

# **Social Networks: A Pilot Study**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports preliminary results from a pilot study about the use of social networks and the type of information posted by the user on his or her social networking web site. It probes the awareness of the user of the implications and possible impact of posted material in the employment process. The paper also reports the frequency of visits per day by the user to his or her social network web site.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Social networking, one form of social media, is permeating the lives of individuals at an increasing rate. Facebook alone has about 350,000,000 registered users (Zuckerbury, 2009). Other high profile site are MySpace with 130,000,000 users, Twitter with 75,000,000 users, and LinkedIn with 60,000,000 users (Wikipedia,2010). Furthermore, the utilization of social networks has begun to permeate corporations, educational institutions, government, and even the medical community (Kornblum &Marklein, 2006; Larrumbide, 2009; Luo, 2007).

The connections that people make through social networks cannot be ignored nor underestimated. Powerful influence can be instantly exerted. Insight into people's thinking can be quickly assessed through social networks. One area that can benefit from such information is politics. Candidates for political office can and do use social networks to connect with people and to influence and to court them for their votes. Another area that benefits from social networking is marketing. Profiling of individuals from social networking information allows demographic segmentation for targeted advertising. A third area in which social networking information is being increasingly used is in the human resources hiring process and in monitoring current employees. A person's social networking site can either provide a positive or negative image of him or her. For example, inappropriate photos, language, and/or behavior are a few things that reflect poorly upon a job candidate.

This pilot study gathers information about various areas related to social networking site usage. Specifically, the type of information that people post on their social networking site, their reading of the privacy policy of the site, and their awareness of an employer's use of information on their social networking site are several areas that are included.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

Data was collected from a convenience sample of college juniors and seniors in a management principles course. All data was collected on an anonymous and voluntary basis. Subjects were asked questions about their use of social networks and the items they display on their personal social networking web pages. Also included were questions relating to privacy policies and employer usage of information on their social networking web site.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The demographic profile by age of the convenience sample for this study was 94% in the 18-25 year old range. By gender the profile was 58% female and 42% male. College seniors composed 58% of the sample and college juniors were 42%. There were 50 subjects in this pilot sample. Of these, 90% had personal social networking web sites. The other 6% without sites gave reasons such as no time, "consider it to be beneath me," "too busy and not worth the time," and "too much drama."

By far, most subjects at 96% of the sample had their social networking web site on Facebook. MySpace came next at 62.2% of users on their site. Then Windows Live Spaces and Imeem followed with 6.67% of users each. Tagged had 4.44% of users, followed by Classmates and Twitter each at 2.22% of users. Clearly Facebook and MySpace were the most popular sites.

When asked how often the subject visited his or her social networking web site during the day, a wide range of responses occurred. The span went from less than once a day to twenty times a day. The four most frequent responses were once a day for 20% of users, twice a day for 6.7%, two to three times a day for 8.9%, and three times a day for 17.8%.

When asked what items the person posted on his or her social networking web site, a long list resulted. The most frequently responded items are contained in Table 1 and the least frequently mentioned items are in Table 2.

**TABLE 1: MOST FREQUENTLY INCLUDED ITEMS ON SOCIAL NETWORKING WEB SITES**

Items	Percentage
Your Picture	97.8 %
Gender	95.6 %
University	95.6 %
Real Name	82.2 %
Age	77.8 %
State	75.5 %
E-mail	71.1 %
Marital Status	68.9 %
Hobbies	68.9 %

**TABLE 2: LEAST FREQUENTLY INCLUDED ITEMS ON SOCIAL NETWORKING WEB SITES**

Items	Percentage
Favorite TV Shows	51.1 %
Lifestyle	40.0 %
Sports	37.8 %
Community Affiliations	24.4 %
Personality Type	15.6 %
Food Likes	15.5 %
Phone Number and/or Pseudonym	11.1 %
Eye Color	6.7 %
Street Address	4.44 %

When asked if their social networking web site was password protected 100% of those with a site responded that it was. However, only 66% of them were aware that their personal information could be read on the server and used in accordance with the privacy policy of the web site. When asked if they had read the privacy policy of the social networking web site on which they had their personal pages, 60% of respondents answered in the negative.

Use of social networking site information by employers in their decision process for hiring was another question asked. In response, 84% indicated that they did not think that current or future employers may use this information in their hiring process. Clearly this shows that the majority of users are either not informed or have misconceptions about use of their information. And because of the longevity of information gathered in digital format, the impact of damaging information for hiring purposes can have a lasting effect.

## CONCLUSION

This pilot study begins to document some of the issues regarding information given by users in establishing a social networking web site. Indications so far confirm that much personal information is freely given by users without understanding of the use of that information by the web site or others. In fact, the site's privacy policy is not even read by the majority of users. The expansion of this research project and similar research by others into this ever-popular mode of communication is essential in order to educate those who use social networking sites.

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