

Social media actually strengthen social ties, various demographics engage differently, study says

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Contrary to popular opinion, Facebook is making us more social, albeit in ways unique to the digital age, according to new research at The University of Texas at Austin.

While the social network site — the most visited site in the world — is helping to close the social media generational gap, it's being used differently by men and women, and by current college students versus recent college graduates.

The study, led by S. Craig Watkins, associate professor of radio-TV-film, is the first to examine the distinct ways in which engagement with Facebook is evolving into a multi-faceted social experience. Radio-TV-Film doctoral candidate H. Erin Lee helped with the survey design and data analysis.

"Our findings indicate that Facebook is not supplanting face-to-face interactions among friends, family and colleagues," said Watkins. "In fact, we believe there is sufficient evidence that social media afford opportunities for new expressions of friendship, intimacy and community."

Watkins surveyed 900 current college students and recent college graduates across the country to find out what and with whom these Facebook users communicate, the influence of gender and age, and the

role of news, information and entertainment (for example, quizzes, games, photos, etc.).

Whether it's a wall post, photo, comment or news link, young people's engagement with Facebook is driven primarily by a desire to stay connected and involved in the lives of family and friends who live near and far, or have recently entered their lives.

When asked to choose the top three activities most engaged in on Facebook, 66 percent of respondents listed "posting status updates," 60 percent listed "posting comments/likes to my profile" and nearly half, 49 percent, listed "posting messages and other content to friends' profiles."

When asked about the type of communication they engage in on Facebook, 47 percent of survey participants cited their communication with friends who live in a different state or country as "very important," while 28 percent cited communicating with friends who live in the same city as "very important." Thirty-five percent of survey participants cited communicating with family members, such as parents, aunts and uncles, as "very important."

"Using Facebook to strengthen familial ties indicates that boomer parents are now quite active, leading us to believe that the generational gap in social media use is closing," said Watkins.

While men and women use Facebook in equal numbers and agree it's an important tool to stay in touch with friends, they engage with the social media platform differently.

Men tend to use Facebook for functional activities, such as sharing news, information and task-oriented content. Men are less likely to share photos on Facebook, but when they do they're more likely to be photos connected to their personal interests, such as hobbies, animals or

scenery. In comparison to women, men are 8 percent more likely to post video clips to their Facebook profile.

Women tend toward affectionate uses of Facebook, such as sharing personal photos from family events. Women in the survey viewed photos as an important way to share fun and important personal experiences with friends.

Over the last year, Facebook has come under intense scrutiny concerning its privacy policies. While Watkins' study found young Facebook users are relatively open to sharing [personal information](#) on their profiles, individuals tend to censor themselves more as they transition from college to the professional world.

Of the personal information individuals are able to share on their profile, Watkins found "relationship status" is widely shared (84 percent), as is "favorite media," including information about their favorite books, TV shows and movies. Compared to graduates, college students were more likely to list their "religious views" and "political views" on their profiles, suggesting that as users move from college to the professional world they become less likely to share personal information that may be perceived as controversial. When it comes to sharing what may be considered personal information men are much more likely than women, for example, to share their political views (49 percent vs. 36 percent) as well as their religious views (51 percent vs. 43 percent).

"As the debate about social media and privacy rages on, this study suggests that as social media users grow older they may become more selective about the personal data they share online," said Watkins.

Other findings from the "Got Facebook? Investigating What's Social About [Social Media](#)" study:

- Of all the media content young people share via Facebook — photos, videos, links, quizzes — sharing photos is common with 87 percent of respondents reporting that they post photos on Facebook. However, less than 20 percent of these people post photos weekly or more frequently.
 - Facebook has evolved into a social gaming platform with 58 percent of respondents reporting they are likely to play a game or take a quiz on a typical day, whereas 33 percent reporting they are not likely to. Of those who participate in gaming, 52 percent are college graduates and 44 percent are college students.
 - In the transition from high school to college, individuals share significantly more personal information and "friend" more people, but don't spend more time on Facebook.
 - College-educated Facebook users still frequently rely upon more traditional news sources, such as television and radio, and turn to those sources more frequently than online news sources.
 - Men tend to use Facebook more than women to post links to pop culture, current events and news-related topics.
- The average number of [Facebook](#) "friends" among respondents was 254.

More information: A summary of the "[Got Facebook? Investigating What's Social About Social Media](#)" study is available online at theyoungandthedigital.com. This is the first set of data to be released from the study. A second set will be released in early 2011.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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