

'Lifecasters' part of a growing group of social-networking junkies

July 14 2009, By Melody McDonald

It's just before noon, and Jeni Searcy is sitting in her room, talking to a friend about driving to the Apple Store to buy a new iPod.

It's a normal, fairly mundane conversation -- being watched by 58 people on the Internet.

"Well, I'm out of here," Searcy says into her webcam before shutting it off. "Y'all have a good day."

Searcy, 21, is a "lifestreamer" or a "lifecaster": someone who broadcasts her daily doings over the Internet.

Whenever the mood strikes her, Searcy turns on her webcam and streams live video of herself onto Justin.tv, a Web site where people can watch her every move. Searcy, who goes by "Jane" online, also continuously updates her friends and fans through blogs, Twitter, Facebook and MySpace.

A college student and barista at a local Starbucks, Searcy is an extreme social networker. She carries her phone, computer, webcam and camcorder everywhere.

"I haven't met a lot of people like me," she said.

But experts say [social-networking](#) junkies -- people consumed with e-mailing, texting, tweeting, blogging, podcasting and videoing _ are

everywhere. They're college students, marketing professionals and journalists. They're attention-seeking extroverts and anxiety-ridden introverts. They're young; they're old.

And they're here to stay.

"It is a large group and growing," said Temple University psychologist Frank Farley, former president of the American Psychological Association and an expert in human behavior. "They literally exchange messages, in some cases, hundreds of times a day."

Consider: The number of minutes users spent on Facebook in the past year has increased over 700 percent, from 1.7 billion in April 2008 to 13.9 billion in 2009, according to a Nielsen online report released last month. Users spent 5 billion minutes on MySpace, 300 million on Twitter and 202.4 million on LinkedIn.

"My grandmother is on Facebook," said Lauren Turner, 28, an interactive marketing manager at the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce. "It is not just a stereotypical young thing anymore. It has broadened to all generations."

When Shama Kabani of Frisco, Texas, got married last month, she considered tweeting as she walked down the aisle.

But then she thought better of it. (Not to mention, her phone mysteriously disappeared about an hour before the ceremony.)

For Kabani, 24, owner of Click to Client, a social-media consulting firm, using Twitter during her wedding probably wouldn't have surprised anyone, but even she has social-networking limits.

"He deserves better than that," Kabani said of her new husband.

On a normal day, Kabani estimates that she spends six to seven hours a day on social-media networks. She has more than 17,000 followers on Twitter and so many friends on Facebook -- 5,000 -- that she can't add any more. She also has an online TV show, Shama.Tv, in which she talks about social media.

"I had my first computer in the fourth grade, and I haven't looked back since," she said.

Farley characterizes people like Kabani as "digital natives."

"These are young people growing up inside of the digital world," Farley said. "People like me are digital immigrants. The younger generation, they live there."

Jonathan Alpert, a Manhattan-based psychotherapist and advice columnist, said using social networking to reconnect with old friends, make new friends, build a brand image, promote a business or market yourself is a positive thing.

"When it becomes a problem is when it interferes with other aspects of life, like relationships, finances or career," he said.

Every morning, Jon Ray wakes up, pours a cup of coffee -- and grabs his iPhone.

"I have my iPhone synced with Twitter, Facebook, e-mail and Google Reader, and while I'm sitting having coffee on the patio, over the course of an hour I will browse 200 to 500 blogs," he said.

Ray, 25, is the founder of the Austin, Texas-based social-media marketing company Papertank Productions, which teaches other companies how to use social-media tools to find their "online voice."

His life revolves around social media.

"I was at a party once and jumped into the pool with my phone, and I had to go 48 hours without my phone, and I thought my life was going to end," he said. "To have massive amounts of info at your fingertips is certainly addicting."

Alpert said social networking is popular in part because it appeals to people's ego and narcissistic tendencies. The constant feedback also drives people to continuously post seemingly meaningless aspects of their lives, like what they ate for breakfast.

"Would they post such minutiae if they knew they weren't going to get a reply?" Alpert said.

Ray, who hopes to achieve celebrity status, said it is empowering when people respond to what you have to say. "That is a power trip, no matter how big or small it is," he said.

And while [Facebook](#), Twitter and blogs are immensely popular right now, experts agree that these forms of social media will eventually become integrated or give way to something more exciting.

"We are in the early days of mindless communication," Farley said. " ... But I think these are the early days and as long as we aren't afraid, we will come out on top of it."

Kabani predicts that, one day, we will walk into a grocery store, scan a card containing various social networks and we will hear: "Your friend Cynthia bought tomatoes, would you like to add them to your cart?" she said. "The more global we get, the more connected we are able to stay to people."

Searcy said she is surprised that so many people are interested in her life.

Since she began lifecasting more than two years ago, she has had 1.8 million viewers to her channel.

"I have taken a couple of days off before and ... people started e-mailing me and asking, 'Are you OK? Are you sick?' " she said. "They get so used to seeing me every day."

Searcy she started lifecasting after a friend told her about Justin.tv, a Web site founded by Justin Kan, who wore a video camera 24/7 and streamed continuous live video to viewers. The site is now a network of thousands of channels, where anyone can broadcast and watch live video.

"I was like, 'Hey, that looks pretty cool,' " Searcy said. "I have a webcam, so I just turned it on. I tried it the first day, and pretty much since that day, I have been broadcasting every day."

Searcy has been getting more exposure after Ford recently selected her to drive their new Ford Fiesta for six months, performing missions and relating her experiences through social-media platforms.

Searcy acknowledges that juggling work, college, Ford's missions and social media is exhausting.

Still, she has no plans to stop anytime soon. For one, she said, lifecasting is fun.

"I don't know how it would tie into marriage and kids and stuff like that," she said. "But I'll do it as long as I can -- until I get sick of it, I guess."

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