Students bare souls, and more, on Facebook "confession" pages

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By Stephanie Simon

(Reuters) - "I'm a compulsive laundry room thief," says one Facebook confession. "I'm the reason the 'Public Urination is Illegal' signs were put up at Coyote Village," says another.

"I sold books for the semester to go to South Padre for spring break ... Gotta pay for the booze somehow," reveals yet another poster.

By turns rueful and raunchy, these anonymous admissions pop up on 'campus confession' pages unofficially linked to scores of high schools and universities.

Like many social media trends, the confession craze captivates teenagers and 20-somethings - but alarms teachers, law enforcement officers and counselors.

"It's another creative venue where kids are able to say hurtful things, and that's frustrating," said Sameer Hinduja, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center at Florida Atlantic University.

At the same time, the pages can sometimes offer a catharsis of sorts, attracting heartfelt disclosures from students struggling with depression, alcoholism or eating disorders. Classmates often respond with links to counseling sites and offers to talk.

The anonymity of confession pages is at the core of their appeal, and they use a simple workaround to Facebook's general insistence that people use their real identity on the social network.

Students who set up confessional pages must do so under their real names, as per Facebook policy. But they can choose to cloak their identity as page administrators. To keep posts anonymous, they use free online survey tools such as SurveyMonkey or Google Forms. Confessors simply click on a link to open up a blank box where they can type their tell-all.

The page administrator doesn't see identifying information - just the latest confession.

The pages then prompt visitors to show admiration for the juiciest confessions by "liking" them and posting comments - often smart-aleck remarks that can draw fan bases of their own.

"The more outrageous comments attract more attention ... so there's little incentive to exercise restraint," Hinduja said.

Alisen Lafaive found that out quickly when she began reading the Facebook confession page for Clarkson University in Potsdam, New York. "At first, I thought, 'Ooh, Clarkson Confessions! This
ought to be juicy!" said Lafaive, a junior. Then she began scrolling through posts filled with crude invective toward women.

"These things are mean," she said. "My feelings are hurt even though none of its directed toward me." She posted a plea for courtesy but was ignored.

The confessions pages do not violate Facebook rules so long as the content remains within the bounds of civility, said a spokeswoman for the social network. But the pages have drawn complaints from some from principals, college administrators and police.

Dismayed by the content on two high-school confession pages in Kalispell, Montana last month, police asked Facebook to shut them down. Facebook closed one and removed offensive comments from another - but the student instigators simply started a third page, said Jason Parce, a police officer in Kalispell.

Parce threatened to charge participants with defamation and they quickly pulled down their posts. Though some posts were anonymous, many comments came in through Facebook accounts so the writers could easily be identified.

"There was a lot of sexually explicit content directed at specific individuals and a lot of hateful language being used," said Parce. "Absolutely, kids are more willing to be crude when they don’t have to face anyone. They hide behind the computer."

High-school pages in Idaho and Arizona have also been shut down after school officials moved to investigate offensive posts.

SAFEGUARDS

Administrators of several confession sites told Reuters that they review each submission and refuse to post any that seem inappropriate.

Facebook also routinely reviews pages on its site and responds to any complaints about content. If its reviewers deem a post objectionable, the social network will remove it or shut down the site entirely, the Facebook spokeswoman said.

None of these safeguards can determine whether those posting and commenting on confessions are bona fide students of a particular school.

At the college level, the concern isn’t bullying so much as brand protection. Universities including San Francisco State have asked confession sites to stop using school logos and photographs of iconic buildings for fear that outsiders might mistake the many tales of alcohol-fueled sexual conquests for an official depiction of campus life.

Despite, or perhaps because of, official disapproval, the fad continues to gain steam - and may be helping Facebook regain some of its allure among teens and college students. A recent poll by an online survey tool, Survata, found teens and young adults aged 13 to 25 used micro-blogging platform Tumblr more than Facebook.

Scores of Facebook confession pages have popped up in recent months, at small private colleges and huge state universities. Princeton, Harvard and Yale have pages. So does Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon.
Some campuses have Twitter confession accounts as well but Facebook remains the most popular medium. The University of Wisconsin-Madison's confessions page has racked up more than 21,000 Facebook “likes.” The University of Hawaii at Manoa has nearly 12,000. College students in India, New Zealand and Great Britain are baring their secrets online, too.

"It just makes me laugh," said Matt Miller, a biology major at the University of Hawaii who checks out his classmates' confessions several times a day. Among the recent posts: a lament about the difficulty of conversing with beautiful brunettes, an admission about a romantic relationship with a teaching assistant, and a cryptic, "Majoring in mathematics. Judge me."

The campus confessonals teem with references to specific dorms, classes, fraternities and traditions, giving them an intimate, gossip-over-coffee feel. Many have also become forums for posting secret crushes: "To the boy in Art History with the long hair and blue shoes. You're so cute!"

The pages can also offer a lifeline to struggling students.

"I want to pass on hope to people who feel like they don't have any," said Stephanie Suchecki, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay who makes a point of responding to the most wrenching posts.

Moments of compassion, however, are often swamped by the lewd and the crude - just how some confession junkies like it.

An administrator of the Arizona State University confessions site recently goaded readers to ramp up their revelations: "What happened to your crazy stories?! Hook ups gone bad?! Party gone crazy?! Come on guys! This is ASU!"

(Reporting by Stephanie Simon in Boston; Editing by Jonathan Weber, Tiffany Wu and Tim Dobbyn)