

Erin Baker-Burgoon, PhD — Social Psychologist

A FRIEND INDEED

Erin Baker-Burgoon was finishing her doctoral degree at the University of Texas when a fellow student submitted her resume (without a cover letter) directly to the Facebook recruiting team. “I went through the interview process and was really impressed by the people and the company’s mission, which is to make the world more open and connected,” Baker-Burgoon says. “It was clear that they were passionate about improving people’s lives by finding better ways to help users connect with each other.”

APPLYING PSYCHOLOGY TO FACEBOOK’S HUMONGOUS DATASETS

In graduate school, Baker-Burgoon learned a lot about survey methodology, including how people think about questions and how to avoid confirmation bias, or the tendency to ask questions to get a preconceived answer. This training has made her a valuable asset in guarding against misleading study results. “I make sure we know whether we launched something people actually like. I’m careful about how to ask people about their preference between the new and old products and I account for the fact that the new one is unfamiliar,” she said.

One technique for that is doing two sentiment surveys. Before a new product is launched, for example, she asks people using an old product how they feel about it. After the new product launched, she asks how much they like or dislike the new version of the product. Then she does a statistical analysis to measure which product provides a more likable service. “By using this method, we avoid making a direct comparison, which can lead to misleading results,” she says.

FROM SOCIAL PSYCH TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Before joining Facebook, Baker-Burgoon received a PhD in social psychology from University of Texas at Austin where she primarily studied social and cognitive influences on prosocial behavior (e.g., volunteerism and making donations) and what language makes for better, less hurtful social rejections. While writing her dissertation, she completed a 10-month internship at Hewlett-Packard Autonomy in marketing research and development, where she created machine learning algorithms to capture consumer online behaviors.

She started working at Facebook in July 2014. “I had to adapt to working at a fast pace, and there is a really good mentorship program that helped with the adjustment to the non-academic environment,” she says. “Having the ability to work for a company that can reach more than a billion people is really exciting to me, and I get to do this with colleagues who are really smart, passionate people.”



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SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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