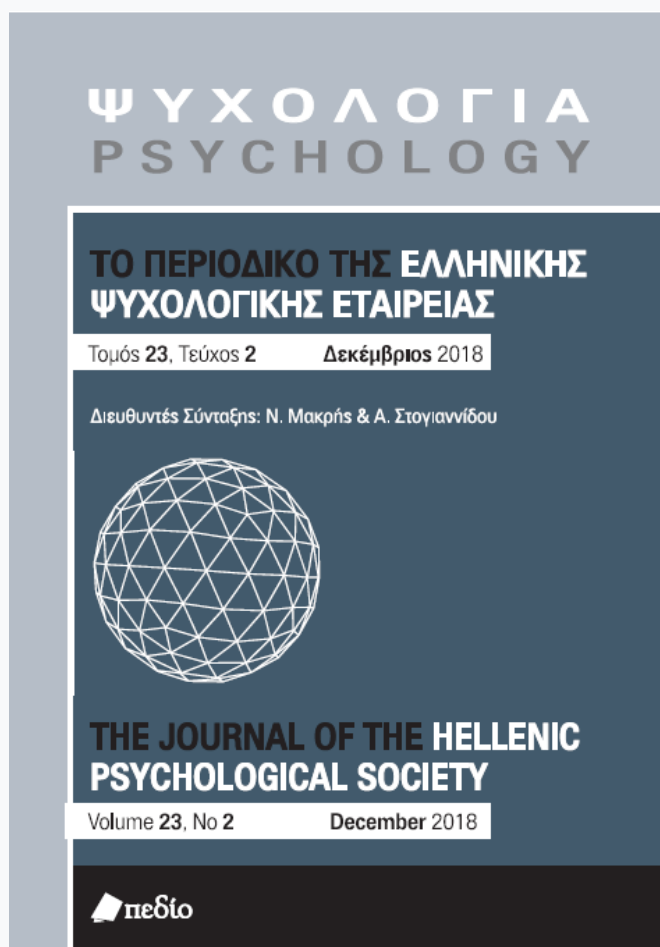


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## Social perception of Facebook friendship among Greek students

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### ABSTRACT

Making friends is the basic concept upon which Facebook (Fb) is conceived. Fb operationalizes friendship more by simple acts of contact reinforcement (e.g., “add”, “like”, “comment”) and under the rubric “friend” allows diverse kinds of friendships (from real close friends to complete strangers). These new ways and practices of relating raise mainly issues of how friendship in Fb is perceived from users’ subjective point of view and according to their personal experience within the Fb context. This study focuses on users’ social perception of Fb friendship. Participants were Greek students (N= 166); they provided their demographics and responded to questions on Fb intensity use, Fb friends total number and their estimate of real friends in Fb. They also listed words or thoughts to the question “how would you present Fb friendship to someone who has never heard about it?” Content analysis of responses yielded 7 themes (no response included). Fb friendship was predominantly perceived as a means of “aggregating social capital” and “socializing”, frequently as “phoney” and less frequent as a way of “developing [real] friendships”, another mode of “flirting” and a “dangerous” way of connecting with people. Correspondence Analysis performed on the themes, taking into account gender, number of friends and proportion of real to total Fb friends, indicated that although the social perception of Fb friendship is permeated by disbelief and apprehension, making Fb friends is also perceived as a tool for the maintenance and expansion of one’s social capital and the promotion of desirable social identities.

*Key words:* Facebook, friendship, social perception, intensity of Facebook use, online friends, offline friends

### Introduction

Over the years, social networking sites (SNS), which rely on users’ participation and contribution within a pre-defined virtual community, are gaining more and more popularity. Facebook (Fb) is actually the most popular SNS in the world, as well as a widely discussed media phenomenon (Anderson,

Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012). Launched in February 2004 for Harvard university students, it was expanded the following month to other universities and in September 2006 opened up to anyone over the age of 13 with a valid email address (Facebook, 2016). Reports of more than 1.04 billion daily active users on average for December 2015, worldwide (Facebook, 2016), prove that

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Fb has increased dramatically in size and became rapidly a leading source of information and enjoyment, but also a platform for civic and political participation and self-expression (Qureshi & Mir, 2013). These numbers reveal not only Fb's dominance over several other social platforms but also that it is the most active and vibrant community (Giannakos, Pатели, & Chorianopoulos, 2013).

### **Facebook Friendship**

The rapid expansion of Fb is a landmark in the history of the study of social interaction and communication. According to the company, its mission is "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook, 2016). "Friending" practices are at the core of Fb activities; making friends is the basic concept upon which this platform is conceived and the frontispiece under which users are invited to connect with new members to the system is "Friendship": users create profiles and connect to other users, called "friends". A request to become a "friend" must be accepted before the person concerned is listed as a friend. Facebook allows users to add "friends" and keep track of their status, interests, photos, "likes", and updates of others' personal information in cyberspace. This "managerial" mode of perceiving friendship and handling contacts – a kind of bureaucratization of friendship (Rosen, 2007) – allows for the unlimited multiplication of Fb friends, as well as for bringing together under the rubric "friend" diverse kinds of friendships, ranging from real close friends to complete strangers. Thus, new ways of relating are emerging, putting forth questions on the types of social networks and the meaning of friendships that are evolving in Fb. At the same time, the new ways and practices of relating promoted by Fb, raise concerns that users' ability to distinguish among kinds of relationships in their social circle might be

undermined. An early study noted that the use of the global label "friend" may have introduced confusion among users and that it is often quite difficult for two users who call each other a friend to know if they are talking about the same thing (Fono & Raynes-Goldie in Ellison & Boyd, 2013). As Ellison & Boyd (2013) mention, even if SNS "allow for more asymmetrical disclosure of information [followers, friends, close friends], that may give users more freedom to express complex connections, the tools to negotiate these relationships are often too complicated to be truly usable" (p. 155). This situation raises mainly issues of how friendship in Fb is perceived from users' subjective point of view and according to their personal experience within the Fb context.

While Fb is now popular with all internet users, it is still and even more so, with university students, who use it on a daily basis to support both their social and academic goals (Irwin, Ball, Desbrow, & Leveritt, 2012; Johnston, Chen, & Hauman, 2013; Junco, 2015). Moreover, friendship is particularly important for young people and more specifically during their university years, with closer and deeper relationships being established than at previous points their lives (Brooks, 2007, as cited in West, Lewis, & Currie, 2009). Because of its prominence in the lives of university students, there has been a good deal of interest in different countries in studying the many facets of their experiences with this SNS.

Studies of Fb use by students have examined how it is related to various aspects of their experience, including the aggregation of social capital and the benefit of Fb friends (Bryant & Marmo 2009; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe 2007, 2011; Johnston, Tanner, Lalla, & Kawalski, 2013; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), motivations, choice of friends and activities (Joinson, 2008; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006; Sheldon 2008a, b; West et al., 2009), Fb use and learning (Gafni & Deri, 2012; Junco, 2015; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Pasek, More, & Hargittai, 2009), political

participation and civic engagement (Valenzuela et al., 2009; Vitak et al., 2010), socialization and communication (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013). Additionally, researchers have examined how Fb use relates to personality variables such as gender (Schultz, 2011), scores on the big five personality dimensions (Back et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2009; Pettijohn T.F. II, LaPine, Pettijohn T.F., & Horting, 2012), addictive use of Fb, use, perception and attitudes towards Fb (García-Martín & García-Sánchez, 2015; Giannakos et al., 2013; Hew & Cheung, 2012; Qureshi & Mir, 2013;) as well as changes in use and perception of Fb (Johnston, Chen et al., 2013; Johnston et al., 2013; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2008).

Despite the plethora of research questions and approaches to Facebook and Fb friendship among students, there is a surprising lack of research on students' social perceptions of friendship in Fb, *per se*. Understanding perceptions, defined "as the process by which an individual selects, organize and interprets stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world" from the users' point of view, is of vital importance since perceptions affect attitudes (Schiffman & Kanuk, as cited in Qureshi & Mir, 2013) and may well affect their behavior within the SNS and offline, in relation to this SNS. More specifically, social perceptions are shared cognitions about social stimuli among members of a community, they are represented and reproduced in various forms in everyday communication, and may dictate expectations, affective reactions, behavioral intentions and actual behaviors. Fb users of a specific community, such as that of university students, may be sharing similar more or less expectations about the role, utility and possible outcomes of Fb friendship; may share positive or negative feelings about it, such as excitement or apprehension, and accordingly, may decide to get involved with Fb more or less intensely. For example, the kind and number of people one is befriending in Fb,

the type of activities (virtual or not) she or he decides to engage in with them depends to a large extent on social perceptions about the nature and consequences of Fb friendship.

### **Aim and empirical expectations**

The aim of the present study is to amend for this gap in the literature, by identifying Greek students' social perceptions of Fb friendship. Previous research in Greece, on students and Fb use has dealt with users' acceptance of and satisfaction with Fb (Giannakos, Giotopoulos, & Chorianopoulos, 2010; Giannakos et al., 2013), Fb addiction (Frangos, Ch. C., Frangos, C. C., & Kiohos, 2010; Frangos, Ch. C., Frangos, C., & Sotiropoulos, 2011; Tsimtsiou et al., 2015), privacy issues (Papathanasopoulos, Athanasiadis, & Xenofondos, 2014) and bullying (Kokkinos, Baltzidis, & Xynogala, 2016). The sole study examining subjective perception -and not social perception- of Fb friendship in Greece was that of Savrami (2009); she employed semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to study the personal experiences of eight participants (4 men, 4 women, aged 22-33, university graduates) with Fb friendship in comparison to real life friendship. She found that the Fb friendship experiences were described as lacking the intimacy, trust, emotion and psychological support that is usually expected of real life friendship.

Due to the scarcity of information on the social perception of Fb friendship, and the difficulties associated with its definition, this study resorted to Fb users themselves and their own understanding of Fb friendship (Fehr, 2006). Hence, our approach is based on spontaneously elicited features of Fb friendship that are used in everyday communication by Fb users to describe it. In other words, we will try to tap, laypersons' social perceptions, defined as socially shared cognitions of Fb friendship.

Although it is difficult to formulate expectations, due to lack of relevant data, based on the limited and partially relevant findings of Savrami (2009), we expect that social perception of Fb friendship will be characterized by mistrust and apprehension; Fb friendship is likely to be described as a deficient form of friendship. Other studies on Fb privacy issues (Papathanasopoulos et al., 2014), Fb bullying (Kokkinos et al., 2016) and Fb addiction (Frangos Ch.C. et al., 2010; Frangos, Ch.C. et al., 2011; Tsimtsiou et al. 2015) suggest that friending in Fb might also be perceived as risky or even dangerous. On the other hand, other studies focusing on acceptance and satisfaction of Fb use (Giannakos et al., 2010; Giannakos et al., 2013) suggest Fb may also be positively viewed as a medium of enjoyment, socializing and networking.

The social nature of the above perceptions, should be demonstrated by their association with basic social categorization variables, such as gender as well as social-personal involvement variables, that directly or indirectly indicate the extent to which a user's interaction with the medium contributes to his or her social identity. Such indirect indicators are the number of friends one maintains in Fb and the proportion of real life friends to total number of Fb friends. In contrast, intensity of Fb use (Ellison et al., 2007) is a direct indicator of personal enmeshment with Fb. In particular, gender has been found to be generally associated with Fb use and behavior (Caers et al., 2013; Junko, 2015; Schultz, 2011). On the other hand, research with indirect social indicators, including Fb social habits of building and maintaining friendships in Fb has suggested that Fb friends are not necessarily off line friends and users with a large number of Fb friends do not necessarily have the same number of close friends in real life (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012; Wang & Wellman, 2010). Research with the direct indicator, intensity of Fb use, has further shown that Fb use is associated with the aggregation of different types

of social capital (Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison et al., 2011; Pettijohn, T.F. II et al., 2012) in response to self-presentation needs; in other words, Fb intensity of use serves one's motivation to present self in a socially desirable or self-promoting manner to a much wanted network of people.

Gender is expected to be associated with Fb social perceptions, as it represents one of the primary social categorizations that people employ to filter social information. Hence, the differential social norms associated with how men and women handle friendship in society should be reflected in perceptions about how men and women handle Fb friendship. Intensity of Fb use, that is time engaged, self-involvement, importance and activities within Fb, are likely to accumulate experience with Fb interaction as well as a broad range of personal feedback on befriending different people. Hence, students' social perceptions about friendship in Fb should also be associated with Fb intensity, for instance, high or, perhaps, medium intensity student users should be more at ease with making new friends as well as different kinds of friends; this should not be expected of low intensity users. Total number of Fb friends, as well as the proportion of total number of Fb friends to actual real life friends are behavioral indications of what Fb users are actually doing by friending in Fb. For example, are they affirming their real-life network or are they expanding it? Are they expanding it in order to actually make more potential real friends (thus keeping a reasonable number of total friends and a reasonable proportion of real life to online friends) or are they expanding their network just to increase their popularity and social capital? Students with a low number of Fb friends and a high proportion of real to total Fb friends, may simply be using Fb as a tool of affirming already existing real life friendships, whereas students with a lot of Fb friends and a low proportion of real life friends to total Fb friends may be motivated to expand their social network.

## Method - Participants and measures

Participants were 166 undergraduate students (female=119, male=47), active Fb users, their age ranging from 18-26 ( $M=20$ ,  $SD=2$ ); this was a convenience sample. All were single. Students replied to a paper and pencil questionnaire comprising basic demographic questions (age, gender, university, family status) and questions of Fb use, such as years of Fb use, number of Fb friends and number of real-life friends (subjective estimate). The questionnaire also included the Facebook Intensity Scale (Ellison et al., 2007) which measures frequency, time invested, personal importance in daily personal and social life and self-involvement with Fb. This 12-item questionnaire was adapted into Greek, using the back-translation technique; its internal consistency was checked using Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and was found to be good ( $\alpha=.85$ ) and comparable to the English version (Ellison et al., 2007). Finally, we employed the thought listing technique suggested by Fehr (2006) for the study of lay social perceptions and prototypes to tap social perceptions of Fb friendship. Specifically, participants were asked to list words or phrases with their thoughts in response to the question "how would you present Fb friendship to someone who has never heard about it?" Participants were free to list as many thoughts they liked and stop after 10 minutes.

## Procedure

The study was conducted between November and December 2014; participants were sampled in small numbers from different University Departments in Greece to prevent sampling bias (University of Athens, Panteion University, Economic University of Athens, University of Piraeus, Polytechnic School, University of Patras, University of Crete, University of Thessaloniki). Students were approached by field researchers at their

university campuses; they participated to the study voluntarily and responded to the questionnaire individually and anonymously. The entire procedure did not exceed 20 minutes. The procedure complied with ethical standards and regulations.

## Results

### 1. Content analysis of responses to the thought listing technique

Verbal responses to the thought listing technique were submitted to content analysis by two, independent judges who were media and communication studies experts. Each judge sorted the original verbal responses into thematic categories. Once each judge completed his or her work, the categories and their contents were compared, only few content differences were identified and eliminated. Labels were assigned to the categories on the basis of the meaning of their most frequent verbal contents and judges' overall impression of the underlined meaning of the category established. Subsequently, verbal data in participants' response sheets were coded according to the category they fell into and counted. Seven categories were the outcome of this procedure; their labels, respective contents and frequencies appear in Table 1.

### 2. Correspondence Analysis

To examine the empirical expectation that social perceptions of Fb friendship, that is the seven thematic categories (dependent variables) would be associated with gender, total number of Fb friends and the proportion of real life to total number of friends and Facebook intensity (independent variables) we first converted continuous variables involved in our expectation, into categorical variables using the median as criterion to create groups, allowing the distribution of participants' responses to define the grouping cutpoint. Hence, students

**Table 1**  
**Frequency of thematic categories and category contents**

Thematic Categories	Category content	Frequency
Aggregating Social Capital	Networking, communicating, sharing, contact, self-publicity, group memberships, keeping in touch (with acquaintances, people met once, holiday friends, fellow students, old classmates, old teachers, acquaintances from work), looking for people with common interests, looking for professional acquaintances, sharing information about events and going out.	95
Socializing	Having fun, socializing during spare time, spending the night chatting, keeping track of another's' profile, learning their whereabouts/ news/ views, gossiping, reciprocating, checking-in with others, posting and commenting on someone's wall exchanging views and notes, like to friends, chit-chat, tag.	85
Phoney Friendship	Phoney, superficial, hypocritical, virtual, fake, invalid, not equated with friendship in real life. no real friendship, meaningless, lacking emotion, limited to formalities, imaginary friends, people you never talk to, shallow discussions, one must be desperate to be looking for friends on Facebook, short term friendship.	74
Developing friendship	Strengthening an existing friendship, more frequent contact with friends, strengthening old friendships searching for already known friends, old friends, you decide which friends to interact with, possibility of talking with many people you know, opportunity to communicate with people living far away, creative friendship	48
Dangerous Friendship	One hides behind the screen, trolling possibilities, deceitful, scornful, must be careful, dangerous, harassing/ sometimes bullying, perverted, selfish, suspicious, insidious, stressful	35
Flirting	Flirting without risk, erotic contacts, dates, you can find exactly the date you are looking for, love, dating opportunity	31
No response		5

Note. Thematic categories resulted from analysis of contents of verbal responses to the question "How would you describe Facebook friendship to a friend who has never heard of Facebook". Numbers indicate frequency of appearance of a category. Participants (N=166) have referred to more than one category in their response sheets, hence column numbers do not add up to number of participants.



Table 2

Cross tabulation of the frequencies of the social perception of Facebook friendship thematic categories with Gender, Total Number of Fb Friends, proportion of Real Life Facebook Friends to Total, and Intensity of Facebook use.

Thematic categories	Men	Women	Small no of friends	Medium no friends	A lot of friends	Few real/ All friends	Medium real/ All friends	A lot real/All friends	Low intensity	Medium intensity	High intensity	Total
Aggregating social capital	23	51	21	26	27	18	28	28	22	32	20	74
Socializing	24	11	11	10	14	9	13	13	5	17	13	35
Phoney friendship	16	32	16	16	16	16	12	20	12	17	19	48
Developing friendship	23	72	25	41	29	31	32	32	26	34	35	95
Dangerous friendship	11	20	9	11	11	13	4	14	7	9	15	31
Flirting	24	61	24	38	23	25	33	27	26	29	30	85
No response	2	3	3	0	2	3	1	1	2	1	2	5

Note. Independent variable names legend: SMALL, MEDIUM NO FRIENDS and A LOT OF FRIENDS are levels of “total number of Facebook friends”, FEW, MEDIUM, A LOT REAL/ALL FRIENDS are levels of the “proportion of real life to total number of Facebook friends” and LOW, MEDIUM and HIGH INTENSITY are the three levels of the “intensity of Fb use”



having less than 299 Fb friends were placed into a group with “a small number of friends”, those having 530 – 4000 into a group with “a lot of friends”, and those falling in between, into a group with “medium number of friends”. Similarly, students with a proportion below 12% of real-life to total Fb friends belonged to the group of “few real life to total number of friends”, those with 26% and over belonged to the group “a lot of real life to total number of friends” and those with a proportion in between to the group “medium real life to total number of friends”. A tripartite grouping was created with participants’ intensity of use responses, students with intensity up to 2.99 on the 5 point scale were members of the “low intensity”, group those with a score higher than 3.44, members of the “high intensity” group, and those with a score in between of the “medium intensity group. Frequencies of the newly created independent variable groups appear in Table 2 along with the dependent variables, that is the thematic categories.

Subsequently, we performed Correspondence Analysis on the dependents variables of the social perception thematic categories, treating gender, number of total Fb friends and proportion of real life to total Fb friends as independent variables. Analysis results are depicted in two-dimensional space in Figure 1<sup>1</sup>. There were two basic factors interpreting 83.5% of the total variance. The first factor contrasts men, engaging in medium intensity of Fb use, having a lot of Fb friends and perceiving Fb friendship as dangerous, to women, engaging in low intensity of Fb use, having a medium number of Fb friends and perceiving Fb friendship as a means of aggregating social capital and socializing. This factor explains 56.41% of variance. The second factor explains 26.94% of variance and juxtaposes on the one hand those that have a proportion of few real to all Fb friends and engage in high intensity Fb use to those that have a medium number of real to all Fb friends and engage in medium intensity Fb use. The former either do not pro-

vide us with their perception of Fb friendship or perceive Fb friendship a means of flirting and developing [real life] friendship. The latter, perceive Fb friendship as phoney and dangerous.

### 3. Thematic categories of the Social Perception of Facebook Friendship – ***Discussing the contents of social perception themes.***

The thematic analysis of students’ verbal production (Table 1) revealed seven themes or thematic categories (six, including five “no-responses”). The six themes could be viewed as the particular conceptual components making up the social perception of Facebook friendship. Below we discuss each category separately and subsequently draw a conclusion on what seems to be students’ overall social perception of Fb friendship.

Friendship in Fb is viewed by most student Fb users as a means to aggregate social capital. This first category ( $f=95$ ) is defined by an active attitude to create and maintain a network of social relationships and hence to establish a socially desirable personal image (Joinston, 2008). Indicative activities mentioned by the students are networking, communication, maintaining connection with people one already knows or has spent some time with (school, university, holidays, work), establishing professional connections, sharing, looking for or exchanging information of interest (common interests), self-publicity and pursuing group membership.

The second most frequent theme ( $f=85$ ) is evolving around “socializing”, in the sense of spending recreational free time with people one likes. Fun, chatting, gossiping, making compliments (“like”), commenting or following others’ behavior (on their “wall”), refer mainly to the “recreational and inoffensive” part of a relationship, which, apparently, does not require any further personal involvement or self-disclosure to others. The category seems to describe a general tendency to gather, exchange and browse social information about

friends or acquaintances that is a tendency of social monitoring, in a covertly entertaining and “gossipy” fashion. One, should not fail to observe that the category (nor any other of the seven categories) does not include reference to close friendship and relationships. Students’ view about socializing in Fb is consonant to Bumgarner (2007) contention that Fb contributes to socializing by acting, mainly, as a dispenser of information about peers, while actual communication between peers is secondary. Moreover, students description of Fb friendship can probably be understood as a resistance to the notion that Fb can be a platform through which strong relationship are established; relations observed between «friends» in Fb are represented as mere activities that, while providing entertainment and social updates, constitute only one-sided communication (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013).

The third thematic category ( $f=74$ ), describes Fb friendship as “phoney”, that is as a relationship that in no way meets the definition of real life friendship as it lacks intimacy, trust, emotions, support, care and mutuality. Friendship in Fb is also perceived as a short term, superficial, hypocritical, fake, meaningless, relation. Exchange and essential communication is perceived as deficient (“people you never talk to”) or limited to formalities and shallow discussions with “imaginary” friends. Furthermore, looking for friends in Fb is perceived as futile (“one must be really desperate to be looking for friends in Fb”). Thus, overall, students do not seem to even consider the potential of Fb for establishing new friendships. In contrast, however, this very attitude seems to indirectly acknowledge that Fb friendship can be hypocritical and manipulative in the service of self-presentational purposes (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987).

The contents of the fourth thematic category ( $f=48$ ) suggest that Fb is considered a “technological tool” that can strengthen and maintain real life present, past or distant relationships, as it allows for easy and immediate

communication between users. “If Facebook is used with care”, as a user said, offline relationships can even be further developed. This is a, so to speak, “safe” perception of Fb friendship. Users are in essence encouraged to add friends they have had a previous relationship with and Fb friends are likely to be peers rather non-peers (see Lampe et al., 2008; Sheldon 2008a,b). Hence, Fb friendship, according to this perception, has a supportive function to real life friendship.

The fifth theme ( $f=35$ ) emphasizes the negative aspects of Fb friendship as it is presented as a dangerous and risky connection with people that may be hiding their true identities and can engage in threatening, aggressive, deceitful, insidious and harassing behaviors. This perception has probably been built on media overreaction to actual events associated with general internet risks such as privacy breaches, offensive behaviors, bullying and sexual harassment etc. (Luce, 2013; Milivojevic, 2011). Inevitably, this view of Fb friendship suggests that it should be handled with caution.

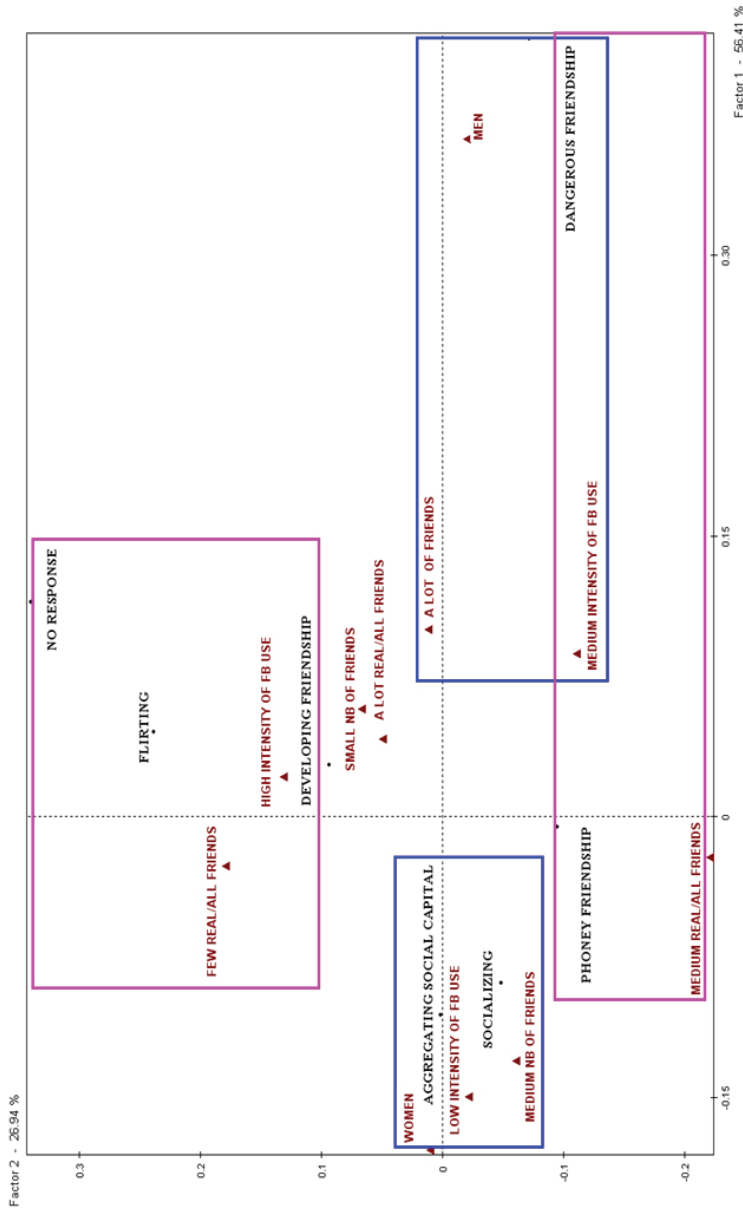
The sixth theme ( $f=31$ ) contains is composed exclusively by terms associated with flirting and dating. Perhaps, easiness of networking, adding friends, browsing profiles and socializing, along with the anonymity and the ability present the self under favorable and controllable circumstances, dating opportunities with minimum risk.

Finally, the seventh thematic category simply refers to no-responses.

#### 4. Conclusive remarks on the Fb friendship social perception themes.

As a whole, the six themes suggest that friendship in Fb does not correspond, at the cognitive, affective and behavioral level, to common perceptions about real life friendship. Student participants suggest that Fb friendship does not contain the qualities of real life friendship, only a poor subset of them, such as formal and superficial communication; it also does not involve basic emotions upon which

**Figure 1**  
**Figure 1. Perceptions of Facebook friendship by gender, total number of Facebook friends, number of real life to total Facebook friends and intensity of Facebook use.**



Points on the graph represent variables. Ones that are far from the center of the axes contribute significantly to the total variance and define a factor. In contrast, points that approach the center of the axes have the same profile and do not participate in its definition. Points that are close to each other (right-left, up-down) participate to the definition of a factor. Independent variable names legend: NB FRIENDS refers to "total number of Facebook friends", REAL/ALL FRIENDS refers to the "proportion of real life to total number of Facebook friends", and INTENSITY OF FB USE to "intensity of Facebook use". To facilitate interpretation rectangles group together variables that define the opposing poles of a factor.

real life friendship is been built and developed; most notably, it does not involve trust. In contrast, it involves fear and apprehension. Also, it does not implicate actions usually observed in friendship, such as support and care, but more the exchange of information, spending spare time, problem solving etc. Thus, for the most part, students have, neutral to negative feelings about friendship in Fb, with the exception of online friendship with offline friends. There is hardly any mention about making new friends in the Fb context; moreover, there is no reference to transferring friendships from the Fb context to the real life one, unless the friended person in Fb is a potential date. These findings are in the same line as those by West et al. (2009) and Quan - Haase & Young (2010), who found that making new friends in social media websites – in the sense of being able to depend on them or communicate with them on a regular basis - was not particularly important to college students. Hence, friendship in Fb is predominantly perceived as a mode of aggregating social capital and socializing, albeit a manipulative and phony mode, that one should employ with caution. On the other hand, according to the perception of student Fb users, friendship per se, is a human connection rooted to real life and cannot be established in virtual or digital terms.

**Associations of facebook friendship social perceptions themes with gender, total number of facebook friends, proportion of real life friends to total facebook friends and intensive facebook use.**

Findings in Figure 1 have demonstrated that Fb friendship social perceptions are malleable to social factors such as the norms associated with gender. The socially assertive role of men in real life is also reflected in the digital milieu. Men have a lot of Fb friends, engage in medium Fb use and perceive Fb friendship as

dangerous. This implies that their relatively rich experience with Fb friendship - coming from the feedback they get from their many Fb friends and their medium Fb use - suggests that in Fb friending connections one takes risks and is exposed to risk and should thus approach Fb friendship with apprehension. This may further imply that for men, Fb friending involves self-presentational manipulations, on the one hand as a precautionary measure and on the other as a means of claiming desirable outcomes from the befriended person. In contrast, women seem to have much less experience with Fb than men as they engage only in low intensity Fb use and have relatively less Fb friends. To them, possibly due to the selectivity associated with having less friends with whom they also interact less, Fb friendship is a benign connection equated to enjoyable socializing and the potential to gradually expand one's social network by adding friends. In comparison to men, their perception of Fb friendship is both positive and explicitly target oriented. In contrast, men's perception lacks a specifically stated motivation about Fb friendship but instead they simply state their negative attitude toward it. Does that mean that they use it less than women or that they make less friends? Apparently not! Quite the opposite. They simply avoid stating explicitly what Fb friendship is all about other than being dangerous. As already suggested, this could imply that to them, Fb friendship is a tool to be manipulated in a risky manner in order to pursue personal outcomes through the interaction with others.

The interpretation of the Factor 2, perhaps explains what "dangerous" friendship stands for to men and the student participants in general, as it is associated with perceiving Fb friendship as manipulative and phoney by those who also engage in medium intensity Fb use and happen to have a medium number of real life friends among their total number of Fb friends. In other words, students whose Fb friends include a more or less balanced number of real-life friends and digital friends (prac-

tically strangers), and also have a substantial experience in using the medium, understand that Fb friendship can both be abused for own purposes by themselves as well as by others against self. Students understand that one can both be exposed to risk while having Fb friendship and be the perpetrator of phoney and deceitful behaviors. At the other side of the fence, students who highly engage in Fb use, thus having acquired a lot of experience, while having a small number of real friends among their Fb ones, perceive Fb as a tool good for either flirting or for further developing existing real life friendships. This group expresses a perception of Fb that is practical and close to a real life need. Fb friendship serves the real life need of easily connecting with people one knows and wants to keep in touch. At the same time, it assists in looking for people to flirt with, who, for the most part, would have been strangers in real life anyway.

Conclusively, Fb perceptions are malleable to social and personal factors associated to one's social identity, such as gender, and his or her kind and degree of involvement with Fb e.g. intensity of use, number and kind of Fb friends.

### **Significance of study, limitations and prospects.**

The findings of the present study are limited by the convenience sampling and the composition of the sample (small number of participants, more women than men, students living in metropolitan areas). Another limitation of our study is methodological; content analysis has a relatively high degree of subjectivity, despite the fact that we employed two independent judges to formulate the resulting thematic categories. Alternatively, we could have employed a different methodological approach to the analysis of verbal data as that proposed by Fehr (2006), who uses the original data. Albeit, this is probably one of the

few studies that examines social perceptions of Fb friendship, per se, among students, and the sole study that has focused on the social perception of Fb friendship among Greek students. It is important to ground research on such a disputable and difficult to define phenomenon as Fb friendship on layperson's perceptions rather than on top-down definitions.

Of course, this is an one shot study on a phenomenon that would require the design of step-by-step studies to clarify findings about which, here, we could only offer conjectures. For instance, what are the exact motivations for aggregating social capital? Why women readily perceive Fb friendship as a means of aggregating social capital and socialization and men as dangerous? Why do people friend so many others in Fb, when they perceive Fb friendship as phoney and dangerous? How do people handle their social identities among Fb friends who are distributed – in different proportions - to real life friends and digital strangers? Under what circumstances and by what criteria do Fb friendships transfer to the real life world? Future research should deal with these and similar questions.

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## **Κοινωνικές αντιλήψεις Ελλήνων φοιτητών για τη φιλία στο Facebook**

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### **ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ**

Η δημιουργία φιλικών σχέσεων αποτελεί τη βασική ιδέα πάνω στην οποία σχεδιάστηκε το Facebook (Fb). Η φιλία όμως στο Fb συνίσταται κυρίως σε απλές πράξεις ενίσχυσης της επαφής (π.χ., «προσθήκη φίλου», «μου αρέσει», «σχόλια») ενώ ο όρος «φίλος» παραπέμπει σε διάφορα είδη φιλίας (με πραγματικούς στενούς φίλους, έως πλήρως άγνωστα άτομα). Αυτές οι νέες μορφές και πρακτικές σχέσεων εγείρουν μια σειρά από ερωτήματα ως προς τον τρόπο με τον οποίον γίνεται αντιληπτή η φιλία στο Fb από την πλευρά των χρηστών σύμφωνα με τις προσωπικές τους εμπειρίες. Η μελέτη αυτή εστιάζει στην κοινωνική αντίληψη της φιλίας χρηστών του Fb. Οι συμμετέχοντες είναι Έλληνες φοιτητές (N = 166). Απάντησαν σε ερωτήσεις σχετικά με τα δημογραφικά τους στοιχεία, την ένταση χρήσης του Fb, το συνολικό αριθμό των φίλων τους στο Fb και τον αριθμό των πραγματικών φίλων τους στο Fb. Επίσης, κατέγραψαν με λέξεις ή φράσεις τις σκέψεις τους στο ερώτημα «πώς θα παρουσιάζατε τη φιλία στο Fb σε κάποιον που δεν γνωρίζει κάτι για το θέμα αυτό;». Από την ανάλυση περιεχομένου των απαντήσεων αναδείχθηκαν 7 θέματα (συμπεριλαμβανόμενης της «μη απάντησης»). Η φιλία στο Fb γίνεται αντιληπτή πρωτίτως ως ένα μέσο «συγκέντρωσης κοινωνικού κεφαλαίου» και «κοινωνικοποίησης», συχνά ως «ψεύτικη» και λιγότερο συχνά ως ένας τρόπος «ανάπτυξης [πραγματικών] φιλικών σχέσεων», ένας άλλος τρόπος «φλερτ» και ένας «επικίνδυνος» τρόπος σύνδεσης με άλλους ανθρώπους. Η Ανάλυση Αντιστοιχιών που εφαρμόστηκε στα θέματα αυτά, λαμβάνοντας υπόψη το φύλο, τον αριθμό των φίλων και την αναλογία πραγματικών φίλων στο σύνολο των φίλων στο Fb, έδειξε ότι παρά το γεγονός ότι η κοινωνική αντίληψη της φιλίας στο Fb κυριαρχείται από δυσπιστία και φόβο, η σύναψη φιλικών σχέσεων στο Fb γίνεται αντιληπτή και ως ένα εργαλείο διατήρησης και επέκτασης του κοινωνικού κεφαλαίου καθώς και προώθησης επιθυμητών κοινωνικών ταυτοτήτων.

*Λέξεις-κλειδιά:* Facebook, φιλία, κοινωνική αντίληψη, ένταση χρήσης του Facebook, φίλοι στο διαδίκτυο, εκτός διαδικτύου φίλοι

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