What is "social" in social networking? Is social networking failing to sustain traditional social standards?

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Online social networking continues its rapid emergence as a force in our personal and professional lives. Yet, the "social" aspect of these online sites may be failing the traditional connotation that we have become culturally accustomed to. As with most new technology there is a push for business to embrace and participate in the new technology. This paper examines the characteristics of traditional social networking with the characteristics of online social networking. This paper explores the alteration of the connation of "social" through mediated technology. Online social networking has lost some characteristics of the traditional connotation of "social", as well as bred new characteristics, such as exclusivity and misleading identity. This paper reviews lessons learned from similar technology and suggests how business might succeed with online social networking by understanding the new connotation of "social."

The push for cultural acceptance and quick adaptability to a new technology, such as online social networking is to be expected, especially when big business is funding the efforts. The desire to participate in a new technology evolution has become a cultural pattern. Throughout history from the telegraph of yesteryear to social networking sites of today the cultural hype associated with the promises of new technology is expected. Reflecting through history we can learn from our mistakes and communication failures. However when new technology is pushed upon us as a fast-growing phenomenon, we too quickly jump on that phenomenon bandwagon and all too soon lapse on reflecting on lessons learned from history. With the emergence of social networking, business is losing the time and space needed, in order to reflect and instead it's diving headfirst into the current online social networking phenomenon indiscriminately. This paper identifies past technology failures, provides suggestions for addressing those failures, and recommends future direction for understanding the relationship between shifts in cultural communication (such as online social networking) and how business should adapt to those shifts for continued success.

Escalation of Social Networking

Online social networking is a relatively new technology which has emerged as a popular online pastime. Therefore, big business is eager to cater to this emerging audience. With the popularity and buzz behind Web 2.0 it is necessary to fundamentally understand how the end-

users of social networking sites operate. Business must too understand what the "social" in "social" networking represents and realize the recognized limits that Web 2.0 exits within.

Online social networking is heralded as a phenomenon, but are online social networks really used for social networking? Newspaper headlines suggest that online social networking is an area of new media where business needs to participate and create original content to succeed in the Web 2.0 world. The concept of social networking sites may appear obvious to business in the traditional sense, but how users are socializing online today is vastly different. The online social networks of today function within an accepted perspective of half-truths, skepticism, and hesitation.

Social networking sites are redefining the perception of "social" into a commodity, something that is not necessarily bought, but rather exchanged. Online social networking users can acquire thousands of new friends, de-friend an individual, and even rank the significance of their friends on online social networking sites such as, MySpace, Facebook, and Friendster (Highfield & Fleming, 2007).

According to a survey by psychologist, Dr. William Reader and his team at Sheffield Hallam University, the United Kingdom has over 150,000 citizens signing up for Facebook everyday (Tomilson, 2007). This statistic exemplifies the popularity of these networking sites, but at the same time this statistic is quite misleading. Many Brits may be joining to simply see just what the buzz is about. This same study noted that the average Brit spends 22 days a year socializing in the traditional face-to-face way a year, as opposed to six days a year using online social networking. This study suggests that online social networking is not necessarily the new way we are socializing, but rather an alternative way to communicate for some.

Traditional Social Networking

Before MySpace and Facebook there was little confusion with the definition of the word, friend. Friend was not an ambiguous word. The definition of a friend for many was and still is; the label attached to one with whom you are emotionally close with, one with whom you trust and are fond of. Familiarity and trust are inherent within the context of a traditional social network of friends; whether one's social network consists of neighbors, colleagues, poker pals or book club buddies. One feels safe and comfortable with friends inside the walls of their social network, whether it is the weekly poker game, book club meeting, or get-together at the local bar after work.

Based upon interpersonal communication experiences, individuals trust others in their social network. One can make assumptions and stereotypes of a friend based upon that friend's wardrobe, speech, hairstyle, or choice of music. One can assess, reflect and create their own profile for that friend.

Psychologist William Schutz, noted for his theory on Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO) points to three interpersonal needs that are largely universal for interpersonal relationships. The three needs are affection, inclusion and control. Affection is the need we have that allows us to feel that we are loved and wanted by others. Inclusion is simply the need to belong to a group. Control is the desire to control our environment, perhaps others [parents with children], or a situation (McClean, p. 108).

Traditional social networking allows us to meet these three basic needs. In traditional social networks the significance of non-verbal communication strengthens friendships and social networks. Noted psychologist, Albert Mehrabian conducted a comprehensive study and found

that we communicate emotional messages through the spoken word as little as 7 percent of the time, which suggest that we communicate nonverbally up to 93 percent of the time (McClean, 2005, p. 80). Mehrabian's study implies that the nonverbal communication occurring in traditional social networking helps to establish the deeper connection, the emotional connection between two friends.

In traditional social networks it is mutually apparent that one is putting forward their best behavior, both verbally through proper speech and vocabulary and nonverbally, by using appropriate proxemics, facial expressions and body language dependent on the environment of the network or group. However, unlike mediated social networking, traditional social networking gives all members an opportunity to assess the actual social interaction and create their own stereotypes of their fellow networking members.

Mediated Social Networking

What is the definition of a "friend" in an online social networking site? It is not clear, it is rather ambiguous. Perhaps a friend is someone that shares a common interest, a mutual friend, or a friend that one has from their traditional social network whom has now joined them in their virtual network. Today's popularity of online social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace allow users to ask written permission to become a "friend" and then add those "friends" to a list, much like one collecting poker chips, boasting to the rest of the poker table how well one is doing.

The term friend is not the only ambiguous component of social networking sites, but so are the elements of trust and identity. Unlike traditional unmediated networking, social networking sites exist on an open platform. Anyone can join, anyone can be asked to become a friend. A user is given one's profile to review, no room for the user to make their own assumptions based upon interpersonal experiences. A social networking site user can only make assumptions and stereotypes based upon the profile a fellow member already created. A member of a social networking site presents their best self physically, emotionally, and socially, thus a more misleading self.

As Walter Lippmann contends, "to the hurried observer a slight connection is enough […] The signs [for online social networking—a user's personal page] stand for ideas, and these ideas we fill out with our stock of images" (p. 75). The images and text displayed on one's social networking page permit users to see what the page owner wish for them to see, thus permitting that page owner and fellow network members to decide what stereotype should be created for them. Profiles on social networking sites allow "friends" in these networks to establish obvious stereotypes without attempting to see the "friend" wholly.

Online social networking users are aware that no one is being completely honest, yet the network expands and friends are added. Author David Weinberger best describes the online social networking experience (1997). Weinberger discusses his experience on the online social networking site—Friendster. Weinberger writes, "The Friendster experience encapsulates much of the problem: Making complex, meaningful phenomena explicit can leave us rudderless, force us to oversimplify, and result in statements that are incomplete and misleading" (1997, p. 156).

According to a non-random convenience sampled questionnaire given to social networking site users by Victoria Geyer in June 2007, no respondents ever personally experienced an issue of their privacy being compromised, yet respondents lacked faith in the security of their privacy and identity on the social networking sites. Results from the questionnaire suggest that end-users

expect the behavior of false identification to erupt on the online platform. The acceptance of false identity or misleading identity is drastically different than the expectations held to those in traditional un-mediated social networks. Online behavior suggests that users accept the altered connotation of being "social" with their "friends" on online social networking sites. This is an example of an accepted shift of the connotation of "social" from the traditional to the mediated for social networking site users.

Walter Ong's theory of orality and literacy illustrates this behavior in electronic communication. Ong contends, "this 'secondary orality' consists of group-minded individuals that act self-consciously and programmatically. The individual feels that he or she, and an individual, must be socially sensitive" (1982, p. 136). Online social networking allows one to be an individual and present their best self, yet a duality exists of socializing communally with other members of the social networking site. This very duality helps foster one's misleading self within the social networking site.

Referring back to William Schutz's theory of interpersonal needs, one could feasible argue that social networking sites provide both the needs of inclusion and control. Inclusion can occur on online social networking sites, by joining a Facebook group or MySpace page where one can become a member of an established group. A social networking site user can also exert control by deciding if one wants to become a member of a group or accept the offer to become one's friend. Yet, the first interpersonal need of affection is lost in translation from traditional social networks to the mediated online social networks. David Weinberger clearly illustrates:

> *Friendship isn't that binary. I have no hesitation in listing my pal down the street as a friend, but that's not exactly how I'd describe the former boss with whom I had a good but not very warm relationship, the doctor with whom I chat but never see outside of his office, or the person with whom I've been exchanging intermittent emails about politics for the past ten years. If a site asked me the true-false question of whether they're my friends, I would probably say yes because they're not my friends, but I would want to put an asterisk next to each answer. There's just so much more to say* (p. 155).

Affection or degrees of affection do not translate within the social context of online social networking. This is the first limit of communication that Web 2.0 exits within, that limit being users having an accepted misleading identity.

Suggestion of Exclusivity

It is because of the very fact that online social networking sites exist within a much more open platform, than traditional networking groups, that the issue of exclusivity begins to emerge. Research has shown that young people, the largest population using online social networking sites, do not have loyalty to specific social networking sites (Richtel, 2007).Younger users will leave those sites and friends behind to try out the next, newest, coolest site; post their profile and present their best self to a new set of friends. There is a need to set one apart from this mass social online network, where anyone can be anyone's friend, as long as one clicks "accept." The behavior of needing to belong to an exclusive social networking site has direct ties to traditional unmediated social networks—the need for inclusion.

Traditionally people join weekly poker games, book clubs or "get-togethers" for the need of belonging to a group, based upon common interests, whether it is shared recreational hobbies,

career, or unique interests. Once within that group, one can have a sense of V.I.P treatment, a feeling of belonging, an experience of being welcomed, and expect to participate in the group. Yet, when socializing online, exclusivity is compromised. One has to seek out a new site and new friends to achieve that V.I.P status to set them apart from the masses. Journalist J. Scott Orr (2002) summarizes this behavior, "the burgeoning world of social networking has spawned hundreds of sites all vying for the attention of users interested in expanding their social circles. Experts who have studied network promiscuity see it as a natural phenomenon that mimics real world social activity." The open platform that social networking operates within is an additional limit of communicating on Web 2.0, the limit being the desire for exclusivity.

The concept of exclusivity has entered the executive minds in business, in hopes of carving out a piece of Web 2.0 for their business model. Technology investors and entrepreneurs are seeking to capitalize on older internet users for this very reason of exclusivity. Older users that are less likely to leave one social networking site for hottest, newest one. Older users are separating themselves from the pack of young twenty-something and teenagers, who are associated with sites such as, Facebook and MySpace. The social networking site, *Multiply*, is an exclusive site for people who are older and more settled in their life. Johnson and Johnson spent approximately 10 to 20 million dollars to acquire *Maya's Mom*, a social networking site exclusively for parents (Richtel, 2007). The boom in venture capitalist funding for the exclusive or age-framed social networking sites must enter the Web 2.0 business with caution. If it is exclusivity that older users are looking for, then by offering too many social networking sites for this demographic, the concept loses its very function—exclusivity.

Lessons Learned

Business is eager to join the social networking phenomenon by joining the bandwagon that the media is heralding as a phenomenon that is necessary to be relevant in today's global economy. However, business cannot afford to ignore how Web 2.0 users are using the technology—the present limits set forth by users, instead of focusing on the possibilities set forth by media hype.

It was less than a decade ago, when venture capitalists were spending millions of dollars on network television Web portals, such as NBCi and ABC's Go network. Business was eager to participate in the dot.com bubble, referred to today as Web 1.0. NBCi debuted in November of 1999 through the merger of NBC and CNET. The portal had a large user base, with 27 million registered users and 16 million unique users a month, yet this venture was deemed a failure less than two years later (Tomasula, 2007).

In 1998, Disney changed Go.com from a search engine into a web portal. Almost all Disney/ABC sites migrated to the Go.com domain and the web portal was mentioned at the end of television programs. However, in January of 2001, Disney announced it would be closing Go.com and its search engine, laying off 400 employees and retired the Go.com stock (Gordon, 2001). Why did these Web portals fail with both users and ultimately for business? Because financial backers and analysts failed to observe how the "eyeballs" on the websites were using the sites. Internet users did not need or want a multitude of web portals. Users did not want to choose from various access points to conduct their internet searches, check e-mail, shop and browse forums; they wanted one site that would direct them where they needed to go. Business was providing too much of the same thing and users wanted their experience streamlined.

Yahoo! entered Web 1.0 and came out on top, because the site functioned within the capacity of how users were willing to use the technology at that time.

Direction for the Future

Social networking is a main component of the Web 2.0. Less then a decade ago, e-commerce and the information superhighway were the main components Web 1.0.

Business must reflect on how the few powerhouse businesses that emerged in Web 1.0 succeeded and still remain powerful today (Yahoo!, Amazon, and EBay). And when one looks at the successful business models it becomes evident that these companies understood both how the technology operates and more importantly how the users used the technology.

The greater population of social networking site users are on social networking sites with their existing real-life friends, simply sharing yet another layer of themselves to their existing real world friends, their virtual self. Psychologist, Dr. William Reader contends, "Although the numbers of friends people have on these sites can be massive the actual number of close friends is approximately the same in the face to face real world"(Rosen, 2007). Business must use new technology for how it is being used, which is simply an additional way to communicate, much like the cellular phone, or e-mail and not the only way we communicate and socialize. Business must recognize that online social networking possesses inherent limits, which are misleading identities and a desire for exclusivity that an open platform technology cannot eliminate. Once business pauses and comprehend that online users are not socializing in the traditional sense, but within the limits that online socializing provides, business may prosper into the next world of Web 3.0.

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