

Study takes a look at social networking sites

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Online social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter are now firmly implanted in the cultural mainstream. Yet in spite of their popularity - Facebook currently has 300 million users - relatively little is known about what drives users towards particular sites and what prompts them to contribute content.

Likewise, how knowledge and information transmitted socially among users of these sites can be captured and turned into opportunities for profit has so far largely evaded the business sector. To date, research on social network sites has focused largely on user [personality traits](#), benefits to individuals such as information sharing, issues of privacy and the like.

Now, Macquarie University PhD student and Associate Lecturer in Marketing, Lucy Miller, is taking a closer look at online social networks

from a marketing perspective. She recently presented her preliminary research at the Australian & New Zealand Marketing Academy conference in Melbourne.

Online social networks give the sites' owners and potential advertisers insights into their users thoughts and patterns of behaviour. Miller looked at the key motivating factors for use of [social networking sites](#) that influence content contribution behaviour, friending behaviour, and attitudes towards advertising - all essential components that determine the success or otherwise, of a [social networking](#) site.

Miller found four key motivating factors influencing the users of social network sites. These factors were curiosity about the lives of others, social engagement, a desire to increase social capital and status, and self expression.

The different motivating factors in turn resulted in different user behaviours and attitudes towards site advertising, how much content they contributed and friending behaviours.

The users driven by curiosity about others were less likely to contribute much in the way of content but would likely have a higher tolerance for advertising, Miller found. Likewise, others had a need to express themselves and would not be as active in seeking friends, instead feeling more satisfied that the site allowed them to be creative and reduce their anxieties. Still yet others built social capital and status through the large network of friends they established.

Based on her preliminary survey of existing social networking sites, Miller argues that those differing core motivational profiles and resulting behaviours show social networking sites such as [Facebook](#), have distinctly segmented user markets. Site owners, anxious to retain and increase user numbers, and advertisers wanting to reach those user-

consumers, need to be aware of the differences and tailor their approaches accordingly, she said.

Miller also found other, less clear factors such as gender and major transitional events in life such as a divorce, death, moving house or changing jobs can also influence and create changes in user behaviours.

By identifying groups of users with distinct behavioural useage patterns and attitudes towards advertising and commercial use of the medium, Miller's future work will serve to improve our understanding of the nature and dynamics of consumer motivation. It will also have important implications for owners and sponsors of social networking sites interested in user retention.

With her preliminary research on key motivational factors now presented, Miller will move into the next major data collection phase of her work creating in-depth user surveys and profiles. She'd also like to partner with media and social network site owners interested in developing effective user retention and site sustainability strategies.

Provided by Macquarie University

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