

Student Engagement in a Facebook Group Supporting a University Course (Short Paper)

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פעילות וצפינות (Lurking) סטודנטים בקבוצת פייסבוק התומכת בקורס באוניברסיטה (מאמר קצר)

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Abstract

Facebook groups have become popular tools and are often used for educational purposes. In the current study, a Facebook group was created as a support to a course in the university with the participation of the students and the management of one of the researchers, in order to better understand what makes the students be more or less engaged in the group. By the end of the semester, 44 students have answered an open question in an online questionnaire about their engagement. Their answers were analyzed into six factors behind active engagement or lurking in the Facebook learning group: getting help with the learning material, the quality of the group leader's response, students' sense that they were not coping alone with the difficulties of the material, the group's interactive nature, the prizes and the game-play and accessibility. This action research shed a light on the students' motivation to participate actively in learning Facebook groups and enrich their learning experience.

Keywords: Facebook groups; University courses; Online engagement; Lurk.

Introduction

Engagement in online discussion groups

Online discussion groups allow people with similar interests to express opinions or give feedback on someone else's post, discuss common problems and issues and to offer information and support on a variety of topics (Bronstein et al., 2016). The literature distinguishes between active participation and "lurkers" (i.e. the ones who are members in the group, read its content, but never participate), claiming that the level of engagement can be determined both by psychological and environmental factors (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2016; Gazit et al., 2018).

Despite the necessity for user engagement in online groups, research demonstrates that only a marginal percentage of individuals contribute to online discussions. In fact, the majority of online community users are the lurkers (Han et al., 2014; Rafaeli, Ravid & Soroka, 2004).

Too many lurkers in an online discussion groups are liable to result in problems that face online communities such as a low posting rate and lack of valuable content (Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014). The level of engagement is also important from the users' point of view. Prior studies have found that online participation enhances social well-being (Herrero et al., 2004; van Uden-Kraan et al., 2008). Hence, users - especially lurkers - should be encouraged to participate more actively in online discussion groups.

Facebook groups as educational tools

As Facebook is nowadays still the biggest social network site (Smith & Anderson, 2018), Facebook groups have also become a popular tool, and are often used for educational purposes (Miron & Ravid, 2015). Blonder and Rap (2017) created Facebook groups as a support to Chemistry classes at high schools and found that the teachers better integrated links to videos and visualizations that supported understanding abstract chemistry concepts. It was also found that the addition of Facebook groups to the classical array of courses at schools and universities significantly improved the level of students' satisfaction comparing to LMS (Meishar-Tal, Kurtz, & Pieterse, 2012) and is an important educational tool for students to receive help on homework and assignments (Aaen & Dalsgaard, 2016). Students admitted that their relationship with their classmates, lecturer and material improved after participating in Online Social Networking (OSN) educational activities (Hamid, et al., 2015). Finally, Miron and Ravid (2015) surveyed twelve Facebook educational groups and found that one of the advantages is the speed and ease with which students can be answered asking a question in Facebook groups.

The current research

In the current study a Facebook group was created by the researchers as a support to a course in the university ("research methods") for undergraduate students. The research used mixed method designs, using action research, questionnaires and interviews to answer the question: what are the factors behind active engagement or lurking in a Facebook group supporting a university course? The findings presented in this paper are the ones from the questionnaires.

Method

Sample

First year undergraduate students participating in "research method" on-campus course in the communication department of the Inter-Disciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzeliya Israel were invited during one of the first classes to join the Facebook group with the promise to support and help with the course material. There was full cooperation with the teacher of the course and a special permission from the dean. Students with no Facebook accounts were invited to open a temporary one to be able to join the group. Out of the 78 students in the class, 63 joined the group, of which 44 have answered the questionnaire by the end of the semester. 30 of the students were women (68%) and 14 men (32%), with age mean 22.8.

Tools and procedure

The Facebook group was created and administrated by one of the researchers. The admin was publishing a new post twice a week during the semester with questions from previous exams, tips about how to improve their papers and invitations to ask questions about certain topics they were learning in class. Sometimes prizes were promised for giving the right answer first. As the semester continued, more and more students posted their own questions, to which other students as well as the researcher answered.

By the end of the semester 44 students answered a questionnaire that was first published in the Facebook group wall and then was also sent to each group member by the Facebook messenger, containing a few closed-ended questions (that are not presented in this paper) and one open question, that was mandatory: what made you be engaged or avoid engagement in the group?

Data analysis

Participants' responses to the open questions in the questionnaire were grouped into six categories that answered the research question: What motivates or prevents engagement in the group? The thematic analysis facilitated identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data in an inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). A similar analysis was made in the study by Nonnecke and Preece (2001), in which students were interviewed and sought answers to the question "Why lurkers lurk?".

Results

The categories received from the participants' responses are presented in figure 1 and table 1, which shows the categories in descending order based on the number of references.

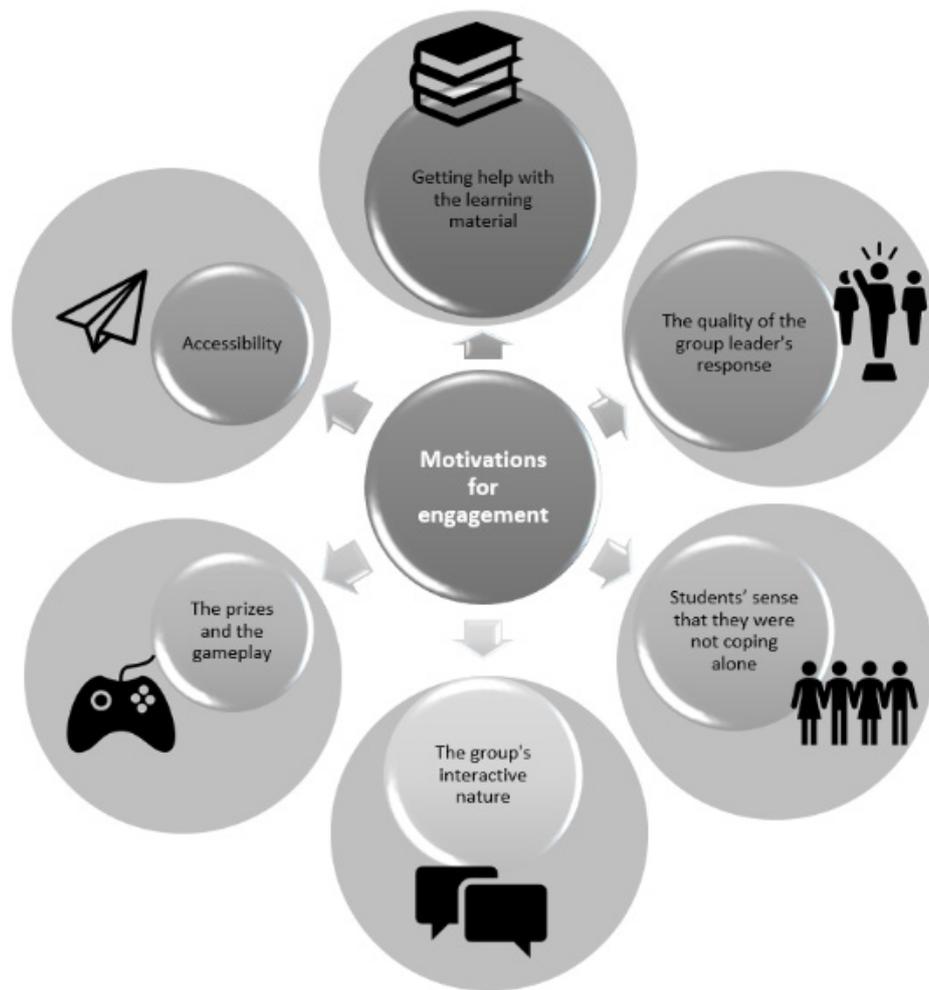


Fig. 1. The motivations for engagement in the Facebook learning group

Table 1. The motivation for engagement in the Facebook learning group in descending order according to the number of references to each category and accompanied by representative quotes (N=44).

The category	Number of references	Quotations
Getting help with the learning material	30	First of all, my need for help; I do not like to react too much, but the responses really helped.
The quality of the group leader's response	10	A quick and easy response by the group manager to students' questions; The admin's ongoing help and support along the way; The group was free and headed by a supervisor who is an expert in the field.
The student's sense that they were not coping alone	7	Knowing that everyone has the same problem - it's relaxing; To know that I do not swim alone in the water and that there is someone to turn to and there is help; If others did not understand like me it would help me feel more comfortable and respond.
The group's interactive nature	7	Brainstorming and collaboration; Students' openness to asking questions; I answered a few questions of others and it made me think about the material and practice it.
The prizes and the game-play	4	The prizes were an upgrade and were a nice addition to participation; The admin's questions published from time to time was cool and made me and my friends want to answer the questions and learn more.
Accessibility	3	Since the course is not simple, the help through Facebook in such an accessible way has contributed to the group's activity; The response was much faster than email, for example.

Discussion and conclusion

The six categories found in the current research can help teachers to create better engagement of the students in Facebook groups supporting academic courses: offering help with the course material, answering quick and quality answers to their questions, create an atmosphere of coping together as a group, maintain interactivity, offer prizes and provide accessibility.

The present study can function as a basic framework presenting factors that may help appreciate the level of students' engagement in Facebook groups supporting courses in the universities. However, there are some limits: there was only one group tested, in which the sample was small and contained homogeneous population of young communication students in Israel. In addition, the categories found may be translated into a closed-ended questionnaire in future research to get quantitative results and conclusions.

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