

## Chapter 1.18

# Web 2.0 Social Networking Sites

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter describes one of the Web 2.0 technologies, Social Networking Sites (SNS). A definition of SNS is offered, as is a short history of these sites. The existing research is reviewed and organized to summarize what we know about SNS usage (from the perspectives of student use, general population use and organizational use), and what we know about the antecedents and outcomes of SNS use. The chapter concludes with discussion of new developments, challenges and opportunities. There are many opportunities for future research and organizational applications of SNS as SNS adoption grows at incredible rates.

### INTRODUCTION

Offline social networks have existed since the beginning of humankind and have been the study of anthropologists and others for many years (Clemons, Barnett, & Appadurai, 2007). Social networks can

be groups of people who have interacted in the past for some common purpose or interest, and that have ongoing relationships with members of the group. Membership in networks can be relatively permanent (i.e., family relations) or flexible and short-term (i.e., members come and go as their interests and need for membership changes). The shared experiences and perceived shared values or needs can build trust among members and value, such that members tend to rely on each other and perceive shared information to be reliable and trustworthy (Clemons et al., 2007).

In the past decade or so, advances in technology have made it possible to use electronic communication tools to create social network applications and online social networks. The applications, sometimes called social networking tools, are web-based locations that lets a user create a self-profile and connect to others (who are using the same application) to build and maintain a personal network (Skiba, 2007). This type of application is part of the Web 2.0 evolution toward more collaboration via the web and examples include MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn, to name just a few of the largest. While the terminology used to describe these sites

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varies, recently the term Social Networking Sites (SNS) has become the common way to refer to them. The focus of this chapter is on these SNS and the chapter is organized as follows. The next section discusses what SNS are and presents a brief history. The third section describes what is known in the literature about the usage of SNS. This is followed by a discussion of potential business uses and anticipated developments, discussing both opportunities and challenges.

### WHAT IS A SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE (SNS)?

In this section, we first define SNS and then describe typical characteristics. The history of SNS is briefly discussed. Two of the current leading SNS are profiled in this history: MySpace and Facebook.

#### Social Networking Sites Defined

Boyd & Ellison (2007) appropriately defined SNS as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” (p. 211). They prefer the word network over networking in SNS, although they acknowledge the terms are used interchangeably in the literature, because they argue that networking emphasizes the initiation of relationship, often between strangers and that not all users are doing this. Many users use SNS’s to communicate with people that they already know (i.e., the people are already part of their offline social network).

Others argue that “networking” is more appropriate since the term social “network” site would be too broad a term, approaching the same meaning as Web 2.0 (Beer, 2008). Supporting this view, networking is defined by Dictionary.com and MS Word’s reference function, respectively, as:

*a supportive system of sharing information and services among individuals and groups having a common interest.<sup>1</sup>*

*the process or practice of building up or maintaining informal relationships, especially with people whose friendship could bring advantages such as job or business opportunities.*

Neither of these definitions suggest that networking would have to include creating new relationships (in addition to maintaining existing relationships). Therefore, while we adopt Boyd and Ellison’s three key characteristics of SNS, we suggest that Social Networking Sites is a more appropriate term for SNS and this terminology will be adopted for this paper. We next expand on SNS characteristics and typical functions provided to the user.

#### Characteristics of Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites are organized around people. Earlier online communities and their websites were organized around interests and topics. A unique characteristic of SNS is that users can specify their social networks and make them visible to others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This is done by users developing profiles of themselves and identifying acquaintances (termed Friends<sup>2</sup> in most SNSs). The starting point for a new user is to develop their profile which typically contains a picture of the user, some demographic information such as age, location, school affiliation/history, and personal interests.

Users then identify other system users that they have a relationship with or wish to develop a relationship with. Most SNSs required bi-directional confirmation, where a user requests a Friend connection. The system sends the request to the potential Friend, and if he/she accepts the request, then each other’s profile becomes linked. In this way, the social network of a user becomes visible to their Friends and Friends can

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