THE POSTING PARADOX: FACEBOOK VS. TWITTER

Robert E. Miller
Central Michigan University
mille5re@cmich.edu

ABSTRACT
Social networking has become the Internet’s most common activity and college students are some of its most fervent users. Unfortunately, using social networks places college students at risk because of the content that they often post. Previous research has shown that students commonly post content on social networking sites that could damage their chances for employment. Although students know the risks that they are taking, many continue to post content that is inappropriate. Researchers have dubbed this behavior the “posting paradox”. In order to better understand the paradox, this paper reports the results of a field study which compares student uses of two of the most popular social networking sites, Facebook and Twitter. The results of the study indicate that students post inappropriate content on both sites, with the paradox being more pronounced on Twitter. The paper discusses the implications of these results and proposes areas for future research.

Keywords
Social networks, posting behavior, posting paradox

INTRODUCTION
Although they have only been around for a little over a decade, social networking sites have become a significant presence on the Internet. In fact, social networking now accounts for nearly one in every five minutes spent online globally, making it the most common Internet activity (ComSource, 2011). Social networking sites reach roughly 82% of the world’s Internet population 15 years of age and older. The size and continued growth of these sites, makes social networking a phenomenon worth investigating.

While social networking sites come in a variety of flavors, most allow users to create online profiles where they can post photos, messages, status updates, etc. Users can also specify a list of other users (friends, followers, etc.) with whom they share a connection. Through these connections, users can view and post information on each other’s profiles. The content posted on these profiles covers the gamut from the ridiculous to the sublime. Users post everything from social commentary and political discourse to their views on celebrities and popular cultural. Much of what is posted is also very personal. The posting of personal information can cause problems given the lack of privacy associated with social networking, especially when the personal information borders on being inappropriate.

The appropriateness of posted content has become a particular issue for college students. According to a Nielsen (2012) study, college-aged users spend more time on social networking sites than any other group. Their extensive use of these sites, and somewhat cavalier attitude, has led many students to post content that is extremely inappropriate. Interestingly, most students appear to know that the content that they post is not appropriate for all audiences, especially when the audience is made up of potential employers. The fact that these same students continue their inappropriate posting behavior, despite the risks, has been dubbed the “posting paradox” (Miller, Parsons, and Lifer; 2010). Although first noted in the behavior of college students in the United States, the posting paradox has also been found in other countries, as well (Melton, Miller, and Salmona; 2012). So far, studies investigating the paradox have only looked at sites such as Facebook and Myspace. While these sites account for a large percentage of social networking traffic, there are other sites which have grown rapidly and deserve similar attention. One such site is Twitter, which has also developed a significant user base, especially among college students.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to expand the investigation of the posting paradox beyond the studies conducted to date. Specially, the paper examines student uses of both Facebook and Twitter, in order to see how the paradox manifests itself on different sites. The paper begins with a discussion of Facebook, Twitter, and the posting paradox. It then presents the results of a field study in which data were collected on site usage, profile privacy, and appropriateness of posted content. The paper ends with a comparison of content appropriateness between the sites and a discussion of future research based on the results.

FACEBOOK AND TWITTER
Facebook has experienced phenomenal growth since it was introduced in 2004. According to its website, Facebook had one billion active users as of October 2012 (Facebook, 2012). Approximately 81% of those users were from outside of the

Proceedings of the Southern Association for Information Systems Conference, Savannah, GA, USA March 8th–9th, 2013 135
United States and Canada, making Facebook a truly global Internet force. ComSource (2011) reported that Facebook accounts for nearly one of every seven minutes spent online around the world. More importantly, Facebook accounts for three of every four social networking minutes. Numbers like these make it clear that Facebook is a global phenomenon. While it continues to be the major player in the social networking space, other sites have begun to make their marks. One of these sites is Twitter.

According to its website, Twitter is a “real-time information network” that connects users to the latest ideas, opinions, and news (Twitter 2012). Essentially, Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to send and read text-based messages of up to 140 characters. These messages are known as “tweets”. Users of the site can view the tweets of another user by becoming a “follower” of that user. Several celebrities have thousands of such followers.

Since its introduction in 2006, Twitter has also experienced significant growth, reaching the 500 million global user mark in June 2012 (Koetsier, 2012). In a Pew Internet study, Smith and Brenner (2012) found that approximately 15% of online adults in the United States use Twitter. The percentage of college-aged adults who use Twitter is even higher at 31%.

**THE POSTING PARADOX**

While the number of college students using social networking sites is significant, it is the way they use the sites that is particularly interesting. Since students are allowed a great deal of latitude in what they post, the posted content often contains material which is not appropriate for some audiences. In their study of Facebook profiles, Peluchette and Karl (2010) found that students commonly posted photographs of themselves with alcohol or in sexually provocative poses. They also found profiles that contained comments about alcohol/drug use, sexual activity, and profanity. If the content in these profiles were only viewed by other college students, the damage would probably be minimal. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

According to a recent survey, approximately 70% of recruiting professionals acknowledged that they, at least occasionally, reviewed the social networking profiles of job candidates (Jobvites, 2010). The use of profiles to screen candidates has become an increasingly common practice across many industries. The problem for students is that potential employers often do not like what they see in these profiles. Haefner (2009) found that 35% employers reported they had decided not to hire a candidate based on the content posted on his/her social networking site.

Given that employer use of social networking sites has been covered extensively in the media, most students are aware that posting inappropriate content can be problematic during a job search. Interestingly, however, this awareness does not appear to change their posting behavior. Miller, et al. (2010) found that students report being less comfortable with their profiles being viewed by potential employers as compared with other audiences such as their friends, parents, and professors. The researchers argued that this lack of comfort indicates that students know their content is not appropriate. Essentially, students know that their profiles may be reviewed by potential employers and that what they have posted could reflect negatively on their employability. Why then do students continue to post this inappropriate content? This is what Miller, et al. (2010) called the “posting paradox”.

To date, studies investigating the posting paradox (e.g., Miller, et al., 2010; Melton, et al., 2012) have concentrated of sites such as Facebook and Myspace. Although the studies show that the paradox is pervasive on these sites, the findings may not generalize to other types of sites. For example, it would be hard to imagine that students would intentional post inappropriate material on a career-focused site like LinkedIn. It could, therefore, be argued that the posting paradox is not present in all social networking contexts. At the same time, it could also be argued that the paradox might be even more extreme on some sites as compared to Facebook or MySpace. One site where this might be true is Twitter.

As noted by Smith and Brenner (2012), Twitter use has nearly doubled in the last two years among 18-24 year olds. Researchers have found that much of this growth is spurred by a need for privacy (Irvine, 2012). Essentially, students are moving to Twitter to distance themselves from the prying eyes of parents, teachers, and other adults who may try to “friend” them on Facebook. If students are using Twitter to communicate with friends without the burden of having to filter what they say, then their tweets could be even more inappropriate than what is seen on Facebook. Since most student Twitter accounts are public, this could lead to an even more pronounced example of the posting paradox.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

In order to investigate the issues raised in the previous section it was decided to collect data directly from students who use Facebook and Twitter. To accomplish this, the author created a web-based survey with questions to collect demographic data along with questions about the student’s use of social networking sites and the content that they post. The study sample was drawn from undergraduate business students attending a large university in the Midwest United States. Based on the nature of the questions, the students were assured that, if they chose to participate, their responses would remain anonymous.
total of 192 usable responses were collected (students with both Facebook and Twitter accounts). The demographic breakdown of respondents is given in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time to Graduation</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 5 years</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Gender and Time to Graduation

RESULTS

The students were first asked a series of questions about their Facebook accounts. The vast majority of respondents (91.2%) admitted to visiting the site at least once a day, with 64.6% visiting multiple times a day. While students may visit Facebook often, their visits tend to be short. The majority of respondents (93.8%) reported their individual visits are less than 30 minutes in length. Table 2 gives the breakdown of frequency and duration of Facebook visits.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often do you access your profile?</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than once a month</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a day</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple times a day</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How long are you on when you access your profile?</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 10 minutes</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-30 minutes</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-60 minutes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 60 minutes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Facebook Usage and Duration

The survey results also show that Facebook users are becoming more cautious about who they share their profiles with. As Table 3 illustrates, the majority of respondents (78.1%) only allow friends to view their profiles. While this may indicate that students are becoming more aware of their audience, it should be noted that a substantial group of respondents (15.1%) still make their profiles available to everyone.
Who can view your profile? | n | %  
--- | --- | ---  
Friends only | 150 | 78.1%  
Friends of friends | 9 | 4.7%  
Friends and networks | 4 | 2.1%  
Everyone | 29 | 15.1%

Table 3. Facebook Privacy

As a part of the survey, students were also asked about their Twitter accounts. Specifically, the students were asked about how many Twitter accounts they were following and about how many people were following their accounts. The average respondent reported following 178 accounts (range = 1 to 897) and having 191 followers (range = 0 to 1525). Students were also asked if their accounts were public (71.4%) or protected (28.6%). Table 4 shows that the majority of respondents do not tweet excessively, with 82.8% tweeting five or less times per day.

| How many tweets do you post per day? | n | %  
--- | --- | ---  
Less than 1 per day | 69 | 35.9%  
1-5 per day | 90 | 46.9%  
6-10 per day | 19 | 9.9%  
11-15 per day | 6 | 3.1%  
16-20 per day | 2 | 1.0%  
more than 20 per day | 6 | 3.1%

Table 4. Twitter Usage

Finally, the students were asked about how comfortable they would be if different audiences viewed their Facebook and Twitter accounts. For each audience, the student responded on a seven point Likert-type scale anchored with “strongly disagree” (1) and “strongly agree” (7). Table 5 gives the mean score for Facebook and Twitter by audience.

| I would not mind if __________ saw the contents of my account | Facebook | Twitter | Sig.  
--- | --- | --- | ---  
Friends | 6.56 | 6.39 | .002  
Parents | 5.76 | 4.85 | .000  
Boyfriend/Girlfriend’s Parents | 5.49 | 4.65 | .000  
Professors | 5.05 | 4.30 | .000  
Potential Employers | 4.43 | 3.85 | .000

Table 5. Paired Samples T-Tests

As can be seen in Table 5, students are considerably less comfortable with potential employers viewing their accounts. This result was true for both Facebook and Twitter. Interestingly, the mean responses for Twitter were lower than those for Facebook for each of the potential audiences. When student responses for Facebook were compared to their responses for Twitter, using a paired samples t-test, it was found that the differences were significant for each potential audience (see Table 5).

DISCUSSION

The results presented in the previous section confirm the central position that social networking has in the lives of college students. The study shows that students use Facebook and Twitter on a daily basis, often multiple times a day. The majority of students (64.6%) visit their Facebook accounts multiple times a day, for less than 10 minutes per visit. Students also access their Twitter accounts daily, with the largest group (46.9%) tweeting one to five times per day. Interestingly, the average Twitter user reported having slightly more followers (191) than they were following themselves (178). Since having a large number of followers is seen as prestigious by some Twitter users, there may be a small reporting bias at play here.

While the results highlight some similarities in the way students use Facebook and Twitter, when it comes to privacy, students treat the two sites very differently. The majority of students appear to be very cautious when deciding who can view
their Facebook profiles. Seventy-eight percent of respondents restrict profile access to friends-only. This tight control of profile access might be a response to media coverage about profile content being used against students by others, including potential employers.

Given the results of this study, it appears that students don’t view Twitter as having the same level of risk as Facebook. The majority of students (71.4%) actually make their Twitter accounts public, meaning they can be viewed by anyone. Only 15.1% of students had a similar privacy policy for their Facebook accounts. This cavalier attitude about Twitter security could be the result of the fact that many students have not been on the site long and are still trying to recruit a large group of followers. It could also be based on the flawed logic that they can, somehow, hide themselves on Twitter by using an alias. Regardless of the reason, it will be interesting to see if students continue to leave their accounts public, or if they begin to restrict access as they have with Facebook.

As it relates to the posting paradox, the results show both similarities and differences between the sites. In both cases, students are clearly less than comfortable with potential employers viewing their content. This indicates that students realize what they have posted on Facebook and Twitter could negatively affect a job search. The fact that they continue to post this content, despite the risk, confirms the presence of the paradox on both sites.

Although students are not comfortable with employers viewing their content on either site, they are significantly less comfortable with their Twitter content being viewed. This result is very revealing. As researchers (e.g. Irvine, 2012) have already noted, much of Twitter’s growth among students has been spurred by their need to distance themselves from authority figures who are, increasingly, joining social networking sites like Facebook. Basically, students are trying to find a place where they can express themselves freely without having to worry about who is in the audience. For many students, Twitter has become that place. Unfortunately, comments made on a social networking site (especially on a public account) can hardly be considered private. In the end, students may be exposing themselves to even more risk on Twitter than they were on Facebook.

FUTURE RESEARCH

While this paper has expanded the investigation into the posting paradox, it has also highlighted questions which should be addressed in future research. First, researchers should examine the student migration to Twitter in more detail. Do students view Facebook and Twitter differently? Do they believe Twitter is less risky than Facebook, and if so, why? Second, researchers should examine how students use Twitter. Does Twitter serve the same basic purpose as sites like Facebook? If not, then how does the purpose differ? Finally, researchers should investigate any longitudinal changes in the use of Twitter. Will students change what they post on Twitter, resulting in a less pronounced posting paradox? Will students begin to secure their Twitter accounts, or will they largely remain public?

REFERENCES