



# Making a statement or missing out: An exploration of non-use of Facebook among Danish students

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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies have explored people's use of Facebook, but the non-use of Facebook has been relatively neglected. Our motivation for this research project was therefore manifested in the curiosity to discover the reasons for this phenomenon. Through interviewing six Danish students, who had actively chosen not to use Facebook, we gained insight into the thoughts of non-users and explored their reasons for not using this social platform, whether it was identity creation or lack of interest.

We found that identity and the desire to be perceived unique affect the decision of future adaption. Additionally, constant pressure from friends and acquaintances creates a social paradigm, which may lead to a type of counterculture.

## Keywords

Non-use · Facebook · Counterculture · Identity · Uniqueness

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has gained a central position as a social activity among many different age groups in Denmark, and among these Facebook (FB) has grown to become the dominant social network [1] - a paradigm in society.

As stated by Grimmelmann [2], FB's cultural norms reflect the experience and activities of college culture and therefore addresses students in particular. According to Barkhuus & Tashiro [3] students lead nomadic lives and find FB a particularly useful tool for managing social gatherings. Furthermore, they explore how university students integrate FB into their highly scheduled student and social life.

The understanding of non-use of social media is a somewhat undiscovered field. As Selwyn [4] presents, the research concerning information and communication technologies have over the past decade been focusing on outer elements influencing use and non-use. However, our goal has been to gain a better understanding of non-use among Danish students aged 20-30 years, hence we expected the grounds for this choice to go beyond the digital divide, as this group of people have grown up using digital media and thereby have the skills to interact with the technology [4].

Satchell & Dourish identify different categories of non-users, where the active resistance non-users "are those who steadfastly refuse to adopt a technology, in active and considered ways" [5].

The research recognizes this characteristic and focuses on an understanding of the reasons for not participating on FB, without the possibility to convert non-users into users.

When a paradigm in society becomes dominant it is often followed by a counterculture [6]. As FB has become such a dominant paradigm in Denmark, it raises the question whether or not the non-use can be classified as a counterculture. Our research explores this question as well as the reason for being a non-user.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Counterculture

Roszak introduced the notion of "counterculture" during the late 1960s to label the movement that opposed the dominant cultural paradigms in the United States of America. It arose on the foundation of a society dominated by technocracy and opportunism, which provoked a group of people to establish an opposing set of cultural values that radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of society. Furthermore, Roszak [7] describes how the counterculture explored the politics of consciousness and questioned the validity of the conventional set of beliefs, thus undermining the foundation of the dominant culture. This is somewhat similar to the way non-users confront FB as a dominant paradigm and questions its status as necessary in everyday life.

Desmond et al. [6] discuss the terms *revolutionary counterculture* and *aesthetic counterculture*. Both of these are shades of rebellion against the mainstream, but the main characteristic of the revolutionary counterculture is the desire to transform mainstream society, while aesthetic counterculture focuses on expression rather than objectives of revolution. We associate Roszak's exposition of counterculture with the term revolutionary counterculture, but if non-use of FB is an example of counterculture, it is rather a case of aesthetic counterculture, as the participants of our study are not trying to transform the mainstream but simply just challenge it by opting out and establish their own cultural values. Eco contributes by defining counterculture as "an active critique or transformation of the existing social, scientific or aesthetic paradigm" [8]. This can be applied to the non-use of FB, in the sense that the non-users, we talked to, are aware of what this popular social network site facilitates, but for one or several reasons actively choose not to take part in it.

The concept of counterculture leads to the discussion of whether or not non-use can be described as a culture. According to Hofstede, culture can be defined as "the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from another" [9]. This definition suggests that culture is a shared set of meanings and values and that culture can operate even in relatively small groups, independently from the dominant cultural belief. The concept of counterculture leads to the discussion of whether or not non-use can be described as a culture [10]. Ehn & Löfgren further argue that the polarizing between "us" and "them" is often central to the perception of "our" cultural values in opposition to "theirs" and the creation of cultural meanings is thus facilitated by separation from dominant cultural values [10].

## 2.2 Presentation of Self

Identity is relevant when considering the participants' decision regarding non-use since we assume that some elements influence this choice. Here, we look into Hogan, who describes the presentation of self in social media by extinguishing between *performances*, how actors behave among others, and *exhibition* that regards personal elements and objects. One can argue that when the non-users choose not to use a communication channel they choose to present themselves in a certain way. Hogan uses Goffmann's approach to identity creation in order to describe the online participation, where life is a stage for activity and thus is engaged by performances; the front-stage as a self-presentation of what people want to show, whereas back-stage refers to how "... we do much of the real work necessary to keep up appearances" [11]. Hogan relates to this by depicting FB users as individuals who carefully select the content they want to share [12].

Non-users' active choice might radically express their identity and a desire to be perceived unique. When approaching the choice of exhibition it is necessary to focus on how FB offers something valuable through use, but also through non-use, because this view supports a dimension where "individuals in search of differentiation from others avoid buying and consuming commonly used products and brands" [13].

Ruvio states that the behavior is driven by a need for assimilation and differentiation, although this strive to create uniqueness may prompt disapproval because of the deviation from group norms.

## 3. RESEARCH

In order to explore non-use of FB we chose to work with students aged 20-30 years. We conducted six interviews with respondents found through a snowball sampling technique. The participants were aware of the research topic and this awareness could cause some biased answers, although the interviews did not focus directly on their active choice, but rather developed through a series of questions of how they managed tasks we normally would manage through FB.

We prepared semi-structured interviews in compliance with Kvale's idea of interviews as a conversation, which allowed us to collect more personal and profound data, than if we had used a questionnaire [14]. At the same time this approach enabled us to gather a neutral conception of their thoughts.

## 4. ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Seeking Authenticity

The interviews showed that some of our participants were quite resistant towards FB; one participant mentioned that he often had to defend his decision of being a non-user and therefore had

developed a sort of defense speech. Another participant mentioned that out of all SNSs, FB was the one that he, simply out of principle, would not use. Several of the interviewees felt they were often confronted with the decision of whether to use FB or not, but this did not change their attitude. However, none of the participants were so frustrated with the FB paradigm that they were actively trying to change it. It seemed that they accepted the users of FB, but just did not want to be like them. Hence they focus on expressing their personal differentiation from the mainstream.

We experienced several cases of the non-users holding FB and its users up to ridicule, and some even seemed to think of FB users as both pathetic and anti-social. This illustrates the importance of authenticity in the notion of self. As stated by Desmond et al. [6], we all like to see ourselves as representatives of the "true culture" and tend to deal with the reality of the opponents by thinking of their behavior as inauthentic. By seeing FB as a primitive community, the non-users express their belief in their own authenticity, as they value primordial social interaction.

### 4.2 Identity

It can be difficult to determine whether or not our participants actively use their non-use of FB for identity creation, but it is fairly safe to conclude that their image is altered by their decision to avoid the cultural paradigm, to be present on FB. This is supported by statements such as "it has grown to become an identity issue", and how a participant describes how he feels unique - being a non-user of FB has become part of his identity. This indicates that they would not be able to join FB without being ridiculed by their friends. Non-use has become such a vital part of their identity, that it is not possible for them to change it, without suffering a "principle" defeat.

### 4.3 Subculture

The notion of subculture becomes relevant in the sense that it is difficult to speak of a united counterculture against FB based on our interviews. Some of our participants had a very neutral approach to the identity issue, both in terms of how they feel users present themselves on FB and how they understand themselves in relation to being a non-user. Simply, there is an identity conflict between FB's facilities and the participants' needs, because they do not feel that FB adds anything to their social nor personal life. On this basis it can be argued that there exists a subculture to the aesthetic counterculture of those who are not directly against FB, but just do not find it appealing, despite its position as a dominant, ubiquitous element of everyday life for many students in Denmark.

### 4.4 Arguments and Justifications

The participants found it a waste of time to look at others' FB profiles and perceived it as a frivolous communication channel. One participant stated that the information users presented on FB is *fake*, unlike information in physical interaction. This can be related to the front-stage that Hogan uses to state that users "carefully select which tastes to show" [15]. The participants expressed another argument for not using FB is that they have contact information such as cell phone number and e-mail address on people they communicate with in their everyday life, which seems sufficient.

Besides these arguments for not using FB, the non-users had some standard justifications they use, when people confront them and ask why they are not on FB. Statements such as "The reason, I always give, is the recognition of the fact that I would spend too

much time on FB” as well as issues of stalking and trivial information were generally mentioned.

Another example of a justification is privacy, which was not expressed to be a major issue in the active choice, even though they did mention it. It seems to be one of the justifications, the non-users are prepared to use. These justifications are furthermore supported by the statement: “It’s the things we have learned to say” and relates the non-use to aesthetic counterculture by not actively fighting against the paradigm’s existence, but rather being against the integration of it in one’s life.

#### 4.5 Indirect Use

In order to explore non-use of FB we chose to work with students aged 20-30 years, we conducted six interviews with respondents found through a snowball sampling technique. The participants were aware of the research topic and this awareness could cause some biased answers, although the interviews did not focus directly on their active choice, but rather developed through a series of questions of how they managed tasks we normally would manage through FB.

All participants have experienced indirect use and some have experienced more extended use, e.g. a participant’s friend that created an event for him. This need for dissemination of information makes the non-users rely on their network to support their choice. The participants do not seem to experience any disapproval even though they deviate from FB as a paradigm in society. Grimmelmann [16] states that “identity performance requires an audience”, an audience which is prerequisite to the uniqueness of the non-user. This indirect interaction reveals that the non-users’ front-stage identity can be difficult to maintain, and they have to communicate through their peers. We can therefore assume that the indirect use offers an insight into the non-users’ back-stage, since they to some extent hide the indirect use behind their front-stage identity.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Choosing not to be a part of FB, or any other dominant community, can be seen as a statement through which people can express their identity. Among the students we interviewed, reasons for non-use proved to be the need to feel unique and different from the mainstream, or simply just lack of interest. We found that the transition from non-user to user becomes increasingly difficult over time, since being a non-user becomes part of one’s identity. There might also be a constant pressure from friends and acquaintances, who try to persuade non-users to join their community. This pressure can lead to a form of counterculture, which reinforces the non-user stance and makes the decision a matter of dignity and principles.

However, there does not seem to be a clearly defined revolutionary counterculture, and being a non-user of FB does not necessarily lead to a distinct resistance towards FB; in fact the non-users accept FB, even though they are confronted with it frequently. The findings can however have been influenced by the indirect use of FB, which may mean that we have not observed complete non-use.

This study has examined some of the tendencies for non-use of the dominant cultural paradigm, FB, and can serve as an

inspiration to further studies that elaborates on this subject. Such a study could be based on an extended interview study supplemented with focus group interviews to examine to what degree it can be defined as a culture.

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