

Family e Journal as an Online Relationship Enhancement Tool: A Preliminary Investigation

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Abstract

The use of online social networking sites (SNS) has become increasingly popular during the past decade. While motivation to use SNS varies, the current pilot study examines the usefulness of a specific SNS, Family e Journal, as a therapeutic tool. Specifically, use of this online Q & A website was evaluated as a mechanism for improving connections with family and friends. Qualitative responses were overwhelmingly favorable from a sample of college students during a 14-week trial. While a more in-depth quantitative analysis is warranted, current results suggest SNS platforms such as Family e Journal may be a convenient tool for enhancing relationship quality and overall well-being.

Keywords: Social networking sites; Life satisfaction; Well-being; Family e Journal

Introduction

There is a growing body of empirical work that deviates from pathology and dysfunction and focuses on a strengths-based approach. A considerable amount of research has recently begun to focus on the well-being and happiness derived from the use of online social networking sites (SNS) [1,2]. As many college students travel far from home, the use of SNS is an attractive platform for communication as it makes friends and family more accessible regardless of time and location. The online environment may also inhibit self-censorship by means of a platform that is less threatening than face-to-face interactions [3].

Kim and Lee [4] examined the effects of self-presentation on personal well-being in a sample of college student Facebook users. Results supported the notion that self-presentation to Facebook friends contributed to the user's well-being. However, perceived social support and number of Facebook friends were negatively related. In essence, a larger number of friends may result in shallow relationships that would not be predictive of social support and personal well-being [4]. In a similar study, Asbury and Hall [5] found that highly engaged SNS participation (number of friends) was a predictor for personal well-being.

Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe [6] suggest that SNS are commonly used for the maintenance of social relationships

that may otherwise be defined by a weak personal connection. However, SNS platforms like Facebook may not directly address meaningful personal connections. Researchers are just beginning to examine the potential benefits of SNS as therapeutic group platforms. Lemma and Fonagy [7] found that the asynchronous communication between therapist and client are attractive to those who value the self-paced nature of the interactions.

The current pilot study attempts to evaluate the SNS platform Family e Journal (FEJ), which is designed to enhance relationship quality between family and close friends. Family e Journal is a web-based activity that utilizes private, asynchronous dialogue wherein users are prompted with sets of four questions and when answered, only members of your "family" are able to access and read. It was founded and designed by biomedical engineer Kevin Strauss, M.E. who has nearly 10 years of experience in positive behavior modification interventions. While the site does not provide psychotherapy, questions are designed to promote reflection and discussion between self-selected groups. Family e Journal is a commercial available website that is free for individual families to join and offers a fee-based program for organizations interested in offering a mental and emotional wellness program to its members.

FEJ questions are designed to help users share their thoughts and feelings about everyday life events. FEJ asks non-confrontational and non-controversial questions and does not have an underlying agenda (e.g. religious, political, etc.). The goal is to remove pressure and level the field so each person is comfortable sharing opening and honestly. In doing so, family/group members are able to learn about and better understand that person. Sample questions include:

- Describe how you feel today.
- What was your first thought or feeling when you awoke this morning?
- Describe a memorable experience from elementary school.
- How would you define a really good conversation?

The goals of the present study were to compare users of FEJ

to non-users on measures of family cohesiveness and overall life satisfaction. It was predicted that FEJ users would report higher levels of overall life satisfaction compared to non-users. In addition, we predicted the FEJ users would report general satisfaction with the SNS platform at the end of the trial period.

Method

Psychology students at a Texas university were challenged to use FEJ to enhance relationships with family and/or friends ($N = 66$). Two classes were recruited to participate. The control class ($n = 30$) did not use FEJ while the experimental students (FEJ group) were asked to recruit 3-5 members from their family or close social network. The FEJ students were also asked to use the website at least one time per week. The Life Satisfaction Questionnaire Diener [8] was administered to all participants pre-and-post timeline for FEJ usage. This scale includes 5 Likert scale items such as, "I am satisfied with my life" and "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.88). A qualitative user evaluation (please comment about your experience using Family e Journal) was also completed by FEJ users at the end of the program and students provided anonymous feedback.

Results

All students from the FEJ group registered and recruited at least three members of their social network. During the 14-week program, a total of 51 families and 199 family members accessed FEJ. Website usage data was collected using the host server and Google Analytics (GA). GA generates detailed statistics about a website's traffic and traffic sources and measures conversions. Family e Journal's host server data was used to determine

specific behavior about the cohort's activity (e.g. number of families, number of family members, logins). FEJ data and Google Analytics confirm that they were able to successfully navigate FEJ and remained engaged 14 times longer than the average website visit [9]. An average of 30 users visited FEJ each day, 60% of visitors were returning, 30% of the users used FEJ more than 1x/week and the average visit lasted 7m 12s. The average number of e Journals completed was nine and the most completed by a user was 46.

The quantitative analysis revealed a high degree of life satisfaction at the study outset and no significant differences were reported on life satisfaction between groups. Post intervention, there was no statistically significant change in life satisfaction between control (pretest $M = 20.2$, $SD = 6.4$) and FEJ ($M = 25$, $SD 5.4$) groups. However, eighty-three percent of the FEJ group reported that FEJ helped improve their relationship connections. Only one of the 36 reviews was reported to be a negative experience (see Table 1).

Discussion

Unfortunately, the quantitative results did not measure FEJ's potential effectiveness. All users began the study with a high degree of life satisfaction and hence there was a limited opportunity (i.e. ceiling effect) to improve that metric. Also, using FEJ only once per week may be too infrequent to elicit change. A better measure of therapeutic efficacy might include a placebo group for added control and comparison to the FEJ group. Since the present study utilized two separate college courses, future designs might employ a crossover design to protect against potential course content confounds. A measure of overall

Table 1: FamilyeJournal Qualitative Reviews.

Response	Review	Comment
1	Positive	It was interesting to learn about different thoughts of my family and friends. Some of the answers they gave to those questions; I never knew that some felt that way. I think it creates an awareness of one's actions and opens the lines of communication for those that have been remiss in doing so. Some of my friends and family members I talk to, but the cares of life sometimes prevents us from speaking more regularly about the deeper things going on in our lives. I think some of my friends just wanted to help me, so they did it and the answers may not have been succinct enough and may lead to misinterpretation on limited information.
2	Positive	I really like the family e journal it has brought me and husband together. I am able to read his discussions on things he normally would not share. I think the layout of the family e journal is pretty user friendlier also.
3	Neutral	Honestly, I lost one of my participants over the course of the semester and going to do the journals just reminds me of our falling out. That is obviously no fault of the program, just a personal issue. Otherwise, I feel like some of the questions could have been better thought out to provoke conversation between my family members and me as some of them were a little trivial and were too easy to answer without truly contemplating them.
4	Negative	I tried to use it with my family hoping we could communicate better and become closer but the more I asked the more they refused. Unfortunately, the Family e Journal experience only solidified my family's lack of communication skill and desire to help each other. It also made me realize that I do not have any friends who would be willing to help me when I needed it.
5	Positive	It was a good experience to help people come together. It was just hard to make sure everyone logs on.
6	Positive	It was very interesting to view the thoughts and ideas of my family and friends while also putting simple things into perspective. I thought it was very helpful in improving communication and opening dialogue with members of your close circle.

7	Positive	I enjoyed it, reading my little brothers responses and my fiancé's have me comfort and I learned new things I did not know about them. My brother and I have had conversations but he is better at expressing himself on paper than in person.
8	Positive	I really enjoyed it except my husband never really did his which made me really mad.
9	Positive	I love using the family e journal and reading about how my friends are feeling. It's a way to just put everything down that affecting us in the day. I feel better once the journals are done because it can change my outlook. Some emotions can't be expressed with words to everyone but the journal gives up an open door. I remember reading my friend's e journal and knew she was having a horrible day. I didn't meant the journal but I called her that day and we went out for lunch. It was a way to say I understand and if all you need is a shoulder that I would be there.
10	Positive	It was ok. It was really difficult for me to get my family to participate. My mom did though which was really nice. She actually seemed to enjoy it. I wish there was a way to get my family to want to communicate more.
11	Positive	I really enjoy using Family e Journal it is fun to answer the questions every week.
12	Positive	It was useful, as I go back and read what my brother wrote during the journal experience, I was able to learn more about him in that time period than when we are in person. Before, I think it is true to say we didn't really have much of a conversation, but it has greatly improved getting to know him more through Family e Journal. We are both shy, and introverted, so communicating through online has improved our sibling bond.
13	Positive	Family e Journal has significantly helped my family and I understand how we truly feel about something, without having to feel anxious or uncomfortable. The questionnaires helped us connect, even with the distance that lies between us.
14	Positive	I love using Family e Journal. Not only me but my family members, who I choose to do it with, enjoy it as well!
15	Neutral	It has been okay, but my family members I chose to do it with have not been very helpful in doing their part.
16	Positive	I really enjoyed using Family e Journal. I know my family enjoyed getting to hear about each other's days and I found that I would fill out more of them all at once, just because I enjoyed the questions. It was a good thing for my family and I since we don't get to see each other very often.
17	Positive	Overall it is a great way to get your thoughts out for others to read and relate to.
18	Positive	I have a good experience with my Family e Journal. It really makes me think about my surroundings and the things I have done lately. It is a good way to reflect on one self.
19	Positive	Some of the questions are almost too vague to really answer. Overall, I feel like I have had an overall positive experience with the Family e Journal. I don't feel like the questions have sparked conversation between my family and me. The only time the e Journal is brought up is to see how one another are responding or to ask what the question is really asking.
20	Positive	Family E Journal has been an interesting experience. Although it was interesting learning some of the answers from my family, and be able to express random bits of information about myself, such as favorite book or plans for the current weekend, most of the answers are things that I already discuss.
21	Positive	With my family in person. I think Family E Journal has both positive and negative qualities that mainly depend on the individual. For someone who is distant from his or her family, this system is great to keep in touch and learn from, but from someone who lives in close proximity, this is something that can come in between actual face-to-face conversations. One major benefit that I noticed from this experience was discovering how supportive my family can be when helping me in a school assignment.
22	Positive	I really enjoyed using Family e Journal. I was able to learn new things about my family members I didn't know before.
23	Positive	I really enjoyed using family e journal but it was difficult to answer some of the questions at times. Reading my family members responses was cool and helped me to understand their perspective just slightly more than before using the Family e Journal.
24	Positive	The experience has been very fun for me and my family. I believe the most fun has been the responses my teenage son has provided throughout the semester. He is in his first semester of college and seems to be stuck in the sullen teenager phase right now. His responses have been very entertaining to us and as the semester has progressed we are seeing a slight shift of him beginning to move out of his sullen phase into a more phase with a more positive outlook. However, this has not been evident in the journal responses but most evident in the times we visit him at North Texas.
25	Positive	Actually, FEJ has been more beneficial than I had originally thought. My sister, boyfriend, and a close friend of mine all use it. It is interesting to find out new things about them and how they view life. It makes you realize how little you actually know about people and their day to day routine.
26	Positive	Using the Family e Journal is very interesting and it is fun to see all of the different responses that my friends and family have about the same questions.
27	Positive	Using Family e Journal has been interesting, it has made me stop and think about things I generally may not put much thought to. Also, it was fun seeing the responses of my family and chatting about it.
28	Positive	Some of the questions are hard to understand. I understand them differently than what my friends see them. But overall I enjoy getting to see their views and opinions on different things.
29	Neutral	It really did not affect the way I communicate with my family because we pretty much share everything already.
30	Neutral	My family and I have really not found it to be beneficial. I have not found it sparked conversation. To be honest, we talk more about our family on Facebook than FeJ. Maybe if we were a family that had trouble communicating than we could need conversation starters. Also, the survey is very vague in its definition of family. My immediate family, children and spouse, and amazing; but I have no connection to my parents or extended family. As such, I answered the questions based upon my immediate family.

31	Positive	I thought it was very interesting to see how other people thought about different aspects of their lives. The only thing is that after a while people stopped answering the questions. I really enjoyed all the questions because it made me think and allowed those near me to see a different side of me.
32	Positive	Over the course of the semester, I have grown to like the journal entries. Though last weekend was the first time I have sat down with my family and discussed some of our entries, being able to read them has shown me that no matter how much you think you know someone in your family, you don't. After reading some of my family members entries I have been able to see certain situations through their eyes. Seeing their side of things has really helped and opened up my eyes to "adult" life and that hard work does pay off.
33	Positive	The family e journal has been extremely helpful in strengthening communication in my family. I have learned so much about my soon to be mother in law, nephews, and even a little about my fiancé. My sister and nephews are living in China, so it has made us communicate more regularly which has been amazing, because often times I forget to Skype or call especially due to time distance, and it has been amazing getting to read what they are experiencing. I have really enjoyed the family e journal and believe it has so much to offer.
34	Positive	The reason I like e journal is because it helped get close to my friends.
35	Positive	I liked the experience because I was able to learn more about my husband and close friends. Family e Journal asked questions I would have not thought of asking.
36	Neutral	Some days it's enjoyable to write in but other days it is a chore.

relationship satisfaction should also be utilized.

Despite the weaknesses noted, the qualitative evaluation, including the high return in visitors per day and long visit duration, suggest that FEJ offers something worthwhile to its users. In the future, we aim to recruit participants who may identify with high-risk behaviors, such as alcohol/drug use, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression. The overwhelming positive evaluations from users in our pilot study suggest that FEJ may benefit users who are in high need of social support and relationship enhancement. These factors are strong predictors of personal and academic success and critical to the mental health and well-being of college students.

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