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Creators@SIU - A Socio-Academic Networking Tool

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SETTING THE STAGE FOR AN ACADEMIC PLAYGROUND

IMPLICATIONS OF USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES WITHIN THE ACADEMIC SECTOR AND
CONSTRUCTING A SOCIO-ACADEMIC NETWORKING PLATFORM

by

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A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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in the field of Professional Media and Media Management

Approved by:

Robert Spahr, Chair

Narayanan Iyer, Co-Chair

Graduate School

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

ADITHI RAVISHANKAR, for the Master of Science degree in PROFESSIONAL MEDIA AND MEDIA MANAGEMENT, presented on 03/29/2013, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: **SETTING THE STAGE FOR AN ACADEMIC PLAYGROUND**

IMPLICATIONS OF USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES WITHIN THE ACADEMIC SECTOR AND CONSTRUCTING A SOCIO-ACADEMIC NETWORKING PLATFORM

MAJOR PROFESSORS: Robert Spahr and Dr. Narayanan Iyer

Abstract

The project studies the implications of using social networking sites as a platform for student learning / collaboration and to enhance classroom experiences. The goal of this study is to illustrate how a customized socio-academic experience made available within academia, could positively impact the student's learning, foster a culture of creative self-sufficiency and collaboration, while simultaneously cut down on the privacy issues that are found while using social networks that are available for public usage.

Adding to a critical analysis of studies about social networking patterns amongst students and faculty members in higher education, the research methodology for this study would also feature an analysis of our target user group (students and faculty members, school of MCMA, SIUC) and a competitive task analysis of the online learning tool; Desire2Learn and the group functionality in the social network; Facebook, both of which are extensively used within the college of MCMA to enhance classroom discussions.

The results from these studies are used to design the user interface of a social-academic networking platform for the students belonging to the college of MCMA at SIUC. The paper also includes results from the usability test that was conducted among students pursuing degree programs at the college of MCMA in Southern Illinois University.

Findings from this study indicate that an online platform built for use within academia, incorporating the right concoction of features that suit the needs and gratifies the target consumers, could enhance student's academic experience. The study also elucidates that this platform could possibly also help tackle some concerns related to social development, student disengagement and online privacy, which are otherwise predominant while using openly available social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter etc.

Keywords: Online learning environments; Online Collaboration; Uses and Gratification theory in Social Media; Social Networks; Social Networking Sites within universities: Social networking sites for interactio

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The latent scope for social networking sites to contribute to educational endeavors has been considerably studied and highlighted by researchers worldwide (Pollara, P. & Zhu, J. (2011)). However, the potential development and use of a customized online networking platform for formal learning/collaboration and the outcome of the same still remains relatively unexplored. While many educators are accepting and incorporating social networks for learning and collaboration within the university, others remain apprehensive about using social networks in education. This is probably because it could possibly hamper student engagement, distract students, lead to privacy concerns and concentration abatement issues.

The first phase of this study involves understanding the current usage patterns of social networks for educational purposes and the main advantages / concerns found in doing the same. The primary goal in this research is to find the right combination of online learning / social networking site features, which would aid student development while reducing concerns among educators about negative side effects. The second phase of research involves developing the most beneficial user-interface design for a socio-academic space within the University. Though other social networks such as Facebook are now being commonly used for academic networking and learning, research studies have shown the need to address some concerns while using these public social networks.

The socio-academic networking site *'Creators@SIU'* is proposed to provide a platform for exchanging ideas, producing creative work and also finding career prospects for the students belonging to the Media and Communications field.

With an intention to enhance the learning process and cultivate working relationships during their tenure of study, the proposed sites' unique cross platform model is projected to act as an interactive learning tool by providing the students a concoction of essential features currently available in public social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, MySpace etc (discussed in later chapters), while cutting down on the elements that have a record of arousing concerns amongst educators. The site would act as a networking community that would facilitate inter-student and student-educator interactions, with a purpose to enhance classroom discussions and cultivate working relationships while searching for gateways into their desired professions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet is one of the most recent in a sequence of technological changes that has impacted social interactions, at a scale never seen before. A study about the convergence through Internet in the current context demonstrated how it has now developed to be a medium that intersects with our everyday life, in ways being both distinctive and ubiquitous (Polman, Joseph. (2006)).

The role of web has also changed rapidly since its evolution. In recent times, the way the web is being used to facilitate communication and share content, has also made it easier to access information or make learning interactive in educational institutions. Social Networking sites as a web based platform, though is a recent development, has brought a paradigm shift in the way people perceive and share information with each other. According to Berger and Luckman (1966), "all knowledge, including the most basic knowledge of everyday reality, is derived from and maintained by social interactions". In their well-known work: *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge,* they argue that "reality is socially constructed through interaction and sharing of information amongst the members of a social system forum, over time". A social networking site could therefore be seen as a virtual representation of the forum mentioned by Berger and Luckman in their book: *The Social Construction of Reality*. Comparing this ideology to online social networking, one could potentially elucidate why communications on these Social networks are seen to have the potential to cultivate interactions, through which knowledge and meaning are derived. Interactions through

these online social networking sites as a result help to analyze information, collaborate ideas, make informed decisions and share knowledge with other members of the group.

"Web can be seen as a complex nexus of economic, social, political and aesthetic forces. In doing so, we can describe web as a space where magic, metaphor and power converge." (Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss., 2000). Studies prove that from its beginning, the web has often been used as a tool to meet new people, but in recent years the interaction between web-users has grown dramatically, sowing the seeds for a new generation of networking sites. The notion of Web, where content is created and collectively used by the people themselves, has led to the evolution some of the most popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc. and these sites have now proven to have fuelled the social interaction and information sharing trend.

This new media environment has in many ways altered the way people communicate with each other. The traditional model of communication from 'one-to-many' has now been replaced by interactive content being produced and shared by 'many-to-many'. This change in turn often makes the production and consumption roles of information overlap with each other, especially when people use the new media platforms for collaboration and participation.

With more channels of communications and more ways to assure perception of messages, many early communication theories that highlight the impact of media shaping public opinion often get questioned. Furthermore, with people being a part of this interactive information production and consumption cycle, the possibility of them getting swayed away by a media messages from particular sources is rather unrealistic. The communication environment post the introduction of social networking platforms,

interactive online blogs and real time chat functionalities has made response and participation very different from the context of many early communications theories.

Many theories of mass communication in this way get challenged and questioned, but despite these changes, the basic human needs for information creation / sharing and their characteristic of finding ways to gratify these needs, seems to significantly grow with time.

One could potentially argue that although many theories highlighting impacts of noise / feedback/ shaping public opinion require alterations, the current new media scenario often tends to highlight the importance to review some aspects of our existing theories.

To aid our research, we take into consideration the *Uses and Gratifications theory* (Katz, E., Blumer, J.G., and Gurevitch, M., 1974) in the context of using online learning platforms and networking sites to enhance student learning and collaboration.

The *Uses and Gratifications theory* is an approach to understanding how users interact with mass communication messages. The theory places the focus on the users and the way they use specific media, rather than the media message itself, i.e., it focuses on analyzing "what people do with media" rather than "what media does to people" (Katz, E., 1959). The theory suggests that users actively look for specific media to satisfy their specific needs and fulfill specific gratifications.

When this theory is applied to online media scenario post the arrival of social networking sites, one could easily point out the nature of it evident in how people use social media to target specific needs and fulfill specific areas of gratifications.

In an attempt to understand the nature of social media usage for information creation and sharing within universities, we intend to address two main areas in our literature review. Addressing these areas could help understand the nature of uses and gratifications theory in the current social network usage patterns in academia, among students and faculty members.

- How have social networking sites been used within higher education and what has been the level of receptiveness among faculty members and students for its usage?

- What are the apprehensions towards using social networking sites within the educational sector?

Usage of Social Media networking sites within higher education

Since Facebook was launched in 2004, it has evolved to become one of the most frequently visited social networking sites by students worldwide. Social media has become a medium of communication and networking sites have found their permanent place in the minds of educators and students.

The paper "The Use *of Alternative Social Networking Sites in Higher Educational Settings: A Case Study of the E-Learning Benefits of Ning in Education"* by Kevin P. Brady, Lori B. Holcomb, and Bethany V. Smith, (2010) assesses the potential of using social networking sites in the educational sector and explores benefits in doing the same. The study particularly concentrates on the use of *Ning*; an education-based social networking site.

A survey conducted among graduate students registered in distance education courses using Ning, is taken to analyze the role of social networks as a productive online tool for collaboration and learning. The results of the study showed a majority of participants to be favoring the use of social networking sites, as it is seen to enhance their experiences in interacting with each other. The findings suggest that developing or using education-based networking sites such as *Ning,* could prove to be a very effective technological tool for better online interactions and collaboration among students in higher education.

Another case study of learners' perspectives and experiences in an online course taught using the social network : *Elgg*, by George Veletsianos and Cesar C. Navarrete (2012) indicates that the learners valued both the "social learning experience" offered by the online networking platform and also felt that the learners enhanced other student's experiences amidst enhancing their own experience. The students who were interviewed as a part of the study and 90% of students surveyed were mentioned to have found great value in their interactions with other students and the social setting in which the course was set. When asked to reflect about their course experiences as a part of the study, the students described the connections they formed with other learners and the importance of collaboration / support that the medium offered them. These studies illustrate the importance of using social networking sites among students and how it has repeatedly demonstrated to enhance their creative experience, also providing them a platform for reciprocal learning.

An important characteristic to take into consideration is how these social networking sites are nowadays being increasingly used to acquire recognition and support for one's creative talents and practices. A student is able to post his creative work online and receive comments and suggestions on it. This in turn helps him improve his quality of work and gain recognition. As Sarah Gavin from Bebo says "It's a really powerful tool. I think it's the first time that students have got the power. We've got authors up there publicizing their books. If they're just starting out as a film producer they have the opportunity to get their content up on the site and go out to the general public to see what they actually think about it" (2006).

An additional prospective area of study relevant to our research would be to examine how professors in higher education settings are now able to help students understand, analyze and retain the knowledge that they acquire during their class sessions through the use of various narratives and tools present in a social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter etc. There has also been an increasing trend amongst faculty members and educators to create accounts on networking sites to interact with students in an informal environment. An evaluation on social networking platforms at University of Wisconsin-Madison documents the platform's role in connecting students, faculty and staff, and increase the efficiency / flexibility of campus services (Berg, J., Berquam, L. & Christoph, K., 2007). At Lee University, Cleveland, it has been observed that many of the faculty members have created Facebook profiles for themselves through which they interact with their students (Sturgeon, C. M., & Walker, C., 2009).

The faculty members in many such universities find the need to use these networking platforms to communicate with their students and this helps in building positive relationships between them. The studies also show that the students were able to communicate more openly through these networking platforms, which in turn improved their performance in class discussions. A noteworthy research by Endo & Harpel, 1982 substantiates our findings as follows: "Over recent decades, numerous studies have suggested that student and faculty interaction has a notable impact on students' outcome, both in the intellectual and the social realm" Cited by (Sturgeon, C. M., & Walker, C., 2009).

Another study conducted at a large university in the southeastern US, Ajjan and Hartshorne (2008) concluded that 56% of faculty believed that these online tools would be beneficial for student-to-student interactions. "Educators have now begun exploring alternative platforms to provide learners with the social communication tools that allow for ease of use, pedagogical freedom, fluid online discussions, and identity management." (Brady et al. and Lee and McLoughlin., 2010; Webb., 2009).

Additionally, an initiative taken in 2011 at the Pearson Learning Solutions and Babson Survey Research Group to understand the teaching, learning and sharing patterns while using social media in higher education included Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, SlideShare, and Flickr. This survey also included blogs, wikis, video (both on YouTube and elsewhere), and podcasts. The subject pool consisted of teaching faculty from various disciplines (full-time or part-time, tenured/ non-tenured, tenure track/adjunct). A wide range of them were purposely selected to represent the overall range of teaching faculty in US higher education. With over 90% of the Professors in the

sample set using social media tools widely in their classes and professional careers, the large differences that the results showed seemed to be in the way it was being used. The basic differences relied on a number of parameters or concerns associated with the different features in social media networks. The study results summarized YouTube and Facebook to be the highest in terms of recurrence in usage among faculty members for the different classes they taught. Online video materials from sources such as YouTube were consistently revealed to be good learning catalysts. Other workhorses in line were podcasts, followed by wikis and blogs. An overwhelming percentage of faculty members (70%) according to the study have been stated to believe that online video, podcasts, wiki and blogs have great potential in fostering catalytic learning inside classrooms.

This study result could probably be an indication of the particular tools or features that were frequently needed to enhance class sessions and after class interaction and collaboration among students. The results also indicated a good 30% of the faculty putting social networking tools to use to help students assimilate content both inside and outside classrooms. A much more obvious proclivity towards social media is observed from 40% of the faculty who get students to use social media sites as a part of the course curriculum, with at least 20% of them providing students with assignments on collaborating, sharing and commenting on these channels.

Among different channels, the online videos, podcasts and tutorials featured to be the most favored by faculty members. As much as 80% of the faculty members are reported to be using it inside/ outside class to help students stay at the helm of learning via social media. Is this favoritism towards social media really polarized among the faculty clan? The survey questions about podcasts, blogs, and wikis being valuable tools

for teaching, shows 70% of the faculty agreeing to it; with only 6% not in favor of the same. Also, looking at social media on the whole, 58% of the faculty in the sample set have been stated to have found social media valuable for collaborative learning; while a lesser number (12%) not seeing as much sheen in the idea of social media for learning.

These studies provide evidence to how social networking sites are used by educators to help students understand, analyze and retain the knowledge that they acquire during their class discussions. In spite of the apprehensions amongst educators in institutions to support such technologies, these tools have been recommended within the educational sector, possibly due to its perceived opportunities and benefits. Social networking technologies thus function as a social learning resource / a platform for creative out-of-the-box thinking and collaborative learning.

Adding to these results on favorability towards using social networking tools for education, a data-rich survey published by The National School Boards Association (USA) in partnership with research firm Grunwald Associates LLC, and the support of Microsoft, Newscorp and Verizon analyzed the social and education related activity patterns among students in America. The results of the survey state that the academic institutions that have been refraining from the pervasive presence of social networking activities among their students, have now begun to look at the usage of these tools as requisite to student's development .This information collected from the NSBA survey results certainly re-emphasizes the importance of networking platforms among young learners.

All these study results could be an indication of the changing attitudes and the increasing willingness towards using social networking technology in the educational

sector. The student faculty interactions, student self-development/recognition and the valuable online video tools that aid student engagement/understanding are seen to be the most important aspects of our research findings in terms of understanding student / faculty needs while using social media in education. Details on how these findings have helped come up with the features of the networking platform would be presented in our upcoming chapters, after reviewing the reasons that are seen to arouse apprehensions while using social networking in Universities.

Apprehensions towards using of social networking sites within higher education

The trend of using Social networking sites has been booming ever since it started in 2004, but these tools have also been constantly subject to questioning when used within the educational sector. Though there are a growing number of people who support the usage of this medium, there are still others who fear the consequences of youngsters using these applications.

The paper *The Effect of Social Network Sites on Adolescents' Social and Academic Development: Current Theories and Controversies* (June Ahn., 2011) reports about the concerns that parents and educators have about the impact of social networking sites on their children and students. The concerns demonstrated often include a range of reasons from youth privacy, safety, psychological well-being of the student, their social development, all the way to their academic progress.

The article *'Social Networking to Academic Networking…A Paradigm shift'* (Childers, T., 2011) discusses the importance of social networking throughout the world and the varied levels of receptiveness that people have towards it, when used within the

educational sector. The paper elucidates the context by explaining how professors and students at different schools have begun to use Skype, Facebook and other social networking platforms for general and academic learning purposes. The author introduces the ideology of rephrasing the word 'social networking' as 'academic networking' and the paradigm shift that it would thus bring in the minds of parents and educators who have an apprehension towards it. The study results suggest that these apprehensions have developed mostly because of the way these sites are at times being used. If one addresses this issue by bringing a change in the features being made available for students to use, it would consequently bring in a positive mindset towards the platform for using the tool within an educational sector.

The use of social media within higher education has often been subject to skepticism due to various reasons, some of which were outlined above. The results from the study conducted by The Pearson Learning Solutions and Babson Survey Research Group in 2011 reveal two most important concerns to be student privacy and integrity of academic work. According to their findings, 80% of the faculty members are said to have complaints about the integrity of student submissions done through public social networks and 70% have been quoted to have privacy concerns. These concerns result in preventing educators from completely trusting these online tools towards fostering education. While it can be agreed that social media is a valuable tool, the results prove that not all forms of its uses seem to suit a learning environment. According to the study conducted by The Pearson Learning Solutions and Babson Survey Research Group in 2011, a good majority of faculty members believed that Facebook (53%) and Twitter (46%) produce what is known as "negative effects" on students.

Above all the speculation of social developmental issues, privacy/student disengagement concerns; it is a fact that social media key resource to enhance classroom learning. While issues such as privacy and integrity of user information could easily hurt social media's sheen on academic forefront; the enthusiasm towards social media has surprisingly held well regardless of the apprehensions.

Hypothesis

Indeed, there is sufficient evidence based on studies that aid our understanding of how social networks are used by students and faculty to satisfy specific needs. The issue now lies on finding the way to gratify the concerns related to social development, student disengagement, academic performance, online privacy etc. raised by the educational community. Our review in literature and analyzing specific areas of uses and gratifications has helped in understanding that:

· Social networking site usage within a University could enhance a student's academic experience if:

- The site incorporates the right combination of features or is designed to meet student / faculty requirements.

- The site does not leave much scope for student disengagement or privacy issues.

· The use of social networking sites could potentially interfere with the student's learning and development and arouse privacy concerns if:

- The site incorporates unnecessary features / fails to meet the requirements of being an academic learning / networking tool.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research studies that we analyzed in the previous chapters reiterate the fact that students and faculty worldwide are now extensively using social networks and other online tools to enhance learning / collaboration and increase student engagement in classes. Nevertheless, as proven by the results from Pearson Learning Solutions and Babson Survey Research Group in 2011, not all social media sites/features are used equally or seen to be equally beneficial for student development.

We would be conducting a user group analysis to understand the social networking usage and willingness and preferences of our target consumers (Students and Faculty members at the school of MCMA in Southern Illinois University) while using social networking sites in academia.

For the purpose of this project, the task list / functionality of the key features of our prospective market competitors would also be examined. The task list of specific features of the online pedagogical learning tool; Desire2Learn and the social network; Facebook that are used by professors/students in Southern Illinois University and various other academic institutions are laid out. The aim in laying out this matrix is to understand the functionality of these key features, incorporate the elements found in these platforms that have been proven by research to enhance the educational experience. Our review in literature addressing specific areas of uses / gratification, analyzing our user group and examining the task list of our competitors would give us the basic resource to develop the user interface of our platform.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

TARGET USER GROUP (PRIMARY & SECONDARY PERSONA)

The objective of this study is to analyze the personal and academic social

networking site usage of our primary target users (Students, College of Mass

Communication and Media Arts, SIUC) and secondary target users (Graduate Teaching

Assistants and Faculty, College of Mass Communication and Media Arts, SIUC) to

understand their user goals and needs from using the medium for learning and

collaboration. The results of this analysis would help in designing the site; by aiding the

understanding of the receptivity shown by the target group towards such a socio-

academic platform.

Primary Persona

Student at Southern Illinois University, MCMA department

Application Usage: Gmail, Skype, Adobe Creative Suite, Preview, Evernote, Chrome, Microsoft Word, iTunes, Garage Band, Youtube

USER GOALS

Personal use of social media: Facebook, Google+ for networking

Use of social media for class modules: Facebook for collaboration and learning

Web hrs approx/day: 5 hrs

Social Network usage hrs approx/day: 1 hr

Wiilingness/apprehensions towards using social networking sites like Facebook within the educational sector:

I would like it because it would be easier to get in contact with my fellow classmates especially if there is a test or group project

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Age : 25

Occupation : Student

Social Life : During the week I am busy with school. On most weekends visit family and friends back in Martin, Tennessee, have one pet back home.

Education : BA in Communications, currently working on my MS in Professional Media and Media Management

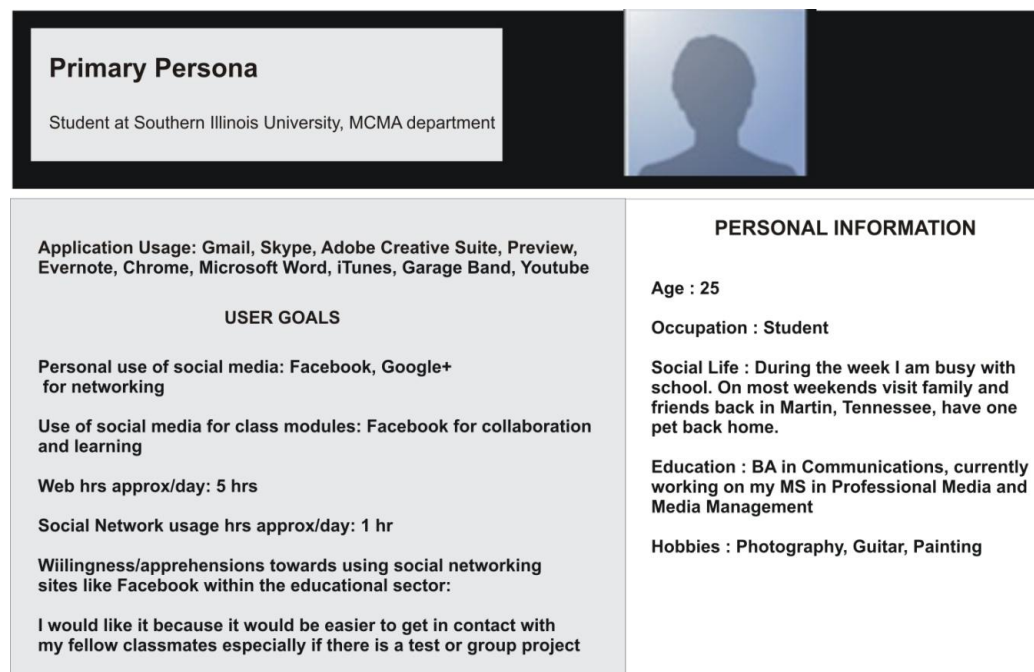Hobbies : Photography, Guitar, Painting
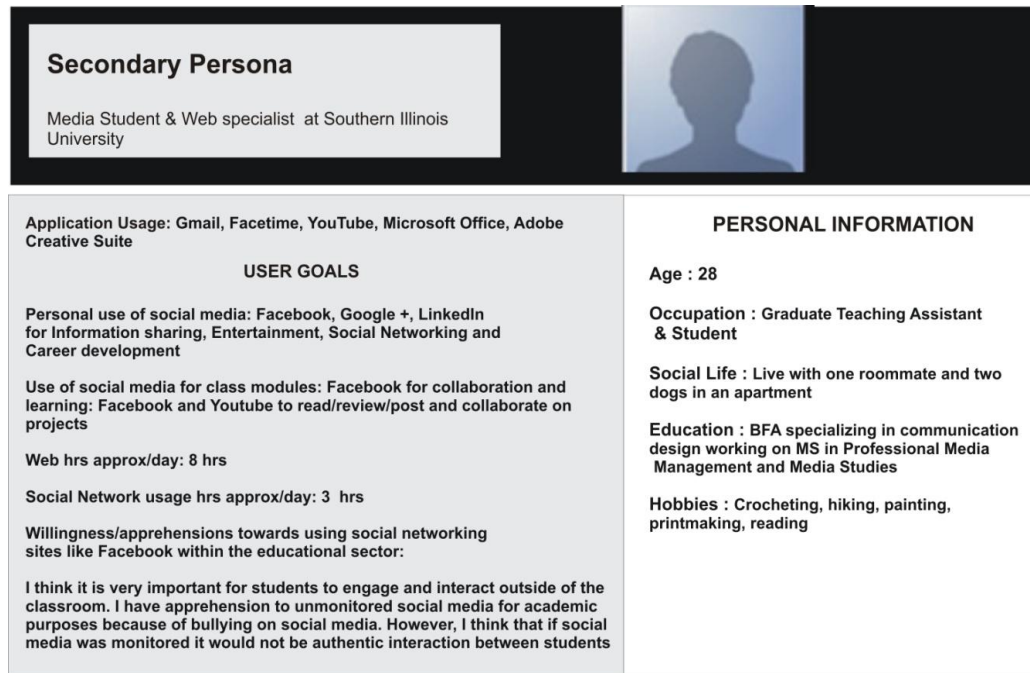
Figure 1: Primary Persona

Figure 2: Secondary Persona

Findings

Analyzing our target group's profile and user goals makes it obvious that there is a focused drive and inclination towards using such social networking platforms within the educational sector. Both our primary (Student at MCMA, SIUC) and secondary target users (Faculty/Student at MCMA, SIUC) have demonstrated their interest in engaging in outside classroom experiences and collaborating with fellow students on group projects through social networks.

Some of the apprehensions or areas of concerns were using public social networks for education, as it could lead to privacy concerns or bullying. Results from this analysis would be used in developing the design of the site, making it amenable to specific target group needs.

COMPETITIVE TASK ANALYSIS

Case 1: Desire2Learn

Overview

Desire2Learn, a cloud based online learning tool provides an open extensible learning platform to educational institution and corporations.

For the purpose of understanding the features that have been useful to faculty and students in general, the study would include some usability research findings including the Milestone Review conducted by the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

The Milestone review in 2008, conducted by University of Wisconsin was about their usage of the Desire2Learn as the central course management system (branded "Learn@UW"). This Milestone Review included information from surveys, interviews with faculty, and records from various service teams. The analysis showed a steady rise in the awareness and usage of this tool among faculty, staff and students since 2003. The results also show that the students to have had a very receptive attitude towards using online tools for learning and have wanted to see more instructors use these tools. Other results in the review showed that the tool's impact on learning was not as significant as expected from the faculty's end. Only 33% of faculty perceived the tool to enhance student learning, while 44% of the faculty/staff who used the tool were uncertain of its impact on learning.

In terms of user interface features/functionality, the review states that instructors have time and again reported problems with the interface. The primary issues have been found while using the grade book, quizzes and while loading the content of the

Desire2Learn website. The users have consistently reported lack of functionality and intuitiveness in the design of the site.

Many other online resources and reviews on University websites (Clarion University, Middle Tennessee State University etc.) about *Desire2Learn* as an education enhancing tool suggest that the instructors view the primary use of this online learning platform to be for distance learning programs and specifically for potential students who do not have access to education in any other way. According to the UW milestone review, the specific tools that are most widely used are for course administration, sharing course materials and managing grades.

The figures below clearly illustrate the features on a course page of Desire2Learn. Elucidated below is a task list of the key features and their functionality found on the page:
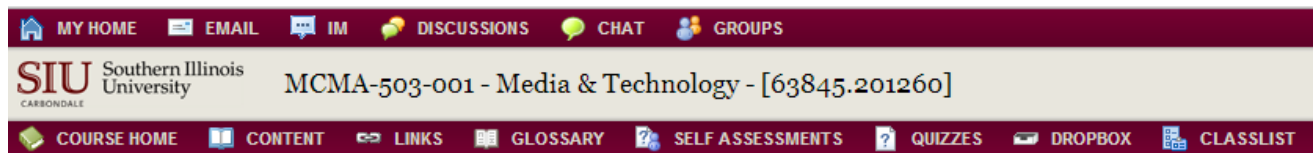

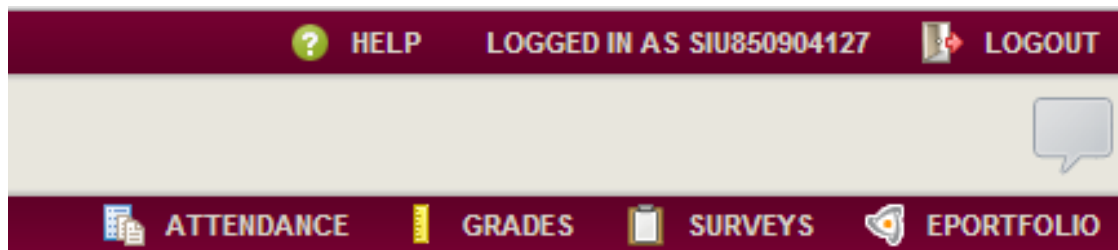*Figure 3:* Desire2Learn - Course Page Main Menu

Figure 4: Desire2Learn - Course Page Sub Menu

Table 1: Desire2Learn Features and Functionalities

Feature	Task/Functionality
Email	Allows users to email the members
Chat	Allows users to chat with the members who have signed in
Discussions	Gives members the access to a discussion board, where they can add, read about or comment on existing discussion threads
Groups	Displays the name of the groups created, discussions, drop box submissions, members and email
Content	Displays the course/group contents uploaded by the administrator
Links	Allows users to create categories and save links
Quizzes	Allows administrators to create quizzes
Drop Box	Allows members to attach files and send it by email
Class List	Displays the contact details of the members in the group
Attendance	Displays details about the attendance that has been updated by the administrator
Grades	Displays the currents standing of the students and the grades achieved in the course

Survey	Displays any surveys that have been taken/initiated
E-Portfolio	Displays information updated by the members, content including user's demographic and psychographic details, contact details, education and work details and an "about me" section

Case 2: Facebook

Overview

Founded in 2004, Facebook has now evolved to be one of the most extensively used social networks by students and faculty worldwide to enhance learning experiences.

The Facebook post "Using a Facebook Group As a Learning Management System" in the group "Facebook in Education" in 2010 by Anthony Fontana, Instructor of Art at Bowling Green State University in Ohio discusses the creation of an educational dynamic environment for all students by using Facebook groups. The author states that these online learning environments have been observed to keep students engaged, socially motivated, and more productive.

Illustrated below is a screenshot of a Facebook's group functionality that is extensively used by educators worldwide for teaching online courses/enhancing classroom experience and sharing specific relevant topics, videos, links and pictures to students.

For the purpose of this study, we will be highlighting the key features and the tasks they perform.
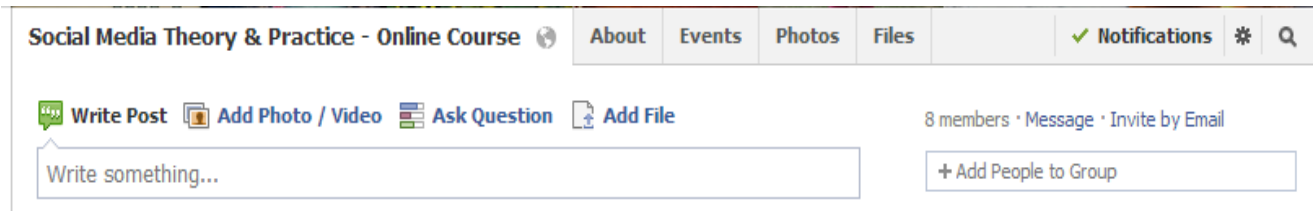
Figure 5: Facebook Groups - Main Menu

Table 2: Facebook Group Features and Functionalities

Features	Functionality
About	Displays information/Provides a space to add a information about the group
Events	Displays recent and upcoming relevant events added by the members of the group
Photos/Videos	Displays existing pictures/videos added by the members and allows members to add relevant photos or videos
Write Posts/Add Questions	Allows members to start a discussion thread/relevant topic or ask a question related to the topic
Add File	Allows members to add relevant files from user's computer / drop box
Recent Posts	Allows members to comment/like existing topics/discussion

	threads
Search	Allows members to search using key words within the group
Add People to the Group	Allows members to send email invites for people to join the group

Findings

Drawing a comparison of the user-interface of Desire2learn and the functionalities of features found in Facebook groups that are extensively used in education, we find the following features to be present in both the applications

- Ability to form groups based on interest

- Ability to start discussion thread and post relevant content: text and links

- Ability to add and chat with other members

- Ability to send messages to other members

Adding to these features, Desire2Learn gives users the ability to manage grades, create their own personalized profile and a drop box function to send files to other members and other features that specifically cater to managing online distant learning courses.

The studies and related research work we analyzed in both the sections show signs towards Desire2Learn being more useful as an online learning platform rather than

to enhance classroom experience. Facebook groups, on the other hand, have been mentioned to remarkably improve classroom experiences, but being a public social network, it has also been subject to some speculation of privacy concerns (Refer Chapter 2 - Apprehensions towards using of social networking sites within higher education).

CHAPTER 6

PROPOSED USER INTERFACE DESIGN

Creators@SIU has been proposed to act as the interactive learning platform for the college of Mass Communications and Media Arts at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. The site's unique cross platform model is specifically aimed at current students & recent graduates from a broad range of mass communication disciplines at SIUC.

The current sites' features as mentioned before have been conceptualized to provide a space for open and instant inter-student / student-faculty communication, but at the same time not leaving much scope for distraction to irrelevant content.

DESIGN APPROACH

The methodology adopted while finalizing the product design of the site consisted of several different User Interface research processes. First, two mock-ups were designed for the Learn Page and the Profile page of the users *(Appendix B).*

Subsequently, results from the literature review were reconsidered to make needed alterations to the design. Some results discussed in our literature review revealed faculty favorability towards features such as online video podcasts, informational posts and student favorability towards interaction, portfolio display and job search. The site's design proposed in the second phase of this study "selectively" incorporates these favorable elements.

Some elements currently available on networks such as Facebook/Twitter have been found through our research to induce concerns of student privacy and integrity. Examples of these features may include: writing on each other's Facebook walls and posting personal information (including pictures, personal messages). These features available in existing social networks, in addition to distracting students and raising privacy concerns, also hold a considerable bias towards a certain form of public expression, tailored to suit individual company requirements and standards. Subsequent to the analysis of our research findings, these elements have been avoided in the design proposed in the second phase of study.

After analyzing the features in online learning environments (Desire2Learn and Facebook group) that have proven useful for students and amenable to educators, the site design was further revised. Findings showed features such as the Drop Box functionality and Chat function on Desire2Learn to be avidly used and so these elements were incorporated in the proposed site's design.

Next, based on the critical analysis of the target user goals and the results from laying down the task list of key features found in similar applications such as Desire2Learn and Facebook groups (discussed in Chapter 4), additions and revisions were made to the site design.

Finally, after re-evaluating some organizational and functionality issues in the site, the final prototype was designed. We plan to incorporate features in the site design of Creators@SIU that would have the following functionalities.

TASK LIST FOR CREATORS@SIU

- A user friendly search function that could help the user search content on the site using keywords

- Ability to create groups of interest

- Ability to choose categories to subscribe to based on academic areas of interest

- Access to podcasts/tutorials and discussion forums

- Drop box functionality to share / save content, documents, images, links and videos

- Ability for members to upload content including academic work, Resume, Profile and Social network information to their Portfolio, share it with a public link and comment on each other's work

- Ability for members to search for each other based on skill set which would help them collaborate on projects

- Chat function

- Messaging function

- Ability to search for jobs relevant to profile information, post jobs in the media and communications field

- Other resources that would provide information pertaining to area of academic interest

We would like to avoid the features with the following functionalities:

- Wall posting ability that could disengage/distract students

- Ability to add videos/pictures (other than the display picture and in the Portfolio section) that could induce privacy concerns

- Ability to comment on display pictures

- Ability to "like/dislike" posts

PAGE DESCRIPTIONS

The final prototype presented below consists of five different page types. These pages include login, home, learn, show and future page. This high-fidelity prototype is what we intend to get tested by users. Based on the usability test feedback on this high-fidelity prototype, we intend to modify the features or specific functionalities of elements, to make the design more user-friendly and intuitive.

Login Page

Overview

It is always important to keep in mind the target audience and their need while developing the design of an interface. The login screen is purposely made to look simple, with not too many colors or graphics so that the page loading time is relatively fast. To log into the site, the user must provide their university / registered email address and password. If the email / password combination is entered correctly the user will be allowed to log into the site. Otherwise a pop up window indicating the user that the details entered were wrong will appear and would give the user an option to log in again. If the user has forgotten the password which was registered, clicking on "Forgot

password" link would aid the user to recreate a new one based on answering the security question. If a member is not still registered, clicking on "Don't have an account?" would help user create an account with his registered university email id.

A user friendly search function is provided on every page to help the user search content on the site using keywords.

Figure 6: Login Page

Home Page

Overview

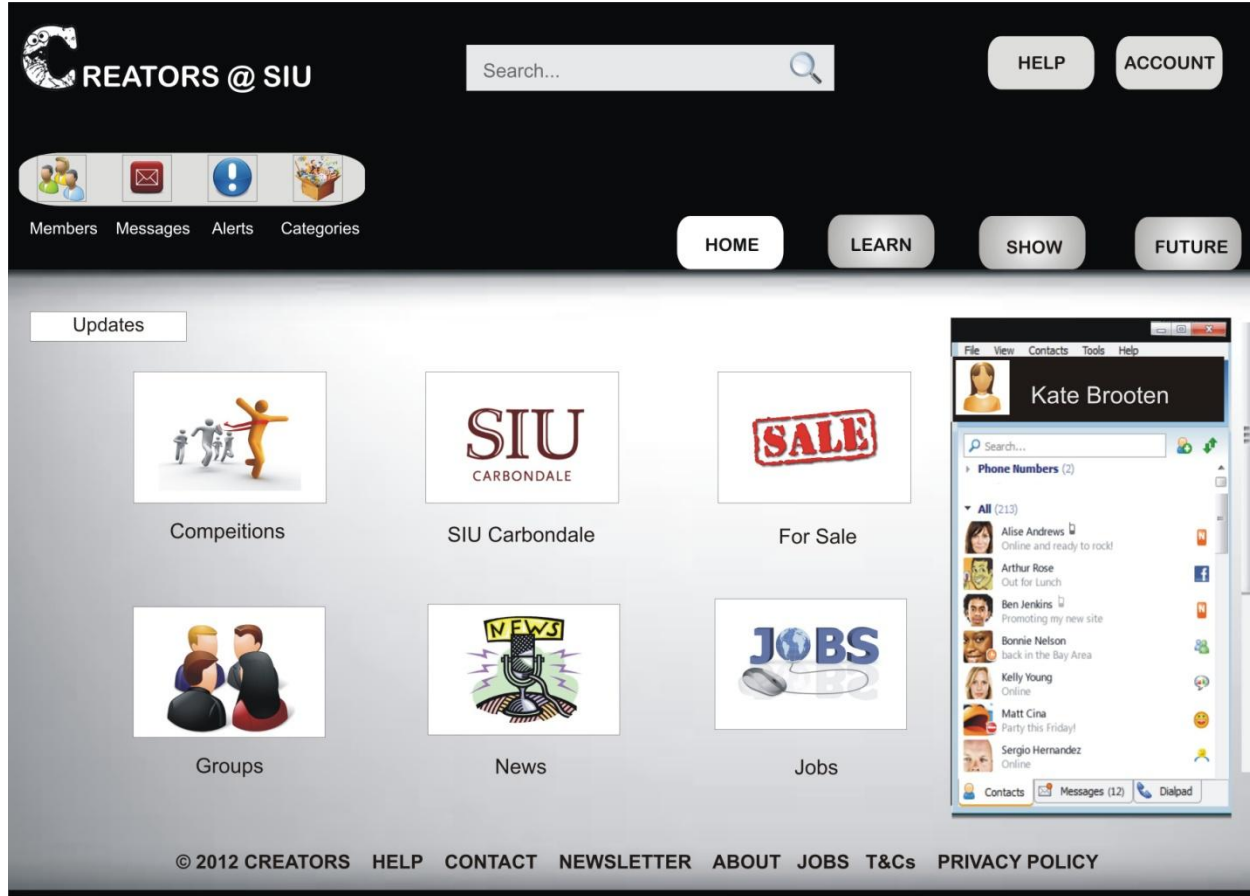The "Home page" is where one would land up as soon as they sign in.

Figure 7: Home Page

The users are given the option to customize the icons that are displayed in this page by choosing from the variety of relevant options available under the categories menu, found in the top menu bar. The figure below illustrates an example of how this customized function would work. Each of the categories that the user subscribes to e.g.: Competitions, SIU Carbondale, For Sale, Groups, News and Jobs are displayed on the Home page as soon as the user logs in. These individual links customized based on user interests, takes the users to other individual sub pages from the Home page, providing the users a database of information under each category.

The main menu bar which is consistent in all the pages consists of quick access links to the other members of the site that the user can connect to, messages received and sent, alerts if any, and the categories (areas of interests) that they wish to subscribe to (Refer Fig. 8).

Figure 8: Main Menu

The chat feature is included on the home page to aid communication between the students and between the student and faculty. This chat function includes an option to be or minimized or popped out, so that the user could access the chat irrespective of which page they view. (Refer Fig. 9).
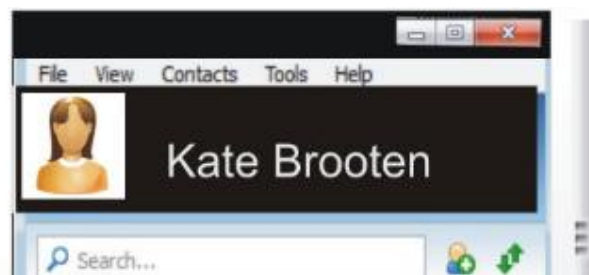
Figure 9: Home Page Chat Box

Learn Page

Overview

Consequent to analyzing studies that proved the tutorials and lectures of professionals in the field to be a very effective learning tool, the **"Learn Page"** was included as a part of the site. This page enables the members to gain access to groups (based on academic interest) where they can find relevant online course material, tutorials and lecture podcasts. This aspect of the site helps facilitate a culture of collective intelligence, stimulate innovation and enhancing creativity.

Figure 10: Learn Page

Users are also provided the ability to indulge in relevant topics of discussions, by starting a topic or by commenting on a pool of revolving discussion topics (Refer Fig. 11).
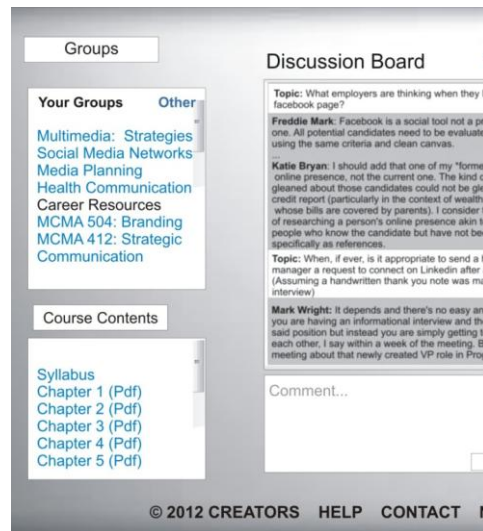
Figure 11: Learn Page Groups and Discussion Board

Consequent to the study results from the University of Wisconsin Milestone Review that provided evidence favoring the drop box functionality to be one of the most widely used features in the Desire2Learn application, the drop box functionality was added to this page of the site. This feature provides users the electronic storage space for files / documents that could be sent to other members in the Group. (Refer Fig. 12)
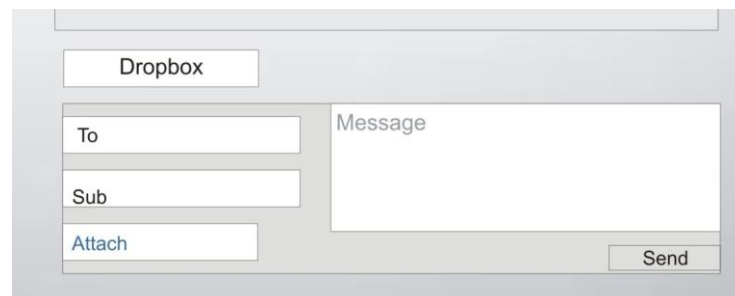
Figure 12: Learn Page Drop Box

Show Page

Overview

The **"Show page"** is where one can update all the personal details, education

information, interests etc. This page was incorporated based on the studies that

illustrated that social networking platforms are now increasingly being used among

students to acquire recognition and support for one's creative talents and practices.

Figure 13: Show Page

This page would provide professional information about the user, a section to view

and comment on the user's portfolio of works and also the user's Resume information.

The site's unique model would help the user share this page with a public link with their prospective employees on the 'future' page.

Future Page

Overview

The "Future page" consists of links to multiple job databases and websites in the media and communications field that students would gain access to.
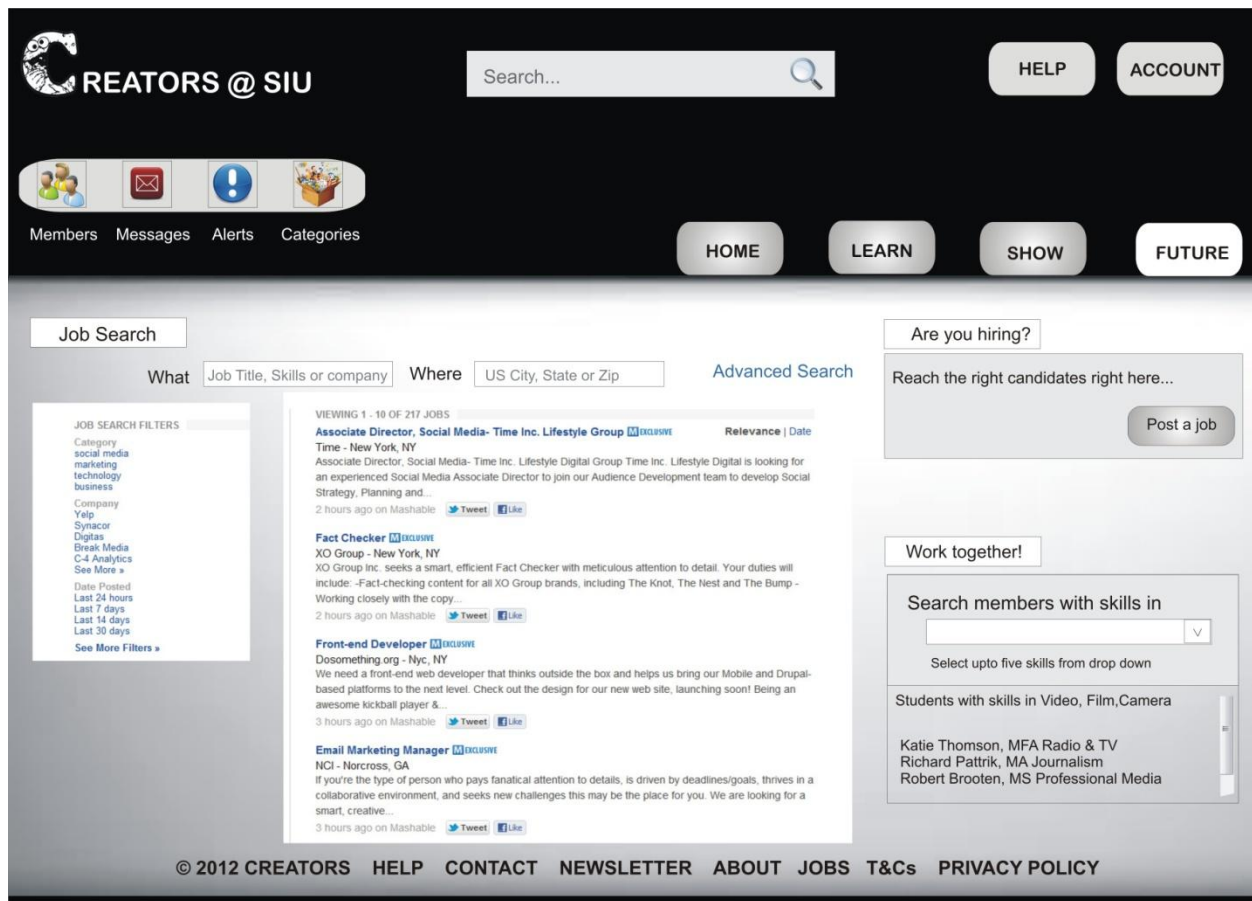
Figure 14: Future Page

The page also enables Faculty / Department staff to post jobs within the University and an option for students to search for other members of the site using keywords / skill set. This enables students to find prospective team members for their creative projects. (Refer Fig. 5 and Fig. 6).

Figure 15: Future Page - Job posting
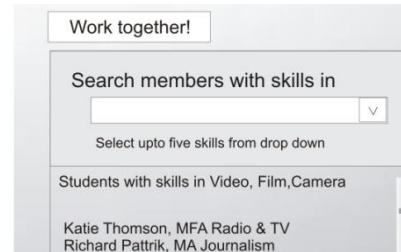
Figure 16: Future Page - Work together!

CHAPTER 7

SURVEY & USABILITY TEST

Prior to starting the usability test, the users were reminded that we were only testing the functionality and the features of the interface and not the technical aspects or the usability of the site. A test was conducted among 19 students, enrolled in under-graduate / graduate programs in the college of MCMA in Southern Illinois University.

The survey consisted of two parts. The first part was a pre-test survey to determine if the student belongs to the primary target user group and to understand his/her social networking usage pattern within the University. In the second part of the survey, the prototype of the academic networking site, Creators@SIU was presented to the students and they were requested to analyze the features of the site / answer questions based on their individual views.

PRE-TEST SURVEY

It was very useful to conduct the pre-test survey questionnaire as it helped determine if the students fit the target criteria and also become aware of their experiences and preferences in using social networking platforms for collaboration and learning. The information that was collected included:

- Age
- Education
- Reasons to use social networks (options given)

- Opinion about working on group projects using social networks (options given)

- Views on how important it is for students to collaborate outside the class (rated)

- Preferences in teaching patterns based on experiences (options given)

- Experience in classes that used video or other online mechanisms like Social Networking/Websites for learning (options given)

- Their perceived success of online networking platforms when used as a mechanism for collaboration among the students (rated)

- Views on the disadvantages/barriers in using social media tools for learning (options given)

The complete set of questions with options for the pre-test questionnaire is included in *Appendix A.*

USABILITY TEST

After completing the pre-test survey questionnaire, the students were presented with questions about the interface design, features and functionality. The questions included:

- The ease in understanding the functionality of the different pages (rated)

- Ease in navigating back to the home page

- The main purpose they thought the site is designed for (options given)

- How they thought the features fit the idea of collaboration and learning (rated)

- Which pages they felt were very useful, in terms of features and functionality

- Their views on the visual appeal in terms of color, contrast (rated)

- Their views on the visual appeal in terms of font size and style (rated)

- Their views on the ease in understanding the functionality of each page (rated)

- The changes they would like to make to the name of the page, buttons, and links that would help clarify its purpose and functionality on each page

- Any additional links or information they would like to see on each page

The responses obtained from this section helped in evaluating the success of the interface in terms of how it fits the purpose of collaborative learning and also helped in understanding what the target users felt about the features on each page of the site. The questionnaire for this usability test is also included in *Appendix A*.

PRE-TEST SURVEY AND USABILITY TEST RESULTS

A total of 20 responses were recorded from students pursuing degree programs at the college of Mass Communication and Media Arts at Southern Illinois University and the sample included one test subject (not included in the results summary). A Google Docs form was used to design and collect the surveys. This link will display the online survey questions: <u>Online Survey</u> and this will display the results retrieved: <u>Results of Online Survey</u>. An additional text-based version of this survey and usability test is included in *Appendix A*.

Pre-test Survey Questionnaire Results

- The age demographic of the survey was as follows: 89% (17 of 19 students) of the users were between the ages 21- 25 and the remaining 11% (2 students) of

the users were between the ages of 26 - 30. This means that the subjects were rightly chosen to meet the target group requirements for the study.
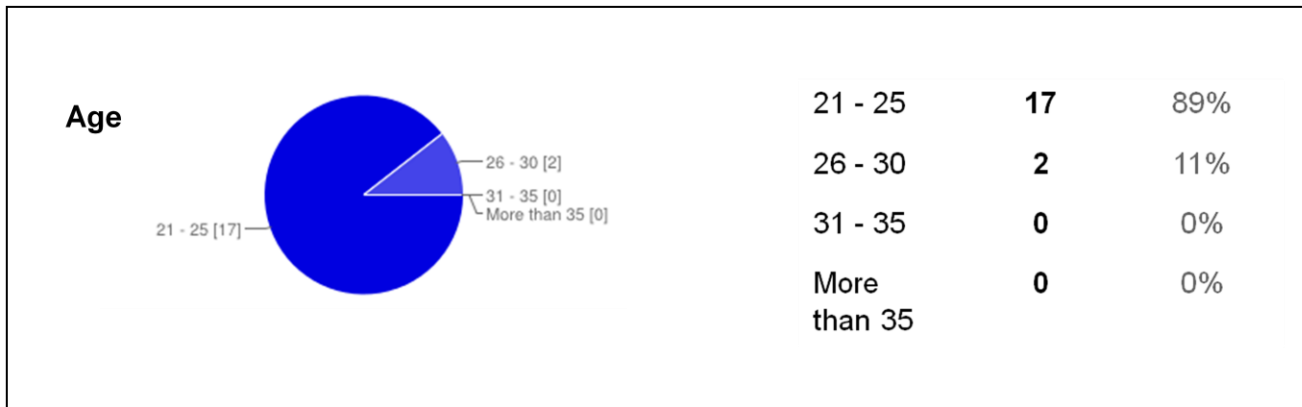
Figure 17

- 84% (16 students) were under graduate students and 16% (3 students) were graduate students enrolled in the college of MCMA at Southern Illinois University.
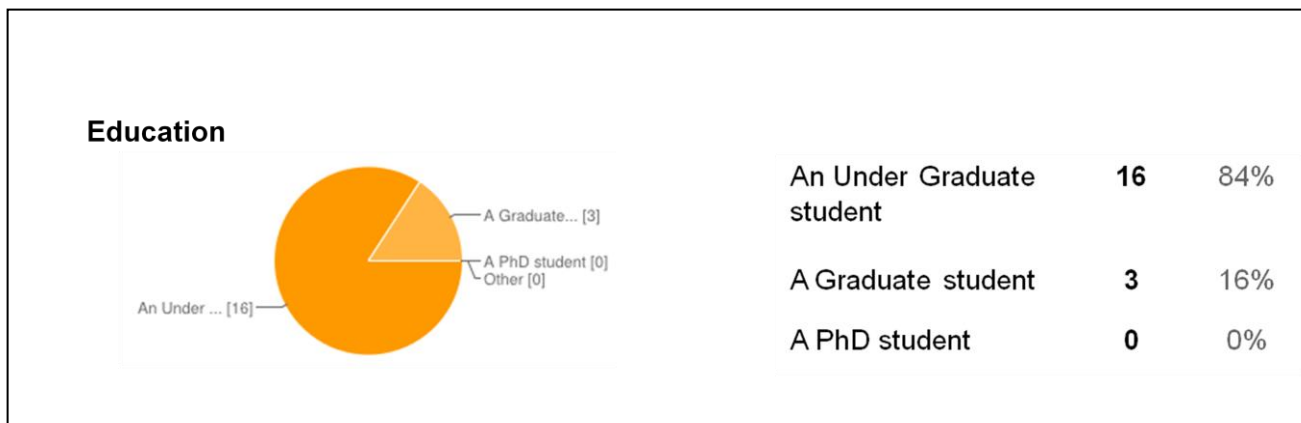
Figure 18

- For why they use social networks, students were given the option to chose more than one reason and the results were as follows: 21% (17 students) chose to connect with friends and family, 14% (11 students) chose to share or receive information (for work, school, etc), 11% (9 students) chose to meet new people,

10% (8 students) chose to make professional and business contacts, 17% (14 students) chose to share photos, videos and music, 4% (3 students) chose to play games, 9% (7 students) chose to discover new music, books, films and other entertainment, 9% (7 students) chose to find information and share feedback about brands and products and 6% (5 students) chose to promote business or cause.

Reasons for you to use Social Networks

To connect with friends or family	17	21%
To share or receive information (for work, school, etc)	11	14%
To meet new people.	9	11%
To make professional and business contacts.	8	10%
To share photos, videos, and music.	14	17%
To play games.	3	4%
To discover new music, books, films, and other entertainment.	7	9%
To find information and share feedback about brands and products.	7	9%
To promote a business or cause.	5	6%
Other	0	0%

Figure 19

- On their views towards collaborating on group projects using social networks, 11% (2 students) felt it to be problematic, 37% (7 students) considered it somewhat useful, 42% (8 students) thought it would be very useful and interesting and 11% (2 student) gave a reasons that it could depend on the group you are working with.

Opinion about working on group projects using social networking sites

Problematic	2	11%
Somewhat useful	7	37%
Very useful and interesting	8	42%
Other	2	11%
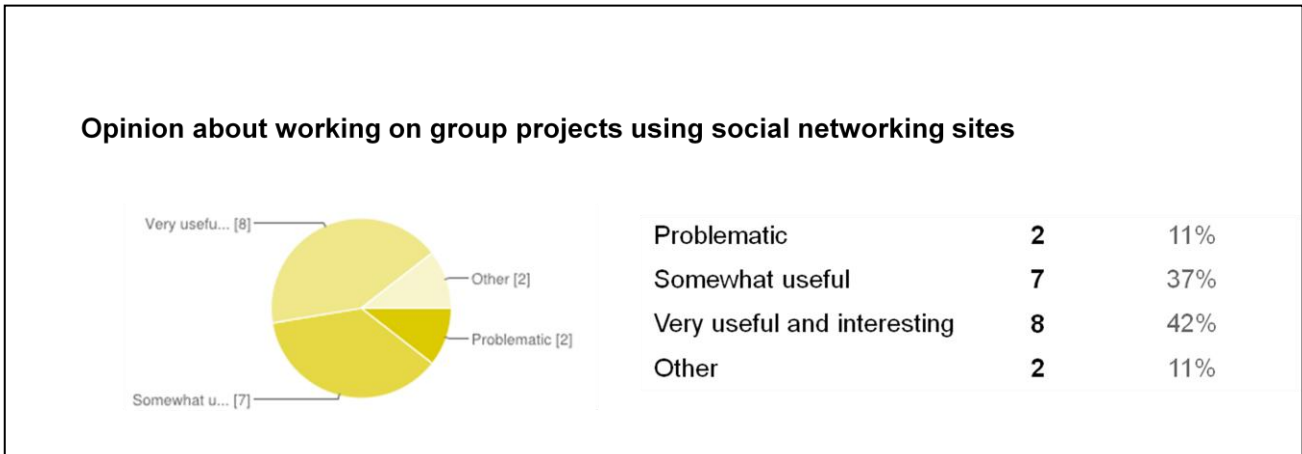
Figure 20

- On how important it is for students to collaborate outside the class, on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being least important and 5 being most important), the average user rating was between 3 and 5. 32% (6 students) rated 5, 32% rated 4 (6 students) and 26% rated 3 (5 students) and 11% (2 student) rated 1. This proved that most of the students in the target group felt that it was important for students to engage and interact outside the class.

Views on how important it is for students to collaborate outside the class

1	2	11%
2	0	0%
3	5	26%
4	6	32%
5	6	32%
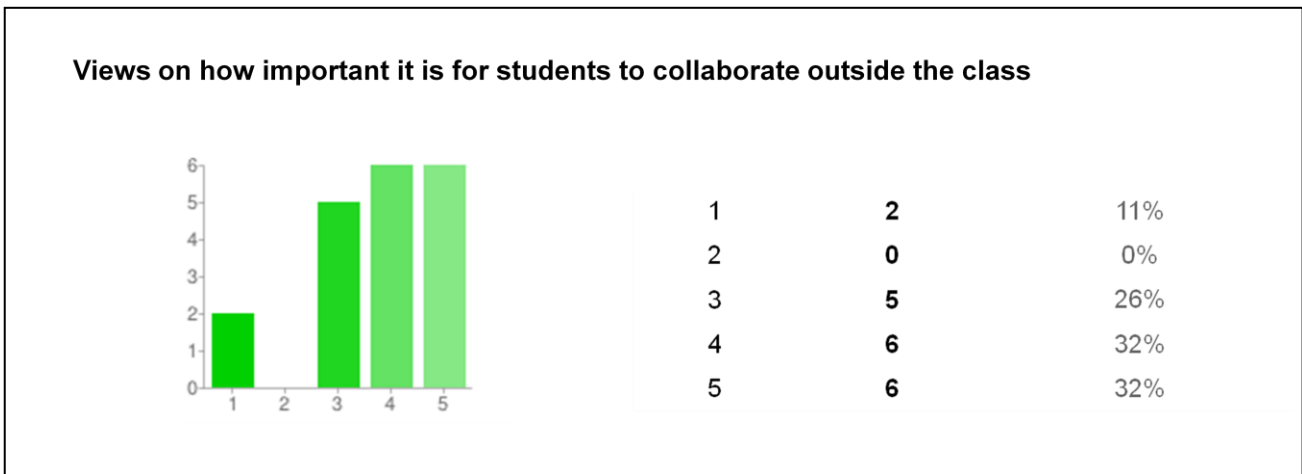
Figure 21

- The next question was about their most preferred teaching pattern based on their past experience and the results indicated that many students preferred to use social networks as a learning tool that could enhance classroom experience. The results showed 22% (7 students) choosing the option of the class meeting once a week and the Professor lecturing to the entire class, students take notes and prepare for their exams by themselves, while 38% (12 students) chose the option of Instructor and students using an online social network to interact and discuss the modules before the examination. Another option that received a lot of response was group discussion with 38% (12 students) preferring the same.

Preferences in teaching patterns based on experiences

Class meets once a week and the Professor lectures to the entire class; students take notes and prepare for their exams by themselves.	**7**	22%
Instructor and students use an online social network to interact and discuss the modules before the examination.	**12**	38%
Lecture without notes with Q & A from students	**0**	0%
Class group discussion	**12**	38%
Other	**1**	3%

Figure 22

- On their experience in classes that used video or other online mechanisms like Social Networking/Websites for learning, 48% (13 students) demonstrated that they have used social networks for accessing class content, 48% (13 students) confirmed that they had used social networks for information viewing, reading and

posting. All the students in the subject sample demonstrated that they have had classes that used online tools in the past.

Experience in classes that used video or other online mechanisms like Social Networking

Accessing Class content	13	48%
Information to View/read/post	13	48%
Have not had a class that used online mechanisms	0	0%
Other	1	4%
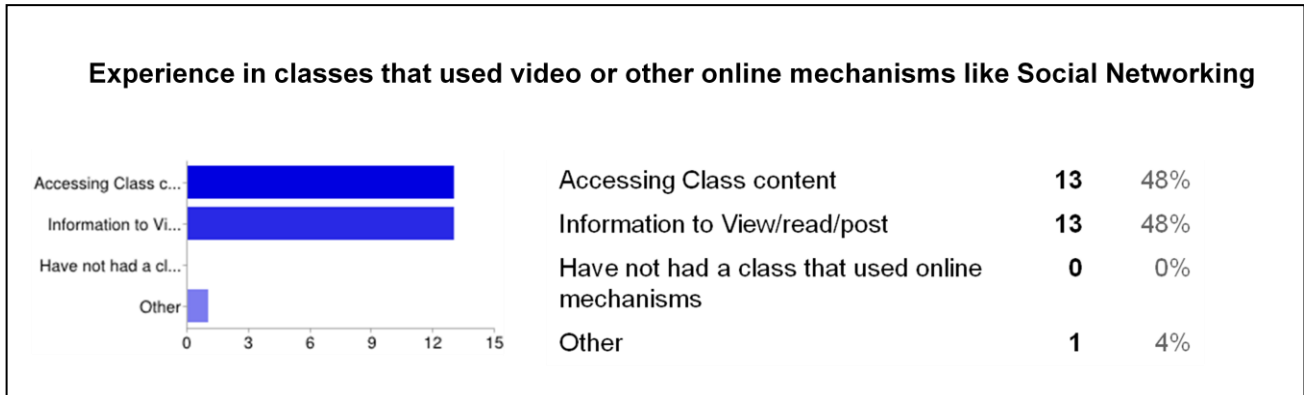
Figure 23

- About the success rate of social networks as a mechanism for collaboration on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being least preferred and 5 being most preferred), most of the rating was between 3 and 4. 42% (8 students) rated 3, 32% (6 students) rated 4 and 11% of the whole (2 student each) rated 1, 5 and 5% (1 student) rated 2. These results showed that many of our target users felt that social networking platforms could possibly be a successful mechanism for collaboration.

Perceived success of online networking platforms when used as a mechanism for collaboration

1	2	11%
2	1	5%
3	8	42%
4	6	32%
5	2	11%
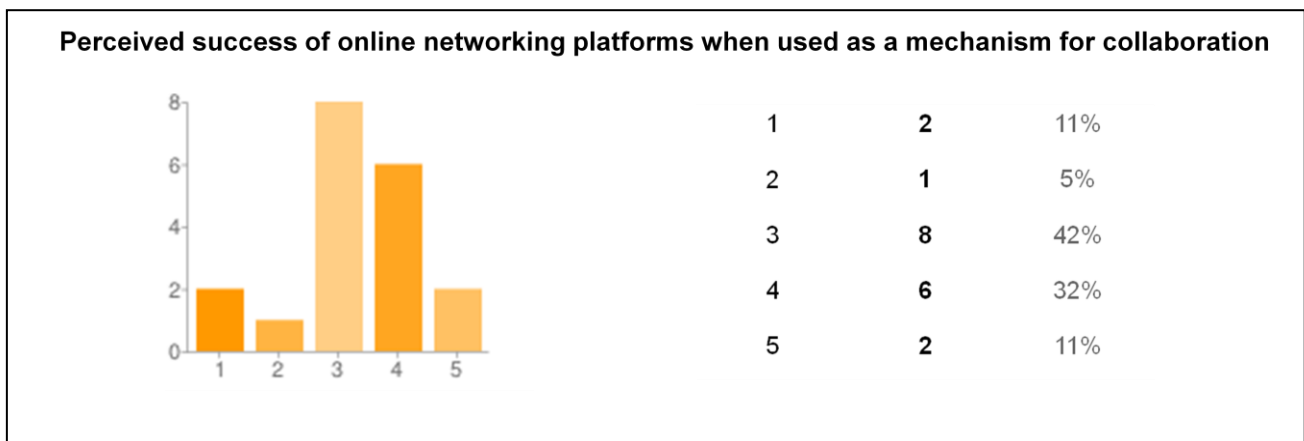
Figure 24

- The final question of the pre-test questionnaire was about their views on the

  barriers in using social media tools for learning. Students were given the option to

  choose more than one option for this question. 19% (7 students) felt the reason to

  be lack of integrity, 31% (11 students) thought it was privacy concerns, 11% (4

  students) chose time consumption, 8% (3 students) thought it was lack of training

  and 17% (6 students) chose lack of all required features in a networking platform.

  8% (3 students) felt that the reason would also be lack of knowledge to use the

  platforms and 6% (2 students) noted other reasons like insufficient user base and

  lack of intimate conversation about topics. A majority of the results for this

  question showed the need for the right mix of features in online learning platforms

  would prove beneficial for the students.

Views on the disadvantages/barriers in using social media tools for learning

Lack of integrity	7	19%
Privacy Concerns	11	31%
Time consuming	4	11%
Lack of training to use online mechanisms	3	8%
Lack of all required features in a networking platform	6	17%
Lack of knowledge to use the platforms	3	8%
Other	2	6%
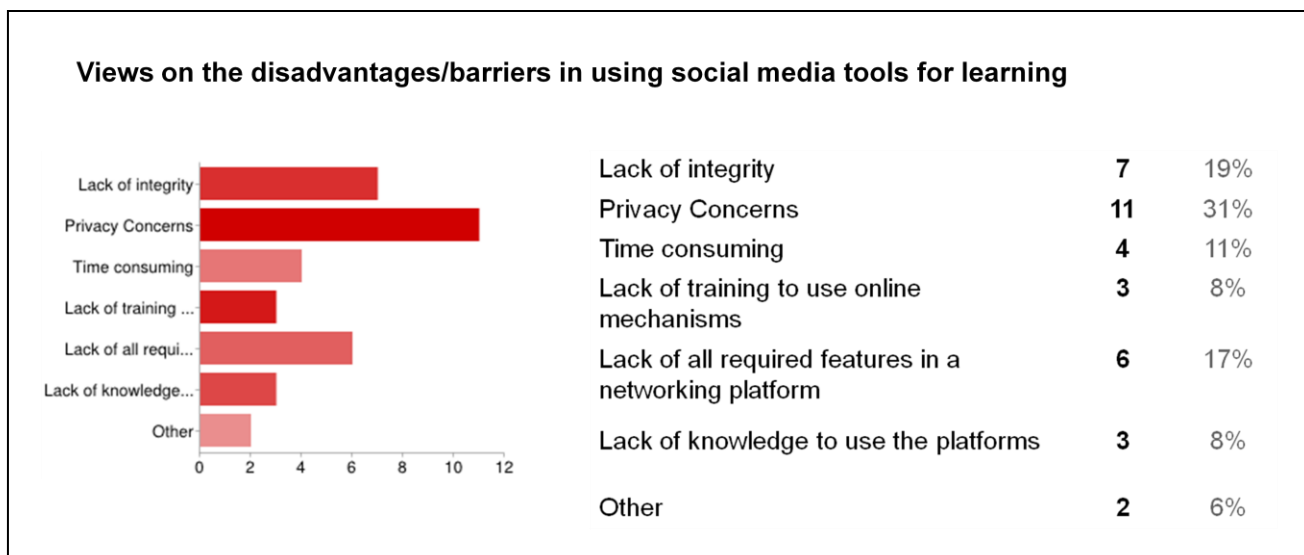
Figure 25

Usability Test Results

The main purpose of the usability test was to understand what the students felt about the interface of *Creators @SIU* and its functionalities. The students were provided the prototype of the site's individual pages and were asked to answer the questions based on their views.

- On a scale on 1-9 on how easy it was to find the main features on the interface, (with 1 being very easy and 9 being very difficult), the average user rating was between 1- 3. 26% (5 students each) chose 1 and 32% (6 students) chose 3. Very less number of students rated in the range of 4-8. These numbers could be an indication that the interface was fairly easy to understand, but since the sample set was just 17, it would be difficult to state what the main causes that differentiated their views were.

Ease in finding the main features on each page

1	5	26%
2	2	11%
3	6	32%
4	0	0%
5	2	11%
6	1	5%
7	2	11%
8	1	5%
9	0	0%
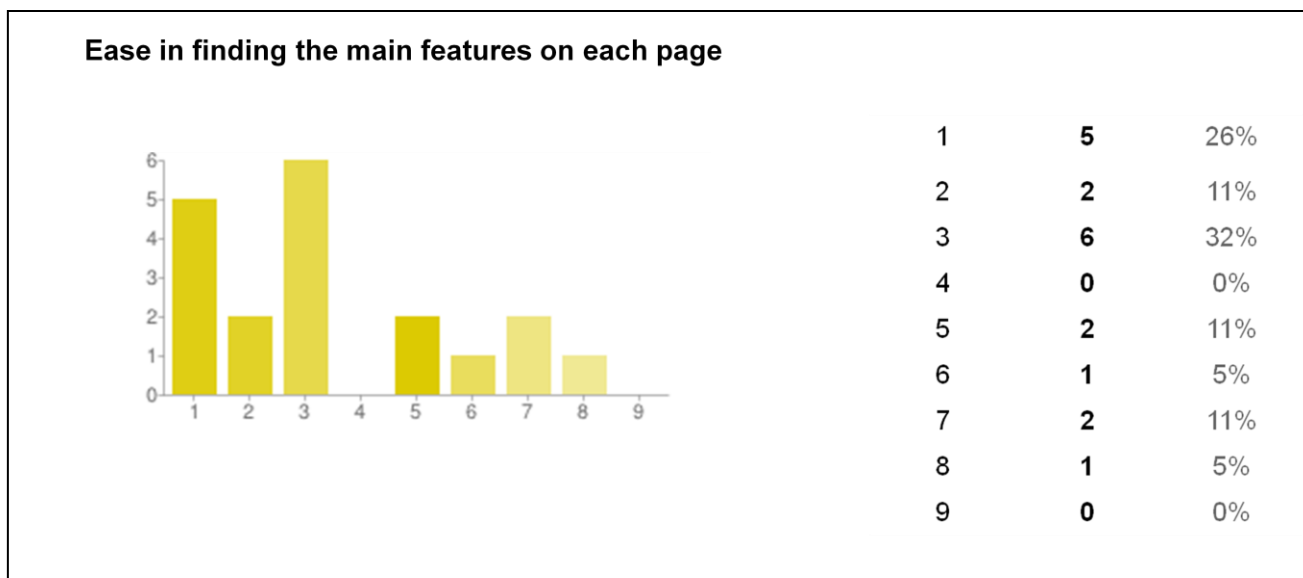
Figure 26

- On how easy it was to locate the Home page button from other pages, all the
  users answered that it was very easy and it was fairly simple to locate the home
  page button from other pages.

Ease in navigating back to the home page

The unanimous answer to this question was a 'Yes!'   100%

Figure 27

- With regard to their views on the main purpose of this platform, the users were
  given the option to choose more than one choice for this question. 25% (14
  students) thought they would use it to gain access to information, 9% (5 students)
  chose entertainment, 19% (11 students) chose collaboration and learning, 11% (6
  students) opted to choose social networking, 19% (11 students) chose the option
  to connect with other students and professors and 18% (10 students) career
  development. With information and collaboration ranking high on the results, the
  responses to this question gave us the understanding of which pages the students
  would avidly use.

The main purpose they thought the site is designed for

Information	**14**	25%
Entertainment	**5**	9%
Collaboration and learning	**11**	19%
Social Networking	**6**	11%
Connect with other students and professors	**11**	19%
Career development	**10**	18%
Other	**0**	0%
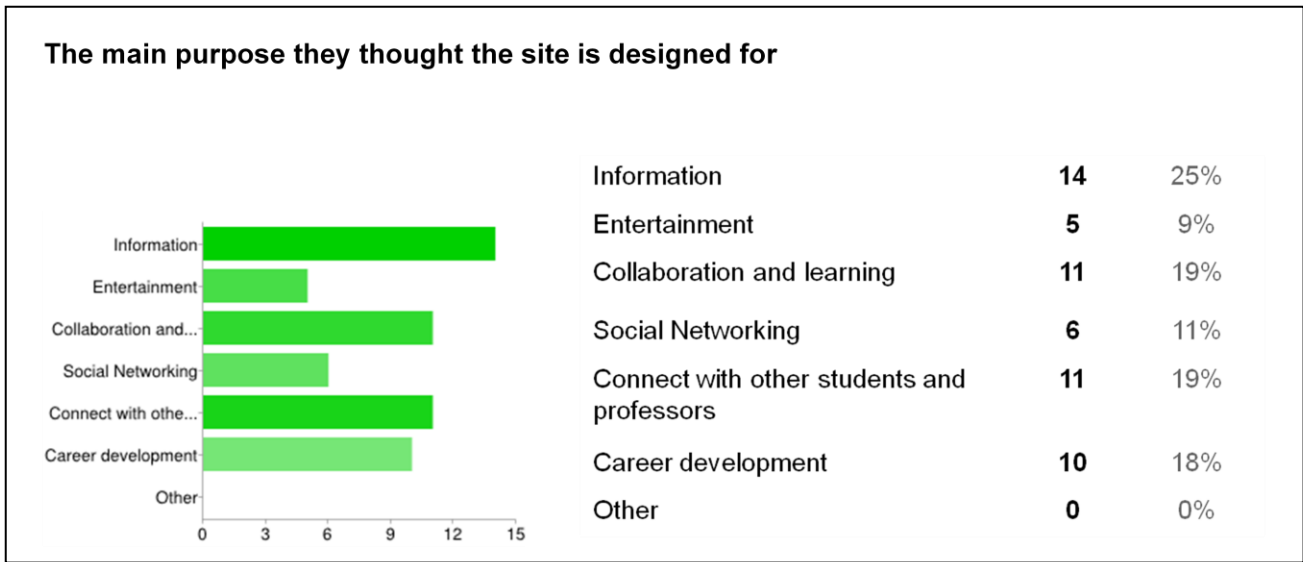
Figure 28

- On how the features fit the purpose of collaboration and learning on a scale of 1-9 (with 1 being poor and 9 being marvelous), most of the user rating was between 7 and 8. With 37% (7 students) rating 7 and 32% (6 students) rating 8, the results indicated that the students could rightly analyze the main purpose of the networking platform.

How the features fit the idea of collaboration and learning

1	**1**	5%
2	**0**	0%
3	**0**	0%
4	**1**	5%
5	**2**	11%
6	**1**	5%
7	**7**	37%
8	**6**	32%
9	**1**	5%
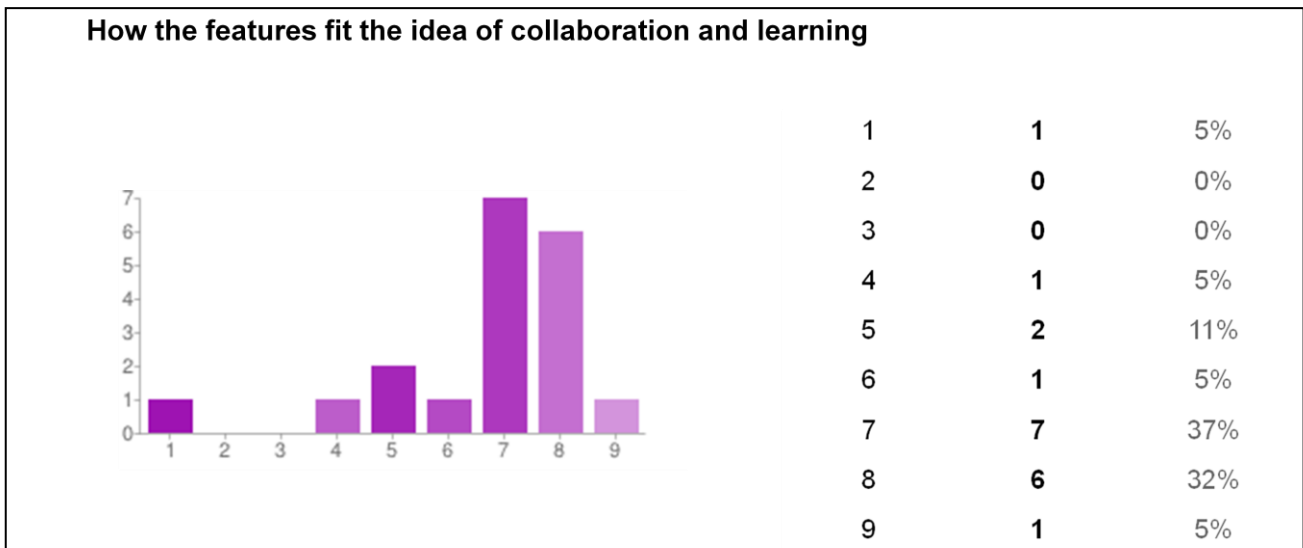
Figure 29

- The next question was about which pages the students felt were most useful and this question allowed students to choose more than one option. The responses indicated a mixture of all the pages, with 31% (12 students) choosing the Learn page, 28% (11 students) choosing the *Future Page*, 28% (11 students) choosing *Home page* and 13% (5 students) choosing the *Show page*. The response clearly demonstrated a correlation with our research studies that indicated that tutorials and discussion forums are features in online platforms that are heavily sought after.

Which pages they felt were very useful, in terms of features and functionality

Home: To get access to different kinds of information like upcoming competitions, things on sale, relevant news stories	**11**	28%
Show: To display your portfolio and get personalized job recommendations	**5**	13%
Learn: To gain knowledge from the different tutorials, lecture podcasts and discussion forums	**12**	31%
Future: To get access to a job portal	**11**	28%

Figure 30

- On a scale of 1-9 (1 being repulsive and 9 being marvelous), the users were asked to rate the visual appeal of the interface it terms of color choice and contrast and this question received critical responses. Average user rating was between 3 and 6; 28% (5 students) rated 6, 17% (3 students each) rated 3 and 5, 11% (2 students each) rated 4 and 7, and 6% (1 student each) rated 8 and 9. The

prototype presented to the students was designed in neutral color purposely to not repel users. A number of color options would need to be reconsidered and a specific color choice study would need to be conducted to finalize the color and contrast for the final interface.

Views on the visual appeal in terms of color, contrast

1	1	6%
2	0	0%
3	3	17%
4	2	11%
5	3	17%
6	5	28%
7	2	11%
8	1	6%
9	1	6%
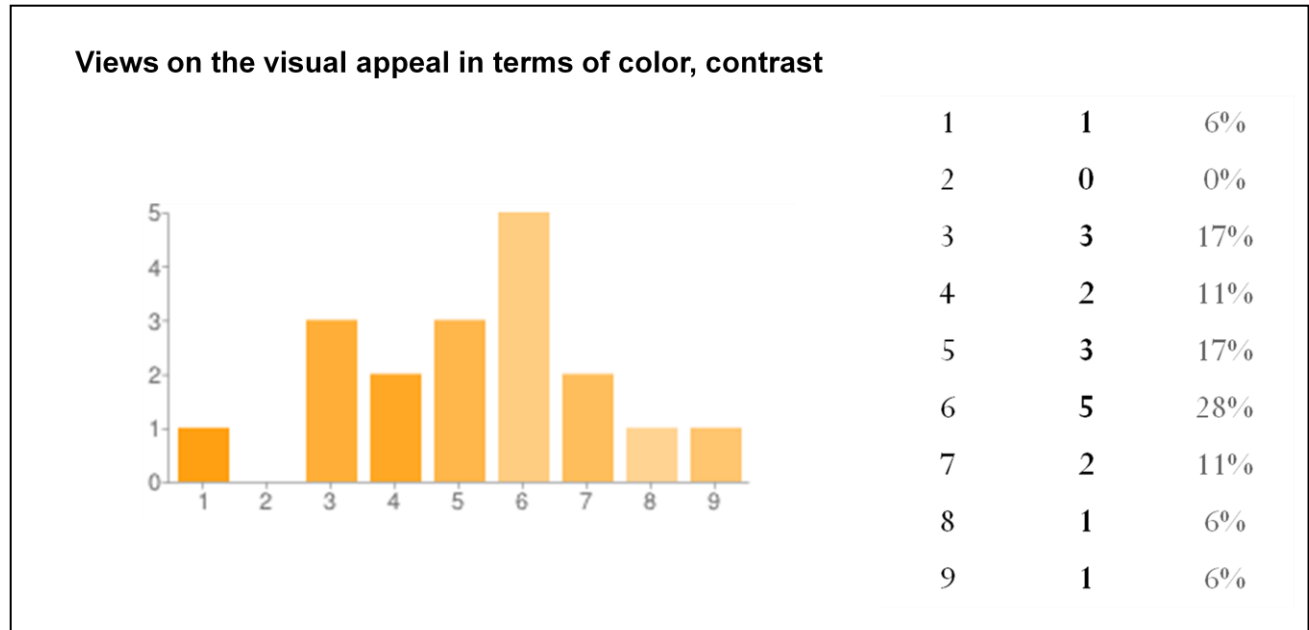
Figure 31

- The next question required the users to rate the visual appeal of the interface in terms of font size and style on a scale of 1-9 (with 1 being repulsive and 9 being marvelous). The average rating was between 5 and 8. 17% (3 students each) rated 5 and 6, 22% (4 students) rated 7 and 28% (5 students) rated 8. 6% (1 student each) rated 2, 4 and 9. The font size and style was made to look simple and clear and the responses indicated that the students preferred the same.

Views on the visual appeal in terms of font size and style

1	0	0%
2	1	6%
3	0	0%
4	1	6%
5	3	17%
6	3	17%
7	4	22%
8	5	28%
9	1	6%
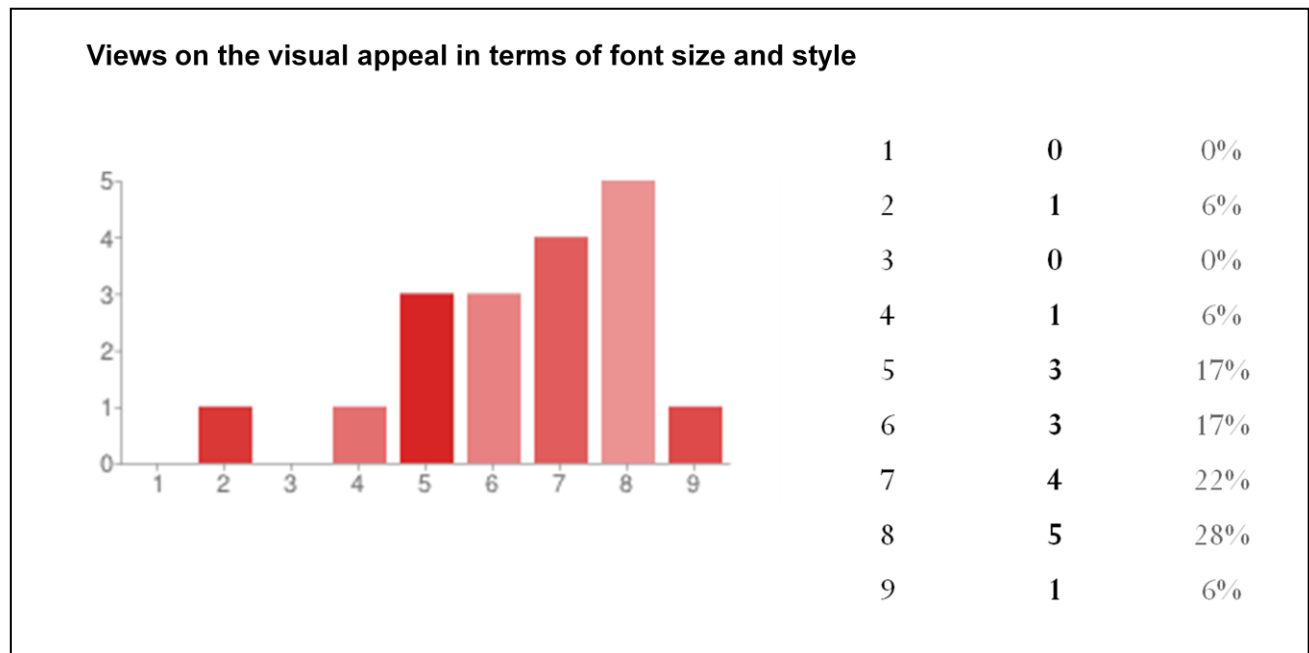
Figure 32

- On their ease in understanding the functionality of each page (with 1 being very confusing and 9 being extremely clear), 32% (6 students) rated 8, 26% (5 students) rated 6, 16% (3 students) rated 5. The student rating for this question was on an average between 5 and 8. According to these results, the functionality of the pages seemed to be well understood and received among the users.

Views on the ease in understanding the functionality of each page

1	1	5%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	3	16%
6	5	26%
7	2	11%
8	6	32%
9	2	11%
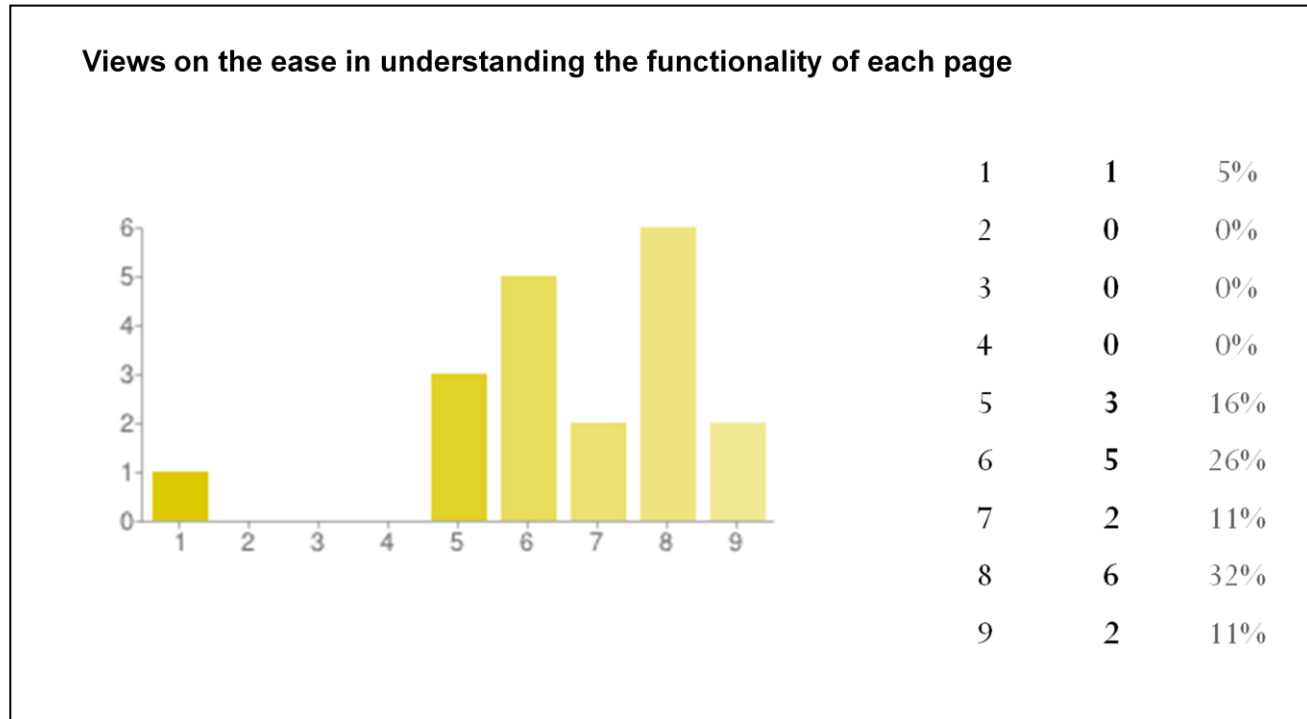
Figure 33

- The last two questions were based on what features the users would like to change or add to the existing user interface of the Creators@SIU system. 4 responses included suggestions for different color schemes for the background and links. Almost all the other users recorded that they would not want to change anything in the current site design. In terms of additional links that they would want to see, 3 users mentioned that a link to the university website could be added to the interface, 1 user mentioned about the chat feature being present on all pages and 1 mentioned about making the name of the pages more obvious; such as naming the Show page as the Profile page. The rest of them had mentioned that there needs to be no more additions and that the features provided seem user friendly, simple and to the point.

SURVEY AND USABILITY TEST CONCLUSION

Analyzing our pre-test survey questionnaire and usability test results gives a clear indication that our survey findings were similar to our findings from the content analysis of recent research studies conducted in this field. The students seemed to understand the main purpose of the site and also showed their eagerness in using networking platforms for collaboration and learning. The pre-test questionnaire results indicated that many students in the target group have already had the experience of using social networking platforms in their classes for reading, sharing and posting content. The results also showed that the lack of the right combination of features on an online platform seemed to be one of the predominant constraints found in using existing platforms to enhance classroom learning and group work. This is exactly what we aimed to tackle, by providing the students/faculty a platform designed based on research of what they found useful, while using this tool within the educational sector.

In terms of the features and functionality of the proposed networking platform; Creators@SIU, most of the users have noted to find adequate usage of the existing pages/ functionalities with the *Learn page* being the most sought-after. The users had critical reviews on the color scheme/other aesthetic elements of the site design. The results indicated the need for more color choice based studies and studies to understand user preferences on naming features, before developing the final design of the interface.

Further research also needs to further focus on *Users and Gratifications theory* to analyze the educational benefits of the features incorporated as a part of the design of the networking platform: Creators@SIU and how effective these would be in fulfilling student needs. Also, research needs to focus on addressing how developing a platform such as this would cut down privacy concerns and gratify the educational community. This would make the faculty members in the higher education setting more willing to adopt the idea with confidence of both the usefulness of the resource and security that it provides.

CHAPTER 8

FUTURE WORK & DISCUSSION

The higher educational community, though with some apprehensions has been noticeably changing their views towards adopting social networking technologies within the educational sector.

Social networking sites such as Ning (education based SNS) have been seen to offer an exciting platform for online learning and group work. Results from the study of *E-Learning Benefits of Ning in Education* by Kevin P. Brady, Lori B. Holcomb, and Bethany V. Smith, (2010) also show that social networks have the potential to provide significant e-learning benefits in their courses. In addition, using networking sites have also been proven to be a great alternative for enhancing higher education experience by inducing online interaction and collaboration.

While considering the growing nature of networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter among the educational community, a proposal to design an educational social networking site which could have a constructive purpose of getting students to learn, collaborate and find career prospects, could prove to be all the more resourceful.

The features of the networking platform; *Creators@SIU* were conceptualized and designed after researching and understanding the student's nature, wants and the apprehensions among some faculty members in using a networking platform within the educational setting. This makes the site a professional/academic networking platform rather than just another social networking site. This aspect could consequently increase the willingness of educators to encourage students to use the medium within the

university. Moreover, the networking platform developed with an intention to enhance learning and collaboration, has also helped in customizing the features that are made available, which in turn reduces concerns of student integrity and privacy.

A future scope for the project could be creating one parent site; Creators, under which Creators@SIU would be an independent sub group that would contain information specifically catering to the college of MCMA at Southern Illinois University. Similar groups could be proposed for other schools that have a media/communications wing. By putting this platform to use to enhance classroom learning, the faculty in various institutions would be able to make space for an effective learning environment by bringing together academic, social, collaborative and interactive capabilities of this powerful platform. The project is currently aimed specifically at students/faculty in the media and communications field, as a platform for interactive teaching, portfolio display, collaboration and job search. A future possibility could also be to cater to other academic fields of study as well.

In addition to the analysis of various research studies and aggregating results from our target group, usability test and competitive task analysis, a methodology of conducting a quantitative research among the faculty / students in the media and communications sector, would help understand their willingness to adopt the new technology for learning and collaboration. This would also aid modifying the features of the networking site proposed in the second phase of this study based on need and usability.

Findings from this study help to provide a stage for research on using social media in higher education and the idea of developing networking platforms for use within

the educational sector. The results and conclusions derived from this study would give a

direction on how to construct and utilize socio-academic networking platforms to

enhance student's learning experience and upsurge constructive interaction and

collaboration among students by fostering a synergic learning culture.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Pre-Test Survey Questionnaire

1. Age:

   o 21 - 25

   o 26 - 30

   o 31 - 35

   o More than 35

2. You are...

   o An under graduate student

   o A graduate student

   o A PhD student

4. What are the most important reasons for you to use Social Networks? (Please select all that apply)

   o To connect with friends or family

   o To share or receive information (for work, school, etc)

   o To meet new people.

   o To make professional and business contacts.

   o To share photos, videos, and music.

   o To play games.

   o To discover new music, books, films, and other entertainment.

   o To find information and share feedback about brands and products.

   o To promote a business or cause.

5. How do you feel collaborating on group projects on social networks and why? (Please select all that apply)

- o Problematic
- o Somewhat useful
- o Very useful and interesting
- o Other

6. How important do you think it is for students to engage and interact outside the class?

1   2   3   4   5

(Least important)   (Most Important)

7. Rate the following teaching patterns based on your experiences on a scale of 1 to 5 with one being the least and five being the most favored

- o Class meets once a week and the Professor lectures to the entire class; students take notes and prepare for their exams by themselves.
- o Instructor and students use an online social network to interact and discuss the modules before the examination.
- o Lecture without notes with Q & A from students
- o Class group discussion

Other_____

8. Have you had classes that used video or other online mechanisms like Social Networking/Websites for learning? What has been the primary use? (Please select all that apply)

o Accessing Class content

o Information to View/read/post

o Have not had a class that used online mechanisms

o Other

9. Please rate the success of social networking platforms as a mechanism for collaboration among the students? Rate your preferences on a scale of 1 to 5 with one being the least favored and five being the most favored

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

(Least favored)   (Most favored)

10. What do you think the barriers are in using Social Media in class or for academic learning and collaboration?

o Lack of integrity

o Privacy Concerns

o Time consuming

o Lack of training to use online mechanisms

o Lack of all required features in one single networking platform

o Lack of knowledge to use the platforms

Other_____

Usability Test Questions

The main purpose of this site is to provide the students a forum for online collaboration and learning during their tenure at school.

Based on the Layout of the site, please answer the following:

1. On a scale of 1-9, with 1 being very easy and 9 being very difficult, rate your ease in finding the main features on the different pages

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

  (Very Easy)   (Very Difficult)

2. Was it easy to get to locate the Home page from other pages? (free response)

_____

3. If you were to use this online platform, what would be the main purpose of your usage? (please select all that apply)

   o Information

   o Entertainment

   o Collaboration and learning

   o Social Networking

   o Connect with other students and professors

   o Career development

   o Other

4. On a scale of 1-9, with 1 being poor and 9 being marvelous, rate how you think the features fit the purpose of collaboration and learning?

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

  (Poor)   (Marvelous)

5. Which pages of the site do you feel would be the most useful? (You could choose more than one response to this question)

o Home: To get access to different kinds of information like upcoming competitions, things on sale, relevant news stories

o Show: To display your portfolio and get personalized job recommendations

o Learn: To gain knowledge from the different tutorials and lecture podcasts and discussion forums

o Future: To get access to a job portal

6. On a scale of 1-9 with 1 being repulsive and 9 being marvelous, rate the visual appeal of the interface in terms of color choice and contrast?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

   (Poor)   (Marvelous)

7. On a scale of 1-9 with 1 being repulsive and 9 being marvelous, rate the visual appeal of the interface in terms of font size and style.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9

   (Poor)   (Marvelous)

8. On a scale of 1-9 with 1 being very confusing and 9 being extremely clear, rate the ease of understanding the functionality of each page.

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9
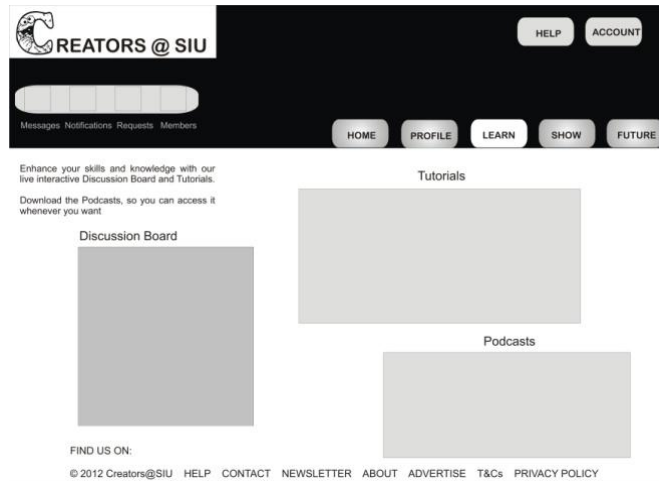
   (Very confusing)   (Extremely Clear)

9. List any changes you would make to the name of the page, buttons, and links that would help clarify its purpose and functionality on each page (free response)
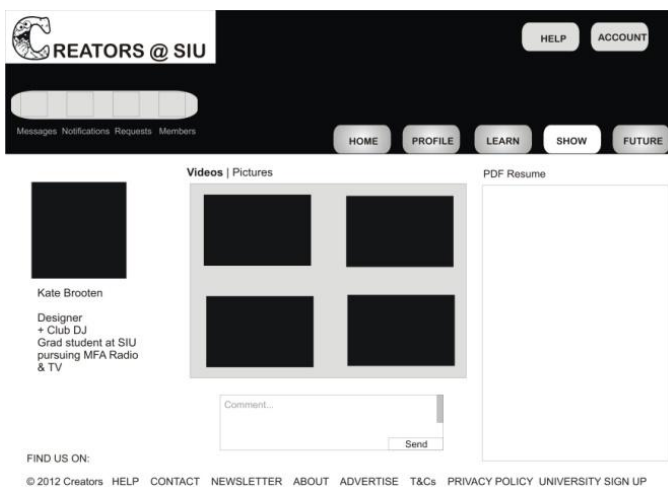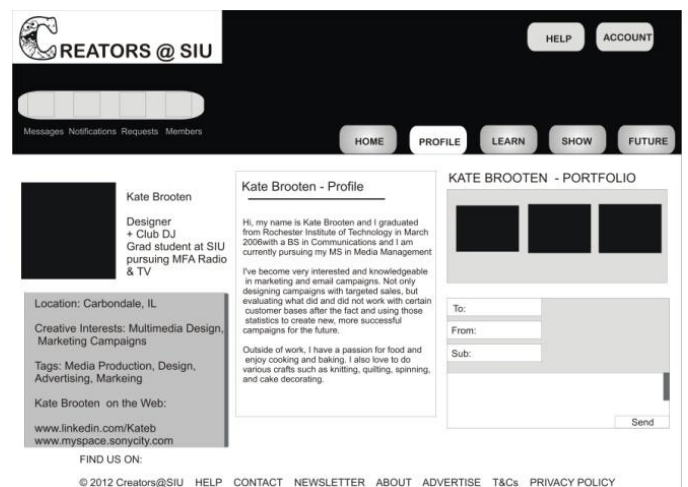
_____

10. List any additional links or information would you like to see on this page (free response)

_____

APPENDIX B

Mock- Up of Learn Page, Profile Page and Show Page

Learn Page

The Profile Page and Show page were originally individual pages, but to simplify the design and make it more intuitive, these pages were later combined.

Show Page   *Profile Page*

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IMPLICATIONS OF USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES WITHIN THE ACADEMIC
SECTOR AND CONSTRUCTING A SOCIO-ACADEMIC NETWORKING PLATFORM

Major Professors: Robert Spahr and Dr. Narayanan Iyer