

**Learning to Like Facebook?
Social Categories, Social Network Site Selection,
and Social Network Site Uses¹**

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Abstract

Previous studies seeking to identify the characteristics, uses, and motives of social network website behaviors have identified several social structural and social psychological correlates, yet methodological limitations and rapidly changing user populations have prevented a comprehensive evaluation of who uses social network sites, how, and why. This paper presents preliminary results from a broad study of social network site use, suggesting that expressive Internet use, educational attainment, and social capital are all significant indicators of social network site behavior among adult users.

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Introduction

In the past five years, social network websites (SNSs) such as Facebook and MySpace have provided an increasingly popular way for individuals and groups to articulate connections and communicate with “friends” through digital media in a semi-public setting. boyd and Ellison (2007: 211) define the social network site as a digitally mediated social space that “[allows] individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”

Since they posited their definition, however, a number of developments have diminished its utility. Many other websites, such as commercial vendors and media sources, have implemented the profile and friend features to increase traffic, while SNSs have greatly expanded their digital media offerings beyond these primary features. Additionally, there are many websites such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube that may be broadly classified as SNSs but differ from other SNSs such as Facebook in their emphasis of a particular social medium, restricted memberships, or employment of social media toward a more specific end.

Facebook and MySpace, then, along with competitors such as Bebo, Friendster, hi5, and Orkut, can be considered a subset of inclusive SNSs that seek to provide an open-ended portal for social agents, much as other Internet portals such as Yahoo! seek to provide a portal for Web content. Users of these SNSs select from many modes of social media to connect with other

users with whom they have articulated a connection in a system that might theoretically encompass all or much of one's online and offline social network.

Of these SNSs, Facebook and MySpace are by far the most popular destinations among SNS users in the United States, collectively accounting for 96 percent of SNS visits by U.S. users in December, 2009. Nearly 112 million active users in the United States visited Facebook an average of 27 times during the month of December 2009, while 57 million active users logged into MySpace an average of 14 times during the same month (Prescott 2010).

MySpace was launched in 2003 as a SNS primarily for young adults. When adolescents joined in large numbers in 2004 and 2005, MySpace became an object of considerable cultural attention, to the extent that adults began to perceive affiliation with the site as an indicator of generational standing. Facebook was founded in 2004 as a SNS for Harvard students, later expanding to include other college students and establishing itself as the preferred SNS for college students at the same time MySpace became the preferred site for high school students (boyd and Ellison 2007). Since 2006, Facebook has been open to anyone over the age of 13, slowly gaining in market share before finally soaring past MySpace in active U.S. users by July 2009 (Schonfeld 2009).

Background

Studies of SNS activity have proliferated in recent years as researchers have sought to identify, explore, and explain SNS phenomena. Many of these studies have attempted to answer basic descriptive research questions, which can be grouped into three overlapping categories: (1) Who is participating? (2) How are they participating? and (3) Why are they participating? Methodological limitations, however, have combined with rapidly evolving user populations and

expanding social media features to hinder attempts to adequately answer these research questions.

The mere act of determining who is participating is problematic, as millions of users may create new profiles, delete old profiles, or become inactive in a short time. In the past two years, for example, Facebook grew from 35 million unique U.S. visitors in December 2007 to 55 million in 2008 and 112 million in 2009. MySpace, meanwhile, grew from 69 million unique U.S. visitors in December 2007 to 76 million in 2008, before falling to 57 million in 2009. Moreover, as there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between individuals and profiles, the metric of unique users is a rough estimate at best. This immense variability in user sizes and compositions limits the effectiveness of cross-sectional demographic analyses.

Two longitudinal studies have measured SNS populations over several years. The EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research has tracked changes in technology use among undergraduate students since 2006, while the Pew Internet and American Life Project has consistently tracked the attitudes and behaviors of U.S. Internet users since 2000 and included questions about SNS use in its surveys since 2005.

Both studies reveal considerable differences in use by age, but both studies also suggest that these differences are rapidly shrinking. While the rate of undergraduate students aged 18 to 24 grew from 85 to 95 percent between 2006 and 2009, the rate of SNS use among undergraduates aged 30 to 39 exploded from 22 to 74 percent during the same time (Smith, Salaway and Caruso 2009). Among the general U.S. population of Internet users, rates of use grew from 55 to 73 percent among teens between 2006 and 2009, 9 to 72 percent among young adults aged 18 to 29 between 2005 and 2009, and 6 to 39 percent among adults aged 30 and older between 2005 and 2009 (Pew Internet 2009; 2010).

Due to these significant discrepancies, the vast majority of SNS researchers have sought to control age by selecting a narrow range of teens or young adults to analyze, largely neglecting the burgeoning populations of older adult users, particularly as cohorts of young users “age out” of the age ranges studied, yet continue to participate in SNSs. For this reason, more detailed analyses are plagued by a lack of generalizability. An additional consequence is that SNS research has disproportionately considered activity among current high school and college students, often limiting their research to small number or even a single school or college.

Another common limitation is a restricted consideration of respondents’ SNS histories. Studies often do not distinguish between whether a respondent has ever created a SNS profile and whether a respondent currently has a SNS profile, and rarely ask how long ago a respondent created his or her profiles, how often a user logs in or actively participates at a site, how many friend connections a user has accumulated, and how these variables have changed over time. These variables are especially significant given the current aggregate growth of Facebook and decline of MySpace, suggesting that the behavior of many current individual SNS users’ is changing rapidly. As a result, no data exists distinguishing between relatively new users and more experienced users who may be further distinguishable by shared histories of SNS adoption and interaction.

How users participate, then, remains imprecisely known. Many studies have asked users to disclose more information about their SNS behaviors, but these questions are often ancillary to the primary goals of the study, conflate uses and motives with one another, and cannot be said to exhaustively address possible uses. Often these questions will group diverse behaviors with diverse actors into umbrella categories, as in the common question of whether respondents use SNSs to “stay in touch with friends” (Pew 2006; EDUCAUSE 2008).

An exception is Joinson's (2008) factor analysis to establish the motives and behaviors of a purposive sample of 241 Facebook users. His study first asked a group of respondents to describe in their own words how they used Facebook. Their responses were then coded into 46 items, which a second set of respondents rated by personal importance. The analysis grouped these uses into seven gratifications—social connection, shared identities, photo sharing, content, social investigation, “surfing,” and status updates—each with its own demographic and behavioral correlates. Although the study's sampling method and limited scope hinders its generalizability, Joinson's model is a promising step toward a more thorough understanding of SNS behaviors.

Other correlational studies examining SNS behaviors have looked to structural variables to draw meaningful conclusions regarding who is participating and why. danah boyd argues in her qualitative analysis of teens and SNSs that “the division between MySpace and Facebook is more than a reproduction of preference; it is a reproduction of turf wars that play out as a result of social categories” (boyd 2008: 209).

Due in part to Facebook's early history as a site for college students, chic minimalist aesthetic, and less publicized incidents of sexual predation, boyd argues that Facebook has become the preferred destination of privileged, upwardly mobile teens who employ the language of race and class to describe MySpace as a “ghetto” SNS for minorities and other marginalized populations. MySpace users, meanwhile, deride Facebook users employing similarly charged terms of race, education, and socioeconomic status. Hargattai (2007; 2009b) has provided quantitative support for a racial and class divide among Facebook and MySpace users in her studies of undergraduate freshmen, demonstrating in 2006 and again in 2009 that Facebook users are more likely to have better educated parents and identify as white or Asian, while MySpace

users are more likely to identify as African-American or Hispanic. Several other preliminary studies have provided limited evidence for this hypothesized division in SNS selection (Klein 2007; Lam 2007; Lynn 2009), although this division has not been demonstrated among older adult users and it remains to be seen if this division persists following Facebook's precipitous growth at the expense of MySpace during the past year.

A final category of correlational studies have investigated the role of social and/or psychological variables in predicting SNS behaviors. Several studies, noting that SNSs more easily enable the maintenance of weak ties, have shown that SNS users report higher levels of social capital than non-users, although these findings are presently limited to college students (Steinfeld, Ellison and Lampe 2008; Valenzuela, Park and Kee 2008). Research also suggests that SNS users report higher levels of psychological satisfaction and well-being (Steinfeld et al. 2008), but one study also found that Facebook users were more narcissistic than non-users (Buffardi and Campbell 2008).

Tufekci (2008) examined differences between SNS users and non-users in a larger context of Internet use. Although both groups used the Internet for instrumental purposes such as looking up information, Tufekci found that SNS users were significantly more likely to use the Internet for other "expressive" purposes, such as instant messaging, media sharing, and blogging. She also examined attitudes among users and non-users toward social grooming, finding that SNS users generally had a positive attitude toward maintaining weak ties while non-users were apathetic or derisive toward ritualistic interactions.

A final variable that has appeared in qualitative studies but has yet to be adequately measured by quantitative studies may be called "attachment." This characteristic refers to a user's increased affiliation and activity resulting from years of use or a large number of active

friends. boyd (2008: 108), for example, notes in her study of teens and SNSs that the most common reason cited for SNS preference is, “That’s where my friends are.”

Method

The data for this paper is drawn from a broad study of SNS attitudes and behaviors conducted by the Center for Social Science Research at George Mason University. This study attempts to clarify the who, how, and why of SNS attitudes and behaviors by measuring previously identified variables such as socioeconomic background and social capital alongside additional variables such as attachment and detailed user histories in a sample that includes older respondents as well as young adults. Data collection and analysis are ongoing, and this paper presents selected findings from data collected so far.

The sample for this study was obtained from the Study Response Panel at Syracuse University, an organization that facilitates the administration of social science studies using digitally mediated modes of data collection to national samples. Respondents are randomly selected from the panel according to the researchers’ specifications and provided minimal compensation for their participation.

Due to the significant market share of Facebook and MySpace in the United States, the study concentrates upon respondents’ attitudes and behaviors regarding these two SNSs. Respondents were asked if they had ever created a profile at either of these two sites and provided detailed follow-up questions regarding the types of profiles they had established. Among the variables measured are the date of profile creation, number of friends, and frequency and intensity of use. Respondents were also asked to rate the relative importance of twenty-three SNS uses corresponding to Joinson’s seven gratification factors. Respondents who were flagged

as having deleted one or more profile, using a site more or less frequently in the present than their average, or eschewing participation at either site entirely were asked additional questions to determine the reasons for these behaviors.

In addition to basic demographic variables such as race, ethnicity, age, and gender, respondents provided detailed educational and family histories, which included such variables as their subjective rating of their quality of education, current educational attainment, and the educational attainment, occupations, and relative incomes of their biological parents as well as any additional guardians. Respondents were asked about their frequency of Internet use according to the categories employed by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, which were grouped into scales of instrumental and expressive uses corresponding with Tufekci's analysis. A series of questions soliciting the respondents' attitudes toward social grooming were also asked and scaled according to Tufekci's analysis.

Since previous studies exploring the relationship between SNS use and social capital have assumed that respondents are college students, respondents were asked a series of broader questions employed by Wellman et al. (2001) regarding the frequency with which they interact with family and friends as a measure of social capital. An additional series of questions ascertaining the extent to which respondents construct their personal identities with their groups or network affiliations was constructed and implemented as a scale of independence.

Due to the considerable length of the questionnaire and incentive for completion, the possibility of respondents mindlessly clicking through to the end to receive their compensation was acknowledged as a significant threat to the validity of the study. A filter question asking respondents to select a certain response to demonstrate that they were paying attention to

question wording was inserted innocuously into the middle of a large block of questions to mitigate this threat (Hargattai 2009a).

Results

Although respondents were diverse with respect to age and geographic location, the sample is not nationally representative. Of 167 valid respondents from the first phase of data collection, 52 percent were male and 93 percent identified as white or Asian. Ninety percent indicated that they had ever created a Facebook profile, while 67 percent indicated that they had created a MySpace profile. These rates are comparable to those reported by the ECAR longitudinal study of undergraduate students, but significantly higher than nationally representative results reported by the Pew Internet studies. Respondents who choose to participate in the Syracuse Study Response Panel are likely to be better educated and have higher rates of digital literacy than the general population, and the topic and mode of data collection of this study is likely to have encouraged avid SNS users to respond at a higher rate than infrequent or non-users (Hargattai 2007).

In preparation for analysis, responses were categorized into dummy variables with respect to age, SNS history, parents' education, respondents' own education. Fifty-two percent of the sample was between the ages of 18 and 29, while the remaining 48 percent was between the ages of 30 and 40. Forty-seven percent of the sample reported that they had first created a SNS profile more than three years ago, while 44 percent indicated that they had created their first profile within the past three years and 8 percent had never created a Facebook or MySpace profile. Sixty-one percent reported that at least one of their biological parents had obtained a Bachelor's or advanced degree. Among the respondents themselves, 20 percent had no college

experience, 41 percent had some college experience or had obtained a Bachelor's degree, and the remaining 39 percent were pursuing or had obtained a graduate degree.

Scales were calculated for instrumental Internet use, expressive Internet use, social capital, social grooming, and independence. Although the alpha for independence was weak (.55), measurements of reliability for the other four scales were strong, ranging from .80 to .92. The seven gratification scales corresponding to Facebook uses were similarly robust, with alpha values ranging from .81 to .94.

Since the vast majority of the sample indicated that they had created a Facebook profile, two variables were constructed as dependent variables. The first variable, *MySpace incidence*, excluded respondents who had never created Facebook or MySpace profiles. Respondents with a current Facebook profile but no current MySpace profile were coded as 0, while SNS users with current profiles at both sites or with only a current MySpace profile were coded as 1. Fifty-five percent of overall sample and 60 percent of SNS users indicated that they currently had a MySpace profile, while 37 percent of the overall sample was exclusively Facebook users. Nearly a third of these exclusive Facebook users and one-eighth of the overall sample reported creating a MySpace profile in the past that they have since deleted.

The second dependent variable, *Facebook preference*, excluded users who had never created a SNS profile as well as users of both sites who indicated that they currently use Facebook and MySpace with a roughly equivalent frequency. Users who currently only use MySpace or who currently use both sites but report using MySpace more frequently were coded as 0, while exclusive Facebook users or those who use both sites but report using Facebook more frequently were coded as 1. Sixty-nine percent of the overall sample and 80 percent of all SNS users in the sample prefer Facebook according to this metric.

<i>Social connection</i> ($r^2 = .32$) + Expressive Internet use** + Social grooming*	<i>Shared identities</i> ($r^2 = .45$) + Expressive Internet use** + Social capital**
<i>Photo sharing</i> ($r^2 = .32$) + Expressive Internet use* + Social capital*	<i>Content</i> ($r^2 = .52$) + Expressive Internet use*** + Social capital** + MySpace incidence*
<i>Social investigation</i> ($r^2 = .57$) + Expressive Internet use*** + MySpace incidence**	<i>Surfing</i> ($r^2 = .40$) - Age** + MySpace incidence** + Expressive Internet use**
<i>Status updates</i> ($r^2 = .34$) + Expressive Internet use** + Facebook preference*	Nonsignificant variables: Profile creation date, parents' education, respondent's education, sex Excluded variables: Race, Independence

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Table 1: Summary of Facebook Gratification Regression Models

Two stages of analysis were conducted. First, multivariate linear regression models were constructed for each of Joinson's seven gratifications of Facebook use. Profile creation date, parents' education, respondent's education, and sex were not significant predictors of any of the seven gratification factors. Race was excluded from the analysis, as all Facebook users in the sample identified as white or Asian. Expressive Internet use, as measured by participation in other digitally mediated social activities such as instant messaging, text messaging, blogging, web page construction, media sharing, or multiplayer gaming, was a significant predictor of all gratification factors. Users with elevated social capital were significantly more likely to emphasize joining groups, organizing events, sharing photos, and interacting with games or applications as important components of their Facebook experiences. Facebook users with MySpace profiles were more likely to rate highly playing games, adding applications to their

profiles, meeting new people, and browsing the profiles of strangers. Users who placed greater emphasis on social grooming were more likely to emphasize creating and maintaining connections with friends, while users under the age of 30 were more likely to enjoy browsing the profiles of users they do not know.

In the second stage of analysis, logistic regression models were constructed for SNS selection and SNS preference. Bivariate analyses revealed that respondents who participated in other expressive digitally mediated activities, had higher levels of social capital, created their first SNS profile more than three years ago, and whose parents did not have college degrees were more likely to have a current MySpace profile. The multivariate analysis found the date of first profile creation and expressive Internet use are significant predictors of having profiles at both SNSs, with age and social capital narrowly missing the significance cutoff.

Variable	B	Wald
Date of first profile creation	1.59	7.00**
Expressive Internet use	-0.07	4.47**
Age	0.89	2.35
Social capital	-0.03	2.09
Sex	-0.74	1.64
Independence	0.05	1.24
Parents' education	-0.66	1.14
Respondent's education	-0.41	0.86
Social grooming	-0.03	0.56
Instrumental Internet use	0.00	0.00

*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .001

Table 2: Regression Model Predicting Current MySpace Profile ($r^2 = .36$)

Variable	B	Wald
Respondent's education	0.97	5.37**
Social grooming	0.09	3.77*
Expressive Internet use	0.07	3.44*
Age	-0.91	2.25
Independence	-0.04	0.82
Parents' education	-0.51	0.66
Social capital	0.02	0.63
Sex	0.15	0.05
Date of first profile creation	0.11	0.04
Instrumental Internet use	-0.00	0.00

*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .001

Table 3: Regression Model Predicting Facebook Preference ($r^2 = .28$)

The regression model predicting a preference for Facebook, on the other hand, revealed that a respondent's level of educational attainment was the strongest indicator of whether the respondent preferred Facebook or MySpace, with more educated respondents significantly more likely to prefer Facebook. A greater emphasis upon social grooming and greater involvement in expressive digitally mediated activities were also mildly significant indicators of Facebook preference.

Discussion

The results obtained from this cursory analysis are limited in several important respects. These limitations include statistical constraints due to unfinished data collection as well as more

durable restrictions, such as the racial and ethnic homogeneity of the sampling frame. The conclusions of this analysis are therefore tentative.

Nevertheless, several important implications have surfaced even at this early stage of analysis. This study is among the first to be conducted since Facebook added an additional 100 million users worldwide, rocketing past MySpace in U.S. market share. The shelf life of SNS studies, already truncated due to notoriously malleable and fickle user populations, is even shorter due to the recent exponential growth of Facebook in the United States. It is not an exaggeration to claim that new studies of SNS use are measuring entirely different populations than studies conducted as recently as six months ago.

Perhaps the most intriguing finding is the high correlation of educational attainment and SNS preference among older SNS users. Previous studies of SNS preference have targeted teen and young adult users, relying upon racial identity and parental education as indicators of socioeconomic privilege. The results of this study, however, suggest that ascribed socioeconomic origin is supplanted by achieved socioeconomic status among SNS users in their twenties and thirties. This finding has important theoretical implications for the perpetuation of offline social categories into online social spaces. If boyd and Hargattai's studies of teens and undergraduate freshmen imply a Bourdieuan framework of inherited cultural capital and taste preferences that provides the initial impetus for SNS preference, this study suggests that adult SNS users gravitate to the SNS preferred by their educational peers. In the sense that socioeconomic origin is a strong predictor of achieved socioeconomic status and the racial and class divisions between Facebook and MySpace users are preserved, this finding is a logical continuation of boyd and Hargattai's results. However, in the sense that indicators of social origin become less relevant as

SNS users acquire their own statuses, it represents a distinct break between older and younger SNS users in their criteria for SNS preference.

Just as importantly, the results of this study underscore the urgent need for more rigorous controls in studies of SNS attitudes, behaviors, and preferences. Although education and socioeconomic origin appear to play an undeniable role in SNS behaviors, social and psychological variables are often significant predictors as well. The related variables of social capital and social grooming, for example, were significant factors in several analyses.

Of the many variables considered in this study, the most consistently significant was expressive Internet use—SNS users who reported engaging in other digitally mediated social interactions such as instant messaging, text messaging, blogging, commenting, chatting, media sharing, and gaming were also those who reported higher gratifications from SNS use as well as those who reported having Facebook and MySpace profiles. It is tempting to conflate expressive Internet use with digital literacy; however, instrumental Internet use, which consists of the use of digital technologies to perform tasks that do not involve social interaction, was not a significant predictor of any SNS gratifications or preferences. These findings suggest that a significant subgroup of SNS users are simply more comfortable and more frequent participants of digitally mediated social interactions, and that this characteristic is not necessarily a function of age.

Since this study is ongoing, several promising avenues remain to be explored. The high incidence of Facebook profiles in our sample, for example, suggests that an examination of differences between frequent and infrequent Facebook users may be fruitful. Upon the completion of data collection, we also expect to explore age interaction effects more thoroughly, as well as the characteristics distinguishing non-users from users.

More generally, future studies should attempt to incorporate older respondents, racial and ethnic minorities, less educated respondents, and higher percentages of non-users than previous studies. Structural variables such as socioeconomic origin and educational attainment should be measured alongside social psychological variables such as social capital and expressive Internet use to generate a more complete picture of the conditions correlated with SNS behaviors.

Without more comprehensive analyses, cross-sectional iterations of the who, how, and why of SNS use will remain unable to keep pace with the current rate of change among SNS populations.

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