

# *Online Social Networks and Social Capital. Case Study: Facebook*

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**Abstract:** *The use of online social networks is increasing significantly in terms of the number of users, as the technological infrastructure is constantly evolving, causing certain effects on student behavior. This paper presents and analyzes how online social networks shape and change human behavior through the exchange of messages that it facilitates. Previous research has shown a link between perceptions of social capital and the use of the online social network Facebook. To identify the positive and negative effects of online social networks, we used data from 217 students at the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Banat "King Michael I of Romania" in Timisoara (USAMVBT), Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism. Facebook is frequently used by students for many purposes; overall, the highest percentages are in the range "Very often" - "Often" (51.58% for women and 43.95% for men, taken together). With this paper, we want to develop and empirically validate a research model on intentional social action in online social networks and social capital. As a case study, we chose the most popular online social network, namely Facebook, because this online communication platform (and not only) has an increased impact on students' motivation to learn, on emotional learning and classroom climate.*

**Keywords:** *online social networks, social capital, students, communication, Facebook.*

## 1. Introduction

**Online social networks** are an essential component of the virtual space, being defined as “online applications that help connect friends, business partners and interest groups” (Mitruțiu, 2005, p. 1). On the other hand, the traditional (offline) social network is defined as a “map of relationships between individuals, which points to the ways in which they are connected through various degrees of social familiarity, starting from accidental acquaintances to strong family ties ”(Mitruțiu, 2005, p. 1). Through online social networks, the socio-economic dimension is highlighted, the virtual environment having a major social impact, in a context characterized by the permanent evolution of the contemporary society. Facebook is one of the most popular online social networking platforms.

Social capital is created by the patterns of interdependence and social interaction that appear in a modern society. Previous research has shown a link between perceptions of social capital and the use of the popular social networking site Facebook. Reciprocity is a key facet of social capital. The expectation of reciprocity is an inherent component of building social capital, although expectations can be violated (Teevan, 2011). One way in which social capital is maintained is through social care activities and other relationship maintenance behaviors that signal attention to one's own network. Facebook is an effective context for achieving these types of social interaction.

Social capital describes the benefits that individuals can access through their social network; these benefits may include emotional support, material support, and new information (Putnam, 2000). Thus, the establishment of one's own social network is directly related to the level of perceived social capital. The relationships between perceived social capital and activities with the online social network have been examined by many social media studies (Burke, Marlow & Lento, 2010).

## **2. Material and methods**

The first stage of the study consisted in studying the bibliography to which we could have access, given the conditions of the pandemic period: we relied on online foreign bibliographic sources almost exclusively, as the effects of online social networks on social capital do not seem to be of much interest to Romanian researchers.

As one of the requirements for the master's dissertation is to use only recent bibliography from the last ten years, we have analyzed only synthesis studies and thematic studies from 2010 on. Reading this bibliography has helped us better understand what social capital looks like from an information and communication technology perspective and why online social networks in general, and Facebook in particular, are a threat to privacy because of their influence on communication.

At the same time, the bibliography we consulted helped us outline the questionnaire we used for the case study, which we administered to students at the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Banat "King Michael I of Romania" in Timisoara, Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism. The questionnaire contains 17 questions related to the topic of the study and 2 demographic questions (related to the age and sex of the respondents). The 17 questions on the topic are general questions designed to identify the place and role of social media in the lives of users (e.g. confidence in social media, evaluation of social media, social media used, preferred social media, the flow of information posted on Facebook and if closing the social network Facebook would affect respondents).

## **3. Results and discussion**

The results expected at the end of this research concern the identification of the positive and negative effects of the Facebook social network on students.

In order to illustrate the impact of the social network Facebook, we further present the results obtained after administering the questionnaire (only the questions related strictly to Facebook).

Asked to give grades from 1 to 10 to the social network Facebook, USAMVBT students gave grades that show the generally upward trend of grades up to 8 given to the Facebook social media (regardless of gender), but also a decrease in high grades (9 and 10) (for both sexes), which indicates a decrease in the popularity of this medium of socialization among young people in favor of other means of socialization, a fact found after the synthesis of the answers to Question no. 2. This clearly shows the third position of Facebook (after YouTube and Instagram) and respectively, the fourth position (after YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest) among the respondents (Figure 1).

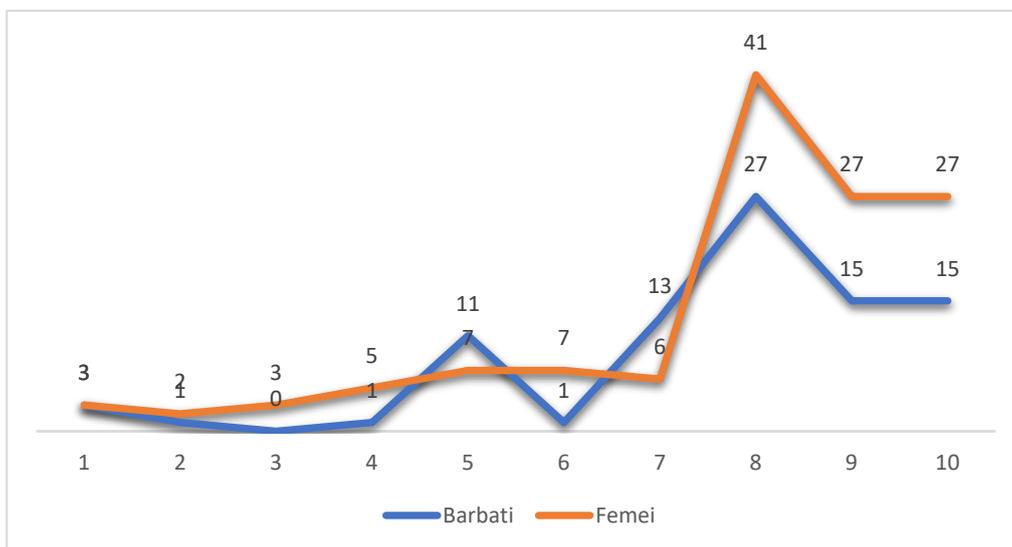


Figure 1. The answers to question no. 2: Please give marks from 1 to 10 to the social media Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter and YouTube

The answers to the question "In a normal work week, how often do you use Facebook?" show that respondents have an average degree of Facebook use compared to respondents: men outperform women in the categories "Often" (28.57% vs. 25.39%), "Moderately" (29, 67% vs. 23.01%) and "Seldom" (20.87% vs. 18.25%), while women outperform men in the "Very Often" (26.19% vs. 15.38 %) and "Never" (6.34% vs. 4.39%) categories. Overall, however, the highest percentages are in the "Very Often" - "Often" range (51.58% for women and 43.95% for men, by cumulating percentages), and the lowest percentages are in the range "Seldom" and "Never" (25.26% for men and 24.59% for women by cumulating percentages) (Figure 2).

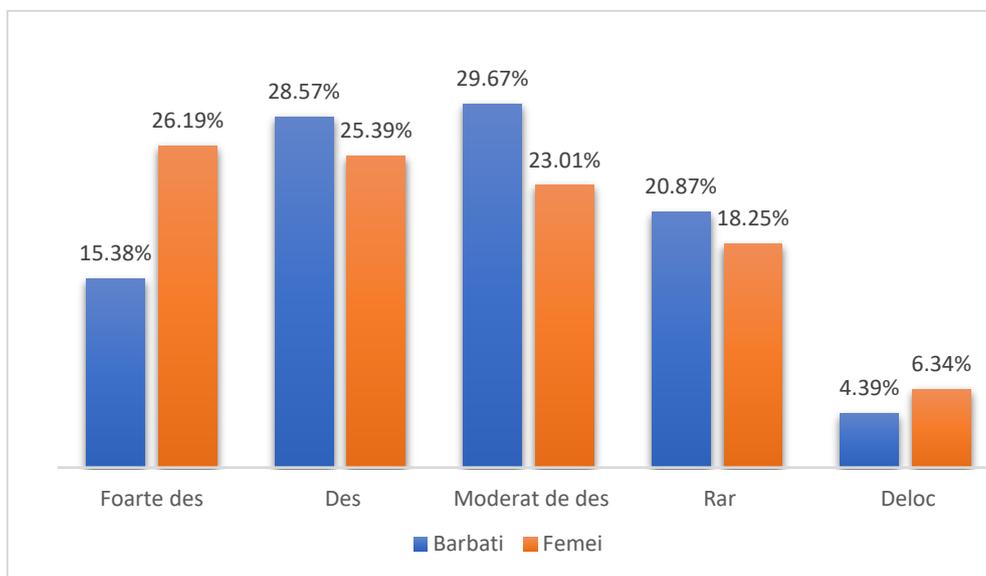


Figure 2. Question no. 4: In a normal working week, how often do you use Facebook?

The answers to the question "How many friends do you have on Facebook?" show that the number of "Facebook friends" for men is higher than that for women in the segments "Under 1000 "(56.04% vs. 51.58%) and "Under 4000 "(10.98% vs. 6, 34%), but it is lower in the segments

“Under 2000” (23.01% vs. 15.38%), “Under 3000” (8.73% vs. 6.59%), “Under 5000” (3,86% vs. 1.09%), “I don't know” (5.55% vs. 4.39%) and “None” (2.38% vs. 1.09%). One female respondent explained that she has no “friends” because she does not have a Facebook account. It is interesting to note that more than half of the respondents (regardless of gender) have less than 1000 friends on Facebook: even so, their number is big and cannot cover the traditional, dictionary meaning of the word “friend” (“a person with whom someone is connected through special affection, based on mutual trust and esteem, on common ideas or principles; friend”- cf. DEX). We also wonder how someone can say that they have under 2000, under 3000, under 4000 and even under 5000 “friends” on Facebook without being a public person, i.e. a person with notoriety, who is appreciated by the national or international public (artists, celebrities, etc.) (Figure 3).

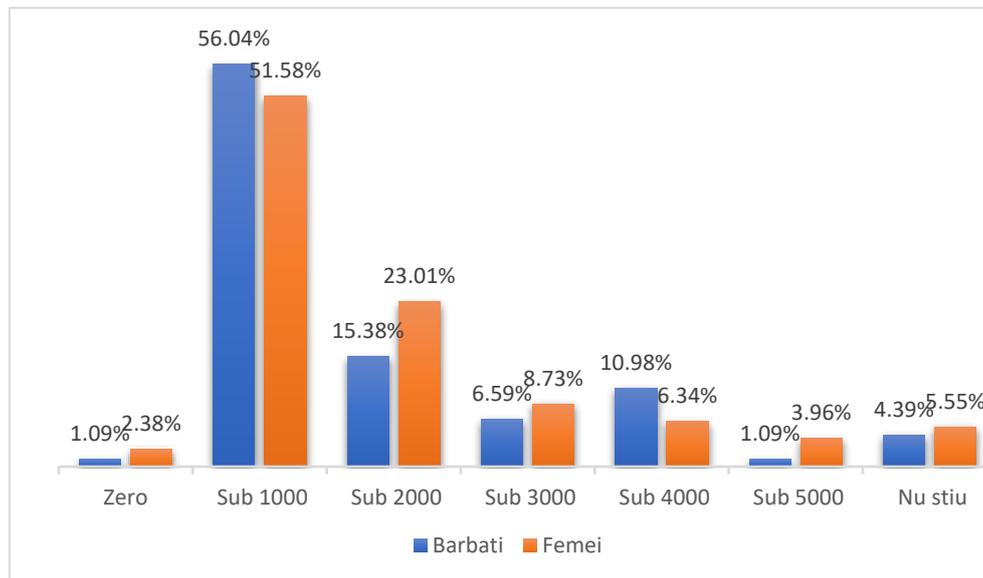


Figure 3. Question no. 6: How many friends do you have on Facebook?

As for the question "How many of your Facebook friends have you met in person?", the percentage of men who personally know their friends on

Facebook is higher than that of women only in two cases: “All” (16.48% vs. 13.60%) and “None” (1.09% vs. 0.80%), while the percentage of respondents who know their friends on Facebook personally is higher than that of respondents in the following cases: “Most” (45.60% vs. 41.75%), “About half” (27.20% vs. 25.27%), “Some” (14.40% vs. 13.18%) and “No answer” (0.80% vs. 0%). Only one respondent did not answer this question because she does not have a Facebook account (in which case the calculations were made according to 125 answers). It is, however, hard to believe that over 40% of men and over 45% of women know “Most” of their “friends” on Facebook (Figure 4).

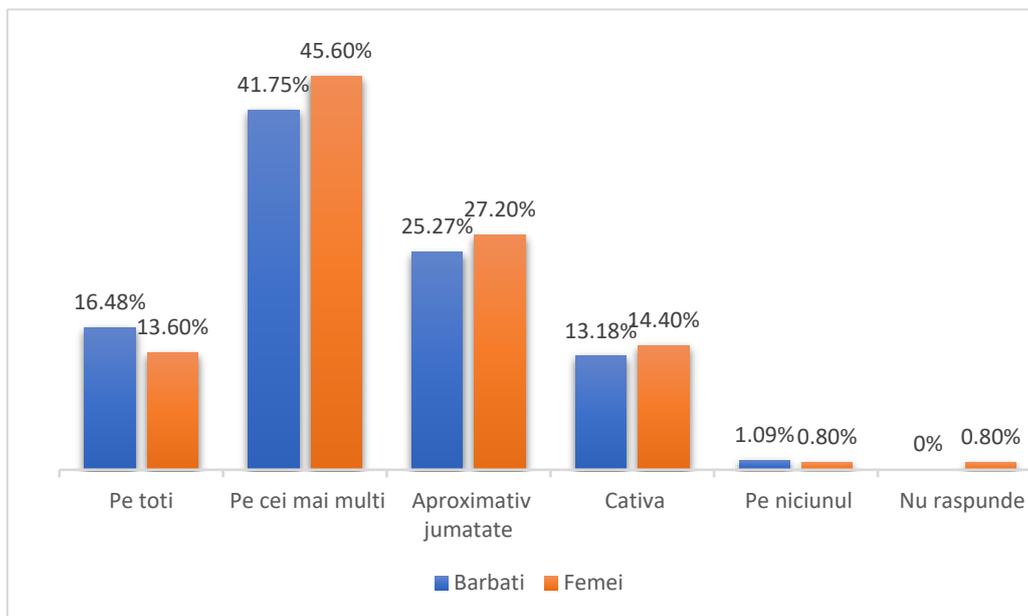


Figure 4. Question no. 7: *How many of your Facebook friends have you met in person?*

The answers to the question “To what extent does the flow of information posted on Facebook influence your decision-making?” are not surprising, given that most Facebook users use this social media either to post their own photos and / or texts, or to see how their

acquaintances, friends and relatives are doing, not to inform or, if they are informed, they do it accidentally (anyway, the weather forecast can be checked on the phone): this explains the percentage of over 49% men and over 35% women who say that they are influenced to a very small extent by the information flow on Facebook when they have to make a decision. It is worrying, however, that only 2.19% of respondents and respectively 0,79% of respondents admit that they are greatly influenced by the information on Facebook in decision-making, although experience shows that, at least in the fields of fashion, gastronomy and health, the degree of influence is high. Worryingly, but not surprisingly, it is known that young people are not interested in economic, political or social news in print (newspapers, magazines), broadcast (TV, radio) or online media (newspapers, magazines) (Figure 5).

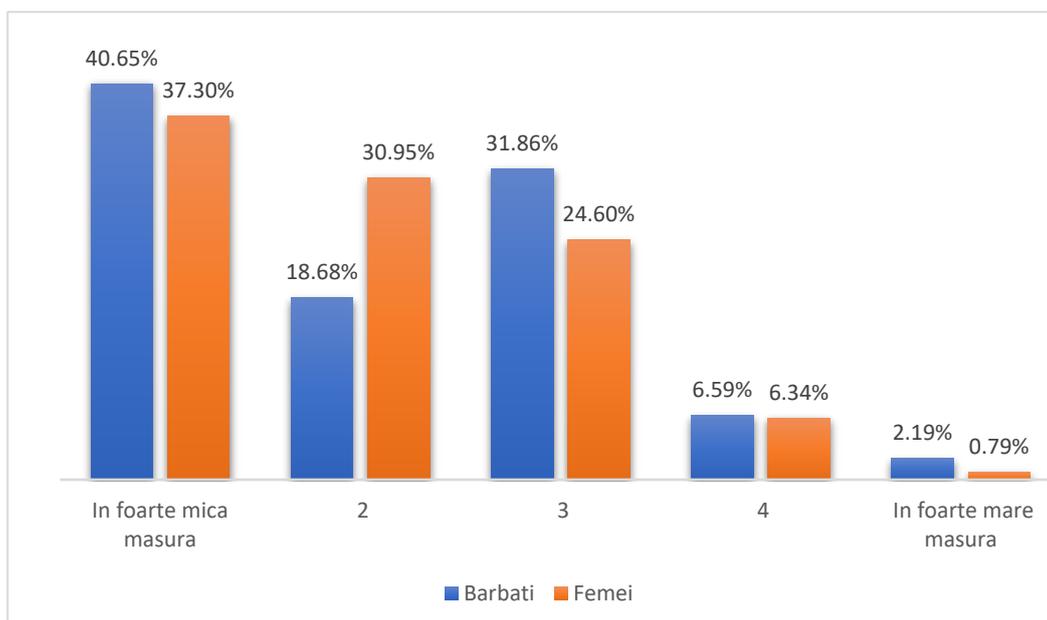


Figure 5. Question no. 18: *To what extent does the information flow posted on Facebook influence your decision making?*

When men were asked why they use social media, they surpass the women only in the cases “Fighting injustice” (30.28% vs. 22.42%), “Event

planning” (9.85% vs. 7.62%) and “Charity ”(6.33% vs. 6.27%), while respondents feel more strongly the need for “Socializing” (40.80% vs. 39.43%), “Making friends” (8.96% vs. 4.22%), “Shopping based on promotions” (6.27% vs. 6.33%) and “Job hunting” (4.93% vs. 3.52% ) (Figure 6).

As with any study based on Facebook interactions, the specific characteristics of the system can influence our results. Because the Facebook Edge Rank algorithm selects the content that appears in Friends’ News Feeds, we do not know how many people saw the requests posted by our respondents. The reasons why some requests were more successful than others were most likely affected by the variables we measure here, but may have also been influenced by their visibility in the news network of our participants’ networks.

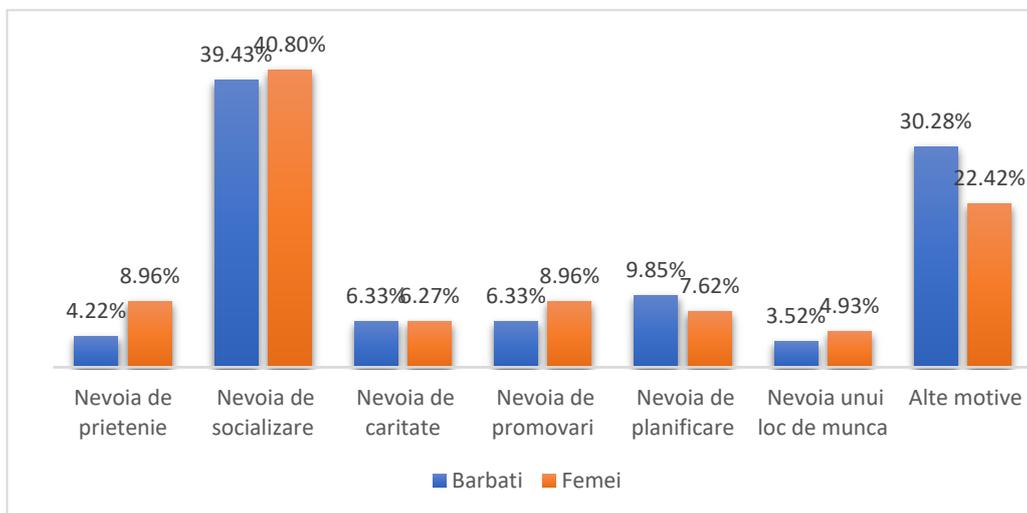


Figure 6. Question no. 13: Why use social media?

Finally, the answers to the question "To what extent would the decision to close the Facebook social network affect you?" correlate with the answers to question no. 2 ("Please give marks from 1 to 10 to the following social media", where the grades 9 and 10 were fewer than the

grade 8 for both men and women): in the case of this question, there is a decrease in the number of those who would be greatly affected by the closure of the social network Facebook - in close connection with the greater popularity of other social networks, of course. Thus, the number of respondents who would not be affected at all by the decision to close the social network Facebook is 10 times higher than the number of respondents who would be affected by this decision (30% vs. 3%), while the number of respondents who would not be affected at all by the decision to close the social network Facebook is more than 4 times the number of respondents who would be affected by this decision (33% vs. 8%). The difference between men percentages and women percentages could be explained by the tendency of women to post (photos, texts, etc.) on Facebook more often than respondents (Figure 7).

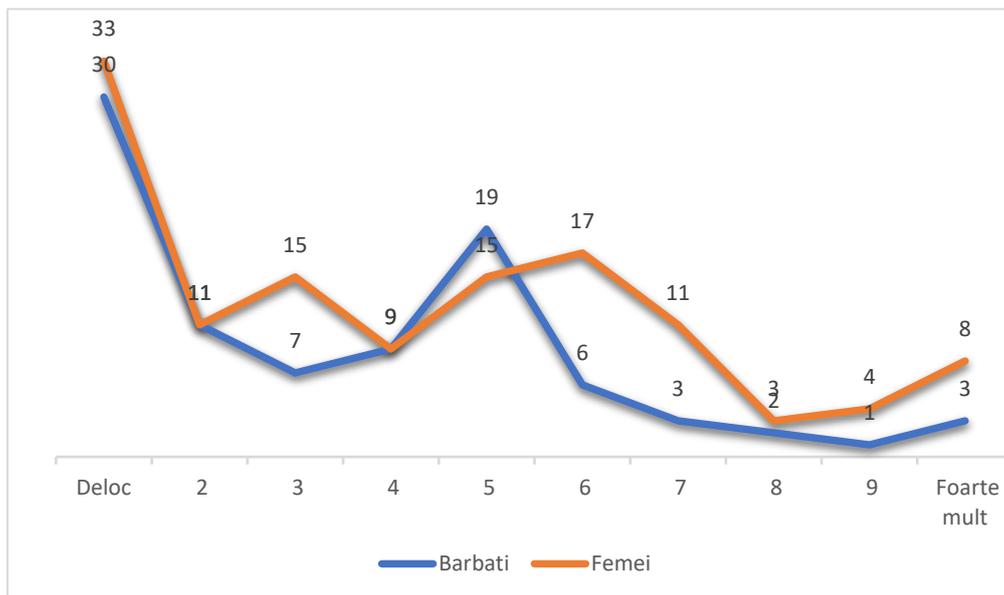


Figure 7. Question no. 19: *To what extent would the decision to close the Facebook social network affect you?*

## Conclusions

In light of the results presented above, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the identification of the positive and negative effects of the Facebook social network on students:

- **using Facebook has positive effects:**
  - *making “friends”*, which allows introverts to overcome, to some extent, their fear of socializing;
  - *information* in areas such as gastronomy, fashion, health;
- **using Facebook has several negative effects:**
  - although the grades given to Facebook (below the grades given to the social networks *YouTUBE*, Instagram and Pinterest) show a decrease in the popularity of this social medium among young people in favor of other social media, they simultaneously show an excessive use of some media at the expense of other concerns (hobbies, reading, sports, etc.);
  - In a normal working week, the high frequency of Facebook use (51.58% for women and 43.95% for men) is double the low frequency of using this social media (25.26% in the case of respondents and 24.59% in the case of respondents), which indicates excessive use of Facebook at the expense of other concerns (hobbies, reading, sports, etc.);
  - the number of “friends” on Facebook, if real (it is hard to believe that someone can have thousands of “friends” on Facebook without being a public person, i.e. a person with notoriety, who is appreciated by the national or international public), worryingly points to the superficiality with which our respondents call “friendship” a relationship that has nothing to do with it;
  - it is hard to believe that over 40% of men and over 45% of women know “Most” of their “friends” on Facebook, which makes this social environment a social danger (our respondents could fall at any time victims of cyberbullying, manipulation, blackmail, etc.);

- most Facebook users use this social media either to post their own photos and / or texts, or to see how their acquaintances, friends and relatives are doing, information being purely accidental.

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