ABSTRACT - Research examining friend networking sites has greatly increased in the past several months exploring topics related to general use, psychological well being, and content analysis of profiles to name a few. The current study sought to identify dimensions of uses and gratifications for users of friend networking sites. Results identified the following three dimensions: the Information Dimension, the Friendship Dimension, and the Connection Dimension. Sex differences also existed with regards to use of friend networking sites. For example, men were more likely to use the sites for dating purposes and women were more likely to set their accounts to private. A discussion of the results is presented in light of the uses and gratifications obtained from the use of friend networking sites.

Since the internet originated in the US (Lievrouw, 2000), its uses and capabilities have expanded greatly (Harris, 2006). For example, the use of the internet has facilitated relationship building and communication between individuals (Kiesler, 1997). One venue for achieving these goals is friend networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook (Thayer & Ray, 2006). Friend networking sites are mediated social communities (Goodings, Locke, & Brown, 2000) that allow people with similar interests to gather (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Rates of use are very high with MySpace having over 20 million registered users (CNN, 2006) and Facebook having over 9 million users (Foxnews, 2006). Friend networking sites allow users to communicate with others utilizing flexible and varying features such as posting information about themselves on their profiles, posting pictures, leaving messages, and providing hyperlinks to other sites (Murphy, 2005).

Research examining these friend networking sites was scarce in the beginning but has exploded in content and scope over the past few months. Recent topics of research interest have included: relation of use to psychological well being (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006), content analysis of user profiles (Pierce, 2007; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008), education applications (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007), and information on characteristics of users and nonusers (Hargittai, 2007; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). One of the first published studies on friend networking sites assessed the impact on adolescent well being. Results indicated a significant relation between well being, frequency of visiting sites, and information received from others on sites (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten,
Further investigation into this relation has indicated that friend networking sites may provide greater benefits for users with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Content analysis of MySpace site profiles has documented several sex and age differences in user profiles. For example, findings indicate that women and girls tend to post more: (a) personal information, (b) sexual pictures, and (c) links to sexual communities than men and boys. Profiles by younger adolescent users contained more personal contact information than profiles by older adolescent users. Finally, individuals who did not include their age on their profiles posted the most sexual content (Pierce, 2007). These results support previous research findings that consistently note sex and generation differences in on-line communication use (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Thayer & Ray, 2006; Wieser, 2000). Related research on profiles has examined the relation between the physical appearance of friends linked to the owner’s profile and subsequent evaluations of the owner. Results indicated that the physical attractiveness of linked friends influenced perceptions of the owner’s profile (Walther et al., 2008).

Research also has examined the use of friend networking sites to hypothetically disclose professor information to students and for students’ perceptions of this use of friend networking sites. Mazer et al. (2007) had participants view Facebook profiles for potential professors. The profiles varied by amount of self-disclosure (high, medium, and low). After viewing the respective Facebook profile, researchers asked the participants to rate their anticipated student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate. Results indicated that the professor in the high disclosure condition received higher levels of student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate. Students, however, were unsure as to the appropriateness of professors having Facebook profiles.

There are many reasons why individuals report using friend networking sites. Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) found the most common reasons include: “to keep in touch with old friends,” “to keep in touch with current friends,” “to post / look at pictures,” “to make new friends,” and “to locate old friends.” Less commonly reported reasons included: “to learn about events,” “to post social functions,” “to feel connected,” “to share information about yourself,” “for academic purposes,” and “for dating purposes.” Results also indicated that users (87% of the sample) spent over 2.5 hrs per day on friend networking sites with an average of 235 friends linked to their profiles. Nonusers, who were significantly older in age than users, reported not having friend networking accounts for the following main reasons: “I just have no desire to have an account” and “I am too busy.” Hargittai (2007) also found that users and nonusers varied by age, ethnicity, and parental educational background.

The purpose of the current experiment was to better understand the uses and gratification that users obtain from friend networking sites. Although previous research has identified numerous reasons why individuals use friend networking sites, it appears that some of these reported reasons are actually assessing the same underlying dimension. For example, reasons such as “to keep in touch with old friends” and “to keep in touch with current friends” are reasons that appear to be conceptually related. Therefore, this experiment sought to identify the uses and gratifications that are conceptually similar. In order to do so, the present study utilizes the uses and gratifications perspective. For extensive reviews on this perspective, refer to Rubin (2002). We predict the results will
identify dimensions of use for friend networking sites and we further predict that
dimensions will be conceptually related to sustaining friendships.

Method

Participants
A total of 201 student recruits from a 4-year public, East coast university participated
in this study on “Student Internet Usage” with no mention made of friend networking
sites. In order to obtain the rate of use of friend networking sites among all college
students, no mention was made of friend networking sites on the participant sign-up
sheets. Of the participants, 63 (31%) were men and 138 (69%) were women with a mean
age of 19.4 years (SD = 4.7). In addition, of the participants, 91 (45.3%) were Caucasian,
60 (29.9%) were African American, 29 (14.4%) were Native American, 10 (5.0%) were
Multi-racial/other, 5 (2.5%) were Asian, 3 (1.5%) were of Hispanic origin, and 3 (1.5%)
were Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

Materials and Procedure
Upon arriving to the study, a two-part packet was given to participants to complete.
The first page contained only one question, “Do you have a MySpace or Facebook
account?” Students responded by checking “yes” or “no” to this question. Directions then
instructed those participants who had checked “yes” to proceed to page two of the packet
(Part I) and those participants who checked “no” to proceed to page five of the packet
(Part II). Because the purpose of the current study was to investigate the underlying
reasons why individuals use friend networking sites, Part II of the packet was not relevant
and therefore warrants no further discussion.

Part I of the packet, completed by students having either a MySpace or Facebook
account, contained three sections. Section one asked participant’s general information
about their accounts. For example, what type of accounts participants’ had and how long
they had these accounts were asked. In section two, participants indicated to what degree
each of the 11 reasons for having a friend networking account applied to them (See Table
1 for list of reasons). For each of the 11 reasons, the scale ranged from 1 (does not apply
to me at all) to 7 (definitely applies to me). The final section collected demographic
information from the participant including sex, age, and ethnicity.

Results

General Frequencies
Of the total participants, 175 (87.1%) indicated having either a MySpace or Facebook
account. For those participants with accounts, 82% had MySpace accounts, 87% had
Facebook accounts, and 70% had accounts at both sites. Over 60% of participants
reported having their accounts for a year or longer. Participants reported logging onto
their accounts an average of 4 times per day and spending over 2 hrs per day on their
profiles and profiles of others. The vast majority of users (93%) made personal
information about themselves such as sex, age, and physical appearance available on their
profiles. However, 67% of users set their websites to private and only 6% posted
information regarding their daily schedules. The mean number of friends linked to
participants’ accounts was 318.39 (the mode and median were both 200), with 54% of participants indicating that they knew all the friends linked to their accounts.

**Dimensions of Use**

Factor analysis determined what, if any, underlying structures existed for measuring the following 11 variables: to keep in touch with current friends, to keep in touch with old friends, to make new friends, to locate old friends, for dating purposes, to feel connected, to learn about events, to share information about yourself, to post/look at pictures, for academic purposes, and to post social functions. Prior to analysis, two outliers were eliminated. Principal components analysis was conducted utilizing a varimax rotation. The analysis produced a three-component solution, which was evaluated on the following criteria: eigenvalue, variance, and scree plot. Criteria indicated a three-component solution was appropriate.

After rotation, the first component accounted for 21.97% of the total variance, the second component accounted for 43.93% of the total variance, and the third component accounted for 63.24% of the total variance. Table 1 presents the loadings for each component. Component number 1 consisted of 5 of the 11 variables: to post social functions, to learn about events, to share information about yourself, for academic purposes, and to post/look at pictures. These variables had positive loadings and were called the **Information Dimension**. The second component included 3 of the 11 variables: to keep in touch with old friends, to keep in touch current friends, and to locate old friends. These variables had positive loadings and were called the **Friendship Dimension**. The final component included 3 of the 11 variables: for dating purposes, to make new friends, and to feel connected. These variables had positive loadings and were called the **Connection Dimension**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component Loadings for Factor Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Components</td>
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<tr>
<td>Component 1: Information Dimension</td>
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<td>To post social functions</td>
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<td>To learn about events</td>
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<td>To share information about yourself</td>
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<td>For academic purposes</td>
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<td>To post/look at pictures</td>
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<td>Component 2: Friendship Dimension</td>
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<td>To keep in touch with old friends</td>
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<td>To keep in touch with current friends</td>
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<td>To locate old friends</td>
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<td>Component 3: Connection Dimension</td>
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<td>For dating purposes</td>
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<td>To make new friends</td>
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<td>To feel connected</td>
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**Sex Differences**

First, a MANOVA determined the effect of sex of participant on the 11 dependent variables related to why participants used friend networking sites. Results indicated that
sex significantly affected the combined dependent variables, Pillai’s Trace = .13, \( F (11, 162) = 2.16, p < .05, \eta^2 = .13, \text{power} = .92 \). Univariate ANOVAs were conducted as follow-up tests. ANOVA results indicated that: for dating purposes significantly differed by sex, \( F (1, 172) = 12.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07, \text{power} = .94 \), with men using their friend networking sites for dating purposes more than women (2.35 versus 1.60) and to share information about oneself significantly differed by sex, \( F (1, 172) = 4.53, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03, \text{power} = .56 \), with men using their friend networking sites for sharing information about themselves more than women (3.00 versus 2.44).

Next, with regard to general account information, a series of two-way contingency table (Chi Square) analyses evaluated whether men or women were more likely to: make personal information available, make schedules available, and set website to private. For each analysis, the two variables were sex of participant (i.e., men and women) and level of agreement with the statement (i.e., yes and no). Results indicated that women (78%) were significantly more likely than men (44%) to set their websites to private, \( \chi^2 (1, N=174) = 20.18, p < .001 \). Finally, two independent sample t-tests determined if sex of participant influenced the number of times per day the participant logged into their account and how many friends the participant had linked to their account. Results indicated that men (450.07) had significantly more friends linked to their account than women (256.02), \( t (166) = 2.25, p < .05 \).

**Discussion**

The purpose of the current study was to identify dimensions of use for friend networking sites. It was predicted that previously identified reasons for using friend networking sites would be conceptually related, especially those reasons related to sustaining friendships. Results did indeed identify dimensions of use for friend networking sites including the information dimension, the friendship dimension, and the connection dimension. The reasons in the information dimension were related to using friend networking sites to gather and share information (e.g., to post social functions, to learn about events, and to share information about yourself). This dimension is a logical one considering how the features of friend networking sites allow users to easily post and share information that will be available to many viewers simultaneously. Individuals who utilize friend networking sites for reasons in this dimension are thus obtaining gratification from gathering and sharing of information related to themselves and others. The reasons in the friendship dimensions were conceptually related to sustaining friendships. In order words, users reported that having friend networking sites allowed them to keep in touch with both old and new friends and to locate old friends. In fact, friend networking sites may be one of the easiest and fastest ways possible to locate old friends. Finally, the reasons in the connection dimension were related to making connections with others by using these websites. Reasons in this dimension included to make new friends, to find a significant other, and to feel connected in general. Future research should investigate how users of friend networking sites vary in regards to each of the dimensions. For example, do different types of users have accounts on friend networking sites for reasons in different dimensions?

It is also noteworthy to compare the current study to previous research by Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) in terms of general information on the use of friend networking
accounts. To begin, it was remarkably consistent that 87% of both the current and previous samples had an account at a friend network site. There were additional consistent findings. For example, men were more likely to report using friend networking sites for dating purposes and men were more likely to have a larger number of friends linked to their accounts, whereas women were more likely to set their websites to private. However, this sample of participants reported having friend networking accounts for a longer period of time than previous research (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). This result is surprising considering that the previous research was conducted during a spring semester when students had been in college for a semester already and the current study was conducted at the beginning of a fall semester. This difference could indicate that friend networking sites are becoming more popular at the high school level and students are entering into college already using these sites. Also, results indicated participants in the current study were more likely to set their websites to private and less likely to post their daily schedules. These findings also indicate that users are becoming more careful about the practices related to friend networking sites and are doing so at an earlier stage than before.

This study is not without limitations. To begin, the primary demographics of users were traditional age, first-year college students. It could certainly be the case that the identified dimensions for this sample would not be the same for users of friend networking sites with varying demographics. Second, this study relied on the accuracy of participants’ memories to gather information such as number of friends linked to their account and number of times they logged into their accounts each day. Participants may have overestimated the number of friends linked to their account or underestimated the number of times per day that they logged into their account. However, even with adjustments for accuracy, the results provide strong support for the fact that friend networking sites are extremely popular among college students and a significant portion of their time is devoted to this venue of communication. Finally, time of year could have influenced the results producing inflation in the rates of use. For example, college students might use friend networking sites more heavily during months they are in school and the rates of use may diminish during summer and winter breaks. Future research should continue to explore friend networking sites to address these limitations.

References


Murphy, D. (2005). A virtual student body: A behind the scenes look at thefacebook.com, the college world’s most popular online social network. *PC Magazine*, 82.


