical thinking skills, as well as different techniques to protect against inappropriate marketing techniques. Montgomery & Chester (2009) notes, for example, the unprecedented intimacy between adolescents, as well as the large variety of brands of food or drink aggressively promoted by the advertising industry through the new media, while the academic research on the impact of advertising digital youth are yet underdeveloped.

In the same time, the systematic observation of students in using social networking tools might provide teachers and counsellors with opportunities for a better understanding of a post-modern logic of identity construction and representation of young people, interests, commitments and expressed attitudes (Maranto & Barton, 2010). The fact that on Facebook, many videos promoting alcohol and drug wins positive reviews from youngsters (Morgan, 2010) should be observed seriously and openly approached, discuss and analysed in face-to-face settings, including in the classroom.

Last but not least, parents, teachers and counsellors can help to the effective protection of children's personal space on Facebook. Not only some personality traits such as sociability and narcissism can be estimated on Facebook, but also sexual interests of youth. Hayez (2009) shows that these interests can be integrated into a normal direction of personality development, provided that it does not involve obscene verbal exchanges regarding sexual issues, nor participation in pornography, cybersex and dating actively established through the Internet. In this context, there should be provided means able to "arming" the young man with a set of rules and ways of action to allow termination of such "invasions".

A further direction of educational intervention should be aimed to prevent an excessive use of Facebook. The results of several studies conducted so far (for instance, Farahani et al., 2011) have shown that Facebook abuse shows a significant positive correlation with mental health deterioration, mainly with anxiety, stress and pathological depression of users. On the other hand, one can observe here a vicious circle, since the individuals suffering from social anxiety or depressed people are more prone to engage in online communication and relationships, instead of engaging in face-to-face interactions (Sheldon, 2008, Carpenter et al, 2011). Other studies (Junco, 2012), also discuss about a decrease of school performance that might caused by excessive use of social networking sites.

3.2. Teacher – student friendship on Facebook: an ongoing ethical debate

In the context of teacher-student relationship, one cannot ignore some considerations of an ethical character. “Friendship” between teacher and students on Facebook, is banned in some countries, with one of the reasons aiming to the prevention of sexual abuse. It is an issue that continues to provoke vivid ethical debate in Europe. Should the teacher draw a boundary between himself and students, to filter relations, to close access to personal data for students or, alternatively, should it be better to accept “friendship”, establishing a set of rules of conduct (appropriate vocabulary, consultation program etc.)? It is acceptable that teachers give students access to their personal space, where it interacts with other mature people, and to receive, in exchange, access to shared information flow between students?

The debates aiming to answer the above questions involve both teachers and parents associations, together with legislators etc. Majority view is the following: it is imperative that on Facebook there are established firm demarcations between teacher that has also ratio of authority and a minor student, because the network tends to "mix the cards". But this recommendation having an ethical character does not absolutely apply in Europe, where teachers are free to choose whether or not to “become friends” on social networks with their students, nor is required for students or former students. Parents' Associations (Lontie, 2011) argue that teachers who accept the opportunity to better know their students behaviour in social networks must always have control on the relationship.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Participation to social networks is, as noted earlier, a normal activity for preteens and adolescents, as it provides opportunities for interaction with peers and helps them in acquiring a better definition of their identity.

Teacher and educational counsellors, under some ethical precautions, can benefit by using public resources offered by social networks, and acquire a better understanding of their classroom, getting to better know their students' interests, skills and aptitudes. At the same time, teachers and counsellors should help the young people to understand both the benefits and the risks of social interactions in social networks. Young people 's depression and anxiety

is directing them most often to look for refuge in the virtual world, while poor academic performance related to an excessive use of social networking are other aspects that can be openly approached in discussions with students.

Research on identity construction, and the of social networking tools like Facebook might have on the process – especially in the case of young people – are at their very beginning. Traditional models of completion of individual personality needs to be critically reviewed and possibly amended in accordance with the new type of context for social interactions preferred by preadolescent and adolescents. Also, traditional concepts of developmental psychology should be integrated and redefined in the context of new virtual spaces of exchange and interaction.

However, we can only note that, in this context, more and more studies of social psychology of the Internet (Guegan & Michinov, 2011) put forward exciting topics such as identity management in remote human interactions and understanding the effects of anonymity. From this perspective, we review models that traditional face to face interactions in the context of computer mediated communication, and knowledge of behaviour, interests and personality of students through new social networks can provide basic directions of psychological research in the coming years. From this perspective, we believe that a revision of traditional models of face-to-face interactions in the context of computer mediated communication, as well as the study of behaviour, interests and personality of students through new social networks can provide cardinal directions of psychological research in the coming years.

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