

## Towards Formal Acceptance of Using Social Networking in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** *In recent years there has been extensive academic and research interest in the use of social networking for educational purposes. There is also a trend towards more formal acceptance of their role in higher education by participants in the educational process. The article presents the results of a survey on attitudes towards (in the direction from informal to formal use) the extent and scope of application of social networking in teaching and learning by teachers and students.*

**Key words:** *Social Networking, Higher Education, Survey*

### INTRODUCTION

The wide academic and research interest in the use of social networking for educational purposes in higher education is the natural result of constantly growing popularity of social networking. The literature found several examples of the successful use of social networking by teachers [2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8] to develop interaction, communication and cooperation between students, to stimulate students' creativity, to increase students' motivation for active participation in the learning process, and to provide feedback.

Although many teachers are sceptical and think that the use of social networks can disengage students [1] and lead to lower results, we have witnessed significant changes in this direction. Today we observe a transformation from the informal use of these networks in the educational environment to their formal adoption by participants in the educational process (students, teachers and administrators).

In recent years, research on this topic has increased exponentially worldwide [5] but much less is known about the development of this trend in Bulgaria.

The study presented in this paper is intended to seek clarity on this issue. On the one hand, it aims to assess the extent to which the use of social networking for educational purposes shall be formally accepted by the two main groups of participants in the educational process (students and teachers) and to what degree it is still informal. On the other hand, the study explores specific areas of the use of social networking in higher education, with an emphasis on their efficacy.

The paper presents the methodology, organization of the study and analyses of the results separately for the two target groups (teachers and students) in accordance with the study objectives. Some general conclusions about the latest trends in the use of social networking in education are derived.

### DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The study's methodology is based on an empirical approach – a survey with a questionnaire. According to the purpose of the study participants are divided into two target groups - students and teachers.

For the collection of primary data two questionnaires (for each of the two groups of participants) were developed. The questionnaires have been prepared in such a way that without being time-consuming to complete (18 questions for teachers and 15 questions for students), to give a clear and accurate picture of attitudes towards the degree and scope of the use of social networks by teachers and students for teaching and learning. The questionnaires contained questions divided into three sections.

The questions in *Section 1. Personal Information for participant* are used to determine the profile of respondents:

- gender, age, program, degree – for students;
- gender, age, degree, title – for teachers.

This section contains also the question of the degree of awareness of participants about social networking to ensure the reliability of conclusions drawn from the analysis of the inquiry results.

In order to examine trends towards the use of social networking for educational purposes, from informal to formal, the main part of the questionnaire includes two sections - *Opinion on the use of social networks in teaching practice/during training* (Section 2) and *Opinion on the use of social networking for educational purposes in general* (Section 3). Due to the most negative attitude towards this type of inquiries, most of the questions here are multiple choice. Respondents should state the extent of their agreement with formulated statements on the 5-point Likert-type scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD), 2 = Disagree (D), 3 = Neutral (N), 4 = Agree (A) and 5 = Strongly Agree (SA).

There is an open-ended question for teachers at the end of the second and third part of the questionnaire. Teachers can indicate how they use social networking in their teaching practice, as well as why they consider that the use of social networks in education has a negative effect (if so).

### ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE SURVEY AMONG TEACHERS

The analysis of the survey results among the first target group is presented on the basis of valid responses of 60 teachers from Bulgaria who participated in the survey. Out of the total number of teachers (60) 61.7% are female and 38.3% are male. The largest group of teachers (43.3%) is 45-54 years old, 31.7% of teachers are above 55 years old. The smallest groups of teachers are 35-44 years old (15%) and 25-34 years old (10%). Most of the teachers have a PhD degree (75%) and D.Sc. degree (5%). The largest part of the teachers are Associate Professors 35%, followed by Assistant Professors – 21.67%, Professors – 23.32%, Assistants – 16.67% and others – 3.33%. Table 1 presents a summary profile of respondents based on the gathered demographic and other personal data.

Table 1. Respondents' profile

Respondent's Information	Total		Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>Age</b>						
25-34	6	10.00%	1	1.67%	5	8.33%
35-44	9	15.00%	6	10.00%	3	5.00%
45-54	26	43.33%	9	15.00%	17	28.33%
Above 55	19	31.67%	7	11.67%	12	20.00%
<b>Degree</b>						
PhD	45	75%	18	30.00%	27	45.00%
D.Sc.	3	5%	1	1.67%	2	3.33%
Other	12	20%	4	6.67%	8	13.33%
<b>Title</b>						
Assistant	10	16.67%	4	6.67%	6	10.00%
Assistant Professor	13	21.67%	4	6.67%	9	15.00%
Associate Professor	21	35.00%	9	15.00%	12	20.00%
Professor	14	23.33%	6	10.00%	8	13.33%
Other	2	3.33%	0	0.00%	2	3.33%

All surveyed teachers are familiar with social networking - 59.3% answered Yes and 41.7% Yes/No to the question "Are you well informed about social networking (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Bebo, Myspace, LinkedIn, etc.)?".

The Section 2 of the questionnaire includes a list of 8 close-ended questions with numbers 6-13 (see. Table 2) asking the teachers about the use of social networking in their teaching practice. Many of the surveyed teachers use the social networking sites to communicate with their students (45% answered with SA or A, and 20% with N to the Statement 6). However, a significantly smaller part of them have been involved in online

social networking groups for information sharing, discussion and organization of learning courses (45% answered SD or D to the Statement 7, and 46.6% answered SD or D to the Statement 8). The percentage of teachers who believe that the use of social networking during the lesson increases the engagement of students is even smaller - only 10% (see answers of Statement 9). The number of teachers who participate in online groups interesting in the use of social networking for educational purposes is also small - 26.7%. Half of the surveyed teachers have a public profile in a social networking site to share research interests and to connect with like-minded people (Statement 11). Finally, when teachers are asked to agree that the use of social networking has a positive effect on student achievement and increases the involvement and interest of students in the training, 43.3% of teachers stated that they are SD or D, and 56.7% are N, SA or A (Statement 12 and Statement 13). Table 2 presents detailed results of the Section 2.

Table 2. Using of social networking sites in teaching practice

Statement	1=SD	2=D	3=N	4=A	5=SA
6. You often use social networking sites for communication and consultation with your students.	9 (15.0%)	12 (20%)	12 (20%)	16 (26.7%)	11 (18.3%)
7. You participate in social networking group/groups with your students for information sharing and discussions on the learning courses.	15 (25%)	12 (20%)	10 (16.7%)	13 (21.7%)	10 (16.7%)
8. You participate in social networking group/groups with your students for organization of the learning courses.	17 (28.3%)	11 (18.3%)	12 (20%)	10 (16.7%)	10 (16.7%)
9. You use social networking sites during the lesson in order to increase students' involvement and to keep track of their reactions.	33 (55%)	11 (18.3%)	10 (16.7%)	3 (5%)	3 (5%)
10. You participate in online group/groups interesting in the use of social networking for educational purposes.	21 (35%)	12 (20%)	11 (18.3%)	10 (16.7%)	6 (10%)
11. You have a public profile in some of social networking sites to share yours research interests and to connect with a wide range of people with similar preferences.	8 (13.3%)	11 (18.3%)	11 (18.3%)	15 (25%)	15 (25%)
12. The use of social networking sites in your teaching practice has a positive effect on the student achievements.	12 (20%)	14 (23.3%)	12 (20%)	11 (18.3%)	11 (18.3%)
13. The use of social networking sites in your teaching practice increases the involvement and interest of students in the training.	12 (20%)	14 (23.3%)	13 (21.7%)	11 (18.3%)	10 (16.7%)

Overall, the survey results show that teachers have a positive attitude towards the use of social networking for educational purposes (average response of 2.77 for the eight statements).

The Section 3. of the questionnaire for teachers is a list of 3 statements about the use of social networking for educational purposes in general. The majority of teachers in all age groups (see. Figure 1) agree that the use of social networking in education can be useful - 28.3% answered SA to the statement, 30% answered A, 23.3% answered N, 15% answered D and only 3.3% of the teachers answered SD. Significantly greater is the number of teachers who agree that the role of social networking in education will increase – 61.6% answered SA or A, 20% answered N and 18.3% answered SD or D to the Statement 16. This shows that despite the relatively low rate of the current use of social networking, the majority of teachers tend to use social networks in the future.

The analysis of the answers given on the question 17 shows that the low rate of use of social networks at the moment is probably due also to the low level of participation of teachers in research on the use of social networking in education – only 10 teachers (17%) stated participation in such researches.

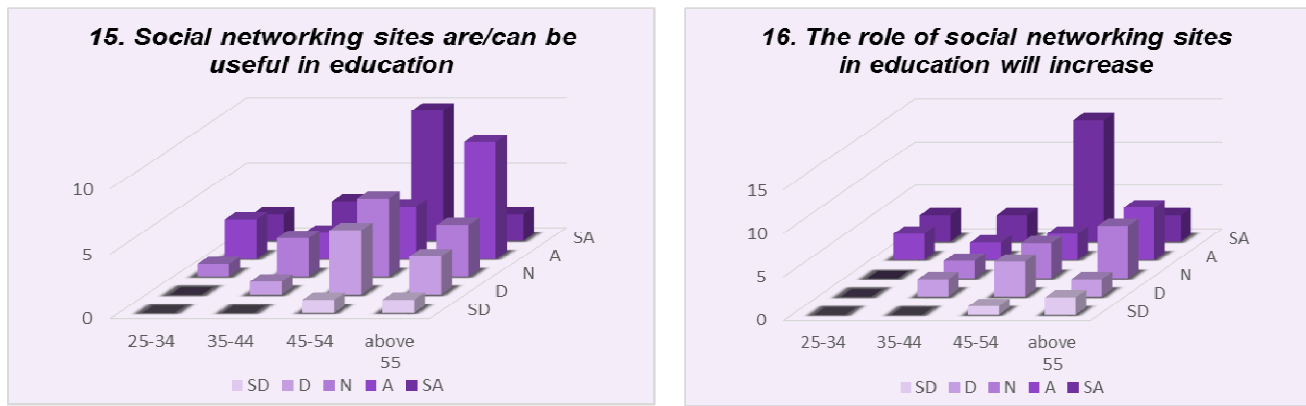


Figure 1. Using of social networking fro education purposes

The answers of open-ended questions show a significant variety in the field of application of social networks in teaching practice (communication about tasks and theses, sending additional materials, guidance for doing assignments, scientific advices for graduate and PhD students), but at the same time demonstrate a level of doubt about the effect of their use in education.

**ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE SURVEY AMONG STUDENTS**

The survey on using social networking by students is conducted among students in regular and part-time programs (Bachelor and Master Programs). The analysis of the survey results is presented on the basis of valid responses of 128 students who participated in the survey. Out of the total number of surveyed students (128) 43.7% are female and 56.3% are male. The largest group of students (81.25%) covered by the survey is 18-24 years old, 16.41% of students are 25-34 years old and only 2.34% are 35-44 years old. The majority of surveyed students (91.41%) is taught in Bachelor programs. Table 3 presents the profile of the surveyed students.

Table 3. Respondents' profile

Respondent's Information	Total		Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>Age</b>						
18-24	104	81.25%	61	47.66%	43	33.59%
25-34	21	16.41%	10	7.81%	11	8.59%
35-44	3	2.34%	1	0.08%	2	1.56%
<b>Program</b>						
Bachelor	117	91.41%	69	53.91%	48	37.5%
Master	11	8.59%	3	2.34%	8	6.25%

The answers given to the question "Are you well informed about social networking (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Bebo, Myspace, LinkedIn, etc.)?" show that the majority of surveyed students are familiar with social networking - 68.5% are answered Yes, 29.9% are answered Yes/No and only 1.6% are indicated that they are not familiar with social networking.

With a list of 8 questions with numbers 6-13 (see. Table 2) in Section 2 of the questionnaire for students they are sked about the use of social networking in their training. The results of the survey analysis clearly show that social networking are the preferred way for students for communication with colleagues and teachers (88.3% answered SA or A to the Statement 7 and 43.8% answered SA or A to the Statement 8). The majority of students stated that they had been involved in online social networking groups for information sharing and discussions on the learning courses (89.8%) and for organization of learning courses (61.8%). More than half of the students are involved in such groups which go beyond the course and university where they are taught (64.9%)

and have a public profile in social networking sites (52.4%). Finally, when the students were asked about the impact of social networking on their education 59.4% of them stated that the use of social networking has a positive effect on their results (Statement 12) and 49.2% of them said that social networking increases their involvement and interest in the training (Statement 13). Table 4 presents detailed results of the enquiry in Section 2.

Table 4. Using of social networking sites in students' training

Statement	1=SD	2=D	3=N	4=A	5=SA
6. You often use social networking sites to communicate with your colleagues.	2 (1.5%)	6 (4.7%)	7 (5.5%)	39 (30.5%)	74 (57.8%)
7. You often use social networking sites for communication and consultation with your teachers.	20 (15.6%)	25 (19.5%)	27 (21.1%)	35 (27.4%)	21 (16.4%)
8. You have social networking group/groups with your fellow students for information sharing and discussions on the learning courses.	5 (3.9%)	1 (0.8%)	7 (5.5%)	20 (15.6%)	95 (74.2%)
9. You have social networking group/groups with your fellow students for organization of the learning activities on specific courses or as a whole.	14 (10.9%)	10 (7.8%)	25 (19.5%)	26 (20.3%)	53 (41.5%)
10. You participate in social networking group/groups with interest going beyond the course and university, where you are taught.	16 (12.5%)	15 (11.7%)	14 (10.9%)	34 (26.6%)	49 (38.3%)
11. You have a public profile in some of social networking sites to share yours educational/research interests and to connect with a wide range of people with similar preferences.	25 (19.5%)	14 (10.9%)	22 (17.2%)	31 (24.2%)	36 (28.2%)
12. The use of social networking sites in your training has a positive effect on your achievements.	7 (5.5%)	13 (10.2%)	32 (25%)	38 (29.7%)	38 (29.7%)
13. The use of social networking sites increases your involvement and interest in the training.	17 (13.3%)	17 (13.3%)	31 (24.2%)	32 (25%)	31 (24.2%)

The answers given to the questions in the Section 2 clearly show that students have a positive attitude towards the use of social networking in their teaching (average response of 3.72 for the eight statements).

The students' attitude to the use of social networks for educational purposes in general is also positive. The majority of students agreed that social networking sites are useful and their role in education will increase. Figure 2 shows the analysis of results from both questions in the Section 3. of the questionnaire.

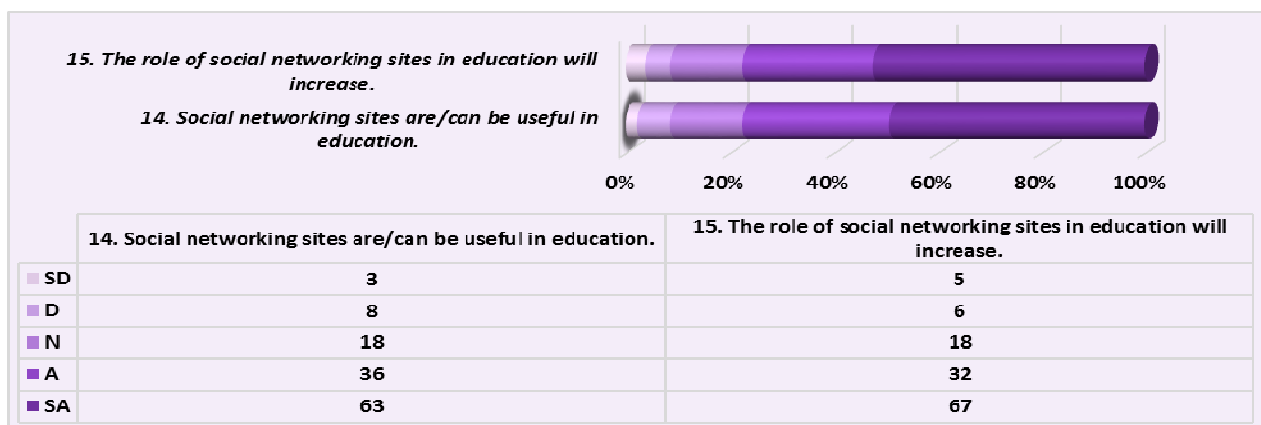


Figure 2. Students' opinion on the use of social networking for education purposes in general

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Due to the time and resource constraints the survey does not claim for the representativeness. The results of the survey show the positive attitude of students and teachers towards the use of social networking for educational purposes.

The comparing of the given answers in both sections of the main part of the questionnaire show that in Bulgaria, the trend in the use of social networking in education is also towards more formal acceptance by the academic community. Although only about 60% of the surveyed teachers actually use social networking and mostly to communicate with their students, then over 80% of them think that in general it can be useful for education. Teachers agree that the educational role of the social networks will increase in the coming years. Quite logically is a high degree of positive attitude shown by the students in this regard. This is due to the fact that students use social networks in their daily lives with enthusiasm. For them, social networks are a natural way for communication, information sharing and discussions on various topics.

The above conclusions need further confirmation. This requires expansion of the survey with the participation of a larger number of students and teachers from more universities in the country with a diverse profile. Future studies should also be considered in terms of possibilities for the fully valued use of social networking in higher education.

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**The paper has been reviewed.**