2009

Social Software Programs: Student Preferences of Librarian Use

Annie Epperson
annie.epperson@unco.edu

Jennifer Leffler
University of Northern Colorado, jennifer.leffler@unco.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digscholarship.unco.edu/libfacpub

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons, and the Social Media Commons

Recommended Citation

REFEREED ARTICLE

Social software programs: student preferences of librarian use

Annie Epperson

University Libraries, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado, USA, and

Jennifer J. Leffler

James A. Michener Library, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present findings of an electronic survey to determine the extent of use of social software programs.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was conducted to discover the extent to which students use social software programs, namely Facebook, MySpace, Instant Messaging and Second Life, and to determine their level of desire for having a librarian or library presence within those settings. A web survey was developed and distributed using convenience sampling. The survey was distributed to students at two college campuses located in the state of Colorado in the USA.

Findings – The majority of respondents use social software programs, but are apathetic about using these programs for library questions or research.

Research limitations/implications – This research has several limitations to its findings: limited response rate, ambiguous phrasing of survey questions and geographic limitations all affect the results.

Practical implications – Owing to constraints on librarian time and resources, involvement in social software programs should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Originality/value – Social software programs are discussed in library literature, but few research projects have been undertaken to determine patron expectations for librarian involvement.

Keywords Social networks, Students, Academic libraries, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

Introduction/lit review

Academic librarians attempt to reach and serve their patrons, primarily college students, in as many ways as possible, and that can include using social software programs. The library literature suggests that librarians should be available to students via Instant Messaging, create accounts in Facebook and MySpace, and build avatars to populate Second Life. This research project seeks to discover whether or not college students actually use those social software programs, and, more importantly, whether they would like to be able to interact with librarians within those environments. Librarians can spend significant time in the creation and maintenance of these "virtual selves," interacting with students and managing information resources within these environments. However, some literature suggests that students would prefer not to interact with a librarian in what is seen as a purely social setting. Empirical data was sought from two quite different populations; one state university

campus with a liberal arts focus and offering some graduate degrees, and one private career-oriented university offering associate and baccalaureate degrees.

All four social software programs explored in this study are discussed extensively in library blogs[1]. However, their coverage in traditional library literature is less prevalent. This stands to reason as many of these programs are relatively new and just beginning to be explored for library applications.

Many articles give librarians background on "web 2.0" or social software programs (e.g. Tenopir, 2007; Ferguson, 2007). Information about how programs started and by whom, main audiences and tips for usage are easy to find. It is obvious that librarians are hungry for this kind of information.

Facebook was by far the most discussed social software program in the literature. Some articles covered both Facebook and MySpace, since these programs share some qualities (Farkas, 2007; Chu and Nalani Meulemans, 2008). Facebook might also receive more attention in the literature because it began as an academic software and many research articles are written by academic librarians. Numerous authors offer advice as to how to reach students through Facebook (e.g. Miller and Jensen, 2007; Mack *et al.*, 2007).

The social software program explored in this project with the greatest amount of coverage in library literature is Instant Messaging (IM). Much of what is written about IM in library literature deals with using this software for virtual reference services. Quan-Haase (2008) conducted a survey of college students to show how prevalent IM is as a communication mechanism. While students are comfortable chatting with friends and family, they were less comfortable with the idea of chatting with professors.

Librarians have begun exploring Second Life as a library setting. The American Library Association has a presence in Second Life (Levine, 2007). Several universities also participate in this virtual environment. For example, some academic libraries are using the software to display collections and answer reference questions (Tananbaum, 2008; Kirriemuir, 2008). One MLIS student's Master's thesis was a study of the information needs of Second Life participants, providing further proof that this software is attracting attention (Ostrander, 2008). While stimulating some discussion among librarians, Second Life might not have the widespread appeal to students of the other programs in this project.

Some librarians are promoting social software programs as the best way to reach patrons, using rhetoric such as "we need to be where our patrons are"(Houghton-Jan, 2006). It appears that patrons themselves have other ideas. Research carried out by the University of Michigan Libraries showed that only 23 per cent of respondents would be interested in contacting a librarian via Facebook or MySpace. Of respondents, 14 per cent said that these spaces were social, and that they are not research tools (Chapman, 2007). *Sharing, Privacy and Trust in Our Networked World* published by OCLC (De Rosa *et al.*, 2007) contains an appendix dealing with college students' feelings about networked information, including social software programs. Not surprisingly, the results indicate that college students participate more in social software programs than the general public. The study also found that college students are not likely to participate in social networking services offered by libraries. One student even went so far as to say "[Social networking is] just not the library's function" (De Rosa *et al.*, 2007 pp. A-11). In an opinion piece for *Computers in Libraries* a student states "No matter how good your intentions are, a lot of the same kids who never set foot in a library will be put off by a librarian attempting to contact them online" (Koerwer, 2007).

Each individual librarian, acting within the guidelines of his/her workplace, must decide if participation in social software programs is appropriate, and if so, at what level. This decision should be based on institutional factors and with consideration of the patron base of the library. What works for some libraries will not work for others. Huwe (2007) also points out that librarians learn much from failed attempts at reaching patrons. The researchers embarked on this project with the intent to discover if there were effective methods to reach their users with social software programs.

Method

The researchers in this project were interested in the use of social software programs in an academic library setting. They, like many librarians, are operating within a library with an undersized staff and limited means for new programs. Interest in serving the student population of their institutions led to this project.

The authors are both librarians at James A. Michener Library of University of Northern Colorado (UNC), a public institution in Greeley, Colorado. They wanted to explore ways in which to better serve the patron base of approximately 13,000 students, nearly 90 per cent of which are undergraduates. Michener is one of two libraries serving the majority of programs on campus, including the liberal arts core curriculum and the majority of majors, found in five colleges: Education and Behavioral Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, Monfort College of Business, Natural and Health Sciences, and Performing and Visual Arts; the second library, the Howard Skinner Music Library, supports music oriented programs. Graduate programs in Education, Educational Leadership, and Nursing are offered in traditional classrooms as well as via online methods. UNC is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Greeley is a small city of just over 90,000 located north of Denver in upstate Colorado. The campus is centered on land dedicated by city fathers in the mid nineteenth century to higher education in Colorado, and includes dormitories, classrooms, laboratories, recreation and athletics facilities. (For more information about UNC, visit www.unco.edu.)

The authors partnered with a colleague at the Denver campus of Johnson and Wales University (JWU), to see if there are specific campus preferences concerning librarian presence in and use of social software programs, or if attitudes were constants despite institutional differences. JWU is a private institution created nearly a century ago in Rhode Island. Initially a business and secretarial school, JWU now has three branch campuses, including the one in Denver which serves approximately 1,500 undergraduate students. Three colleges, Culinary, Hospitality and Business, offer baccalaureate degrees including Food Service Management, Criminal Justice, and Entertainment and Event Management among others. The university is career oriented, enrolling students in major discipline courses from the first term onward. Librarians at JWU maintain a Facebook page, and use it extensively to connect with students, promote new library resources, and invite participation in campus activities. Librarian Merrie Valliant served as able research colleague for this project, disseminating the survey URL and promoting participation among JWU students. Her assistance is greatly appreciated. (For more information about JWU, visit www. jwu.edu.)

A survey instrument was developed focusing on four social software programs: Facebook, MySpace, Instant Messaging (IM), and Second Life. The survey was mounted via WebSurveyor tool. The URL was distributed at UNC via print flyers, the library web site and Facebook. JWU distributed the URL to students via Facebook,

table tents in the library, and bookmarks handed out at the reference desk. The survey was available for approximately a month during the spring 2008 semester. At the end of the survey, respondents could choose to submit their contact information for iTunes gift cards as an incentive to participate. Winners were selected randomly. The contact information provided was separated from survey responses to protect anonymity[2].

Results

A total of 65 survey responses were received. Five were eliminated because of respondent age or completion errors. Of the 60 viable responses, 20 respondents attend the University of Northern Colorado while the other 40 attend the Denver campus of Johnson and Wales University. Of the participants, 42 were female; 57 were born between 1980 and 1990, therefore fitting into the millennial generation (Raines, 2003, pp. 19), while the remaining three are older. More than 50 per cent (33) of respondents were born in 1987-1989, fitting the typical age of a first year college student.

Respondents were asked to share how they accessed the internet. While six responded that they use a home dial-up connection, all of these individuals also reported using high-speed access in other locations. Therefore, all respondents have high-speed access to the internet in at least one location.

The bulk of the survey questions focused on four different social software programs: Facebook, MySpace, IM and Second Life. Results show that 83 per cent (50) use Facebook, 58 per cent (35) use MySpace, 57 per cent (34) use IM, not one uses Second Life. Lack of survey responses precludes further discussion of Second Life. Users were asked about the number of times and the amount of time spent in social software programs. While the majority of social software program users reported less than two log-ons a day and less than two hours (per program) a day, some reported considerably more use. While the maximum reported usage of some programs may seem alarming, it is not uncommon for users of social software always be connected in some way. This might include such behavior as running an IM client 24 hours a day or logging into Facebook every few hours to check status updates of friends (see Table I).

The central impetus for research was ascertaining whether students would welcome librarian interaction with them in social software programs. Respondents can be described as apathetic about the presence of librarians in social software programs. As shown in Table II, the vast majority (70 per cent in Facebook and 77 per cent in MySpace) of respondents would not care if a librarian participated in social software programs. Although a majority of students would be "friends" with a librarian in programs that offer such opportunities, but less than half would seek help with research in these programs. Responses for IM show some differences because the concept of "friends" does not exist with this social software, and a little over half of the IM users would seek research help.

| | Times/day | | | Hours/day | | |
	Facebook	MySpace	IM	Facebook	MySpace	IM
Mean	3.06	2.23	4.21	1.71	1.59	3.88
Maximum	25	10	50	5	6	24
Note: Mean and maximum calculated from those indicating use of each software program						

Table I.
Frequency and duration
of use: Facebook,
MySpace, and IM

Discussion

The small dataset does not allow the results to be generalized to a larger population and prevents any high level statistical analysis. The response rate is consistent with other surveys conducted on these campuses, and while small, still reveals usable information. This survey was conducted across two campuses to see if differences could be found. Answers were very similar in all areas between the two campuses, revealing no notable effect of the established Facebook presence of the JWU librarian.

Not a single respondent indicated participation in Second Life. This may be an anomaly due to a small dataset, a reflection of the culture in the western portion of the USA, or some other factor. As the purpose of this survey was to determine where to focus attention for future projects, the researchers will not invest time in Second Life for the foreseeable future.

More participants would seek library help in IM as compared to Facebook and MySpace users. This illustrates that IM is a different sort of software than Facebook or MySpace; it is a tool, rather than a community or "place."
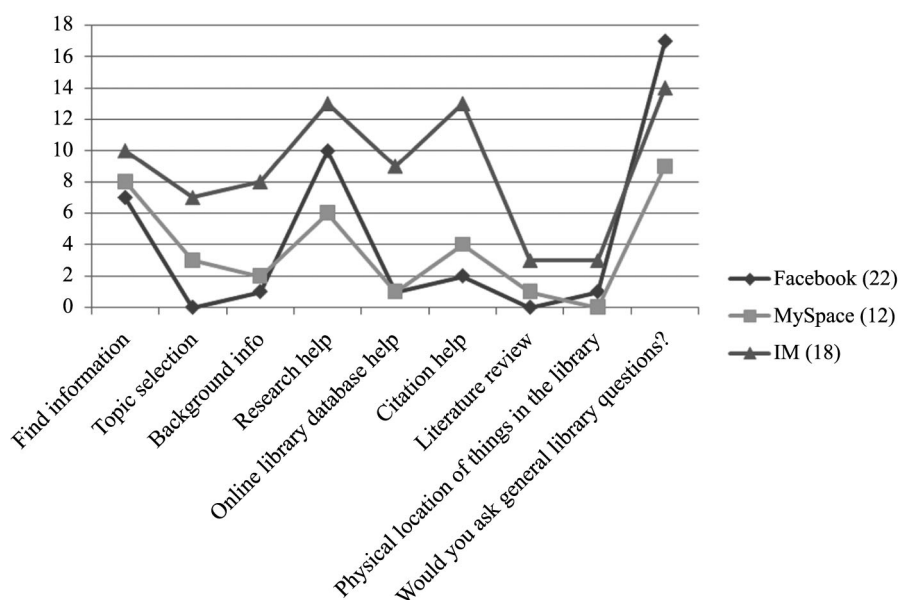
Perhaps the most enlightening trend in the results came from questions focusing on whether respondents would ask for library help, and if so, when. Students responded to these questions in a manner reflecting student behavior in a physical library environment. Most are reluctant to ask for any kind of help. Respondents identified areas in which they would seek assistance differently, depending on the software. "Research help" ranked highest in Facebook and IM, while "find information" ranked highest in MySpace. IM users also ranked highest "citation help" (see Figure 1). Students might be unfamiliar with some of the terms used in the research help question, which might be most evident in the high response rate in all programs for asking "general library questions". While many students might need help identifying the proper database in which to conduct his/her research or in topic identification, many will not admit it or do not know that they could use assistance.

Limitations

Creating a new survey instrument sometimes reveals unforeseen problems with question construction, and this instrument was one such case. Ambiguity was revealed in the question about location of internet access; some students might not view library wireless access as public, and in some locations it is indeed a private network. "Home" is also an ambiguous term; a dorm room can be home for some students, while others would not use that label for the place to sleep during his/her first year at college. Another challenge came with institutional requirements concerning surveys. All surveys must be created and disseminated from a central

Program (total users)	Would not care if my librarian was available via program		Would be "friends" with librarian		Would seek help with a research project	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Facebook (50)	35	70	33	66	22	44
MySpace (35)	27	77	22	63	12	34
IM (34)	18	53	n/a	n/a	18	53

Table II.
Patron expectations of librarian presence in social software programs

Figure 1.
Types of assistance
respondents would seek in
social software programs

office. The individual tasked with creating this survey made some coding decisions that complicated data analysis. These coding decisions resulted in a dataset that was not as clean as it could have been.

Conclusion

Librarians who would like to create a presence in social software programs need to identify what the goals are for participation. Is she/he participating as an individual, and if students or patrons from his/her library find his/her profile, so be it? Is s/he looking for a high "friend" count of library's users, regardless of participation, or is the goal to foster a relationship with individual patrons that promotes library use? Goals should be identified so that the success of the endeavor can be measured. According to these respondents, it seems that many students are willing to be "friends" with librarians in social software programs, but do not anticipate or want library help in these programs. Only the individual librarian can decide what level of participation indicates success of each social software endeavor.

Notes

1. Examples of library blogs that discuss social networks (in addition to those in the References section) include: *Information Wants to be Free* at http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/, *Tame the Web* at http://tametheweb.com/, and *Walking Paper* at http://www.walkingpaper. org/

2. The authors are happy to share the survey with interested parties. Please contact them for a copy.

References

Chapman, S. (2007), "Data: Students + Facebook + Library Outreach", userslib.com, available at: http://userslib.com/2007/12/15/data-students-facebook-library-outreach/

Chu, M. and Nalani Meulemans, Y. (2008), "The problems and potential of MySpace and Facebook usage in academic libraries", *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 69-85.

De Rosa, C. *et al.* (2007), *Sharing, Privacy and Trust in Our Networked World: A Report to the OCLC Membership*, OCLC, Dublin, OH.

Farkas, M. (2007), "Going where patrons are", *American Libraries*, Vol. 38 No. 4, p. 27.

Ferguson, C. (2007), "Technology left behind – making friends online: library use of social networking services", *Against the Grain*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 86-7.

Houghton-Jan, S. (2006), "IL 2006: MySpace & Facebook", *Librarian in Black*, available at: http://librarianinblack.typepad.com/librarianinblack/2006/10/il_2006_myspace.html

Huwe, T. (2007), "The joy of finding out what people don't want", *Computers in Libraries*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 26-8.

Kirriemuir, J. (2008), "A spring 2008 'snapshot' of UK higher and further education developments in Second Life", available at: www.eduserv.org.uk/upload/foundation/sl/uksnapshot052008/final.pdf

Koerwer, S. (2007), "One teenager's advice to adults on how to avoid being creepy on Facebook", *Computers in Libraries*, Vol. 27 No. 8, p. 40.

Levine, J. (2007), *ALA's Second Life, The Shifted Librarian*, available at: www.theshiftedlibrarian.com/archives/2007/01/08/alas_second_life.html

Mack, D., Behler, A., Roberts, B. and Rimland, E. (2007), "Reaching students with Facebook: data and best practices", *Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship*, Vol. 8 No. 2, available at: http://southernlibrarianship.icaap.org/content/v08n02/mack_d01.html

Miller, S. and Jensen, L. (2007), "Connecting and communicating with students on Facebook", *Computers in Libraries*, Vol. 27 No. 8, pp. 18-22.

Ostrander, M. (2008), *Second Life Research Journal*, available at: http://librariandreamer.wordpress.com/

Quan-Haase, A. (2008), "Instant messaging on campus: use and integration in university students' everyday communication", *The Information Society*, Vol. 24, pp. 105-15.

Raines, C. (2003), *Connecting Generations: The Sourcebook for a New Workplace*, Crisp Publications, Menlo Park, CA.

Tananbaum, G. (2008), "I hear the train a comin' – Standford in Second Life", *Against the Grain*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 84-5.

Tenopir, C. (2007), "Living the virtual library life", *Library Journal*, Vol. 132 No. 16, p. 24.

About the authors

Annie Epperson is an Instruction Librarian and Assistant Professor at the University of Northern Colorado. Annie Epperson is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: annie.epperson@unco.edu

Jennifer J. Leffler is the Electronic Resources Librarian and Assistant Professor at the University of Northern Colorado.