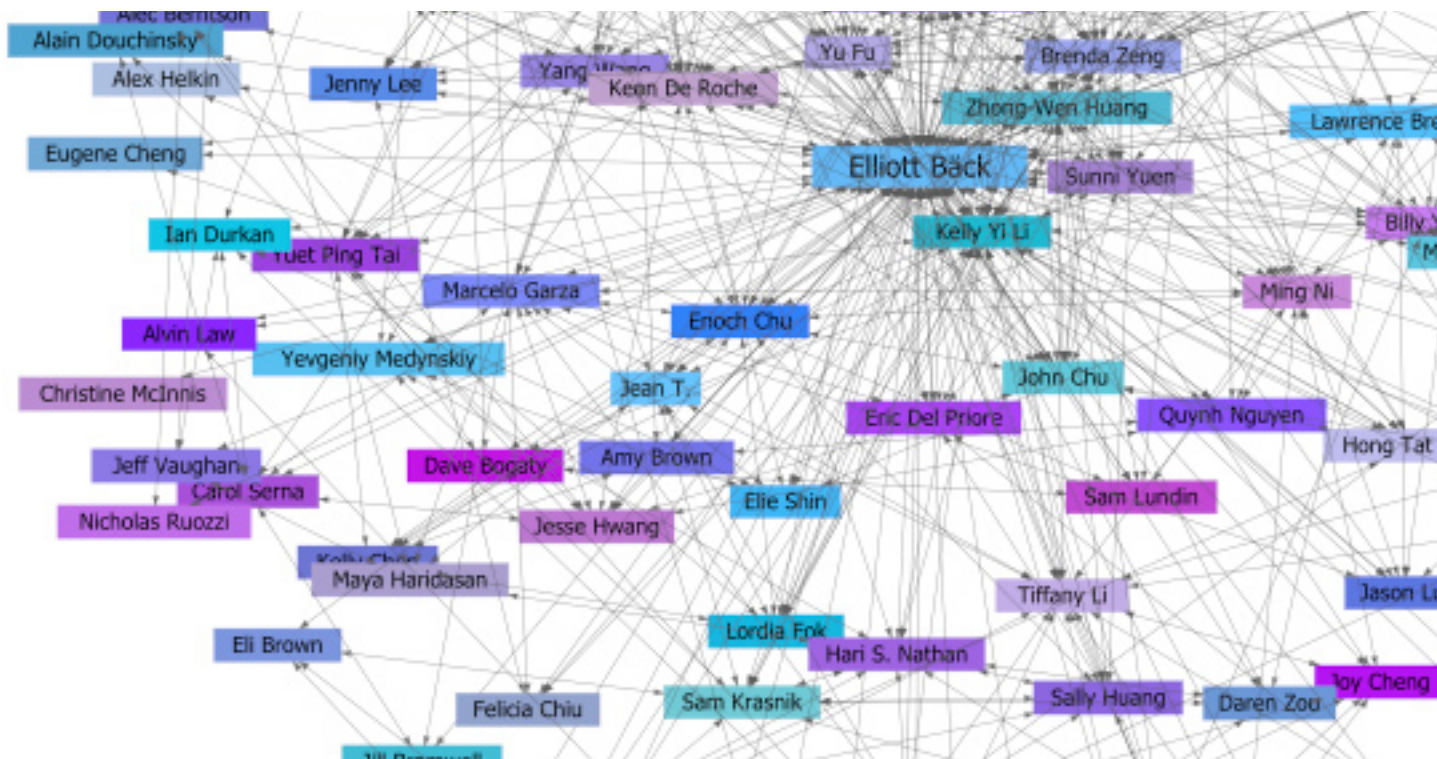


FEATURES

IDEAS, FRIENDSHIP, AND FACEBOOK by Phillip Jeffrey



Do you remember that moment of euphoria when you received your shiny acceptance letter to UBC? You jumped around your room screaming, “I got in, I got in”, and madly called that friend (you know the one) that you always call first when something really exciting happens to you. Since then, more than likely, you have found that the everyday realities of graduate school don’t quite match your expectations. Sometimes you feel that life can’t get any better, and sometimes you wish you could create a time machine to go back and take a different path. You may find you are spending an exorbitant amount of time working in your lab, your room, or Graham House, and that you often feel lonely, even when surrounded by others. I want to tell you that you are not alone; there are

many students just like you – me, for example. These emotions are all part of the roller coaster experience that is graduate school, and your ability to deal with them will define who you are, and the type of person you become post-UBC. [Yes, eventually you have to leave graduate school, and the lucky ones leave with a cool degree!]

I have discovered the secret to remaining happy, healthy, and sane in graduate school. It is called Facebook, and I have been in a state of nirvana since becoming a member in 2005. If Facebook is still foreign to you, you should know that it will change your life for the better, make you feel good inside, and keep a smile on your face. Most of your friends are already doing it, as well as past acquaintances you have lost contact with. Wouldn’t you like the

opportunity to reconnect with your Grade 9 crush?

Facebook [2] is a social networking site launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, a Harvard undergraduate, exclusively for Harvard students. Through word of mouth and student requests on behalf of other schools, it spread across colleges, universities and high schools in Canada and the USA. It offered an environment of exclusivity, as you could only view content within your school network, and users had control over what profile information they shared, such as photo albums or groups to which they subscribed.

Since September 2006, anyone providing a valid email address can register on Facebook. There are appropriately 21 million users, (around two million in Canada), 60% of whom log in at least once a day [3, 4]. According to ComScore, it is

the number one site for photos, with more than one billion posted; over six million are uploaded daily [3]. In 2006, a survey by Student Monitor, a company specializing in research into the college student market, revealed that undergraduates named Facebook as the second most “in” thing, tied with beer – first was the iPod [1].

People may join one or more available networks connected with their school (e.g. UBC), region (e.g. Vancouver), or workplace (e.g. H&M). Users can only view profiles within their corresponding networks, except for their friends’ profiles, which can always be viewed independent of their network. This means that I can see

my friend’s profile on the University of Toronto network, but not the profiles of any of her friends, unless we share a corresponding network (e.g. the Vancouver network). Although people can join as many networks as they would like, their email address needs to correspond to that particular network. For example, to join the Howard University network, you need to provide a valid school email address.

Users can surf for people they know, send private messages, share URLs, post notes, import blog entries, and write on a friend’s message board (called a wall). Photos can be uploaded and then tagged so that their friends’ faces are matched to their names and appear on their profile page. Digital gifts can be shared. Anyone can create a group to which they can invite friends (e.g. “A tribute from Canadian students to those who passed away at Virginia Tech”, “If Wikipedia Says It, It Must Be True”, or “A Cup of Tea Solves

Everything”). Users can also create an event (e.g. “Vancouver’s Largest Water Fight”), to which friends can RSVP as attending, not attending, or MIA. Both events and groups can be restricted to a particular network or be visible globally, and membership can be open, closed, or secret (only visible to invited friends). You can let friends know what you are doing or

in the physical communities of your friends, and primarily those within close proximity, it is rare for people you have never met to send you a friendship invitation. However, you should expect invites from people in your past (e.g. Bobby who sat behind you in Grade 4 and pulled on your ponytails) with whom you have lost touch.



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how you feel (e.g. “Alberta is random - studying diminishes reason.”); users also receive notifications on actions by friends that involve them (e.g. “Natascha tagged you in a photo”). In addition, unless you change the privacy settings, actions on your profile page are broadcast to all your friends via the newsfeed (visible on the first page you see after you log in), as well as via your personal profile page minified, which shows all the actions you have performed. To maintain consistency across Facebook, there is a common look for all the profile pages, which cannot be customised by the users.

Facebook differs from Friendster or MySpace in that it generally dispenses with anonymity. People are unable to use pseudonyms. Although some users only use the first initial of their last name (e.g. “Steve A.”), you won’t come across anyone named “Homer Simpson” and almost everyone obliges by providing their first and last name. As it is grounded

LinkedIn is built on a philosophy of creating social networks that may have research, academic or employment benefit in the future. Facebook can be seen as a social space for maintaining relations with one’s existing circle of friends.

Does it have value as a research or academic tool? Of course! Facebook can be used to further your academic experience. As a teaching assistant, you can create a class group, pose questions in the discussion area, and use the wall for sharing ideas. Membership can be restricted to the class, and the group can even be hidden from searches to provide a higher degree of privacy. Also, everything can be done simply through the TA’s administrator status, so it is not necessary to add one’s students as friends.

Student researchers could create a group for their lab to share information about upcoming lab presentations, provide paper deadlines for relevant conferences

Facebook builds on real world relationships (e.g. residence friends, classmates, or a university club) – people with whom one physically interacts on a regular basis. In this it differs from LinkedIn, in which one’s contacts are generally drawn from work-related/ research contexts.

or workshops, and post news about group members' publications. If the group is public, it would allow Facebook members to learn about what is happening in the lab and be kept up to date about visiting researchers. Prior to attending a conference, a user could access the corresponding event page to determine which other Facebook users might also be present, and to get tips about interesting talks to attend. There may be similar interests among the members, in which case Facebook provides a common space for organising real-world meet-ups at the conference. In general, creating groups is easy to do, and people can remain informed about groups their friends have joined by reading the news feed.

So how is Facebook relevant to the Green College community? I would like to highlight three groups that have been created by Green College members. The first is Green College (Unlimited), created by Mika McKinnon. The second is Joshism, created by Joshua White and Joshua Johnston. The third is Graduate school is making me bipolar, created by Kyla Reid. Each group embodies the Green College motto of ideas and friendship in its own way.

Green College (Unlimited) is a digital place for social interaction and for the sharing of interdisciplinary ideas and academic enrichment initially developed through our dinner conversations, fireside chats, and discussions with visitors. There are currently 68 members. Each member is also an officer and everyone has a fun title associated with his or her name (e.g. "Mistress of Cheeriness" or "King of Whistling in the Dark"). In addition, it provides a space for sharing photographs and information related to Green College events (e.g. sending RSVPs for the annual Green College Alumni BBQ).

Joshism is a fast-growing new religion that many Green College members have joined. At present

there are 51 members. Each member is also an officer with a title particular to their function in the religious organisation. Mine is "Benevolent Guardian of the Kool-Aid." The group can be seen as the digital equivalent to a place of worship, in which members can ask philosophical questions about their purpose in life and lean on the strength of other members when their faith may be waning. The most recent discussion board topic was "spiritual gifts." Although there are a number of commandments to follow, it is a pleasure rather than a burden to

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incorporate them into daily life. I admit that before joining I felt lost, confused and without purpose in my life. Thanks to Joshism, I am a better and more confident individual, driven to succeed by a higher calling.

Graduate school is making me bipolar is a support group with 66 members, dedicated to the sharing of stories and suggestions for surviving the challenges of graduate school. For example, one of the discussion board topics is "Mental Health Tips." This group is global, which is advantageous because it allows users outside of the UBC network to contribute and provide advice about graduate school.

Some say Facebook is addictive, that it will consume your waking hours, disrupt your thesis work, and cause you to spend all-nighters online. Ignore these expressions of negativity. Facebook is no more

addictive than chocolate, cheesecake, or ice cream. Even if you become addicted, there are self-help Facebook groups (e.g. "Facebook Rehab". "I'm addicted to Facebook please help", or "The Official Facebook Support Group") to offer advice and provide emotional support.

So, give Facebook a try and see how it can benefit you. If you don't like it, just delete your profile, it will be waiting for you intact, when you return to reactivate. See you there!

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