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Social networking sites and our lives

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Questions have been raised about the social impact of widespread use of social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, and Twitter. Do these technologies isolate people and truncate their relationships? Or are there benefits associated with being connected to others in this way? The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project decided to examine SNS in a survey that explored people's overall social networks and how use of these technologies is related to trust, tolerance, social support, and community and political engagement.

The findings presented here paint a rich and complex picture of the role that digital technology plays in people's social worlds. Wherever possible, we seek to disentangle whether people's varying social behaviors and attitudes are related to the different ways they use social networking sites, or to other relevant demographic characteristics, such as age, gender and social class.

The number of those using social networking sites has nearly doubled since 2008 and the population of SNS users has gotten older.

In this Pew Internet sample, 79% of American adults said they used the internet and nearly half of adults (47%), or 59% of internet users, say they use at least one of SNS. This is close to double the 26% of adults (34% of internet users) who used a SNS in 2008. Among other things, this means the average age of adult-SNS users has shifted from 33 in 2008 to 38 in 2010. Over half of all adult SNS users are now over the age of 35. Some 56% of SNS users now are female.

Facebook dominates the SNS space in this survey: 92% of SNS users are on Facebook; 29% use MySpace, 18% used LinkedIn and 13% use Twitter.

There is considerable variance in the way people use various social networking sites: 52% of Facebook users and 33% of Twitter users engage with the platform daily, while only 7% of MySpace and 6% of LinkedIn users do the same.

On Facebook on an average day:

- 15% of Facebook users update their own status.
- 22% comment on another's post or status.
- 20% comment on another user's photos.
- 26% "Like" another user's content.
- 10% send another user a private message

Facebook users are more trusting than others.

We asked people if they felt "that most people can be trusted." When we used regression analysis to control for demographic factors, we found that the typical internet user is more than twice as likely as others to feel that people can be trusted. Further, we found that

Facebook users are even more likely to be trusting. We used regression analysis to control for other factors and found that a Facebook user who uses the site multiple times per day is 43% more likely than other internet users and more than three times as likely as non-internet users to feel that most people can be trusted.

Facebook users have more close relationships.

The average American has just over two discussion confidants (2.16) – that is, people with whom they discuss important matters. This is a modest, but significantly larger number than the average of 1.93 core ties reported when we asked this same question in 2008. Controlling for other factors we found that someone who uses Facebook several times per day averages 9% more close, core ties in their overall social network compared with other internet users.

Facebook users get more social support than other people.

We looked at how much total support, emotional support, companionship, and instrumental aid adults receive. On a scale of 100, the average American scored 75/100 on a scale of total support, 75/100 on emotional support (such as receiving advice), 76/100 in companionship (such as having people to spend time with), and 75/100 in instrumental aid (such as having someone to help if they are sick in bed).

Internet users in general score 3 points higher in total support, 6 points higher in companionship, and 4 points higher in instrumental support. A Facebook user who uses the site multiple times per day tends to score an additional 5 points higher in total support, 5 points higher in emotional support, and 5 points higher in companionship, than internet users of similar demographic characteristics. For Facebook users, the additional boost is equivalent to about half the total support that the average American receives as a result of being married or cohabitating with a partner.

Facebook users are much more politically engaged than most people.

Our survey was conducted over the November 2010 elections. At that time, 10% of Americans reported that they had attended a political rally, 23% reported that they had tried to convince someone to vote for a specific candidate, and 66% reported that they had or intended to vote. Internet users in general were over twice as likely to attend a political meeting, 78% more likely to try and influence someone's vote, and 53% more likely to have voted or intended to vote. Compared with other internet users, and users of other SNS platforms, a Facebook user who uses the site multiple times per day was an additional two and half times more likely to attend a political rally or meeting, 57% more likely to persuade someone on their vote, and an additional 43% more likely to have said they would vote.

Facebook revives “dormant” relationships.

In our sample, the average Facebook user has 229 Facebook friends. They reported that their friends list contains:

- 22% people from high school
- 12% extended family
- 10% coworkers
- 9% college friends
- 8% immediate family
- 7% people from voluntary groups
- 2% neighbors

Over 31% of Facebook friends cannot be classified into these categories. However, only 7% of Facebook friends are people users have never met in person, and only 3% are people who have met only one time. The remainder is friends-of-friends and social ties that are not currently active relationships, but “dormant” ties that may, at some point in time, become an important source of information.

Social networking sites are increasingly used to keep up with close social ties.

Looking only at those people that SNS users report as their core discussion confidants, 40% of users have friended all of their closest confidants. This is a substantial increase from the 29% of users who reported in our 2008 survey that they had friended all of their core confidants.

MySpace users are more likely to be open to opposing points of view.

We measured “perspective taking,” or the ability of people to consider multiple points of view. There is no evidence that SNS users, including those who use Facebook, are any more likely than others to cocoon themselves in social networks of like-minded and similar people, as some have feared.

Moreover, regression analysis found that those who use MySpace have significantly higher levels of perspective taking. The average adult scored 64/100 on a scale of perspective taking, using regression analysis to control for demographic factors, a MySpace user who uses the site a half dozen times per month tends to score about 8 points higher on the scale.

Next: Acknowledgements



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