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Article 68

**Social Media and Facebook Use and Its Accompanying Function:  
Implications for Counseling University Students**

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The majority of today's college students are avid Facebook (FB) users. University students report their primary reasons for joining FB include: *A friend suggested it; Everyone I know is on FB; It helps others to keep in touch with me; and Finding*

*classmates* (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). These reasons in turn create a perception of social presence, which makes students more likely to join FB and interact freely using this venue (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, & 2011; DeLambo, Homa, Peters, DeLambo, & Chandras, 2011). As with any behavior, there is a function or purpose of FB use. Understanding the potential behavioral functions of FB use can help counselors work more effectively with college students; for example, by enhancing students' self-awareness and by implementing appropriate strategies for treatment. This article will explore the major functions of FB use by college students and accompanying implications for counseling.

### **Behavior Function and Facebook Use**

B. F. Skinner stated that all behavior has a purpose, that is, a *function* (Skinner, 1974). Subsequent researchers have echoed this point and the vital importance of identifying a behavior's function when addressing problem behaviors (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007; O'Neill et al., 1997; Repp & Horner, 1999). Once this function is determined, then an appropriate intervention can be linked to the function, and treatment success is much more likely. Likewise, counselors will address behaviors that cause problems for the student. In the process of learning to recognize a behavior's function, the client (i.e., college student) gains insight and self-awareness that, in turn, are linked to client well-being (Harrington & Loffredo, 2011). Moreover, development of self-awareness is key within the counseling process (Corey, 2012; Hansen, 2009). Using an array of strategies, the counselor can help clients to become aware of behaviors and personality characteristics they have never previously recognized. For example, for the first time, individuals may realize that their continuous hopelessness and loneliness are due to a competitive drive in all social encounters that tends to drive others away, causing the client to become lonely (Yalom, 1985). Similarly, a comprehensive review of a student's FB profile coupled with an interview may reveal photographs of a competitive nature that tend to drive others away by producing feelings of inadequacy. For example, the picture content contained vacations in Hawaii at elite hotel accommodations, as well as photos of the individual on a yacht with gorgeous company. During counseling sessions, through analysis of FB picture content, that is, Phototherapy (Star & Cox, 2008), the counselor can help the student recognize that the function of these pictures was to gain the attention of others in a competitive way that could impede personal relations. Following a thorough review, the professional and student can identify an intervention that corresponds to the behavior's purpose.

The major functions of behavior relevant to FB use include: *attention*, *avoidance-escape*, and *sensory reinforcement*. *Attention* is a key function of behavior, and FB provides many opportunities for gaining attention from others. For example, a student may post a risqué picture from a university house party on her/his FB profile. In the counseling session, the counselor determines that the function or purpose of this picture was to gain attention from a fellow classmate in a biology course. The counselor and student could discuss the many ramifications of pictures such as these (Chandras, 2011; DeLambo et al., 2011). Then more appropriate behaviors can be chosen that gain attention, but in a positive light (e.g., posting picture of this student with several

classmates at the homecoming game). The student relays that this will produce the same function (i.e., attention), but without negative implications.

In addition, FB can strengthen the attention function through the power of association. That is, individuals make simple associations between events (Cooper et al., 2007), and the social metadata that a user shares with FB friends creates associations between the user and event (Skageby, 2009). The effect of association is magnified as a FB user makes their friend list available to other users. Individuals can highlight their social circle, that is, a qualitative description of the FB user's friends. Likewise, comments can be placed on friends' Walls for all friends to visit. In addition, all games or group affiliations can be listed (e.g., horror fan club, "A List" Hollywood fan club, etc.). A music video or Hollywood icon could be "linked" to the user's page. This in turn would create an association between the user and this icon (e.g., Pink Floyd, Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin). The entire friend list can then witness the individual's cyber relationship with these 1970 rock legends, creating associations between the FB user and these icons. Thus, the attention function of FB is magnified as users create an association between them and any entity with which they wish to create an association.

The attention function of FB may have additional implications for students who are depressed. Moreno et al. (2011) reviewed the FB profiles of 200 college students and evaluated their profiles using the DSM criteria for depression (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Interestingly, 25% of these profile descriptions contained depression symptoms. For example, references to giving up, feeling hopeless, and sleep difficulties relate to depression and were coded accordingly. In addition, when the students made note of depression symptoms, their FB friends responded to these symptoms. Thus, a primary function of this disclosure may be attention from friends. For example, in her status update, an 18 year old female relates: "I'm feeling pretty down today and there doesn't seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel." Her FB friends' responses include comments such as "please keep going" and "hang in there, baby." These responses may act as reinforcement, prompting more disclosure regarding depression. The reinforcement of the attention function can create a cycle in which the FB user relates depression symptoms within their profile or updates. Their friends respond to this prompt or information, and the individual is then likely to include more information about the depression.

*Escape and/or avoidance*, are other possible functions of a problem behavior (Cooper et al., 2007; O'Neil et al., 1997; Repp & Horner, 1999). In this case, the function of the behavior is either to escape or avoid a situation. Also known as negative reinforcement (Martin & Pear, 2011), the individual emits behaviors in order to avoid or escape some aversive stimuli. Quan-Haase and Young (2011) measured the function of college student's FB use and noted that a sizeable number of college students used FB as a pastime activity. Students reported this was a form of escape or a way to avoid responsibilities (e.g., writing a challenging paper, preparing a speech, cleaning a bedroom, etc.). Likewise, *to kill time*, was a key statement reported by students. When examined in relation to school work, this FB behavior serves the function of assignment avoidance. Consequently, the student rushes to complete the assignment and submits it at the last minute, affecting the quality and subsequent grade. In counseling, the issue of avoidance could be explored with this student. The solution may be as simple as asking

the faculty member to further clarify the assignment directions. Conversely, another student's behavior of procrastination may be linked to fear of failure and extreme esteem issues related to years of psychological abuse by a family member. The counselor and student determine the function of this avoidance behavior. In addition, substance abuse may be linked to a student's FB profile. Pictures of alcohol and drug use or a status update may refer to the student's alcohol-ridden Saturday night with accompanying morning hangover. Consequently, the student skipped Monday classes and did not complete required homework. The counselor and student could explore the function of alcohol use; in this case, they determine that the student used alcohol to escape academic and social demands on the student, which felt overwhelming. Unfortunately, the negative consequences were many. During the session, the counselor and student can identify more useful techniques to address university demands. In this case, it may be as simple as teaching the student basic time management as well as study skills.

*Sensory reinforcement*, that is, sensory stimulation, is another function of behavior. Here, the user attempts to secure some preferred sensory stimulation. For example, one of the primary functions of substance abuse is sensory stimulation. The user ingests the drug (e.g., inhales the nicotine, a central nervous system stimulant, into the lungs for a stimulating pleasure). Another individual will drink spirits or beer in order to feel the alcohol, which depresses the user's central nervous system, decreasing anxiety as well as inhibitions (Hart & Ksir, 2011). The function of substance use, in these cases is sensory stimulation (Cooper et al., 2007). The counselor and student can examine the function of the student's alcohol and drug use. It may be to ease anxiety after a strenuous week of academic pressure. Or, it may be to escape a pressure-filled life full of depression and hopelessness; in this case, the function of the behavior would be both sensory reinforcement, avoidance, and escape conditioning (Cooper et al., 2007). Another example of sensory reinforcement would be that of a student using FB to gain sexual stimulation via interactions with a network of partners or pornography-type material. Through a thorough analysis coupled with strong rapport between the student and counselor, the function of the problematic behavior can be identified and a corresponding intervention can be implemented.

### **Techniques to Determine Function in FB Use**

When determining the function of a behavior, an interview approach can be used to determine the why behind the behavior, applying functional assessment techniques (O'Neill et al., 1997). As typically used, functional assessment forms are geared toward working with individuals with severe disabilities, such as autism and intellectual impairments; these forms help determine the functions of problematic behaviors, such as physical or verbal aggression. To determine the functions of a typical college student's FB profile and related behaviors and statements, Chandras (2011) modified the Functional Assessment Interview Form (FAI) of O'Neill et al. After the counseling relationship has been established, the assessment process may begin (Corsini & Wedding, 2011), and the counselor and student can explore the student's FB profile in detail in order to identify the functions of their behaviors in FB.

Chandras (2011) encourages the counselor to freely tailor his open-ended questions to each student, emphasizing that the questions should be modified to gain the most accurate picture of the student's FB profile. The goal is for the client and counselor

to become fully aware of each function. Information generated by these questions can then help the counselor and student determine appropriate interventions, when needed. Furthermore, Chandras echoed that the FB review process can be very time-consuming and it should not be rushed. Ideally, the counselor and student will review the FB profile during session. If the account is disabled or internet access is unavailable, printed pages may be used. Lastly, if these are not feasible, a reliance on memory is the last resort. Below are questions that may be used to determine the behavioral functions of a student's FB profile.

1. How long have you been using FB?
2. What were the reasons for establishing a FB account?
3. Which privacy setting do you use? Why?
4. Please tell me what types of information you share on FB. What are the different topics you discuss? Please list or explain these to me.
5. Are there topics that you consider off limits, i.e., you will not address them on FB? If so, please explain.
6. Do you consider FB to be fun? Explain, how does FB stimulate you?
7. Please list all your FB activities, then rank order them from least to most enjoyable?
8. What are your reasons for using FB? Please list as many as possible. In addition, how would you rank order them from most to least important?
9. What do you like about FB? Please list or provide examples, in detail.
10. What do you dislike about FB? Please list and explain in detail.
11. How many friends do you have on FB?
12. How much time do you spend on FB per day? Please estimate (e.g., minutes, hours).
13. Describe the time of day, location, and under what circumstances you spend the most time on FB?
14. When is your FB use unlikely? Please explain.
15. What games or applications you use on FB? Please give examples of what you enjoy and dislike about them.
16. Do you ever use FB to escape or avoid something in life? If so, please explain.
17. Please tell me how many times per day you use FB.
18. Please tell me where you use FB. List all possible locations (home, class, library, etc.).
19. What feelings accompany your FB use?
20. Do you use FB when you feel down in the dumps? If so, how does FB make you feel?
21. Have you ever said anything shocking to others on FB? If so, please explain. What was it and what happened afterwards?
22. Does FB satisfy any emotions; if so, which ones?
23. Tell me about these photographs, what do they mean to you? Why did you choose these photographs? Who are these people? What are they doing? What is their relationship to you? What is the geographic region of these photographs? (A goal here is to determine if there is a theme to the pictures. A rich dialogue can produce fruitful outcomes. The counselor is encouraged to keep the goal of function determination in mind during this questioning and analysis interview.)

24. Have you ever closed your FB account? If so, explain why. If not, have you ever thought about closing your account?
25. Please list the three most important reasons for your FB use.
26. Now, what are three things you dislike the most about FB use?
27. Have you ever been questioned about the time you spend on FB? If so, what was your response? Please explain.
28. Do you find yourself talking more on FB than in person? If so, why? For example, is it easier to visit on FB?
29. How would someone describe your personality after reviewing your FB profile? Please explain.
30. When do you use the status update function and what information do you include on FB?
31. Do you ever write on someone else's Wall? If so, what do you write? Do you know why? Please explain.
32. How would you define Facebook friend?
33. How many friends do you have on FB?
34. Please describe the full array of friends on FB. Who are they, and why did you friend them?
35. Have you ever denied a friend request? If so, please explain the major reasons why you denied the request.
36. What are the major reasons you accept a friend request?

### **Counseling Applications of FB**

Students place their needs and other vital personal and academic-related information online (i.e., FB Wall). This provides a wealth of information about a variety of issues for the counselor and client to explore (e.g., self-esteem, drug abuse, anger) as well as the dangers of self-disclosure. In addition, this content can be used to strengthen the student's academic success. For example, if the student uses FB as a means of procrastinating, the function of the behavior, such as fear of failure, could be explored and modified. In this case, the counselor may make recommendations for study skill development, attending the university tutoring center, or using other resources to assist the student.

Once the functions of FB use are identified, matching of the treatment mode to behavior function is possible (Mayer, Sulzer-Azaroff, & Wallace 2011). For example, when the function of a behavior is to gain attention, some possible interventions could be to increase attention for appropriate behaviors, extinguish the problematic behavior, or teach a plausible alternative behavior. Likewise, the intervention itself should be void of any attention-producing reinforcement (i.e., positive or negative attention). When the purpose of the behavior is escape or avoidance, the intervention may include reducing task demands or reinforcing appropriate behavior. In the case of escape and avoidance, interventions should not include time-outs or extinction since these interventions positively reinforce the behavior's function (i.e., escape and avoidance). In the case of college students, behaviors such as eating, sexual gratification, alcohol use, and heavy computer use can meet a sensory need, and treatment can be linked accordingly. Techniques useful for sensory reinforcement issues include behavior redirection or alternative reinforcement.

FB can be used to share and address mental health issues for students as well as to foster self-awareness. Fritz Perls, founding father of Gestalt Therapy, noted that self-awareness is a major underpinning of therapy (Corsini & Wedding, 2011). To understand and control aspects of one's life, individuals need to understand the goals and purposes behind their behavior (West, 1982). FB offers an additional tool for developing self-exploration in that the counselor and student can review FB together and delve deeper into the student's self. Through this process, clients can gain enhanced understanding of their behavior and its interrelated dynamics.

FB may also be used to assist students with low self-esteem, as research suggests that selective self-presentation on FB enhances self-esteem. The FB user selectively, and in a deliberate manner, can relay information about the self that will create a positive profile that increases self-esteem (Walther, 2007). Gonzales and Hancock (2011) examined the impact of FB profile review on self-esteem, using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem scale to measure college students' self-esteem following a prolonged interaction with their FB profile. The researchers noted that self-esteem increased following FB profile exposure. This was likely because users were able to selectively self-present on FB. That is, they created their own ideal profile. FB users can insert specific pictures and present statements and interests that reflect a positive self. The authors reported that FB allows users to relay positive information about themselves and thus project their optimal self. If users project their ideal self with their FB profile, when it is viewed by others, self-esteem increases. Implications for counseling are that the counselor can review the FB profile content with the college student to see what is important to the client through a process of selective self-presentation. With the onset of digital media, individuals can present their optimal self to others: when others view and respond to this optimal self, they feel good about themselves. FB and related social media provide counselors information to assist clients in exploring this digital picture of self in which only positive aspects need to be presented. As the counselor and student examine these issues together, they can explore what types pictures are presented on FB, what interests are relayed, and other types of information that could be used to work with this individual. Pictures, dating profiles, interests, etc., can all be selectively chosen to enhance others' reactions by and increase self-esteem. Even brief use of FB may help students who have suffered recent blows to their self-esteem. For example, a study by Gross (2011) found that following an act of social exclusion, adolescents and young adults were able to bounce back from the exclusion and increase their self-esteem by communicating with an unknown individual of the opposite sex or by using a solitary game. The boost in self-esteem was evident after only 12 minutes of interaction with either the individual of the opposite sex or by playing a game for 12 minutes. In this case, both the functions of attention and escape/avoidance may have been in operation.

Wubbolding (2009) and Glasser (1976) address the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their actions. This reality-based approach may be useful when reviewing the consumer's FB profile and accompanying postings. Using Wubbolding's WDEP model (Wants, Direction and Doing, Self-Evaluation, Planning), the student's needs and wants could be explored and addressed. The counselor and student can explore what the student wants, and if this being conveyed on FB via the profile. For example, does the profile reflect the student's desire of fitting in with other students in the dorm? Next, in the Direction and Doing (D) framework, the counselor can ask, "Is your current

behavior assisting to meet your needs?” For example, what information is in the student’s FB profile that contributes to reaching their goals or meeting their needs and wants? Moving onto self-evaluation (E), the counselor can explore the consequences of FB use and see if it is helping the student to reach his/her goals. The student must be the one who notes the discrepancy between their behaviors and wants/needs. For example, after reviewing the FB profile using this WDEP framework, the student may recognize, “Hey, I see it—I look like a fool in these pictures. These comments are ridiculous. Why would anyone ever respect me?” This, in turn, leads to a plan of action (P), “I’m going to remove these inappropriate pictures and limit my friend network.” In relation to the planning stage, using public forums such as FB can help individuals make behavioral changes that positively impact health (Johnson, 2011). For example, FB users may tell their friends that they are going to quit smoking, go on a diet, quit drinking, or commit to some other behavior change. By making this intention public, the student becomes accountable for this behavior and is much more likely to follow through and abide by this goal because others on the social networking are watching or monitoring the behavior.

When incorporating FB in the counseling process, counselors need to be aware that personality characteristics may have an impact on the behavioral functions of FB use. In a review of personality characteristics of a group of college students, Amichai-Hamburger, and Vinitzky (2010) concluded that college students with introverted personalities tended to have a smaller average number of FB friends (N=103) when compared to extraverts (N=150). Interestingly, though college students with introverted personalities tended to have fewer FB friends, they posted more personal information on their FB profiles than extraverts. For introverts, FB may make it easier to share information about themselves, such as activities, favorite music, movies, and books, and postings that relay personal information, for example, About me. Implications for counselors are that they can view this shared personal information and address it with more introverted students. Reviewing this information with the student may enable the counselor to note social skills deficits and address those with the student. For example, perhaps the student needs training in social skills enhancement. Likewise, the counselor and student can determine if an overabundance of information and disclosure could hurt or has hurt the student in the past. The counselor can address identity theft and employment issues with students who post too much personal and/or questionable content that could harm their reputation or privacy (DeLambo et al., 2011; Kluemper & Rosen, 2009; La Roche, Flanigan, & La Roche, 2009; Tufekci, 2008).

In addition, McCarthy (2010) measured FB’s usefulness within the university setting. It was noted that Facebook can compensate for social skill deficits as well as language barriers for first-year undergraduate as well as international college students. For example, first year concerns such as language barriers and introversion were less influential because of FB. Students reported it was easier in class to present as well as participate when they felt acquainted with the other classmates. The initial awkwardness for social interactions was avoided or diminished with cyber-interaction. McCarthy pointed out that social networking relationships were brought into the classroom, and the classroom interaction heightened the personal relationship. Students could post comments regarding assignments and discussions at their own pace, which differed from being the focal point of a physical interaction within the classroom. Likewise, students could build and strengthen this virtual relationship and then bring it into the classroom.

Social networking venues such as FB are powerful tools that can foster the learning process in the university setting (Yu, Tian, Vogel, & Kwok, 2010). FB helps the student to form and strengthen social networks, that is, school friends. These individuals comment (e.g., share feelings) on their peers' FB profiles and news feeds. This sharing of information and peer interaction may increase social acceptance and contribute to satisfaction with university life in general. By encouraging classmates to maintain a social network of fellow students, social networking sites such as FB can have a positive impact on academic performance. Likewise, Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) surveyed a large group of university students to measure their related gratifications associated with FB use and found that FB strengthened a sense of community. College students' social ties with family and friends in various geographic regions can be maintained with FB use. Likewise, friendships from class and other university activities are both formed and maintained with FB, which acts as a social glue that keeps the network together (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

Social networking venues such as Facebook are used by an overwhelming majority of university students. The primary functions of behavior relevant to FB use include: attention, avoidance/escape, and sensory reinforcement. Once a behavior's function is determined, then an appropriate intervention can be identified and implemented. For example, if a student is posting a picture of alcohol use at a college dorm party to serve the function of gaining attention from a fellow student for dating reasons, an intervention could be used to help the student gain attention through more appropriate means. For example, the student could post a photograph of himself shooting a slap shot at a hockey game. This way, the function of attention has been addressed in both an efficient and acceptable manner. The counselor and student can explore the functions of behavior with a variety of functional assessment techniques. The modified information processing questions developed by Chandras (2011) can be a useful tool, and O'Neil et al. (1997) have an extensive interview form that may be utilized.

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