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Community Spaces Project #1

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FACEBOOK AS A PERSONALIZED COMMUNITY SPACE

Introduction

Facebook is an online social networking site. It was created in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg and his college roommates at Harvard University. At first it was originally designed only for students in Harvard to replace the printed directory (The Facebook). Later, it opened its door to college students all over the world as long as they had a validated college email address. Then in May 2007, it decided to let everyone sign up and open the platform for third party mini program developers. It is now the second most visited website in the world with about "1.1 billion monthly active users" (wikipedia.org).

The basic layout

When a user goes to https//www.facebook.com (Facebook's URL), he/she has to login first with an id (can be a phone number? or email address) and password. Once logged in, the main Facebook page is displayed. The color scheme used is based on blue shades. There is a navigation bar at the top, which houses a "Homepage" icon, a search bar, notification icons and links to other settings. The top left space shows all your events (Birthdays and other things), pokes and invitations. Facebook shows friend suggestions and ads targeted to the user

below it. There is a separate notification feed on the extreme right, which is a continuously updating stream of your friends' activities. A list of friends available for chat is displayed below it. On the extreme left is a column containing links to all the 'Favorites', 'Groups', 'Pages' and 'apps'. In the middle is the 'Newsfeed', which is a continuously updating stream of 'posts' by your friends, pages or groups that you are a part of. It occupies a substantial portion of the homepage and most users spend a majority of their time here.

Facebook Login page

Screenshot of Facebook Homepage
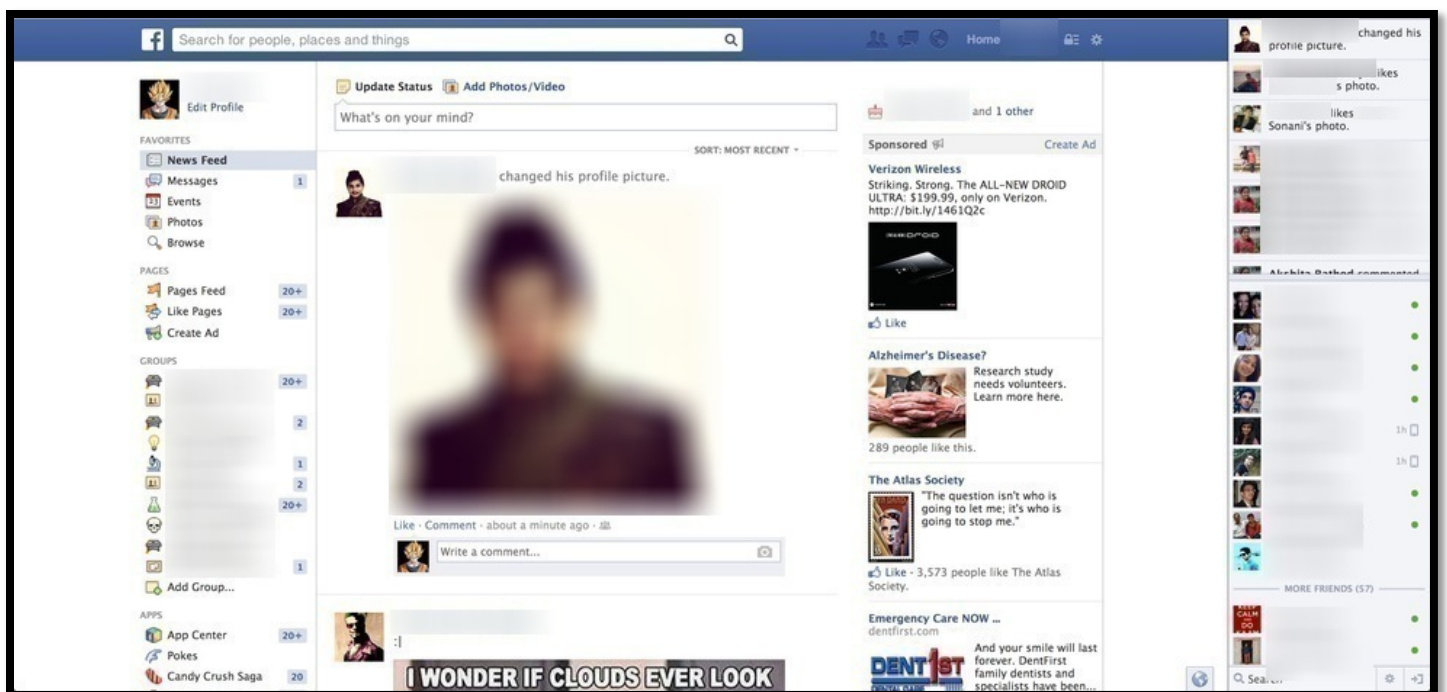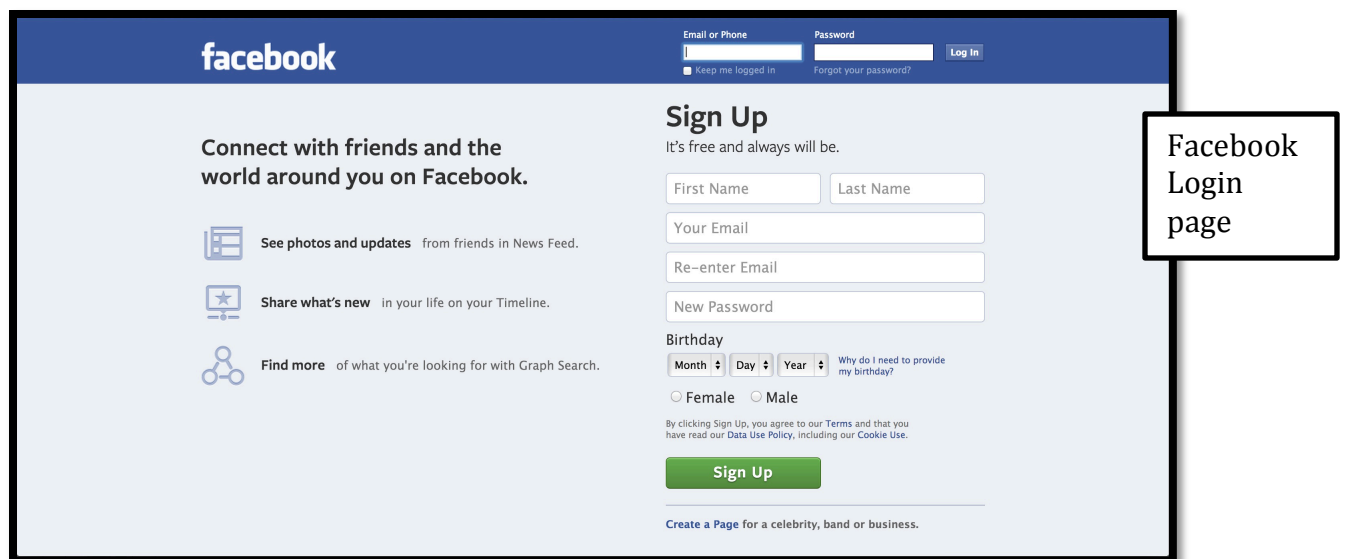
Elements, features and functions

As a community space, Facebook has a lot of features that make interaction between the community members as easy as possible.

The most important elements of Facebook as a community space are:

o Post: A post is the basic element of communication on Facebook. It is a 'story' written by a user. It can be anything. Users can also include photographs, videos or links in their posts. A post can be posted on one's own timeline (visible to 'all') or on another person's or group's timeline (meant for that person/group, still visible to 'all').
Other users who can see the post can interact with it in three ways:

• Comments: It is essentially a response to the post by another user. The owner of the post can also comment to reply to other comments.

• Like: A like, denoted by a 'thumbs up ', is another type of non-verbal response, which means that a user agrees with the post. It is also used to denote acknowledgment of the post.

• Sharing: By clicking on the share button, users can forward an interesting post by other users to their own timeline while acknowledging the original author of the post.

• Check-in: It denotes that the user has visited a real place in the physical world. It is a link between the physical and online world and supports the concept of "*real virtuality*". (Rheingold 1993)


A sample post

o   Newsfeed: According to the Facebook Official Documentation:

"News Feed—the center column of your home page—is a constantly updating list of stories from people and Pages that you follow on Facebook. News feed stories include status updates, photos, videos, links, app activity and likes."

It is analogous to a town center or any central public meeting place where a traditional community meets and interacts. It is a very important part of the 'Facebook experience' and most of the public user interactions take place here. It is the first screen that you see when you log in to the site. The stories in the News Feed are sorted either chronologically or by popularity according to user preference.

Stories from groups/pages of topics that the user finds interesting are also displayed on the newsfeed.
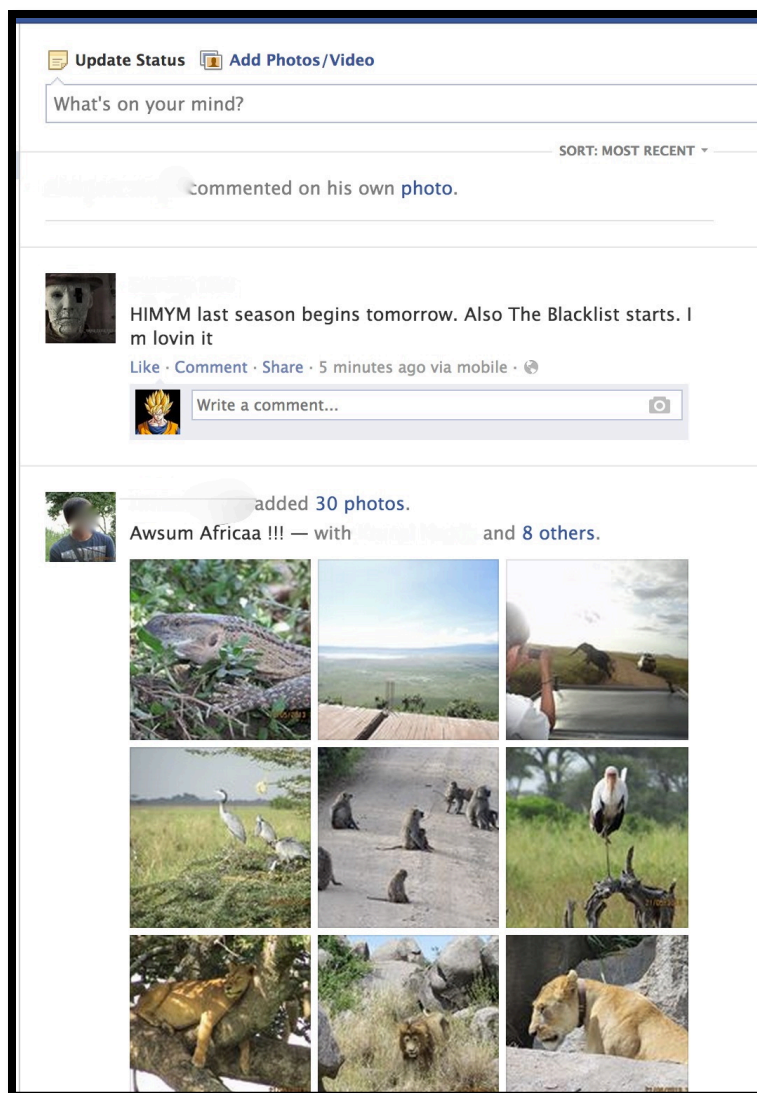
Newsfeed

- o Timeline: A timeline is a member's personal identity in the virtual community. It displays all the posts by the user or related to the user. Other people can browse through the user's posts, photos and other information using the user's timeline.

  It also displays the user's favorite books, movies, TV shows etc. This shows how users in a virtual community have a much greater control over what kind of image they portray about themselves.

  Just like the real world, the timeline is organized in "moments", important moments of a person's life (like birth, marriage etc.).

  "Profile scrubbing" is a recent phenomenon in which a user tries to modify his/her timeline in order to change his/her virtual persona. This is the virtual equivalent of code switching.
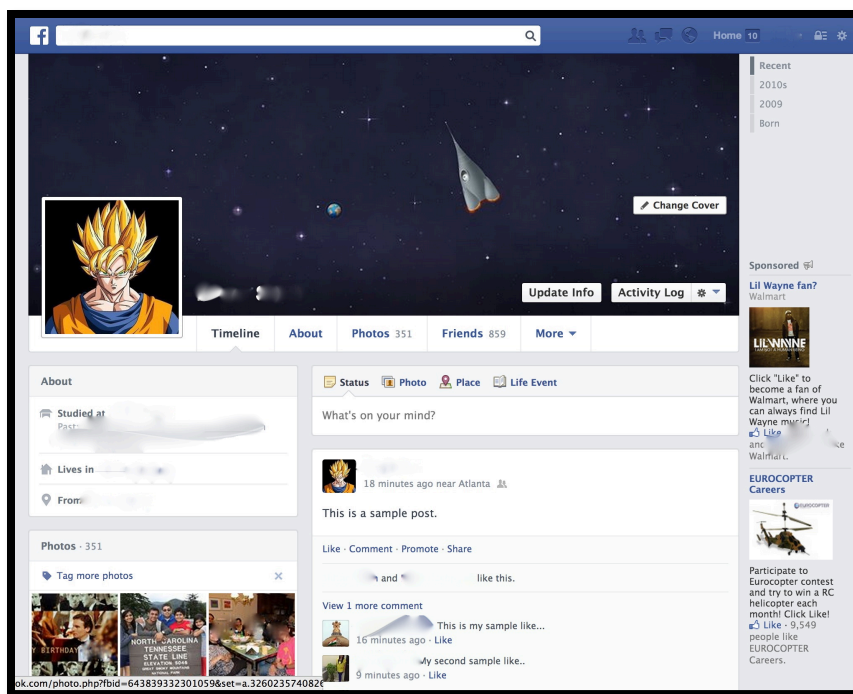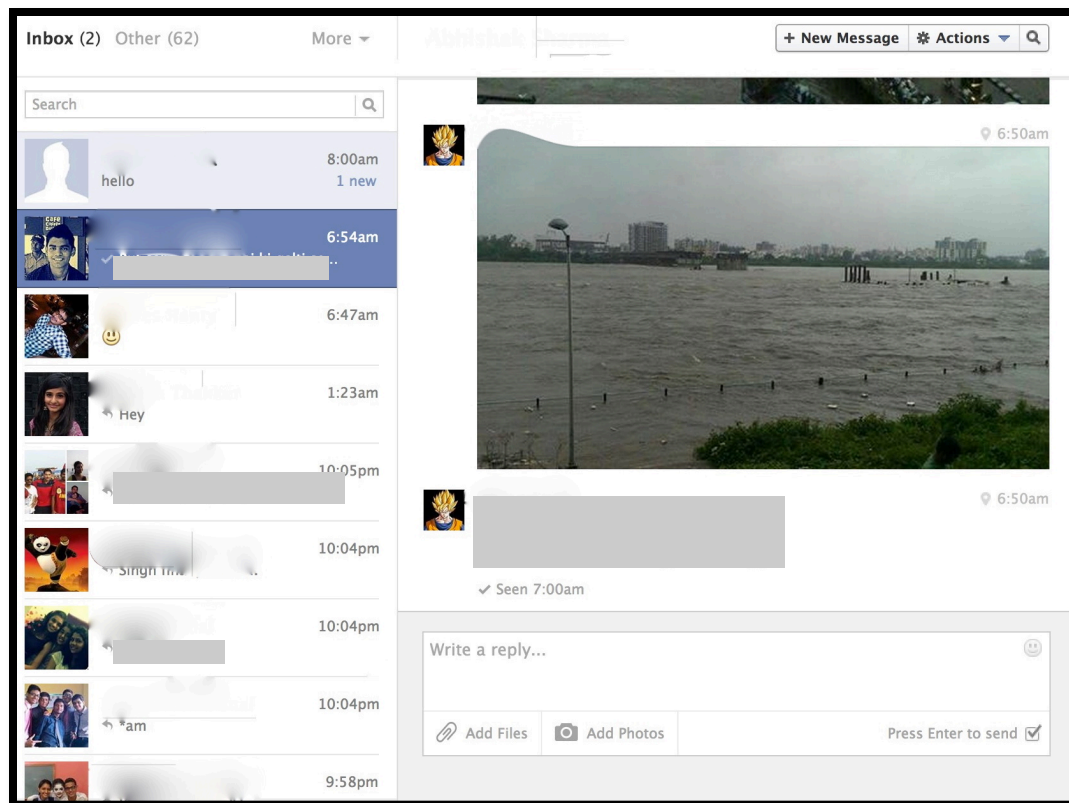

Timeline
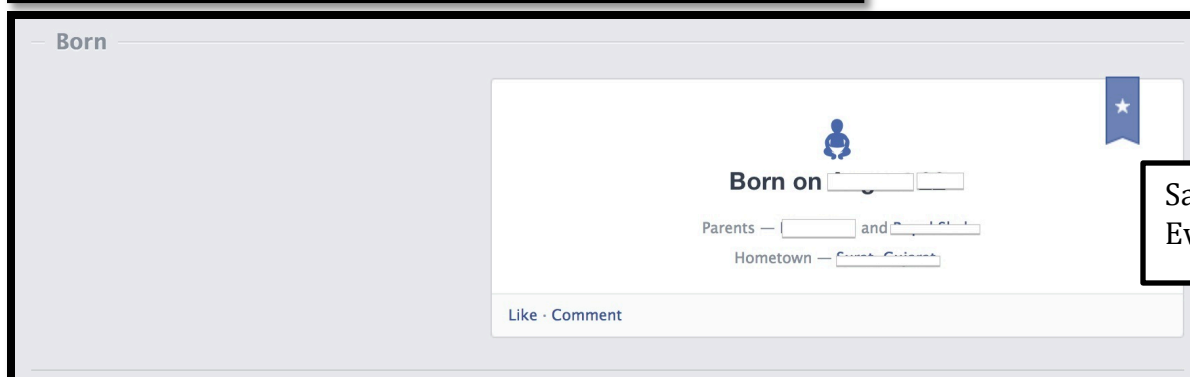
Sample Life Event

- o Private messages/ Chats: Using chats, a user can have a one-to-one or one-to-many interaction with other users in a more traditional conversation style. Users can also make face-to-face video calls using chats.

Private Messaging

- o Groups/Pages: These are "communities" of members sharing a common interest. They are essentially reflected communities within the larger community of Facebook. The existence of groups and pages shows how overlapping communities can exist in the virtual world.
- o Events: Facebook users can create "Events", which are online plans for a physical meeting in the real world. This also illustrates the concept of "*virtual reality*". Users can also send real physical gifts to their friends for any occasion.

o   Notes: Users can add notes to their timelines. Notes are a medium of expression for many users and a lot of insight about the user by his/her notes. Notes are like blog entries. The entire community can see the notes on the user's timeline.
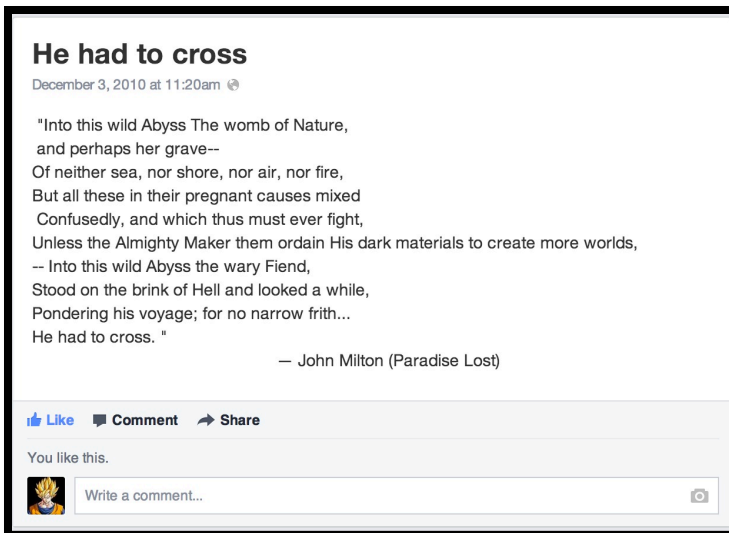
Sample Note

o   Apps: These are third-party applications like games, readers etc. which allow users to do a lot of things in the virtual space. For example, users can maintain virtual farms ("Farmville") or play word games in real time ("Words with friends").

An outsider can gain a lot of insight into the workings of the community by studying these elements. Just by looking at a user's timeline, outsiders can know about him/her in a way that was never possible before.

Relationships on Facebook:

The main form of relationship in Facebook is "Friendship". People can add their acquaintances as their "Friends" to stay in touch with them. "Friendships" can range from a handful of strong bonds to hundreds of weak ties (Wellman and Gulia, 1999).

These are tertiary relationships," which are centered on the individual's choices and have arguably led to *'the privatization of sociability'"* (Castells, 2001:128). This means that members of the virtual community tend to communicate with each other as individuals rather than as members of a community.

Facebook as a 'Personalized Community Space'

Facebook is a virtual community, which means that it is a "*social network mediated by information and digital technologies*" (Blackshaw, 104). The distinction between the community space and the actual community is quite fuzzy as it is an online community with no direct physical manifestations. The members of this community are referred to as 'Friends'. Facebook is typical postmodern community. It is highly volatile as users can easily shift groups and add/remove friends. It is highly personalized as a member gets an opportunity to re-invent himself and be a part of as many groups as he wants.

It is a highly *'cosmopolitan'* community, in the sense that the concept of discrimination based on characteristics like gender, caste, creed, race, sexuality etc. becomes meaningless because identity becomes a liquid entity. It means that since people can easily change their identities, discrimination cannot exist on Facebook.

Facebook also allows a user to control the amount of personal data that other members of the community can see about the user. For example, a user can hide information from certain members of the community. This is another implementation of '*privatization of sociability'* as it imparts of a sense of individuality instead of a community feeling.

Once a user sets up a Facebook profile, it will display only the relevant information according to the choices of the user. This makes every Facebook profile unique and highly personalized.

Other uses

Facebook is used by ad agencies as an ad distribution platform because they can easily send personalized ads directly to the consumers.

It's also used by agencies as a content distribution platform.

It is also possible that governments are using it to spy on entire populations.

Methodology

For this project, I observed what people do on Facebook. I spent some time observing various aspects of the site such as its design, parts, colors, ease of use etc. I did some research on the history of Facebook and how it evolved over time. I also spent quite some time reading Facebook documentation.

I used "Wolfram Alpha Facebook Analytics" to create a case study on how a community member spends time in the space. (*http://www.wolframalpha.com/facebook/*)

CASE STUDY

Using Wolfram Alpha Facebook Analytics tool, I have analyzed a Facebook user's personalized

community. Here are some interesting observations:

1. Friend Network:

2. User activity:

Activity:
Recent history:

Event 1

Event 2

Less
All ▼ Monthly ▼

(from Sep 1, 2012 to present)

■ posted links | ■ statuses | ■ uploaded photos

(based on data from 81 total activities)

This graph shows how events in the real world affect the amount of activity on Facebook.

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All ▼ Hide details

Weekly distribution:

■ posted links | ■ statuses | ■ uploaded photos

↖ mouseover for breakdown details
(based on data from 81 total activities)

most active days	Mondays (15 posts)
most active hour	8 am (9 posts)
most active time	8 am Sunday (4 posts)

(based on data from 81 total activities)

This infographic shows that the user interacts the most with community on Sunday mornings.

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3. Community Demographics

Friends' ages:

Show by gender

Distribution of reported ages:

Most of the members in this community are in the 18-24 year age group.
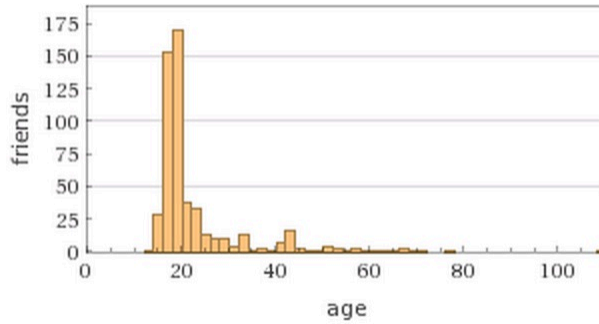
(based on data from 537 of 856 friends)

Friends' genders:

Show by age

71.0%

■ male (562)
■ female (229)

29.0%
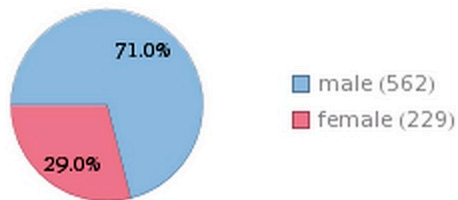
(based on data from 791 of 856 friends)

Friends' relationship statuses:

Show by age

75.4%

18.1%

79.5% (male)

13.4%

63.0% (female)

32.0%

■ single (300) | ■ in a relationship (13) | ■ married (72) | ■ it's complicated (8) | □ other (5)
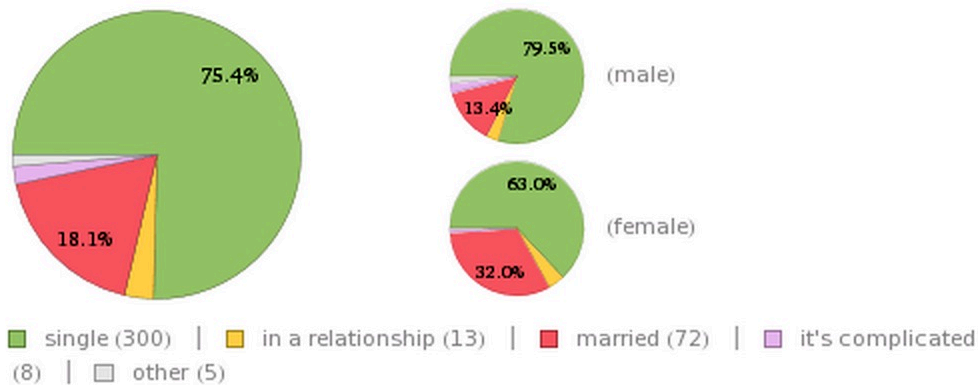
(based on data from 398 of 856 friends)

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4. Virtual Community has no physical limitations.

Friends' locations:
Residences ▼
World ▼   City map ▼

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Country ▼   More

country	number of friends
🇮🇳 India	565 (91.9%)
🇺🇸 United States	35 (5.7%)
🇨🇦 Canada	2 (0.3%)
🇮🇩 Indonesia	2 (0.3%)
🇷🇺 Russia	2 (0.3%)
other	9 (1.7%)

(60 cities, 39 states, 13 countries)

(based on data from 615 of 856 friends)

This infographic shows that a virtual community can thrive even if its members are on opposite ends of the globe.
Physical limitations and time zones become meaningless in virtual communities.

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Geographic extremes:
More   Show distributions

most distant: Cibitung, Jawa Barat, Indonesia
(   )

northernmost: Moscow, Russia
(   )

southernmost: Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
(   )

(based on data from 615 of 856 friends)

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