Breaking the Ice
Facebook Friending and Reference Interactions

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This paper is based on a poster presentation at the 2013 annual conference of International Association of Music Libraries, Archives, and Documentation Centres (IAML) in Vienna, Austria (July 28–August 2, 2013).

Students and faculty members at Chapman University frequently friend the performing arts librarian on the popular social networking site Facebook. Statistics of reference interactions with all library users from the Conservatory of Music were kept during the fall 2012 semester to determine if library users who are Facebook friends with the librarian were more likely to have reference interactions than patrons who were not connected to the librarian on Facebook. Data analysis demonstrates there is a significant correlation between the numbers of reference interactions with Facebook friends than with non-Facebook friends. It is hypothesized that the creation of personal relationships with library users through social media helps to alleviate library anxiety and increases the amount of librarian interaction during the users' information seeking process. Other facets of users' information seeking behavior, such as where and how long, are also analyzed to provide more insight into the information seeking behavior of this user group.

Constance A. Mellon's pioneering 1986 article, "Library Anxiety: A Grounded Theory and Its Development," opened librarians' eyes to how many students react when they think about performing research in a library.[1] The original purpose of her study was to determine effective methods of teaching information literacy skills to undergraduate students based on their feedback, but upon examining their comments, Mellon determined that 75 to 85 percent of students "described their initial response to the library in terms of fear or anxiety."[2] Library anxiety is an issue that students still currently experience. How can librarians help alleviate this issue? Mellon suggested that "getting to know the librarian" was one possible solution to this problem.[3]

In today's world where over 72 percent of all Internet users and 89 percent of all users between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine use some type of online social networking, what better way to get to know someone than through the use of these networks?[4] In the fall of 2012, the performing arts librarian at Chapman University investigated whether connecting with patrons using his personal Facebook page, rather than the institutional page for the library, would help alleviate library anxiety and thereby increase reference interactions with patrons from the Conservatory of Music.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review primarily focuses on the personal use of Facebook by

librarians and faculty and how they use it to interact with students. It does not seek to cover the use of institutional library Facebook pages or studies on library anxiety. An extensive literature review on the use of Facebook in academic libraries can be found in Darcy Del Bosque's *New Library World* 2013 article, "Will you be my friend? Social networking in the workplace."[5]

While most "literature about social networking in libraries has primarily consisted of recommendations on how libraries can integrate social networking into services or case studies on how it can been done at specific libraries," several studies have examined librarians personal use of Facebook to connect with patrons.[6] A 2006 article by Brian Mathews explained his use of unsolicited messages through Facebook (which had been available for just over two years at the time of publication) to approximately 1,300 students in his liaison area.[7] Mathews concluded that Facebook can be used as an avenue to send information to students, but that is "secondary to actually interacting with students directly, which [he] feel[s] is the primary benefit of Facebook."[8] The following year, two young librarians listed various methods to actively friend students (e.g., "friend new students at your fall welcome festival by making a laptop available").[9] One of the authors, Lauren Jensen, briefly mentions that she was "experimenting with Facebook as a tool for connecting with her students"; the article does not discuss whether this was a successful experiment or not, but the authors believe that "consciously connecting with Facebook" will "make you more approachable" and help break negative stereotypes of the profession.[10] Likewise, Phillips asserts that librarians can use Facebook "to present themselves as approachable, in order to develop a rapport with students, which could ultimately facilitate the delivery of service."[11] Most recently, Ahmed and Edwards-Johnson presented their reasons why librarians should or should not friend their patrons. Ahmed argues that friending and interacting with patrons on Facebook "help[s] her build a sense of community with her users and make[s] her appear approachable and accessible," whereas Edwards-Johnson worries that "personal social media accounts as makeshift library service points" can make patrons "too dependent on one librarian."[12]

Bietila, Bloechl, and Edwards examined students' feelings about librarians on Facebook. Although the majority of students were uncomfortable with this concept to one degree or another, the comfort level greatly increased if the students initiated Facebook contact. They believe librarians should "think of Facebook as a resource for enhancing face-to-face relationships" rather than taking the place of them.[13] Additionally, the study acknowledges the difficulty of "negotiating the line between personal and professional spaces"; however, they feel the positive opportunities presented by Facebook connections outweigh possible student discomfort.[14] Two years later a similar study by Sachs, Eckel, and Langan investigated similar issues as Bietila, Bloechl, and Edwards. This newer study directly compares itself to that of Bietila et al., concluding "it is possible that user perception of libraries and librarians on Facebook has changed over the past few years," because they did not record the same feelings of discomfort from students.[15]

Not only do librarians need to be aware of the feelings of students and faculty, but they also need be aware of any institutional policies directing their personal use of social media. Although this issue has not been addressed in literature directly pertaining to libraries, guidelines for government and private sector social media policies are available. After studying twenty-six Swedish municipalities' social media policies relating to official social media presences (rather than personal), Klang and Nolin concluded that many policies are "enacted through a system of command-and-control type regulation. This approach has led to a hobbled social media where many of the main advantages are lost."[16] Lyn Mettler, founder of a Step Ahead, Inc., a company that develops social media campaigns for clients, believes "the positives of being on social media and the goodwill and customer service and awareness it fosters are well worth a couple of negatives" that could occur in personal social media pages.[17] However, many experts on legal issues related to social media, such as Jon Yarbrough, agree that institutions should adopt policies that "establish clear ground rules. These rules might include advising employees that they cannot share trade secrets, harass coworkers or clients, disparage others, or engage in illegal activities online."[18]

While not specific to Facebook, Felicia Smith coined the term *helicopter librarian* to describe successful relationship building between librarian and library user. Smith believes "the main difference between great librarians and [helicopter librarians] is that the former are focused on providing excellent service, whereas [helicopter librarians] are committed to building radically great relationships that students are comfortable with."[19] Some of her relationship building activities include dressing in costumes to entertain students, playing online games together, and giving out her personal cell phone number for students to use for research assistance.

Because many academic librarians are also faculty members or are viewed as similar to faculty, literature about student/faculty relationships on Facebook has also been examined. Both qualitative and quantitative studies found that faculty and students who connect through Facebook have better communication. For example, Sturgeon and Walker suggested "that the in-class interaction between student and instructor is enriched based merely on the use of a social network" partially because faculty were perceived as more approachable and like "normal people."[20] Schwartz felt her communication with students improved once she began to connect with them on Facebook because it "increases the potential for real-time, face-to-face conversations that are rich with connection."[21] Others believe that another benefit of these Facebook connections is the strengthening of the mentor/mentee relationship.[22] In addition to these specific advantages, Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds examined the student/faculty Facebook connection using the framework of Petronio's privacy management theory and discovered "that

when a teacher self-discloses certain information, such as personal pictures, messages from friends and family, and opinions on certain topics, students may perceive similarities between themselves and the instructor. . . . Perhaps, those students who access their teacher's Facebook page may feel more comfortable communicating in the classroom."[23]

Despite these positive benefits, some faculty do not feel that personally connecting with students on Facebook is appropriate. In one recent study, 75 percent of faculty worried that this connection "compromises the boundary of the instructor-student relationship."[24] This boundary is certainly a real issue for faculty who assign grades to students, but Connell believes "the student/faculty member relationship is different than the student/librarian relationship."[25] Should this boundary exist between students and librarians or should it be allowed to crumble as Rebecca Metzger did at Lafayette College, enabling her to become "the sort of authority figure with whom a lot of students . . . feel comfortable sharing both personal and academic dilemmas?"[26] This study addresses how breaking down boundaries between students and librarians through Facebook affects reference interactions.

METHOD

Data about reference interactions with students and faculty from Chapman University's Conservatory of Music were recorded for the entire fall 2012 semester. A worksheet was created to track the date of interactions, the method of interaction, and the type of interaction. Four different physical copies of the same worksheet were then assigned to each of the four types of patron (student who was a Facebook friend, student who was not a Facebook friend, faculty member who was a Facebook friend, and faculty member who was not a Facebook friend). Both the method of communication and the type of interaction were recorded for each instance.

There were five methods of interaction: office, campus, e-mail, phone, and Facebook. Office interactions were face-to-face occurrences in the performing arts librarian's office. Campus interactions were face-to-face occurrences anywhere on the campus (including inside the library) but outside of the performing arts librarian's office and not at the reference desk. E-mail interactions were e-mail inquiries initiated by patrons. Phone interactions were phone inquiries initiated by patrons. Facebook interactions were inquiries initiated by patrons on the Facebook website. Reference interactions that occurred with patrons from the Conservatory of Music while the performing arts librarian was working the general reference desk (approximately four hours per week) were not included in this study because it was thought that patrons seeking help from the reference desk were not specifically seeking out the performing arts librarian.

The type of interaction was based on guidelines used at the Leatherby Libraries' general reference desk. A reference interaction was generally between five and fifteen minutes in length and might involve helping the patron find books on their chosen topic, finding song translations, teaching them how to use a particular database, helping them request particular music items though interlibrary loan, or other topics. An extended reference interaction was at least fifteen minutes in length and might involve helping patrons refine a research topic, extensive collaborative searching of multiple databases, or other in-depth topics.

Patrons were not told about this study so that their information seeking behavior would not be affected by their foreknowledge that data were being collected. No information that could be used to identify individual patrons was recorded.

RESULTS

During the fall 2012 semester, there was a total of 264 students and faculty (192 undergraduate students and 72 tenure track and adjunct faculty) in the Conservatory of Music; 96 of these 264 patrons (36.36%) were friends with the performing arts librarian on Facebook (see figure 1).

Throughout the semester 430 reference interactions occurred with members of the Conservatory of Music. Of these interactions, 245 (56.98%) occurred with students, and 185 (43.02%) occurred with faculty; 271 (63.02%) interactions occurred with patrons who were Facebook friends, and 159 (36.98%) occurred with patrons who were not Facebook friends (see figure 2).

Data analysis demonstrates that a correlation between reference interactions and personal friending on Facebook does exist. Although only a minority of the Conservatory of Music population were Facebook friends with the performing arts librarian, this group accounted for the majority of reference interactions. The chi square test was used to determine that these results were significant, x^2 (1, N = 430) = 103.64, p < .001. Statistics for student friends were quite consistent with the overall findings of this study with 62.04 percent of student interactions occurring from only 39.58 percent of the student population. This was also significant, x^2 (1, N = 245) = 51.63, p< .001. Interestingly, the disparity increases even more for faculty as 64.32 percent of faculty interaction occurred with only 27.78 percent of the faculty population, x^2 (1, N = 185) = 123, p < .001.

Of the 430 reference interactions, 146 (33.95%) occurred through e-mail, 136 (31.63%) occurred around campus, 126 (29.30%) occurred in the performing arts librarian's office, 13 (3.02%) occurred on Facebook, and 9 (2.09%) occurred over the phone (see figure 3).

Students, whether they were Facebook friends or not, were more likely to initiate a reference interaction in person (either in the librarian's office or on campus) than faculty; 73.88 percent (n = 181) of student interactions occurred in person whereas only 43.78 percent (n = 81) of faculty interactions occurred in person. The preferred method of communication for each group of patron was office interactions for student Facebook friends (40.79%, n = 62), office interactions for student
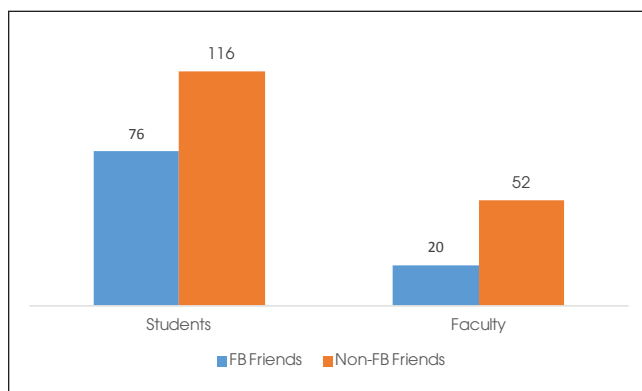
Figure 1. Demographics in the Conservatory of Music

Figure 2. Types of Members Initiating Reference Interactions

non-Facebook friends (41.94%, n = 39), e-mail for faculty Facebook friends (45.38%, n = 54), and e-mail for faculty non-Facebook friends (60.61%, n = 40).

Of the interactions, 368 (85.58%) were standard reference interactions, and the other 62 (14.42%) were extended reference interactions. Students who were not Facebook friends had the most extended reference interactions (26) of any group of patrons. The three other groups of patrons were fairly consistent in the proportion of standard reference questions to extended reference questions (86.55% to 89.39% of total interactions from these three groups were standard reference interactions); however, the student non-Facebook friend group differed with only 72.04 percent of all interactions in the standard reference category (see figure 4).

DISCUSSION

The data collected during this study demonstrate that a significant correlation exists between creating a friend connection with patrons on Facebook and the number of reference interactions in real life. Closer examination of some of these results sheds additional light on the information seeking behavior of this group of library users.

It is interesting to note that only 13 of the 430 (3.02%) reference interactions occurred over the Facebook platform despite the convenience of this method of communication (see figure 3) Several possible explanations exist. First, many students perceive Facebook purely as a social networking platform, not as an instructional tool. Roblyer et al. concluded "that faculty and students do not use Facebook a great deal for instructional purposes; in fact, this was reported as the least-common use of this technology."[27] Instead, its primary use was for social purposes. Perhaps many library users, students in particular, do not view Facebook as an instructional tool at all. A second possibility is that library users themselves recognize the need to respect librarian's personal times and feel that asking professional questions over this social tool would not be appropriate.

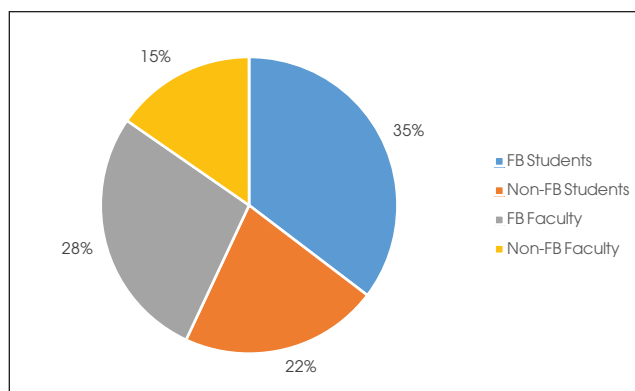A distinct difference between where students and faculty

members tended to initiate a reference interaction was also noted. While almost three-quarters of the student interactions occurred through in-person methods of communication (in office or around campus), less than half of the faculty interaction occurred with these same methods (see figure 3). This difference is probably affected by the amount of time faculty members were on campus. Although there were 72 faculty members in the Conservatory of Music, 55 of these individuals were adjunct who were generally only on campus several hours per week to teach private lessons to a few students. Additional possible factors include faculty members limiting their time on campus to focus primarily on work, not to socialize like many students, and also keeping nonstandard work hours when teaching classes in the evening.

Another observed trend related to where students initiated reference transactions was the avoidance of phone use. All nine phone reference interactions occurred with faculty members. Possible reasons for the lack of phone calls include not knowing the phone number to contact the librarian and calling when the librarian is unavailable and not leaving a voice message. Given that the librarian's phone number is located in the same directory as their e-mail address, which students have no problem using, it is not likely that students were unable to locate the phone number. The most likely reason is students do not like to initiate reference interactions over the phone. Knowing how these students and faculty members prefer to seek help from a librarian is important in the planning of future outreach activities.

The increased tendency for students who were not Facebook friends with the librarian to have extended reference interactions was noted. While only 13 (8.97%) interactions with Facebook friend students were extended, 26 (28.89%) of the interactions with non-Facebook friend students were extended (see figure 4). Multiple factors could create this difference in time spent with the librarian. It is possible that Facebook friend students felt comfortable enough with the librarian that they would ask questions as they occurred. Conversely, non-Facebook friend students might not have felt comfortable enough with the librarian that they waited until their information needs were so extensive that they needed a
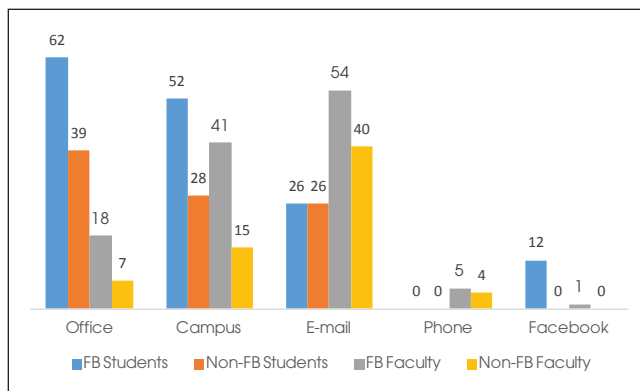
Figure 3. Locations of Reference Interactions

Figure 4. Types of Reference Interactions

longer amount of time to meet them.

The proportion of questions asked by faculty was impacted more by Facebook friendships than those of students. A higher percentage of the faculty (72.22%, n = 52) were not Facebook friends with the librarian than students (60.42%, n = 116); however, this proportionally larger group of individuals asked a proportionally smaller (35.68%, n = 66) number of questions than were asked by similar students (37.96%, n = 93). As mentioned earlier, the amount of time many adjunct music faculty members are on campus is generally quite low and probably affects the amount of interactions this group of individuals has with the librarian.

The success of personal Facebook friendships between library user and librarian demonstrates how breaking the work/home barrier can have positive benefits for both parties. This connection enables library users to more easily view librarians as fully rounded individuals, rather than as a one-dimensional individual sitting at the reference desk or teaching a class once a semester. Librarians experienced benefits from personal Facebook friendships, including better prediction of information needs and more informed collection development decisions due to knowledge of users' interests. This conclusion, in addition to the evidence of this study, is supported by the work of Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds with Petronio's privacy management theory.[28] The sharing of personal information encourages and creates library users who are more likely to engage in information seeking behavior that includes the help of a librarian; however, it should be highlighted that there needs to be mutual sharing of information by both library user and librarian to create the necessary connection.

CONCLUSION

In an 1876 article, Samuel Swett Green, one of the founders of the American Library Association, wrote, "personal intercourse and relations between librarian and readers are useful in all libraries."[29] He believed that both parties benefit from these relationships in the following ways:
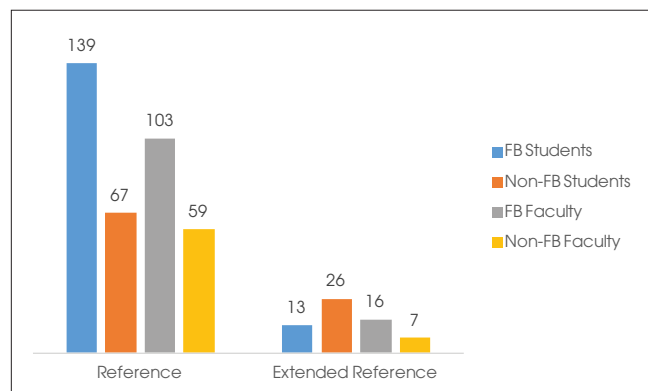
First. If you gain the respect and confidence of readers, and they find you easy to get at and pleasant to talk with, great opportunities are afforded of stimulating the love of study and of directing investigators to the best sources of information.

Second. You find out what books the actual users of the library need, and your judgment improves in regard to the kind of books it is best to add to it. . . .

Third. One of the best means of making a library popular is to mingle freely with its users, and help them in every way.[30]

Green believed in the importance of engaging library users through personal interaction. Facebook obviously wasn't a tool available to Green, but one wonders if he was working today if he might update his third point to "One of the best means of making a library popular is to connect freely with its users on Facebook and other social media."

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