

Identity and Behavior in Social Media Spaces:
An Analysis of the Popularity and Complexities of Community on
Social Media Websites

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Table of Contents	Page
Abstract	1
Introduction	2
Literature Review	5
Methods	17
Analysis	19
Conclusion	25
References	28
Survey Questionnaire	30
Results	32

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Abstract

Social media, according to one definition, “includes any digital environment built on the contributions of and interactions among people” (Hirschorn 2007). It is a collaborative effort, an example of social media or social software, since it enables users to participate and interact with each other. Keeping in touch has never been considered so easy with the rise of these platforms, and the ability to make new “friends”—old, young, halfway across the world, with radically different lifestyles—also is instantly easier, because one is not bound by traditional boundaries, whether that be geographic, age, race, or physical. People often feel a sense of freedom online, since they are only limited by their imagination and their internet connection, so they engage in behaviors that blur the line between public and private, and continue to do so until otherwise affronted with a reason not to. Being online also means having a somewhat public identity (Sheppard 2007; Nussbaum 2007), and the more people integrate their online lives into their offline ones, and vice versa, the more likely a divide between the two will disappear. After all, many people already move fluidly between the two, and do not think of having two separate identities, an online and an offline one. Studies continue to show that online behaviors merely reflect offline ones, although online people increasingly document and reveal more aspects about their lives and themselves than ever before. That is a result of changing notions of privacy; in a mediated culture where people are used to being watched, the idea of performing for an ever-ready audience, no matter who, has infiltrated many people’s behavior. Everyone might want to be a star, but they also want the ability to control what others see about them, which is why social media sites that incorporate substantial privacy features tend to do well.

A survey done by the author supports the statements that privacy is not really an issue for many people, since they already feel they control the information that others read about them, and that their online lives reflect their offline ones; they tend to not go out looking for strangers to validate their existence online.

Introduction

The internet has unlimited potential, and one of the biggest areas of growth online now revolves around social media. Social media encompasses many enterprises, but at its core connects users with each other, to share ideas, text, or media. Social networking sites are one component of social media, in that users build up buddies based around similar interests.

Social media is still a very new term, and the use and definition of the word changes. However, people's behaviors regarding the technology do not change; this paper explores the reactions and behaviors used within the technology. Being social online—or rather, interacting in some version of an online community—is a completely different experience than interacting in person, and each community has its own lingo. Sometimes the terms associated with a particular medium, like Facebook friending, break out of the community box and become known within the larger culture. Terms like “friend” and “network” have become both nouns and verbs, and their meaning changes depending upon the context; online, they mean something completely different than their established definitions.

Social media, according to one definition, “includes any digital environment built on the contributions of and interactions among people” (Hirschorn 2007). It is constantly evolving, with newer and newer software being developed that connects users in some fashion, letting them interact and exchange information. Many-to-many publishing, which is what podcasts and blogs and vlogs do, is information of a sort (video, audio, text) made by many, distributed to many through a specific channel, as listed above. Wikis, the most famous being the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, are places where a community can add, edit, and remove content, usually around a particular subject. It is a collaborative effort, an example of social media or social software, since it enables users to participate and interact with each other.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is the term used to describe the way people communicate using online technology, often using such popular websites and software like MySpace, Facebook and AOL Instant Messenger to do so. These tools are a subset of social media, in that they connect users to each other and allow them to share opinions and flaunt their identity in the form of profiles. Depending on the website, profiles can be as highly developed as a customized car, with graphics, bright colors, and music attached, or can just a list a person's interests or favorite sayings.

Because social media is above all connecting people to other people, the people who make up these sites and use this technology are considered a community, and they have certain behaviors. Technology that affords people greater connectivity has its downsides, of course, since the ability to talk without interacting face-to-face leads to a whole host of behaviors that are usually labeled as antisocial, including passive-aggressiveness and stalking, two behaviors that are well known to users who frequently engage in social media. However, keeping in touch has never been considered so easy with the rise of these platforms, and the ability to make new "friends"—old, young, halfway across the world, with radically different lifestyles—also is instantly easier, because one is not bound by traditional boundaries, whether that be geographic, age, race, or physical. People often feel a sense of freedom online, since they are only limited by their imagination and their internet connection, so they engage in behaviors that blur the line between public and private, and continue to do so until otherwise affronted with a reason not to.

Thanks to these new communication technologies, the nature of communication has changed. For many people, not being connected to a computer feels outside the bounds of society; they are at a loss as to what is going on in the outside world, even if the outside world is their own little bubble. Many of the behaviors discussed in this paper became present when users

began using social media platforms, and indeed the implications and behaviors of users are still being studied. What are becoming hallmarks of the young generation now—the multitasking, the short attention spans, the craving for some sort of “fame”—are side effects of the technologies that they use. Marshall McLuhan claimed that “the channels of communication are the primary cause of cultural change” (Griffin 315), since they facilitate the changes within other elements of society, like family structures and schooling. After all, people use social media to take pictures of the monument they visited on their school trip, talk over AIM how long the trip took, and watch interactive video beforehand to get a sense of what they are going to see. The idea that technology controls social change is called technological determinism, since it is the medium used that changes the message and how the message is conveyed. Those that argue that a generation gap is really a communication gap (Griffin 320) agree, since different groups are unable to understand exactly why others use a particular medium to convey a message, and this causes confusion. This is reinforced by the surveys I have conducted and the research done, since many adults do not understand the point of having a LiveJournal or posting videos on YouTube. However, this will quickly change, as these technologies, and social media in particular, will continue to infiltrate people’s lives, and people will grow used to having an online identity as an extension of their offline life.

Literature Review

Research on social media is very new, and much of it is in the popular press; it is the current media that explore and publicize trends that are occurring in today’s world, and then later the academics pick it up and study it thoroughly. Literature on some forms of social media—MySpace, AIM—and the background on performance, identity, and theoretical concepts related to voyeurism and community is available. Salience of social ties, another important aspect

related to online communication, was also important, as it reflects reasons why people use certain types of websites. In order to understand people's reactions and behavior towards these technologies, research in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and nonverbal behavior must be done, as well as some studies in social psychology, specifically the online disinhibition effect, which is the idea that when someone is online they are not physically seen, and depending upon the technology can respond later on, might be anonymous or semi-anonymous, and so act differently, freer from the constraints of a polite and civil society.

A large portion of studying people's interaction with social media involves studying psychology, and basic personality traits. Although the internet has long been associated with lonely individuals lurking through the dark recesses of what is out there and chatting with people, looking to find anyone, that is hardly the case. One positive factor of the internet in social interactions is because the internet is anonymous, users do not share in physical or proximal contact with others. In this regard, they feel they are safe and in a protective environment, and so certain type of individuals, mainly introverted and neurotic ones, feel they can express themselves more freely online than in an offline relationship (Amichai-Hamburger 2005, 29). "For the most part people only know what you tell them about yourself," explains John Suler, a professor of psychology at Rider University, when describing the online disinhibition effect, the term for the discrepancy between what people say online and what they will say face-to-face. How does this affect how people behave in online groups?

A group is defined as two or more individuals who feel they belong to a common social unit that has its own identity (Amichai-Hamburger 2005, 194). Groups are naturally formed, and exist depending on various social bonds, whether by location, interest, or other commonality. They can be wanted or unwanted (people form groups as friends, or artificially by being packed

in a classroom, chosen by others). Online manifestations of groups tend to be voluntary, because of the nature of the internet: people join sites based on interests, and if they like the community, often participate, whether by posting on a message board, uploading photos, or writing a blog. Group behavior has been consistently studied, but online group studies are relatively new. However, studies have shown that group behavior is consistent whether online or offline; that is, people tend to follow the usual behavior patterns offline and online (Amichai-Hamburger 2005, 67). Prosocial behavior, that is, social behavior like interacting positively within groups and maintaining relationships, also resembles offline activities as well, and that is consistent with all forms of research (Amichai-Hamburger 2005; Haythornthwaite 2005).

Outside communities can be strengthened by a web presence just as much as a web presence can be strengthened by outside interaction. Communities, groups, are made up of individual connections that form ties, and multiple ties form groups. Social networks are different sets of social ties, and the ties maintained range by type of exchanges, frequency of exchanges, level of intimacy, and length of the relationship, and can vary by levels of strength (Haythornthwaite 2005, 127). Within groups there are different strength levels of relationships; person A might be closer to person B even though she has known person C longer, and person C and B might dislike each other, even if they both are friends with A, for example. Online, while all three members might be Facebook friends and have overlapping social circles, they may keep in touch with varying degrees. What is notable in online communities nowadays, especially among software that makes it easier to keep in touch, is that relationships vary among strength, and that while maintaining relationships has gotten somewhat easier in that a quick message can be sent with little effort, real, strong relationships still take work.

The strength of weak ties theory, the idea that saying hello to the friends and acquaintances that populate the outer edge of a life, is true in many online relationships because minimal effort is used to keep up the relationship. Strong ties are close friends and family, people where a lot of effort is used, and social and emotional support is a given, where with weak ties, friendships are not as deep. (Haythornthwaite, 2005, p. 127, 135, 138). Online communities, specifically sites that are meant to connect “friends”, like MySpace and Facebook, “facilitate maintenance of strong bonds as well as the creation of weak ones”, and can “crystallize relationships that otherwise might remain ephemeral” (Ellison et al. 2006, 29), since people can keep track of others they might only have met a handful of times, if at all. Latent ties are those where people are aware of each other (have heard about each other through mutual friends or acquaintances, viewed a profile of theirs available through a public network), but have not met socially; network-enhancing or supporting structures, like Facebook, allow users to convert these latent ties to weak ties by the simple act of adding them to their network, “friending” them (Ellison et al., 2006, 29).

People can say they have friends within an online community, even if they have never met that particular person; they feel an affinity for them, based on their interaction and often mutual interests and attitudes. In discussion groups, participants who report being motivated by community or group interest often provide the most valuable contributions (Amichai-Hamburger 2005, 147). Those that feel they get the most out of being in a specific community feel they have a role to play, and are validated by this role, so they work actively to continue to provide support or otherwise fulfill that role. “A sense of community obligation rather than individual gratification might promote active involvement with others” (Amichai-Hamburger 2005, 75) and this will be tested out once studies are done on sites like Wikipedia, and on gaming, role-playing

communities like Second Life, where people create avatars and interact with others. Even a site where reviews are integral to the success of a company, like Amazon, has a whole community of users who post and criticize products, and that is replicated in thousands of other websites, from entertainment reviews (Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic) to hotels to pet care. Often people who post the most feel they have a social obligation to reveal their opinions, since at a certain juncture they have a name within the community and are expected to deliver something.

Traditional civic engagement has declined within the last decade (Putnam 2000), but that is because a portion of that has moved online. While the voting process for federal and local elections has not moved online, campaigning has to a degree, and news and information about a candidate certainly has. “Civic life is inherently public,” argues social researcher danah boyd (Sheppard, 2007) and she and Putnam make the case that people will transpose the political issues that matter to them to online platforms, because they will have a wider audience and that it is inherently easier to do so than to take part in a traditional march. Being online also means having a somewhat public identity (Sheppard 2007; Nussbaum 2007), and the more people integrate their online lives into their offline ones, and vice versa, the more likely a divide between the two will disappear. After all, many people already move fluidly between the two, and do not think of having two separate identities, an online and an offline one. Studies continue to show that online behaviors merely reflect offline ones; those that are gregarious and social in real life tend to be so online (Amichai-Hamburger 30, 2005), and their interests echo that too: people who are interested in cars spend their online time researching cars as well. Many social media sites can be called “digital publics”, in that they are online hangouts, filling in for what used to be the playground or the mall, especially for young people (Sheppard 2007; Bowley

2006). Here is where people show off, converse, discuss, argue, and share, where gossip is exchanged and where battles are fought, just in a wholly different realm.

As the media has increasingly broadcast “behind-the-scenes” regarding entertainment, as well as going undercover for sensational news broadcasts, the public has gotten used to peeking in, viewing in places where traditionally they would not have been allowed. That has continued with the rise of online diaries like Xanga and LiveJournal, and adding blogs, vlogs, and profiles on sites ranging from Flickr to MySpace, where people post and arrange information, from the scandalous to the mundane, letting anyone with access find out just what is going on in someone’s life. Seeing people fall apart on *The Real World* and announce who and what they hate in confessionals on an array of television shows has given people the freedom to do the same in similar forums, even if they are not on television. Hey, if they really want to, they can make themselves the star of their own show, broadcasting in segments on YouTube or on Vimeo, another video-sharing site. “Our desire to watch sustains a sense of community when we watch the same messages,” write Clay Calvert (2000, 233), since by connecting online through various communication mediums, we are bridging the (physical) gap that modern society has imposed on us.

The internet is another type of media, and in a mediated world, for some it feels true to find truth in mediated contexts, and that includes what is read and viewed in websites. “In the so-called information age, the knowledge that is gained from gazing at others’ lives may provide us with a sense of power and control in our own lives,” writes Calvert (2000, 69), and that is true. Looking at profiles online, a person not only feels informed, but that he knows something that others may not, even if everyone can view the profile. After all, profiles can change, and not everyone bothers to read them, since “the voyeur is the taker of information” and knows that the

individual is being watched by them, something that person does not necessarily know. (Calvert 2000, 69) Being a viewer can lend people confidence, since they might be in possession of a secret (even if it is an “open” secret). Internet voyeurism, in the form of reading strangers’ blogs (or even friends’) or by viewing profiles, can open readers to different attitudes and lifestyles, opening up the world. By keeping informed, even if just by awareness, a person can feel connected, actively involved.

Social media sites work best when “they facilitate behavior that people already engage in” (Hirschorn 2007). That is because they not only connect people to other users, by interest, location, or organization, but they build into habits people already use. The idea for Facebook, for example, was an online version of a student directory for college students, where they can see others with the same major, classes, and dorms; it is an easier way for people to check out and remember other people. It was useful, and filled a niche that students now have turned into a whole new way of communicating.

At first, sites like Six Degrees and Friendster, early “social-networking” websites, were touted as a way to meet new people, scroll for strangers and befriend the ones that looked interesting; find friends of friends, acquaintances from all areas of a person’s life. However, with that strategy came the deluge of complaints and fears of strangers and perverts masquerading as young adults, taking advantage of unsuspecting, naïve youngsters. While to a small degree that is true, and will always be true that websites like those can be used for harm, the majority of the people on sites like this do not go on to meet people; that is a side effect. By joining YouTube and Digg, the news-sharing site, people go online to share knowledge, to spread their homemade videos where they parody the latest pop hit, or to introduce others to a columnist they love. It is more than just telling people about it, because these are platforms

where a much wider audience—friends, acquaintances, work buddies, family members, buddies you only know through a particular website, random strangers who accidentally come across your page—all can access the information. Amateur videos, as well as other forms of expression, like art and essays, now have a venue where they can be viewed by like-minded people, or those inclined to see works like that. Showcasing talent, even showing off, might be one reason why people post things, but for many, it's just about sharing, connecting with other users and expanding minds. In a letter to a *Nation* article on social media, “Millions and millions of people are making the most of opportunities to create something they think is interesting, and they're using technology to let both friends and strangers take a look at what they've done. They're making videos, recording songs, publishing rants, revealing secrets—and the best thing is, they're generally having a damn good time doing it.” (Colin Delany, letter, *The Nation*, 2007)

There is a whole contingent of writing on social media, often called Web 2.0 because platform-sharing and many-to-many publishing, including wikis and podcasts, is considered the next generation of the internet. Some of it focuses on the “micro-celebrity” aspect of it, the idea that everybody wants to become famous, because when people pay attention to you, and you gain an element of notoriety (even among just a relatively small number), you are famous. A blog, a LiveJournal, is linked to a site like MySpace or Facebook, or even in other profile entries on other sites, including chatting mediums like AIM. Strangers and friends are invited to read personal details. Some may comment. There is an audience there, and the person who is publishing this material may even be able to track down exactly who is reading his thoughts.

If someone is not online, then they do not exist. Having accounts on various websites is not only a form of staying connected to others, but, depending upon the context, offers validation (in the form of comments, or “love”), recognition, of having a place in the current culture

(Chaudhry 2007), even if it is just one little private webpage out of billions. “In essence, every young person in America has become, in the literal sense, a public figure,” writes Emily Nussbaum (2007). For many people, being watched is a good thing; it means there is an audience, that people care. In his book on voyeurism, Clay Calvert (2000) writes that “our sense of self is fulfilled by others watching our actions” (47), and that has only become more true with the idea that living an online life is a performance, that there is always an audience there, if an invisible one (Sheppard 2007), because content, once online, can stay there forever, and as such, anyone can access it at anytime, long after the person who put up the original message forgets about it.

Privacy is a social construction (Calvert 2000, 78), and as notions of privacy have changed within recent years, so has the content of information people share. Young people especially are notorious for oversharing, of telling too many intimate and personal details, and being online, being anonymous or semi-anonymous, adds to the feeling of saying anything. With features like the tagging option on Facebook, where people are marked and identified in photos (similar features are available at other sites too), even people who do not make themselves public become public themselves. Nussbaum (2007), Chayko (2002), Twenge (2006), and Amichai-Hamburger (2005) all acknowledge that the current culture is heavily mediated and tracked, whether by E-Z pass, digital video recorders or just an ATM card, and that “your life is being lived in public whether you choose to acknowledge it or not”, as Nussbaum (2007) puts it, so that in an environment like this young people have embraced the lack of a true private life, and have gone in the opposite direction—becoming a star in their own little worlds. Performance is key, and anyone who is online, the argument goes, is performing to a degree, whether through

information published in a profile or an away message deconstructing the sender's emotional state or whereabouts, because they want others to see what is going on with them.

“Information preserves” is the idea that people expect to control a set of facts about themselves (Calvert 2000, 79). One reason why Facebook has become so popular is because of the privacy settings, the limits set forth by both users and the company as a whole; competitor MySpace has a creepier vibe because anything and anyone goes. Self-disclosure is defined by what individuals reveal about themselves to others, including thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Calvert 2000, 83), and while in a public, less private society there might seem to be the feeling that everyone must tell everyone everything, people do expect to control the information that others see; it is just that people are revealing more than previous generations thought was proper or acceptable, and those who tell everything choose to do so. In essence, they are presenting, showcasing themselves. The majority of online sites that let users have profiles contain an “about me” section, where users are encouraged, just like in many applications and in school, to tell others something about themselves. This is a frustrating, exacerbating exercise, constantly in flux for many people, for they have to present a version of themselves to others, ready to be judged if necessary. People do this to clarify what others think about them, as well as a form of social validation, in the hope that others will offer their opinions on their own opinions. Having a presence online and interacting with others naturally develops relationships, since information exchange is a form of friendship. Releasing certain information to certain people is also a form of social control, since that is the selection of what information to reveal in order to influence others' opinions. (Calvert 2000, 83-84) Having privacy settings lets the control rest on the user of who has access to what information, and helps separate weak ties from strong ties, from work friends from school friends.

In reading the literature, many commentators note that in a few years, many social media sites will become old hat, a “commodity function” (Hirschorn 2007) that everyone is used to. This has become true for many inventions, from the telephone to the cell phone, that once something saturates the market enough and is useful and pragmatic, it will be adopted by the masses and then become just another piece of modern life. However, no one is really sure how long this phenomenon will last, if it will be as important to these same people once they grow up and have families of their own. John Cassidy writes in his article on Facebook that on social media sites, the purpose is not necessarily to “network” in the traditional sense; that can be a side effect (Nussbaum 2007), but the purpose is to “see and be seen...it’s just about mingling”, a way of hanging out. Once other responsibilities take precedence, the availability of free time to just cruise various social media—and to take part in them—may diminish. This is not to say that everyone who participates in varied communities like Wikipedia and YouTube are all youngsters without families or commitments, but that the large majority of those fit that mold, and that as this generation grows up and technologies like podcasts and blogs become as old-fashioned as email, or the television has become, the likelihood and study of social media effectiveness could diminish.

Working online has become both extremely efficient and extremely distracting. Studies on computer-mediated communication (CMC) have followed how people interact and behave in mediated environments. CMC is generally used to define any type of communication between individuals using computer-mediated formats, like email and instant messages. The method of communication is important, just as much as what and how people are expressing themselves through the technology. CMC encompasses a variety of forms of social media, including wikis, video, and blogs, since users can respond to other users and their content.

Because those that engage in CMC do not see or hear the person or persons they are speaking to, understanding the basics of nonverbal communication is crucial, as applying those concepts is necessary in understanding the behaviors that underline the uses of social media. A hallmark of CMC is that it can be preserved; emails, IMs, posts, and other forms of contact can be archived, either saved on a particular server or downloaded onto a person's private computer, sent to other people, and copied and pasted into other formats, sometimes un-cited, which is causing problems in publishing and academia. This is called persistence, since the information stays, and replicability, because the information can be copied and reprinted in another format (Sheppard 2007).

Another feature of CMC is the absence of facial tics, social cues, tones, and other nonverbal behaviors that are a necessity in face-to-face interaction. These involuntary movements are what gives speech and people personality, and can distinguish the real meaning of a phrase, whereas online remarks often need to be followed by some sort of emoticon or internet phrase like "lol" to indicate sarcasm, a joke, or otherwise tone or intent of the statement. This invisibility adds to the feeling of freedom that many users feel, enabling them to talk in ways they may not under face-to-face contact, called the online disinhibition effect.

Methods

I sent out surveys to various groups using Luminus, an online platform for professors and students to use to contact those in their classes and in different social and cultural groups, usually based around clubs and intramurals. Since it was sent by email, my name was attached, which could be one reason why certain people, especially seniors, responded, since they knew me. I

received over 75 responses. Most of these questions came from my own online experience, and I was looking specifically for how long people had been online in relation to their behaviors, if they felt that being involved online was a benefit or a hindrance, how accurate they felt they were represented, and if media coverage of certain behaviors is true. This included notions on privacy and the online disinhibition effect.

Since this paper is on social media as a whole, I wanted to expand my focus to the most popular domains like YouTube and Wikipedia. However, because these sites are still pretty new, many respondents either have not heard of them or do not have an account on them, although some answered they used them, but did not participate. Friendster, a precursor to MySpace and Facebook, had quite a lot of buzz several years ago, but quickly was overtaken by those sites, so that its usefulness, at least among this demographic, has faded. Only a fraction of my respondents had an account there, and they said it was inactive.

Reading responses, I, as usual, wanted to ask more questions. For people who answered “no” to feeling part of a group if they were online, I wanted to ask them why they joined networks, and went online. It might be out of habit, a way to check on other people’s whereabouts, leave their own messages. One question that I should have asked, which I feel would have made a huge difference in tracking these questions, is how often respondents used the technology. Do those who use AIM and Facebook constantly (the two technologies that are most common here) feel they overtake their life? Are they more likely to use it because their friends use it too? Why did people join these sites to begin with? I suspect that people joined because others joined; their friends encouraged or asked them to sign up. Eventually, as a large number of people were on the sites, it became, as people wrote down in their surveys, a topic of conversation, and once events, pictures and other things were added to Facebook and with free

high-speed Internet access at school, AIM was omnipresent, commonplace and somewhat necessary to exist in this environment.

The problem with asking about social media is not only is the term still somewhat undefined, in terms of what exactly constitutes a site, but that many of the other social media sites, or digital publics, as they are sometimes called, exist in small, tight-knit communities, and many people are unaware of them or do not participate. Take LiveJournal an example. Only a small percentage of people who took my survey professed to having an account, and they were split in half by usefulness—there were people who had it for several years and used it regularly, and the other half who had one often had it for only a few months or if had one rarely used it, showing that other people in the networks had other ways of finding information about them not dependant on that community. However, there are some circles where these online diaries are very big. This might have passed (considering that many of those who had LJs had them for three years or more, there probably was a time when that was “fashionable”, and those who really liked the medium or had strong ties within the medium stuck with it). This might be the wave of the future—people have several accounts across a wide variety of social platforms, and depending upon the strength and type of community they are involved in, will become invested in a few and fade out the others. The same will happen when new ones form, where there will be buzz about a particular site, and then it will fade. MySpace is arguably having this problem now. Although people still continue to join in record numbers, it is losing ground to Facebook for some people, and many people are “over it”, finding it too creepy.

Analysis

A larger portion than I expected answered negatively for the question on their social networks. The idea behind social media sites, some often called social networking, is to connect

with a larger group of people and keep all these contacts or friends together, and in essence, have a larger social group online (since under a site like MySpace all of one's friends, no matter the different social spheres, can be grouped together). However, responses were pretty much split evenly, suggesting that people did not feel this was the case.

Research continues to support the idea that those who are extroverted are also extroverted online, and so have greater social networks online compared to introverted users (Amichai-Hamburger 2005). This is reinforced by the surveys, as many users report using their online life to support their offline one. While my surveys did not take into account personality differences, an important note, it is known that those with large numbers of friends on Facebook accounts tend to be very outgoing and social people, and as such do indeed know a large number of people of whom to friend.

When looking at these questions, especially since I asked when people started going online for the different technologies in regard to their online life as a whole, I feel that because a good portion of respondents have been going online for a good portion of their lives (indeed, for many people their entire high school and college lives have been lived online, although this is obviously in far greater detail for students younger than those born in the mid-1980s) they are used to it. This is incredibly important, and underlies nearly all the questions I asked. Many of those who answered no in regard to their social networks did so because they are only friends with those people who they know in real life, so they feel that their networks are the same. Conversely, some who said yes did so because they were able to keep in touch with people they would otherwise have not had the technologies or means not existed, so their networks are bigger because of that. As one respondent put it, "The sites kinda feed into already existing social networks," adding that they could arguably be strengthened because of them, which refers to the

literature on the strength of weak ties. Relationships that otherwise would have faded away when people relocated can be kept up with little effort. This also reinforces the fact that online engagement reflects offline engagement; many respondents said that their friends online, whether on Facebook, AIM or other sites, were usually people they interacted with in real life anyway and they would not want to meet or talk to strangers.

The idea that the sites just reinforce existing networks goes against the popular assumption of what social networking sites are designed to do, how they are often represented, as a place where people can meet other people and explore similar interests. The only time that was brought in up in surveys was under the benefits section, where people who are looking for people with “alternative” interests were able to find those with similar attitudes. “Finding communities that are otherwise hidden” is a benefit to those eager to explore, just as it is true, as one respondent put it, that “you can meet more people with the same interests as you when you’re not just limited to your local area”; both of these reasons are commonly attributed to the popularity of these sites, although this does not seem to be the case.

So much publicity has been given to the dangers of these sites that the real use of them has been overlooked. Privacy, and the lack thereof, is constantly being referenced whenever modern communication is brought up, how so many people broadcast their life for strangers to see. Yet, since less than half answered in the affirmative saying they felt their privacy had diminished with the popularity of the web, it can be inferred that many people take warnings of privacy seriously and monitor what they put out. Indeed, many respondents, especially those who answered no, said that because they control the information that others see, it is up the individual person to decide what is too much, just as much as it is a choice to belong to these networks. As many noted, by having a profile and participating in these sites they are allowing others to see

what they are putting out there, so if they are bothered by privacy settings then they should either restrict information further or not join at all. “I can block people or change my privacy settings. I also don’t put anything out there that I don’t want others to see. Some people feel like privacy is an issue, but we have options. People should use discretion when posting things online,” wrote one respondent. Many felt that those who had an issue with privacy were those who let it become an issue.

Some people did find being online intrusive, and a few specifically listed Facebook’s mini-feed as disturbing, because it offered information about people they did not care about whenever it was available. “When I don’t feel like being connected any more I walk away,” wrote one respondent. This leads to more questions, like how much is too much, and of course, how often, and how much, are people online? I suspect there is a huge gap between those who use the internet frequently to chat and to talk to other people, and those that do not. Are people who are in constant contact with others more likely to engage in specific behaviors? I suspect that answer is true, that there is quite a difference between those that are active and those that do not care for the practice, even within the same population or age group. Despite the popular media’s presentation of people who are online frequently, not everyone does it, especially not all young people. Being tethered to a computer is one side effect of being in constant contact, since you are letting people know you are available to talk or be notified of something, but that is limiting to many people.

Overall, it is clear from the surveys that many respondents’ online lives were so ingrained into their overall life that they were not surprised and somewhat bored with the questions. There were people who never thought about privacy with regard to the way they behaved online, which is probably why there has been so much media attention on the dangers of posting information

online. All the early warnings about not putting an address or a phone number are usually heeded, and those surveyed understood implicitly the dangers of being online; they have been grilled on this for years.

The most widely mentioned benefit to all these communication portals is having the ability to keep in touch with people. Even if they do not live far away, being able to idly chat—or, in many cases, scheduling meetings for various groups, like school, club, or sport-related—keeps relationships intact. One girl spoke of how the internet was really the only way she was able to keep in touch with friends and family when she studied abroad. Between the time difference and the expensive rates for overseas phone service, the internet's fast connection and time delays, the medium served her needs well, and she was able to show people what exactly she was doing in a timely manner. In fact, instantaneous communication (like AIM), or the asynchronicity of email and content-sharing websites like Flickr allowed users to communicate with people in group settings, and strengthened weak ties temporarily.

The role that the internet plays in people's lives now is very great, and now that the internet has gotten more interactive, with blogs, wikis, and other social media sites, people are integrating both their online and offline lives. Since so many people take pains to present an accurate portion of themselves online, judging by the responses to my last question, I wanted to know if people do bring up online topics like away messages and wall postings, and if the reaction is positive. Obviously, because the information is up there, others can see it—often it is put up there so others can see it—so is it ok if it is referenced face-to-face? The majority of respondents said they received positive responses when they did refer to something someone said online offline. As one girl put it, “it's what the person wants us to find out about them, so they expect us to talk about it.” It all goes back to the notion of what is put online is meant to be seen

by other people—you are in charge of how others see you; you are presenting a version of yourself to others, so if they get the wrong impression, it is your fault for not accurately representing yourself. Of course, for some people it is impossible to accurately represent themselves online through avatars and the like; some respondents did not believe that to be possible, because they are too complicated and ever-changing to fit in such a limiting platform. They need to be known, personally, to have a real relationship with others to be understood.

A little less than half of respondents say they do say things online they would not in person. This goes back to the online disinhibition effect. Although there is little research, and I would have been unable to track this in my survey itself, on different personalities and correspond them with behaviors online, there must be factors that distinguish why one person would fall prey to acting provocative or passive aggressive, precisely because they know that their face would not give them away. “I hate confrontation and being online makes it easier,” writes one survey respondent. She, like 45 other respondents, agreed she sometimes got into fights or misunderstandings online because the exact nature of what is said gets misinterpreted without vocal or facial inflections. Another respondent understood the replication and persistence qualities of online communication as described by boyd (Sheppard 2007): “written record, so you can’t just fudge it and say, ‘Well, I meant...’ because someone has right at their fingertips what you said.” Although my question on saving messages and away messages was not clear enough (some just said “their own”), 42 said yes, indicating that there are instances where people save notable messages, whether sentimental, funny, or just those that have personal relevance. These are conversations, conversations that are recorded, conversations that otherwise would have faded detail-wise, but now can be reread and repeated years down the line, having emotional implications not fully studied yet.

Stalking was only mentioned by a few respondents, as a benefit of being constantly connected, since stalking is a way of keeping in touch, keeping up-to-date on someone's life, just like checking out a person's profile is. In Bonacci's (2006) and Nastri et al.'s (2006) studies on AIM away messages and profiles, they found that people would sign on just to check out what other people were up to, not even to chat. While this is a version of stalking, it is also a way to alleviate boredom and to find out exactly what other people are doing, whether or not those people are in proximate distance to the person reading the messages. Again, it is the idea that keeping up with people can be done with minimal effort or hassle.

Conclusion

Social media is an ever-changing term that encompasses dozens of sites that allow users to participate within a community. They are interactive, where people post, share, link, connect, talk, view, and comment on others, and reach across a variety of mediums, platforms and content. They can be games, like World of Warcraft or Second Life, places to hang out and collect friends, like MySpace and Facebook, areas to study, learn, and read, like Wikipedia and Digg, spaces to watch and upload videos and performances, like YouTube and Vimeo, open forums to confess and confuse, like Xanga and LiveJournal. They are known as digital publics, because people can hang out in these spaces online, and are also referred to collectively as Web 2.0, for they are called the wave of the future. While their popularity and effectiveness is still debated, some sites are hugely successful and others are just starting out, but all are havens of community where people join to interact with others.

Although ostensibly the province of the young, that remains to be seen, as the young grow up and lead new mediated lives. These sites attract curious people connecting with others, even if those others are people they already know, as well as people who have the free time to

engage in such pastimes. Living in such a mediated environment, where everybody knows every little detail about everyone, has encouraged people to open up their private lives to the public. There is always an audience who wants to read a profile in some fashion; this invisible, always available audience gives people a reason to post things online, even if those who read it read it later. People are performing to a degree online, and as people recognize the privacy invasion of doing so, want privacy controls so that they can limit what exactly people read and see about them.

The internet has also changed the level and types of communication, since people are no longer bound by time or proximity. Posts and messages can be easily saved, replicated, copied and repeated to others and for future use, lending permanence to anything said over these types of mediums. Without facial cues and personality tics, information can easily be misinterpreted, lending misunderstandings to often simple exchanges. The lack of such features also lends people to behave in ways they would not normally, since they do not have to show their face and are free from such things as embarrassment and stuttering.

Online engagement in such sites tends to reflect offline interests. Most people do not find their lives to be invaded by technology, feeling they have control to show others who they are, and are not worried about privacy or perverts, things the media often trumpets when discussing social media. Instead, the world that social media spaces inhabits is positive with unlimited potential, ready to expand the networks of users, offering them creative ways of connecting and interacting with others.

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Social Media Questionnaire

Age

Year in school:

The majority are Yes or No questions.

Do you have a Facebook?

MySpace?

Livejournal (or equivalent—Xanga, etc.)

Blog?

Aim SN?

Account on YouTube?

Friendster?

Flickr?

Digg?

How long have you had each of these accounts? (approximately—be specific when you name the site—ex. MySpace for 2 years, Facebook since 2005)

--since they started

--3 months or less

--4-6 months

--6mos-1 year

--1-2 years

3+

5+ years

When did you start online? (approx.)

Do you ever comment in real life (face-to-face) on a person's away message/profile/Facebook/MySpace/other online posting?

Why?

Has their reaction been positive or negative?

Do you save away messages/posts?

Do you feel more included (part of a group) when connected, in terms of being online?

Do you say things online that you would not say in person?

Do you ever get in fights or misunderstandings online?

Do you ever put information up online specifically for others to see (ex. Not just a general “profile” but specific info)?

Why?

Have you gotten in trouble for it?

What benefits do you see in being constantly connected?

Do you feel your sense of privacy has diminished, with regard to online networks?

Do you find your social network(s) are bigger because you belong to these sites?

Do you feel that you are accurately represented by your online trails (ex. avatars, profiles, etc)?

Survey Results

The vast majority of those surveys were seniors in college (44), with 19 juniors. With the exception of a few people, everyone was between 19 and 23 years old.

Out of 75, 70 had a Facebook account. The same number had an AIM screenname. MySpace is far less popular by half, with only 38 people having an account. A few people said they used to have one but deleted it at some point, because they did not need it, took up too much time, and often spammed their email accounts.

Facebook came to Ramapo February of 2005; 26 people said they've had an account "since it started", with another 11 people responding they have had one for over two years. Since the majority of respondents were seniors, it can be inferred that most of those who've had them for this long were seniors, especially as it was only recently that people outside of college could get accounts.

Combining the results for LiveJournals and Blogs (one respondent believed they were the same thing), 22 had them, although a few considered them to be the same. A few also had accounts that were inactive or only had them for a short period of time. Those that had LJ accounts tended to have them for a long time, while those people who specifically blogged had them for an average of six months.

Respondents answered when they started online in a myriad of ways. Thirteen listed "middle school", which, judging by the age of the respondents would be around the late 1990s. One person put high school, and one person put "age 10". One started in 1989, by the far the earliest (although this particular respondent was in her 40s), one in 1993. Seven started in 1995, three in 1996, nine in 1997, five in 1998, six in 1999. Only 5 started between 2000 and 2006.

The correlation with AIM was similar. Ten people have been using some form of the chat service for over ten years, with seven for 10 years exactly, and 32 for over five. Five put "middle school", which depending on their ages, puts them anywhere between 7-8 years to over ten years of use. Three had it for two years, three between 1-2 years, three for 3+, and two for less than a year.

Do you ever comment in real life (face-to-face) on a person's away message/profile/Facebook/MySpace/other online posting?

Yes 60

No 12

Most common reasons were if a comment was funny or particularly noteworthy, out of concern if the message was worrisome, or for understanding or background information about the message.

Has their reaction been positive or negative?

Yes 56

Negative 11

Neutral 5

Some people put “it depends” or both, so marks were added to both columns. The majority said positive because “message are up so other people will comment”.

Do you save away messages/posts?

Yes 42

No 29

Many said they saved their own, or ones that were particularly memorable.

Do you feel more included (part of a group) when connected, in terms of being online?

Yes 47

23

Neutral 1

Do you say things online that you would not say in person?

Yes 32

No 39

Do you ever get in fights or misunderstandings online?

Yes 46

No 24

Rarely 2

The majority who answered yes referred to them as “misunderstandings”, and a few said they used to get into them more frequently when they were younger, which means that they have grown up a little and have learned to work the medium so that there is less of a chance of disagreements occurring.

Do you ever put information up online specifically for others to see (ex. Not just a general “profile” but specific info)? Yes 31 No 41

Have you gotten in trouble for it?

Yes 8

No 50

What benefits do you see in being constantly connected? The majority said keeping in touch with friends. Some saw no benefits, others...

Do you feel your sense of privacy has diminished, with regard to online networks?

Yes 26

No 35

Somewhat 6

Don't Know 1

Depends 1

Do you find your social network(s) are bigger because you belong to these sites?

Yes 34

No 33

Do you feel that you are accurately represented by your online trails (ex. avatars, profiles, etc)?

Yes 44

No 20

Somewhat 5

Don't Know 2