

## **WHOSE SPACE IS IT ANYWAY? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF STUDENTS' USE OF MYSPACE.COM FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES**

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### **Abstract**

The immense popularity and voluminous usage of social networking tools and sites such as MySpace.com have not gone unnoticed by educators who wish to use such spaces for purposes of education. But it is not known if these networking sites are currently being used for educational purposes. Data for the study consisted of five 505 comments posted in the public or unprotected areas of 50 college-age users of MySpace.com. The study found that students rarely used the comment space for educational interactions. Only 4.75% or 1 out of every 20 of the messages was related to education.

### **Introduction**

The “ARPANET,” which has grown to become what we know as the “Internet,” was first demonstrated in 1972 (Leiner et al., 1997). The still widely used communication tool known as “e-mail” also had its beginnings in the year 1972 (Segaller, 1998). The development of Internet and e-mail allowed many researchers and computer savvy professionals in geographically dispersed laboratories and universities to communicate and collaborate with each other. However, the general population was largely excluded from such capabilities until personal computers that could be connected to the Internet invaded households and the World Wide Web gained popularity among citizens of developed countries. The World Wide Web or the “Web” was born in 1990 (Berners-Lee, 1999). It was Berners-Lee (1999) who developed the “hypertext transfer protocol” which led to the birth of the World Wide Web. The Web emerged as a very popular tool a few short years after it became a reality and now millions of people use it everyday for various purposes, communicating and networking with each other constituting a sizeable part of such Web usage.

## **The Emergence of Web 2.0**

According to McLean, Richards, and Wardman (2007),

The term Web 2.0 does not refer to new technical standards, but to new ways of using the Internet as a platform for interactive applications. A distinguishing characteristic of Web 2.0 is the concept of online social networking — the use of Internet technologies to create value through mass user participation (p. 174).

Web-based services and resources such as MySpace.com provide storage space and interactive features on the Web for users to establish a presence and communicate and network with others. Educators have in the past adopted many emerging and established technological tools with the hope that such technologies will somehow transform education and improve student learning. It is therefore not surprising that educators now consider MySpace.com and other similar communications and networking services and technologies as having the potential for improving the education of modern youngsters enrolled in schools and colleges. For example, according to Andrews (2007),

Some schools ban social networks for wasting classroom time or to protect students from weirdoes. But, as part of a wider trend toward less top-down teaching, other institutions are putting tools like MySpace, Bebo and Facebook on the curriculum — and teachers are saying: “Thanks for the add.”

## **Purpose of the Study**

Web 2.0 and social software are being increasingly viewed as having the potential to transform educational practices (Brown & Adler, 2008; Owen et al., 2006). MySpace is a Web 2.0 technology that offers communications and networking capabilities to its users. However, the extent to which college-aged students who already have MySpace.com accounts use them for educational purposes is not known. The reason for this is simple: little research has been conducted in this area. The purpose of this study is to explore if, how, and how much, students use their MySpace.com areas for educational purposes. Differences, if any, between males and females in their educational usage of MySpace.com will also be explored.

If the study shows that college-age students are already using social networking areas for educational conversations, then universities can enter these spaces with the confidence that, students will not hesitate using the spaces to pursue formal educational opportunities. If the study shows that students use social networking

spaces to communicate little about formal education, then universities may have a tougher time trying to get students to use these spaces for educational interactions.

## **Background Information about MySpace.com**

MySpace.com is a popular service on the Web that allows those who create an account, space or carve out a niche for themselves in cyberspace and use such a space to establish their presence and to network and communicate with others who have also created their own niches. As of December 2008, millions of people, including college students have a presence on MySpace.com. Within each person's private space, and within the common spaces that account holders share with others, users have a few options for communicating with each other. This study will focus on how college students use the publicly viewable comment area to interact with each other.

## **Methods**

### **Sample and Data Collection**

Twenty-five male and 25 females were selected randomly from a list of college-aged MySpace.com account holders. These 50 males and females constituted the sample for this exploratory study. The specific criteria used to select the sample of subjects included the following:

- users be in the 18–22 age range
- users be currently enrolled as a student in a college or university (listed within the MySpace.com accounts under Details)
- users be White Caucasian (listed within each myspace.com account under-Details).
- purpose for establishing accounts was for networking and friends (education is not one of the purposes for which people can establish MySpace.com accounts.)
- accounts were created by users living within the United States
- users are single rather than those who are either married or are in a relationship were selected for the study.

As Table 1 shows, the sample of subjects were distributed among seven interest areas of “video games,” “sports,” “Internet,” “movies,” “fun with friends,” “shopping,” and “read.” These interest areas are selected by users when they create an account for themselves on MySpace.com. At the time the data was collected, there was no interest area labeled “Education.”

Table 1: General Interests of Selected MySpace.com Users by Sex (n = 50)

Interest Area	Male	Female	Total
Video games	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	5
Sports	8 (53.33%)	7 (46.66%)	15
Internet	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	2
Movies	7 (58.33%)	4 (41.66%)	11
Fun with friends	1 (14.29%)	6 (85.74%)	7
Shopping	0 (0%)	4 (100%)	4
Read	4 (80%)	2 (20%)	6
Total	25	25	50

The messages posted in the 50 randomly selected MySpace.com account areas during spring 2008 that were publicly available, constituted the data for this study. As shown in Table 2, a total of 505 comments were posted in the publicly available comment areas during the data collection period.

### Data Analysis

The comments posted by students in the selected MySpace.com areas were analyzed using qualitative techniques suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). A total of 15 categories, including the category of 'education' emerged as a result of such analysis. The fifteen categories are shown in Table 2.

Descriptions for each of the 15 categories are provided in Table 3. Examples of comments posted by students are also provided in the table. The comments made by students that were categorized as 'education' comments are reproduced in Table 4.

Table 2: Comments Made by Friends of Selected Myspace.com Users by Sex

Category	Male	Female	Total*
Greetings	82 (51.57%)	77 (48.43%)	159 (31.49%)
Holiday Wishes	15 (45.45%)	18 (54.55%)	33 (6.53%)
Birthday Wishes	9 (34.62%)	17 (65.38%)	26 (5.15%)
Workout	6 (100.00%)	0 (0.00%)	6 (1.19%)
Thank you	13 (59.09%)	9 (40.91%)	22 (4.36%)
Visit a Website	10 (71.43%)	4 (28.57%)	14 (2.77%)
Hangout plans	43 (42.16%)	59 (57.84%)	102 (20.20%)
Sports	9 (81.82%)	2 (18.19%)	11 (2.18%)
Summer Plans	6 (60.00%)	4 (0.00%)	10 (1.98%)
Hobbies/Interests	9 (47.37%)	10 (52.63%)	19 (3.76%)
Job	17 (54.84%)	14 (45.16%)	31 (6.14%)
Reading	0 (0.00%)	2 (100.00%)	2 (0.40%)
Education	7 (29.17%)	17 (70.83%)	24 (4.75%)
Gossip	16 (34.78%)	30 (65.22%)	46 (9.11%)
Total	242	263	505

\* percentages add to 100% going across

Table 3: Descriptions of the Derived Categories and a Sample Comment for Each Category

Category	Meaning	Sample Comment
Greetings	A friendly hello/hi/how are you	Hello, Hey man, whaz up?
Holiday Wishes	Wishing happiness during holidays	Happy Easter, Happy New Year, Happy Valentine's Day
Birthday Wishes	Wishing happiness for birthday	HAPPY 21ST BIRTHDAY!!!!
Workout	going to gym/exercise	Are you going to the gym tomorrow?? Let's meet tomorrow and w
Thank you	expression of gratitude	Thanks, Thank you
Visit a Website	ask friend to log onto a specific website to view for entertainment purposes	<a href="http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile">http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile</a>
Hang out plans	get together, visit a place	What are you doing tonight? Wanna hang out?
Sports	playing/watching sports	And italy is out of da euro cup!!!!!!!!!! LETS GO GERANY!!

Summer Plans	Plans during the summer	Goin be at the beach all summer long!
Hobbies/Interest	activities or interest for pleasure	Goin shoppin tomorrow
Job	employment/work	Well yeah i have been working for a commercial company
Reading	reading for pleasure	The series is great. I'm reading Eclipse.
Education	comments about classes, courses, homework, studying	see table 3
Gossip	talk or rumor about a the personal affair of others	Did that chic take all your money and drop you off like a cheap dat scank!

Table 4: Education Related Comments made by Males and Females

Male	Female
1) Just say Hi!!! Do you like science?	1) I have a LARGE math test today at 4 and I need to teach myself everything about the course so far until then...so after that I shall give you a call!
2) hey you, yeah i know i haven't been around school at all, im actually in poland right now, i don't think i'll be going to st fransis anymore something crazy came up, but anyway we're gonna get those islanders next time LETS GO RANGERS :)	2) School is alright so far, most of my classes are fine, im not liking macroeconomics too much but o well.
3) yeah.....i actually cant wait for class to start back up again, i had to drop my classes because of work about half way through the semester....	3) Hahaha yea it has. Well I am at Rutgers now and so forth. Got a job as Rutgers EMS, going for a degree in Biotechnology and a minor in Religion and Biochem.
4) but i was spending so much time there that i wasnt spending enough time doinh homework lol. and i'm bummed cause i loved Anthro.soooooooooooo much!	4) Sooo ill meet you at school at 8 k..haha and illl wake up on time this time i promise
5) alright call me soon just not when im in school	5) hey hey....wuts ups girl?? I finally picked my class, now you should take me and show me around the school cuz i got no clue where anything is :)
6) im at my scholarship thing	6)i knowww!! so hows colllege??
7)yea dude ive been good yea mang anytime you wanna chill!! im still in school but i get out really erlly!!	7) not working much..interning twice a week so its nice.
	8) sleeping in and hanging by the pool till class starts, in my slip on shoes.
	9)how studying?
	10) I know!! I'm just working and getting ready to start school again!!
	11) wats up with you? Gah we don't get to talk much since we don't have spanish together anymore. oo well ur lucky u don't have spanish...grr... anyways lots of love
	12)Hey ho-bag! lol Yea i think i will, lol i still don't know if i got detention or not, hmmmmmm hope not grrrr
	13) yea i am going to school. i'm still

	doing that internship through the U of A at the Al-Marah arabian stables. i think i told you that once. hey are you going to the sabino musical this week?
	14) Eh summer class at Pima West for Trig. Just found out from people that m instructor is the worse teacher ever and I'm starting to feel the pain from him. Oh man I hope I don't get destroyed in this class :(
	15) And r u coming back to school next semester?
	16) Hey girl. Just stoppin through to show you some love. When are you coming to see me? I graduate next weekend.
	17) no there going to pay for lander, thank god i don't have that kind of money, lol yea well lander got the best what i'm trying to major in, so that did it for me. yep how bout u?? u still going to coastal?

## Findings and Discussion

MySpace.com users did talk about education. However, such talk mostly focused on non-content related aspects of education. For example a student may have mentioned how difficult a particular class was, but did not go into details regarding the content taught in the course. Only 24 (4.75%) of the total number of 505 comments posted were related to education. Of the 24 total education comments posted, 7 (29.17%) were posted by males and 17 (70.83%) were comments posted by females.

The numbers of comments posted in the 'greetings' category far exceeded educational comments. Comments that were categorized as 'gossip' considerably exceeded those that were considered to be 'educational' in nature. Comments posted that were categorized as 'reading' were the lowest, with only two comments (0.40%), out of the total of 505 comments. Both comments related to reading were posted by females

In spite of educators' enthusiasm about the potential that Web 2.0 and social software technologies have to offer education, students in this study do not seem to be using a popular site as MySpace.com for educational purposes. Students

seem to be using their MySpace.com spaces for social and other non-educational networking purposes.

Our suggestions for further research include using larger samples of subjects. Further studies should also be conducted to determine how students use the password protected portions of their MySpace.com accounts. It will perhaps be hard to conduct such a study since not many students may be willing to grant access to protected areas of their MySpace.com accounts. However, it is worth trying.

## **Conclusion**

In the physical world, there are places designated as universities and people are aware that these are the locations that they need to go to, in order to further their education. There are also places where people go to socialize, such as restaurants, movie theaters, clubs, parks and other areas used primarily for face-to-face socialization. Educators have not tried to invade these places to try and educate the people who frequent them. Imagine a university trying to offer a class in a bar or a club where the music is blaring loudly and people are imbibing alcoholic drinks and dancing.

Should educators try to invade social networking sites in cyber space and start using it for educational purposes even though these sites were not established solely for purposes of education? If large numbers of educational institutions start invading such spaces, will students develop and move away to other, more secure and less accessible cyber areas they can use for social networking purposes, without having to worry about educators trying to invade such spaces?

There are number of educators and educational institutions currently using Web 2.0 tools and technologies to offer virtual coursework to students. However, as Hoare (2007) states, results from “. . . the Learner Experience Project, has just revealed, amazingly, that students want to be left alone. Their message to the trendy academics is: “Get out of MySpace!” Hence the question and the title of this paper “Whose space is this anyway?” We would like to conclude by saying that since the use of Web 2.0 technologies for educational purposes is still in its infancy, much research is needed before educators can make informed policy decisions regarding the use of such technologies for purposes of educating future generations of students.

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