

***Communicating on Facebook: Romanian LIS Students' Opinion
on the Academic Libraries' Use of Facebook****

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Abstract

Many academic libraries have recently created a page on Facebook for better communicating with their users, especially the students. But what do students think about connecting with the library through a social networking site? This article presents the results of a small survey of undergraduates in the 1st and 2nd year of the Library and Information Science (LIS) Programme from the University of Bucharest, conducted in order to find out the students' opinion about the academic library interacting with them via Facebook.

Keywords: academic libraries, Facebook, LIS students, Romania

Introduction

In recent years social networks have begun to be used by libraries in order to reach out to users. A simple access to the websites of the academic libraries shows that many of them have created a Facebook page and are trying to bring the information services closer to their users.

Information and specialized assistance can be provided nowadays in numerous delivery formats, but a series of studies warn that before launching new services, it would be wise that libraries investigate how users access information, and which are their expectations. (1, 2)

Surprisingly, some studies found that academic libraries' users are not so interested in communicating with the library or in receiving assistance or answers to their information problems via social networking sites such as Facebook or other similar applications. (1, 3, 4)

In a 2010 study, which analyzes what net generation students want, L. Ismail (1) advises for any library to try to determine and understand what users want and prefer before implementing and using new technologies and trying to interact with users this way. Many libraries and librarians start from the supposition that if students have a profile and are very active on Facebook this means that they are also ready to communicate with the library via Facebook. R. S. Connell (2) found that the library literature on the social networking sites discussed different methods, less or more aggressive, for approaching and attracting users, but nobody had investigated if users, and especially students, are interested in the library interacting with them via Facebook or via any other social networking site.

Starting from the 2009 study and questions of R. S. Connell (2) which investigated if 1st year students at Valparaiso University in Indiana were interested in being approached by the library via Facebook, we aimed at carrying out a small survey of undergraduates in the 1st and 2nd year of the Library and Information Science (LIS)

Programme from the University of Bucharest in order to find out the students' opinion about the academic library interacting with them via Facebook.

Context and Methodology of the Survey

Large academic libraries in Romania have recently created a page on Facebook as well. The students of the LIS Department from the University of Bucharest use mainly the information services provided by the Central University Library 'Carol I' Bucharest and by its branches. This library created its Facebook page in August 2012. (5)

We have chosen to conduct this survey at the level of the students in the 1st and 2nd year of the LIS Undergraduate Programme. In April 2013, during a break between classes, those who were present were invited to participate in this survey which had three questions, and those who were willing to participate filled in the questionnaire. In total 55 students out of 90 enrolled in the two years filled in the questionnaire, so there was a response rate of 61%.

Results and Discussion

The first question was 'Do you have a Facebook profile?' and the results showed that 52 students had such a profile and use Facebook and there were only three negative answers. (Figure 1)

The participants to the survey were then asked what they thought about the academic library communicating with users via Facebook. Most of the respondents (37 students) were open to such a communication, some of them had a neutral opinion (11 students) and 7 students were against such an idea, stating that for the communication between the library and students there should be a more official channel and that Facebook was a social network and would not be a beneficial communication. Those who expressed neutral opinions said it would be useful, but not so much, and underlined that anyway it should not be used for information on acquisitions, but for informing users about different events, exhibitions, etc. Others considered that such a communication would be a false one, rejecting completely even the idea to socialize on Facebook, but acknowledging the fact that one can communicate easier news about the library by using this application. The positive answers included opinions saying that such communication would be useful and also efficient because it would be liked and very pleasant.

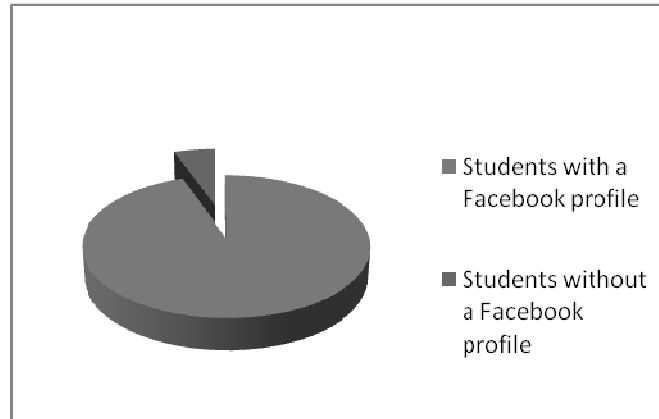


Figure 1 Student presence on Facebook

Others responded that it would be a very good promotional tool and students could find out news about their library and also, considering that many young people spend a lot of time on Facebook, it could attract them and stimulate them to resort to the library for the information they need. Other participants said it would be more useful and at hand if the library communicated with users via Facebook. A student responded that it would be the first good thing done on Facebook.

The third question asked was if they had ever been sent announcements or if the library had ever communicated with them via Facebook. 46 students gave a negative answer and only 9 students said the library connected with them via Facebook and they indicated that they had received announcements regarding different actions taking place within the library or organized by the library, but they said there had been no other type of communication with the library. (Figure 2)

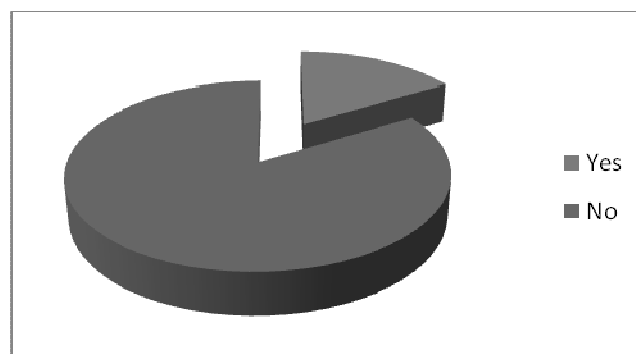


Figure 2 The library's communication with the users via Facebook

Considering that there was not a very high response rate, we cannot generalize these results to all the LIS students at the Undergraduate Programme at the University of

Bucharest, but these results can help us get an idea about the way these students view the possibility for the academic library to communicate with them via a social networking site.

As expected, the great majority of students who participated to this survey have a Facebook profile and are active on this social networking site.

Despite some negative opinions and some which doubt the efficiency of this network as a communication tool between the library and users, the results of our small survey show that, unlike the students from abroad investigated in recent studies, the Romanian students who participated to our study consider such a communication useful and pleasant and also consider Facebook as a very good marketing tool for the library.

In exchange, the library is not completely aware of the advantages which Facebook can bring because, as the results indicate, the only approach in the direction of a better communication with the users was that of posting announcements about different events. It is true that the library created its Facebook page very recently, nine months ago. But if the library really wants to take advantage of all the benefits Facebook can bring in the relationship with the users, then we consider that it should approach its users more actively, and then diversify and intensify its presence on Facebook and also use all the possibilities which this social networking site offers for a better communication with users.

Conclusions

During the last few years, Facebook has attracted millions of people and many of the academic libraries' users access daily this social networking site. This has made libraries consider implementing and using this new application in order to better communicate with them.

The opinions and preferences are divided and, unlike some studies from abroad which indicated that users of academic libraries, and especially students did not favour the communication with the library through social networking sites, our small survey showed that, nevertheless, students in the 1st and 2nd year at the LIS Undergraduate Programme from the University of Bucharest were interested in communicating with the library via Facebook and they have perceived this type of communication as useful and efficient. But libraries must adapt the way they approach users so that they meet the students' expectations and preferences which are constantly changing with the evolution of technologies and of applications which allow for a better interactivity.

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