

What Facebook Users Share: Lower Grades

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By Anita Hamilton

Forget the widely unloved redesign. Facebook has committed a greater offense. According to a new study by doctoral candidate Aryn Karpinski of Ohio State University and her co-author Adam Duberstein of Ohio Dominican University, college students who use the 200 million-member social network have significantly lower grade-point averages (GPAs) than those who do not.

The study, which will be presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association on April 16, surveyed 219 undergraduate and graduate students and found that GPAs of Facebook users typically ranged a full grade point lower than those of nonusers — 3.0 to 3.5 for users versus 3.5 to 4.0 for their non-networking peers. It also found that 79% of Facebook members did not believe there was any link between their GPA and their networking habits.

Karpinski says she isn't surprised by her findings but clarifies that the study does not suggest that Facebook directly causes lower grades, merely that there's some relationship between the two factors. "Maybe [Facebook users] are just prone to distraction. Maybe they are just procrastinators," Karpinski told TIME.com in a phone interview on Monday, April 13.

John Kamin, 23, a student at Hofstra University in New York who uses Facebook, says it's "absurd" to associate the social network with poor grades or lack of aptitude. "It's a networking tool for people," says Kamin, who adds that he spends about an hour a day on Facebook, far less time than he spends playing the addictive game Brick Breaker on his BlackBerry — there's that question of users' distractability and tendency to procrastinate. But, Kamin says, "I don't think someone is more or less intelligent because they sign up for it."

Karpinski and Duberstein's study isn't the first to associate Facebook with diminished mental abilities. In February, Oxford University neuroscientist Susan Greenfield cautioned Britain's House of Lords that social networks like Facebook and Bebo were "infantilizing the brain into the state of small children" by shortening the attention span and providing constant instant gratification. And in his new book, *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind*, UCLA neuroscientist Gary Small warns of a decreased ability among devotees of social networks and other modern technology to read real-life facial expressions and understand the emotional context of subtle gestures. Young people are particularly at risk for these problems, he writes, because "young minds tend to be the most sensitive, as well as the most exposed, to digital technology."

Some experts dismiss all studies of Internet use as flawed, since there is no reasonable way to control for the myriad variables that may affect such research. For its part, Facebook declined to address the specific findings of the new study but issued a statement on Monday, April 13, saying that Facebook isn't the only diversion around; TV and video games can be just as distracting as online social networks. The company also pointed to a study released earlier this month by researchers at the University of Melbourne showing that personal Internet use at work can help focus workers' concentration and increase productivity. Facebook added that "it's in the hands of students, in consultation with their parents, to define priorities and decide how to spend their time."

By most accounts, students spend a heck of a lot of time logged onto Facebook, a circumstance that irks educators, who complain of students messaging friends or posting snarky status updates from their laptops instead of paying attention to lectures. It was this habit that first got Karpinski interested in the topic while she was earning her master's degree in developmental psychology at West Virginia University. "When I became a teacher's assistant, I started noticing my students' using [Facebook] and becoming obsessed with it," says Karpinski — who is not on Facebook, despite her fellow classmates' badgering efforts to get her to join.

She demurred, saying the world of online gossip just did not appeal. "Every day there was some new drama and they would ruminate about it for hours," says Karpinski, who eventually graduated with a GPA of 3.8.

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