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FACEBOOK: A BLESSING OR A CURSE? IN THE LIGHT OF OWN RESEARCH AMONG POLISH INTERNET USERS

Abstract

The aim of this study is an attempt to answer the question as to whether Facebook, the leading social networking site, is a blessing or a curse of the Internet. Apart from the literature and the author's own knowledge, results from a study on the degree of satisfaction of respondents from the use of Facebook were also referred to.

The pros and cons of Facebook were presented. During February–May 2015 the author's own survey on the Internet was conducted. This survey was targeted at Facebook users in Poland. Non-probability methods: a convenient selection and then snowball sampling were used. Because the sample was not representative, it did not give rise to statistical inferences about the population of Facebook users. However, it allowed the formulation of assumptions about the trend.

Three spheres of Facebook: functionality, layout and security were evaluated. Respondents attributed the weight of the individual characteristics of each sphere, and then they assessed the degree of satisfaction from these characteristics. For this purpose, a Likert scale was used. The degree of satisfaction with the website's services was examined by constructing a customer satisfaction index.

Key words: social media, Facebook users, Likert scale, customer satisfaction index

Introduction

In the contemporary world, social media serve as a potent weapon in the struggle against loneliness, social maladjustment, boredom, but also – privacy. Even though our appreciation of data security is growing, we publish increasing amounts of personal information on social networks. Countless applications integrated with social media services force users to submit data; this allows companies to custom-

ize their commercial message and reach the individual customer through retargeting mechanisms.

Social networks are an important element of our lives. People without a single social media account are hard to come by; the vast majority cannot imagine their daily existence without being in touch with friends or keeping track of current events. By engaging with customers on social media (through fan-pages, viral marketing, games, blogs and videos), companies and brands effectively build their public image. Social networks also allow individuals to shape their own social personae, something increasingly important for employers who go online to recruit staff for their business.

Despite the unflagging popularity of major social media sites (YouTube, Facebook, Blogger, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn), web users are ever less likely to use multiple platforms at the same time (hypersociality) [Metyk 2015]. In 2013, 18% of users engaged on 5 social media sites per month, compared to only 8% a year later [Metyk 2015].

Social media are no longer the province of youth under the age of 24; their popularity is also on the rise among “young adults” (25–34 years of age) and seniors (55+) [Metyk 2015]. On the other hand, the 2014 IRCenter report indicates that social media viewership is declining in the under-44 demographic and growing in the 45–64 age bracket [Rok 2014 w Social Media – raport 2014]. According to the same report, more men (56.2%) than women (43.8%) are active on social media.

The purpose of this article is to determine whether Facebook, the current leader among social media, is a blessing or a curse. Alongside relevant literature and personal knowledge, it relies on an independent survey of Facebook user satisfaction. In the context of own research and the article’s purpose the following research hypotheses were formulated:

1. Security on Facebook is most important for Internet users.
2. It is difficult to say unequivocally whether Facebook is a blessing or a curse.
3. Internet users are expected to be at least 60% satisfied with Facebook.

Facebook as the most popular social media site

Facebook is an international social media site established in the US on 4 February 2004. It allows users to send messages, “like” and “share” posts, upload and edit photos, use various apps, play games, create their own events and subscribe to those organized by others, search for and add contacts, create groups, and add videos.

As the unchallenged leader of the world’s social media, Facebook is not only an entertainment tool but also a venue for staff recruitment, professional experience sharing, and publication of specialized articles.

Initially, Facebook was only used by Harvard University students to assess the attractiveness of their female classmates (“Hot or Not”), so the user group was narrow and hermetic; the service opened up to the world in 2006 [Mezrich 2010; Stutzman, Gross, Acquisti 2012, pp. 7–41].

The advantages and disadvantages of Facebook

Despite the popularity it continues to enjoy among increasingly younger users, Facebook also has a number of significant disadvantages. Table 1 shows its pros and cons.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of Facebook

Advantages	Disadvantages
ease of searching for contacts	high addictiveness
ability to make new friends	more and more personal data are revealed
interesting and up-to-date information on actors, singers, poets, etc.	transaction and location data are collected against users' will
timeline	retargeting
creating groups	running a company profile requires strategy and constant monitoring
finding groups	accounts cannot be deleted
creating events	uncertainty surrounding new contacts
keeping track of new events	"stalking" friends
ability to build company image through press notes, articles, newsletters	low efficiency in removing uncensored comments, photos, and videos
source of information on job applicants	too many sponsored ads
liking	phishing (data extortion)
sharing	cyberbullying (slandering, harassment, bullying, and ridiculing online)
notifications	flaming (online quarrels; trading insults)
adding photos and videos	
privacy controls	
advertising	
activity log	
update preferences	
games, quizzes, apps (entertainment)	
Facebook can be synced on multiple devices: laptop, smartphone, tablet	
practicality	
CRM tool	

Source: the author's own study based on: own knowledge; Szymczak 2015; Vor- und Nachteile von Facebook abwägen 2014; Meister 2012; Wyllie 2014; Duranowski 2014, pp. 11–21; Cyberbullying on Facebook... 2014; Grote 2012.

As suggested by the table, the advantages of Facebook significantly outnumber its disadvantages, but the downsides have relatively greater weight. Careful attention, therefore, should be paid to the dangers of addiction and reckless friend-making.

Material and statistical methods

Between February and May 2015, I conducted an independent online study on a group of Polish Facebook users. Non-probability (non-random) methods were used. Firstly, a convenient selection was used, in which my friends were selected. Then snowball sampling was used to identify the members of the Facebook population who are difficult to locate. 618 respondents were surveyed.

Since it was not representative, no statistical conclusions could be derived about the population of Facebook users at large. However, the survey does allow us to formulate certain speculations about general trends. The Likert scale was used to estimate the importance of individual Facebook features and the user satisfaction level. Satisfaction with the site was analyzed by constructing the customer satisfaction index.

Results

The sample consisted of 472 women (76.38%) and 146 men (23.62%). Most respondents fell within the 18–24 age range (63.59%); the 55–64 age group was the smallest in size (0.65%). This stands in stark contradiction to the claim above that social media are no longer dominated by youth under the age of 24. However, it should be kept in mind that the sample was not representative; the findings cannot be generalized to the population of Facebook users at large.

92.23% of respondents have used the site for at least 2 years, with nearly 52% of this group being Facebook users for as many as 5 to 10 years. 88.03% visit Facebook at least once a day; only 0.81% log in less than once a month. Respondents primarily use it at home on (in descending order of frequency): laptops, smartphones, PCs, and tablets.

Facebook user satisfaction index

Three aspects of Facebook were studied: graphic layout, functionality and security. Respondents rated their individual features in terms of importance (on a scale of 1–5, where 1 stood for “unimportant,” 2 – “not very important,” 3 – “quite im-

portant,” 4 – “important,” 5 – “very important”), and subsequently evaluated their satisfaction with each feature (on a scale of 1–5, where 1 indicated “dissatisfied,” 2 – “rather dissatisfied,” 3 – “moderately satisfied,” 4 – “satisfied,” and 5 – “very satisfied”). The results of stage 1, i.e. the importance rating, are shown in tables 2, 3 and 4; tables 5, 6 and 7 present the results of stage 2, where users rated their subjective satisfaction with the site.

Table 2. Importance of Facebook’s GRAPHIC LAYOUT

Features	Weighted mean
Colors	2.46
Font size	2.91
Layout of elements	3.51
Photo exposure	3.33
Ads	1.86
Mean of weighted means	2.81

Source: own study.

Table 3. Importance of Facebook’s FUNCTIONALITY

Features	Weighted mean
Efficiency	4.39
Ease of making new contacts	3.57
Ability to communicate with several users at once	3.85
Unlimited friend list	2.86
Creating closed groups	3.54
Friend search engine	3.62
Hashtags	1.69
Liking	2.50
Sharing	2.24
Apps, quizzes, games	1.60
Uploading photos	3.16
Uploading videos	2.45
Current events	3.97
Mean of weighted means	3.03

Source: own study.

Table 4. Importance of Facebook's SECURITY

Features	Weighted mean
Personal data protection	4.62
Privacy	4.63
Mean of weighted means	4.63

Source: own study.

Table 5. User satisfaction with Facebook's GRAPHIC LAYOUT

Features	Weighted mean
Colors	3.82
Font size	3.88
Layout of elements	3.68
Photo exposure	3.71
Ads	2.27
Mean of weighted means	3.47

Source: own study.

Table 6. User satisfaction with Facebook's FUNCTIONALITY

Features	Weighted mean
Efficiency	3.81
Ease of making new contacts	3.94
Ability to communicate with several users at once	4.15
Unlimited friend list	3.93
Creating closed groups	4.15
Friend search engine	3.86
Hashtags	3.19
Liking	3.74
Sharing	3.49
Apps, quizzes, games	2.77
Uploading photos	3.82
Uploading videos	3.56
Current events	3.97
Mean of weighted means	3.72

Source: own study.

Table 7. User satisfaction with Facebook's SECURITY

Features	Weighted mean
Personal data protection	3.28
Privacy	3.32
Mean of weighted means	3.30

Source: own study.

Respondents attach the greatest importance to the security of the site, awarding the highest rating to data protection and privacy. Facebook's layout is the least important and ads rank lowest among all of its features. In terms of functionality, efficiency is rated highest, while apps, quizzes, and games matter the least.

As regards user satisfaction, respondents are particularly happy with the functionality of the site. The highest ranked features were, *ex aequo*, the ability to communicate with several people at once and the ability to create closed groups. Apps, quizzes, and games received the lowest ratings. This should not come as a surprise since the largest percentage of respondents fall into the 18–24 age range (people in the pre-marital period, singles, students) and the 25–44 age range, i.e. belong to age groups that no longer spend their time playing games and solving quizzes but rather focus on maintaining stable relationships and use the site for efficient communication.

Respondents are the least satisfied with Facebook's security, pointing to the inadequacy of personal data protection. In terms of layout, the lowest ratings are awarded to ads.

At the third stage of the study, importance was assigned to particular aspects of Facebook (table 8), and at the fourth, the user satisfaction index was calculated as the total of weighted ratings, measured as the product of satisfaction estimates and their respective weights (table 9).

Table 8. Importance assigned to individual aspects

Aspect	Importance rating (mean of means)	Weight
Graphic layout	2.81	0.27
Functionality	3.03	0.29
Security	4.63	0.44
Total	10.47	1.00

Source: own study.

Table 9. Facebook user satisfaction index

Aspect	User satisfaction (mean of means)	Weight	Weighted rating
Graphic layout	3.47	0.27	0.93
Functionality	3.72	0.29	1.08
Security	3.30	0.44	1.46
Total	–	–	3.47

Source: own study.

Weighted user satisfaction ratings clearly indicate the prime importance of Facebook security. Referring the final rating of 3.47 to a 5-point Likert scale, an overall user satisfaction index of 69.34% was established. This indicates that Polish respondents are not particularly happy with the site; the index could well be higher. An important question to ask, however, is whether anything can still be done to surprise them. Facebook has now reached maturity and already played all its cards. Site security could perhaps be improved, or the layout enhanced, and the number of ads reduced.

By comparison, according to 2012 data based on the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), as few as 61% of all Facebook users were satisfied with the site, down by 5 percentage points from 2011, when the figure stood at 66% [Kreft 2012]. The reason could have been Facebook's controversial privacy policy or a simple surfeit with the site.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that as a consumer communications tool, Facebook began its life cycle as a truly innovative touchpoint. Almost every single large brand today maintains a Facebook presence and there is nothing remarkable about that. This, however, does not mean that the site is no longer attractive to individual consumers as well, despite the relatively low user satisfaction index (less than 70% in Poland). To the contrary, most consumers take advantage of a variety of cutting-edge touchpoints: smartphones, tablets, and customized advertising tailored to the needs and expectations of individual users. With that in mind, could we risk stating that Facebook is actually a blessing of the World Wide Web?

In order to answer that question, it would be necessary to consider other issues as well: does Facebook reinforce or destroy human relationships, does it help everyday contacts or impede them, is it useful for companies and job seekers, does it foster professional growth, and, importantly, is it addictive? Last but not least, the issues of security and personal data protection also seem of paramount importance.

There are as many answers to these questions as there are Facebook users and opponents. Some cannot imagine their life without Facebook; to others it is a waste of precious time. One thing is certain: it takes skill to use it in a responsible manner.

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Streszczenie

Celem opracowania jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy Facebook, wiodący obecnie portal społecznościowy, jest dobrodziejstwem, czy skazą Internetu. Oprócz rozważań literaturowych i własnej wiedzy powołano się na wyniki badań własnych dotyczących stopnia zadowolenia respondentów z użytkowania Facebooka.

Przedstawiono wady i zalety Facebooka. W miesiącach luty–maj 2015 r. przeprowadzono w Internecie badanie własne. To badanie skierowane było do polskich użytkowników Facebooka. Zastosowano metody doboru nielosowego – nieprobabilistycznego: dobór wygodny, a następnie dobór kuli śniegowej. Ponieważ próba nie była reprezentatywna, nie dawała podstaw do statystycznych wnioskowań o populacji użytkowników Facebooka. Pozwalała jednak sformułować przypuszczenia nt. tendencji.

Ocenie poddano trzy sfery Facebooka: funkcjonalność, szatę graficzną i bezpieczeństwo. Respondenci przypisywali wagi poszczególnym cechom każdej sfery, a następnie oceniali stopień zadowolenia z tychże cech. W tym celu zastosowano skalę Likerta. Zbadano stopień zadowolenia z usług portalu, konstruując wskaźnik satysfakcji klienta.