# Facebook as a Tool in Higher Education and the Gender Issue: a Survey among Students in Bankura

*Suvapriya Chatterjee*
*The University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India*

## Abstract

In the last two years or so Facebook has become a favourite destination for people from all walks of life. This networking site started its journey in 2004[i] to foster social interaction and grew rapidly in prevalence and popularity as an all-pervasive medium on the web. It has attracted attention of administrators, business-men and research organisations for innovative profitable propositions in every walk of life. It is also been steadily used for the purpose of Higher Education by students, teachers to participate in a blending of formal and informal learning. Administrators from higher education institutions are also using this for networking, communication and publicity. This blending is characterised by development of collaborative learning, an opportunity for multi-disciplinary problem-solving and peer teaching and promotion of creative thinking skills. Moreover, it also serves as a medium of resource sharing for geographically dispersed individuals. Ironically, it serves as a major catalyst to reduce the digital divide[2] among students, as also an agent in enhancing gender disparities among its users belonging to various socio-economic levels. My paper discusses the results of a survey made among the college-goers of Bankura and tries to relate them to the emerging issues. It alsowill focus on the influence of gender on the usage of Facebook with reference to college students of Bankura district of West Bengal.

[**Keywords**: Facebook, Higher Education, Bankura]

*It is Magical. It is easier and faster than anything else ever. I wish I could have known it earlier. ( Doyel Sen[ii])*

In order to carry out an in-depth study of the college-goers' experience in Facebook in Bankura, I will focus on group discussions, interviews, observations and document reviews to examine the interaction of students with Facebook in their studies. There are about twenty two colleges in Bankura district of which sixteen are degree colleges, three technical institutions, one medical college and two colleges of education. I started my queries involving several issues related to Facebook. Whether and how far and how to consider Facebook and other networking sites a platform for higher education? Do male and female students have equal engagement with Facebook? Do the number of male advanced users of Facebook is more or less same as the number of female advanced users? How many students agree that Facebook is indeed helpful to their studies? Do access and usage vary with gender? If yes, then in what ways? Is it an academically accepted tool for higher education? What role do teachers and instructors play in reinforcing the importance of Facebook in Higher Education?

Most of the respondents reported that their fascination with Facebook started late at the end of secondary school when they embraced it not just as a means to connect but as a means to survive among their friends and acquaintances. Suddenly they felt Facebook as something different and challenging, a new method of communicating. Rishant Barui, a second year

student of Bankura Sammilani College recalls,

> "I started visiting cyber-cafes without the knowledge of my parents. The attraction of that new Facebook world was tempting to me. I was afraid of getting caught. So felt safe in logging in outside home."

However, in a rural area like Bankura guardians still cannot comprehend Facebook as a means of Higher Education as in included in the genre of instruments for entertainment like television, radios and music systems. Again, patriarchal socio-cultural norms prevent girls from visiting cyber-cafes frequently and for a long time which elucidates why girls in Bankura have less access to internet in their early college lives. 54% of female respondents mentioned that they have been using computers for one year while 72% of male respondents have used computers for over five years. Overcoming the problem of access, students of Bankura irrespective of gender are accessing Facebook from their mobiles now-a-days which have proved to be a revolutionary technological achievement. Zafiur Rahman Khan, a student of third year of Borjora College, Bankura, says, "I feel more comfortable in facebooking through my mobile because the internet speed is high enough and I can have a look into my notifications wherever and whenever I want." On the issue of difficulty there was no significant difference between percentage of those reporting difficulty and percentage of those reporting no difficulty in terms of gender. However, majority of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that Facebook was helpful in their higher studies though use of Facebook is strictly forbidden by many institutions of higher education. Majority of institutions in Bankura restrict use of Facebook and other social networking sites at workplace as they disagree with the idea that Facebook can contribute to higher education. Students as well as employees of governmental organisations have been blocked from accessing Facebook since they do not consider Facebook as an efficient platform which could serve academic and official purpose. There is a persistent debate around the utility of social networks which is nothing but an instrument for distraction and entertainment for students particularly. Several teachers, trainers and instructors were in favour of banning laptops, internets and social networking sites in campus. The open nature of Facebook is also a hurdle to its authoritative implementation in higher studies since it lacks a central authority which would control its ongoing.

The incorporation of Facebook in Higher Education unofficially by students and teachers has increased flexibility in order to work and study at the same time dissolving the binaries within and outside the classroom. Many of the colleges in Bankura have overcrowded classes which in general lack suitable accommodation and basic equipments. The advantage of using Facebook in Higher Education is two-fold:

i.   It enhances qualitative effectiveness in learning by auditory and visual materials.
ii.  It gives vocational guidance to students for attaining their goals by their interaction with people across the globe.

Priyadarshi Chatterjee, a student of Bankura College of Education informs, "There are various groups in Facebook where our teachers and friends assemble to share, argue and discuss their personal experiences." Both male and female students actively participate in these virtual spaces and mutually interact sharing common platform with the greater world. First year student of Bankura Sammilani College, Sunandita says,

> "Earlier people of one college hardly knew what was going in the other college. Now we follow, edit and update e-classnotes of every college via audio and visual aids in Facebook.'"

No doubt it increases the comprehensive skills of students and offers a scope for feedback via comments to ascertain whether communication has been received as intended or not. However, it is found that students of technical institutions and medical college of Bankura are advanced users of Facebook. They are more technically equipped by portable digital devices like notebooks, digital books, smart phones and i-pads which supports round the clock learning. The community group of Bankura Medical College displays videos of classroom lectures, study excursions, practical activities in laboratories making every person a collaborative learner. Survey demonstrates female students of medical college and technical institutions of Bankura were better off in making academic use of Facebook distributing impressions and observations till it becomes a common possession.

| Institutions | Percentage of Boys | Percentage of Girls |
|---|---|---|
| General Stream Colleges | 60% | 65% |
| Technical Colleges | 94% | 96% |
| Medical college | 89% | 90% |
| Colleges of Education | 40% | 45% |

Table I: Percentage of college students using Facebook for study purpose.

The total amount of time (in hours) spent on Facebook per week by students also varies with gender. Findings show the total amount of time (in hours) spent on Facebook was higher in case of male students than female students. 31% of female respondents pointed out that they use Facebook less than one hour a day and 69% of female respondents use it for less than half an hour a day. On the other hand, 24% of male respondents use Facebook less than one hour a day, 43% use more than one hour a day and 33% use it more than 2 hours a day on the average. But female students spend more time on Facebook for study purpose than male students who are more involved in gaming and chatting with friends. Gaming is predominantly a male activity since Facebook games and applications projects images of masculine conquest and penetration actions. Girls are found less involved in befriending and chatting with persons unknown to them.

Clearly, female students of Bankura exploit Facebook to turn communication inspirational and pragmatic. Torsha, a first year under graduate student says, "Now I can learn according to my individual needs without waiting to have other learners progress at a similar level. I can learn rapidly as my personal capability and daily schedule permits." Like Torsha more and more college girls of Bankura feel Facebook helps them to override the barriers of verbal communication in a classroom dissolving the boundaries between teachers and students. The non-verbal communication helps them to overcome the limitations of a traditional verbal classroom teaching like inaudibility of speech, excessive speed of speech and unfamiliar pronunciation of teachers. It also enables a student to encounter a friendly atmosphere free of socio-economic and cultural differences among the students. Facebook space is a new academic frontier to be conquered by female college students of Bankura in search of more systematic presentation of subject matter. They intentionally want to explore Facebook as an academic arena to increase their capabilities. Macharia and Nyakwende opine

"Establishing an internet based social group forum based on gender and studies provides another method of improving female perceptions of ease of using the internet owing to the effective communications among female students themselves." (Macharia 252)

On the other hand, male subjects intend to use Facebook for social activities and general information. Aniruddha Das, a boy of twenty-two asserts:

"I use Facebook because it is pleasant and enjoyable. I have fun using it. Of course, it improves my performance in study. But that does not mean I am all the while using it for my studies."

Guardians and teachers regard Facebook as a plaything which causes huge waste of time. Students spend enormous time in inappropriate futile contents which make them badly addicted and alienate from the practical world. This sort of misuse reduces the serious impact which it can exercise in higher studies.

Moreover, differences were not visible in terms of gender only but also in terms of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. While students residing in proximity to the urban localities of Bankura are more assertive, confident and goal-oriented in their use of Facebook, students of rural areas are more likely to consider Facebook problematic and clumsy. They feel any social network like Facebook cannot be a replacement of a classroom. For them Facebook is nothing but tiresome and mechanical. It is hardly a substitute for the lively, charming and emotional atmosphere created by teachers in a conventional classroom interaction. The female halves of rural students are all the more lagging behind. The primary reason for their discomfort with Facebook is because women's relationship with technology and social networks is still not seen as compulsory. Donna Jeanne Haraway, the Cyborg Feminist[iii] calls for an attempt to modify the cyberspace for empowerment of women by creating e-communities, providing cyber-counseling and positing within cyber space actual material and social practices which a woman experiences. The representation of women in Facebook is a matter of contention in academic discourse. Feminist scholars and activists regard this conspicuous portrayal of woman's bodies as nothing but an articulation of hegemonic gender relations in our socity. Images of women are materialised and commoditized as objects of male desire. We see hundreds of publicity images in which a woman's body is regulated according to the needs of a male spectator. More and more female bodies are displayed in Facebook as an exhibition before the male gaze reinforcing the unequal power relations that structure consciousness of men as also of women. Women also internalise and survey their own femininity as portrayed in an array of visual images of femininity displayed in social networking sites. Facebook enhances the density of visual messages where images of women are associated with a range of consumer products reflecting cultural stereotypical domestic role of women. Meenakshi Thapan writes, "Sexuality, gender and the body in a complex interplay of dominant forces are clearly at the root of women's oppression in contemporary society through the objectification of the female form in everyday society." (Thapan 33) Thus dominant patriarchal ideology determines and shapes gendered bodies through Facebook and other social networking sites in everyday life. Moreover, here are several communities, pages, applications and profiles in Facebook which oppresses women socially and emotionally. Women Activists are protesting time and again against this unfair treatment towards women in Facebook. A number of rape jokes were attacked by them and they opened a community for women in protest of such inhuman fun making in the name of right to speech.

The issue of security in Facebook is also not free of controversy. It is true that Facebook provides privacy options which enable a person to choose whether or not to share certain information. But it implicitly instigates every person to be more and more open about their personal life. Every person has to be cautious as to not to share sensitive information and use sound judgement before s/he publicises any update. Particularly, girls have to be more aware about what they are doing because in a patriarchal society ample efforts are evident of denigrating women at every step by men. In a Facebook world an image can make and break a girl's life. So girls should learn the ways of controlling their privacy on social networks and prepare themselves about the security concerns because at the end of the day everyone is

responsible for their own updates and comments. Facebook should be restructured to facilitate females to make decisions efficiently to use necessary resources. Useful pages and related communities for female students should be made readily available to provide quicker and authentic services. Another reason for a rural student's the discomfort with Facebook is due to his/her lack of competency in English language. Their socio-economic background fails them to provide essential features of language competency. Lack of knowledge of the English language stands as a major challenge particularly to rural college girls of Bankura. They are not proficient in using English in informal communication and so it takes a longer time for them to search and select relevant study materials. Tushpa, a college girl of Saldiha College in Saldiha, a village quite far away from Bankura town says:

> "Facebook, Internet, Technology is inevitable in the present scenario. My brother is doing a computer course in Youth Computer Training Centre. I was also keen to join but I hesitated since I lack sufficient knowledge of English."

Most Instructors in Computer Training Institutes of Bankura reported that there is a difference among their students in terms of gender and ethnicity. They suggest Spoken English classes to their female students and tribal students in order to make them acquire as much competency in language as they expected. A majority of college students reported frustrations in using Facebook for their studies. 60% of those reporting anxiety and frustration with Facebook were girls. Survey shows there are diverse causes for this anxiety. Firstly, peripheral equipments of a technological instrument stand on their ways on which a student can interact in Facebook. Many students get puzzled in dealing with technical devices particularly girls because of their lack of practice. Again, they are also anxious about how to regulate their relationships in Facebook for the purpose of study. Rinky Banerjee, a second year student of Beliatore Jamini Roy College says:

> "I still cannot make out whom to "friend" and whom not to "friend". Sometimes I am so scared of sharing information which can possibly be misused by others. I feel cozy in observing content than posting comments."

Many girls are forced to accept invites from persons whom they may not regard as friends. Students also get more tired in Facebook due to uncertainty attributed with the time taken in searching relevant information. Factors such as internet speed, availability of proper digital device and authentic integration of learning materials into Facebook also play a vital role in regulating the usage of students suffering from Facebook anxiety. Another deficiency of Facebook is that it lacks interoperability, an important tool which the wiki sites contain. As a result there is no option for multi-user editing.

The teachers should play decisive role in making students familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of social networking sites. Facebook is now widely flocked by teaching staff from higher education institutions but sometimes they are there only to make publicity of themselves and ignore students' queries. However some educators are encouraging students to interact via Facebook directly or indirectly. But they are required to be professionally trained in e-learning in order to take the issue of education seriously online. Atanu Saha, a lecturer of a college of Bankura, "I am in Facebook for more than two years. I administer two communities, one particularly for my students." Constituting a learning environment in Facebook or using Facebook as an instructional medium is a new way to be a technology competent role model teacher. However he should carry on interacting with students in real situation just as in Facebook. Lakshmi Priya Nirmala opines, "In this age of cyber revolution when everything concrete and abstract are shifted to a fenceless world of wired existence the role of the teachers

becomes valued in his/her own conscious metamorphoses into a tag line or a link." (Nirmala 116) It is the responsibility of the teachers to develop a greater understanding of how males and females view internet usage for learning to diminish this digital divide. The female body is still sexualised in various ways in Facebook for male consumption which dominate the female folk physically, socially and politically and restrict their equal participation. Male students get distracted from the positive influences of Facebook by downloading pornography and illegal graphics. It is up to a teacher to control such unfair tendencies and direct a student's personal innovativeness to make better use of the online medium of which Facebook is just one part. Computer literacy and inclusion within networking would provide these female students a mode of leaving the traditional space within which they are confined and emancipate them in a wider world. Finally, given the success of the social networking model worldwide, the Central Government and its agencies should think of introducing a full-fledged digital platform equipped with e-learning tools and dedicated to the purpose of networking and education.

## Notes

[i] Facebook was invented by Mark Zuckerberg with his college roommates and fellow Harvard University students Eduardo Saverin, Andrew McCollum, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. The website's membership was initially limited by the founders to Harvard students, but was expanded to other colleges in the Boston area, the Ivy League, and Stanford University. It gradually added students of various other colleges and universities across the world.

[ii] Orginal names of the students have been changed in order to maintain privacy.

[iii] Donna Jeanne Haraway, in her updated essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" and in her book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), uses the Cyborg metaphor to explain how fundamental divides in feminist theory and identity should be united resolving the binaries of body and mind, object and subject, nature and culture, similar to the fusion of machine and organism in cyborgs.

## References

Macharia, Jimmy, and Emmanuel Nyakwende. "Gender differences in internet usage intentions for learning in higher education: An Empirical Study." 30 May. 2011. Web. 31 October. 2012. <http://www.ajol.info/index.php/jolte/article/view/66723>

Nirmala, Lakshmi Priya. "When You are Hyperlinked!: The Endless Possibilities of Virtualscapes and the Posthuman Teacher." *Appropriations*. 2011:7; 116. Print.

Thapan, Meenakshi. "Gender, Body and Everyday Life", *Social Scientist* 23.7(1995): 32-58. Print.

*Suvapriya Chatterjee is currently pursuing Ph.D in English Literature from the University of Burdwan. E- Mail: suva.ju@gmail.com*