

Facebook.com: An Online Phenomenon

If you were to ask any college student if he or she has heard of Facebook.com, the answer would probably be a yes. Who wouldn't know about Facebook? Defined on the homepage as "an online directory that connects people through social networks at schools," Facebook is currently transforming campus life everywhere. Facebook.com is the place to be, with 4 million users spread across 1,500 different campuses.

Facebook.com was launched to the public on Wednesday, February 4th, 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Chris Hughes, and Dustin Moskovitz at Harvard College. The name "Facebook" was based on the facebooks—like the freshmen picture book for MIT—that colleges give out to freshmen to ease the transition into college life. In the first couple weeks after its launch, Facebook.com attracted almost half the undergraduates at Harvard College. The site seemed to have the right ingredients to cook up a network that attracted students across the nation. The Facebook phenomenon soon followed. Expanding exponentially, it spread to include all the Ivy League schools and many other colleges, despite competition from similar websites. In a short period of 18 months, the Facebook fever spread to 4 million college students.

Why is Facebook so popular? Why have so many college students chosen Facebook.com over other, similar sites? The answers lie in its features. Facebook.com is set up in 7 sections: My Profile, My Friends, My Groups, My Parties, My Messages, My Account, and My Privacies. With these organized sections, users navigate through the sites to find old and new friends, discover information about other students, join groups, and confirm parties.

To join Facebook, all a person needs is a valid college email address and the rest is free. After confirming their membership, Facebook users start to create their profile which includes their contact, basic and personal information. The profile displays an array of information that includes more than just names, birthdays and gender. Users can upload personal pictures of their choice and share their AIM—an online instant messenger—screen name, phone number and home address. The user's picture often helps students associate a particular face to a name which makes it more personal than just a name. Moreover, the personal information section displays the user's relationship status, dating and political interests, and favorite books, movies, music and quotes. If that wasn't enough information, users could always write more about themselves in the section labeled "About me". Consequently, a plethora of information about the user is shared with other users within Facebook.com. This can be both good and bad. However, users may only view the profiles of the users of their institution and their friends' profiles from other institutions. Not to fear, users can update their privacy settings to make their information more secure and allow sharing only among their friends. To view everyone else's profile, you would have to friend them, in other words request them to be your friend, or send them a message first.

Besides displaying a picture and personal information, My Profile includes a selected friend list, group list, and a wall. Friends are mutual. A member requests another member to be his or her friend and the other member must confirm this request in order for them to be friends. In addition, the group list is a list of groups that the user has joined. Groups are created by members to draw people of similar interests together. These groups range from an online mirror of real campus organizations, such as Greek fraternities, to silly interests, such as I love Baker Dining or

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Bubble Tea Anonymous. Groups allow students to find other students of similar interests. For example, through the MIT Floridian group, I found other people from Florida. Lastly, The Wall is an awesome feature of the profile. It's a place for other users to leave open messages. They can be silly and entertaining. Only friends of the user can write back or modify it. Many people spend hours online navigating through their friend's wall to find amusement and leave silly and quirky messages. My roommate is a perfect example. She spends hours on Facebook looking through other peoples' profiles and updating their walls to avoid doing homework. Facebook is a great means of procrastination. I find the wall fun. A message on my wall always brings a smile to my face. Conveniently, it also allows me to see who wrote the message, which allows me to return another message on his or her wall. Just as I was writing this essay, I wrote on a friend's wall to take a break from writing.

Facebook also features a My Message section, which allows users to send private messages to any other user. Messages work like an email system. This allows people to keep a steady conversation going at their own pace. Since Facebook is very popular and users check Facebook frequently, messages are normally responded to quickly. It's a great way to talk to friends other than using the phone or email. For example, I have kept a long conversation with a friend for the past few months on Facebook to help us stay in touch while we attend different colleges. For me and many other users, Facebook is a great way to stay in touch with friends from high school as well as new people at college.

With all these features described above, Facebook creates a perfect network for students to connect with other students. This network allows college students to meet new friends even before they attend their chosen colleges. It is part of an online phenomenon of websites created to help connect people through the Internet. Meeting new friends on Facebook often erases some of the awkwardness that might have occurred when meeting them in person. This is one reason Facebook appeals to a large portion of the student body. A common phrase used during meetings is "I remember you from Facebook." Some people dread encountering new friends because they dislike new and unfamiliar situations. Additionally, members could learn information about their crushes and classmates at their keyboard just like an online dating website. Facebook is a great resource. In some extremes, I have heard that people found their significant other through Facebook. Who knows, Facebook might be a great place for people to start a real relationship. On the other hand, some employers are checking the profiles of their applicants on Facebook. This might be a scary thought for prospective college graduates.

Facebook's search engine is very efficient. In the summer, I used Facebook to search for my roommates because MIT did not provide their names. I befriended them and obtained their AIM screen name which allowed me to start chatting with them online before arriving at MIT. Thus, when I met my roommates in person, it was very smooth because I knew them a little through the digital world of Facebook. During orientation, I met lots of new people, but I could not match their faces with their names. Facebook was here to rescue me. I used it to search for the people that I had met and used their user picture to match them with their name. Moreover, it was a great place to look up additional information on people I'd met during orientation.

But not everything about Facebook is great. I recall a mother of my friend calling Facebook too dangerous. Is it? She said there was too much information being shared among users and it was a

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perfect resource for identity theft. People should not give out their phone numbers, email addresses, and birthdates so easily. People could easily stalk other users by obtaining their phone number or mailing address from their profile. Some users also abuse Facebook and use the wall feature to harass other users with inappropriate messages. Other criticisms focus on the addictive nature of Facebook. Many students become known as “Facebook Addicts”. They, like my roommate, spend hours navigating through Facebook instead of doing homework or other activities. It is the most convenient and accessible means of procrastination. Others claim that Facebook’s friend list is a popularity contest that promotes unhealthy competition. Another drawback is that users could form incorrect conceptions of people based on their Facebook profiles. Not all profiles accurately represent the people they portray.

Despite all these shortcomings, Facebook has attracted loyal followers across the nation. Obviously, Facebook is changing the way students meet and communicate with other students. Almost every student has one or more digital friends he or she met through Facebook or other online directory websites. Today, Facebook is ingrained in the culture of college life. It’s popular and almost everyone is a member. According to Garland Elmore, a professor of informatics and communications at Indiana University, in the Teller’s article *Facebook.com Gets Facelift, New Features*, “Students are so tied in to computing and networking that it’s almost like an extension of their central nervous system. It’s how they connect to their friends, it’s how they connect to information—it’s how they connect to their world.” Facebook provides the means for students to stay connected in today’s digital world.

Facebook continues to expand rapidly with new features. The elite Facebook.com was only open to college students until this September. Unfortunately, a high school version of Facebook was launched then, which angered many college students because it used to be exclusively for college students. It was a symbol of status and pride. For now, high school students have to be invited by a college student to join and their Facebook is separate from the college Facebook. There were already 100,000 high school users only two weeks after its launch, an indication of Facebook’s popularity. I predict it will soon spread to include almost all high school students.

In the wake of its rapid expansion, Facebook will include expanded personal photo pages and a possible blog-like feature. For its users, Facebook holds many surprises for its members in the future. If you haven’t checked out Facebook yet, then you should visit Facebook.com, that is, if you have a college email or are invited by a college friend. Otherwise you are stuck with a view of the plain, boring Facebook home page.