

Social Networking:  
Fertile Ground for the Branding of Youth?

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### *Introduction*

Two recent internet acquisitions rocked the online business world and initiated a sense of déjà vu in many, causing them to think back on the dot-com crash at the end of the last century (Glover, 2006). The first is the most recent: Two young entrepreneurs, Chad Hurley and Steven Chen, were given 1.5 billion dollars in Google stocks for You Tube, an online distribution network where individuals could share videos that they had created themselves. In its short history, You Tube has made pseudo-celebrities out of people such as lonelygirl15 (Davis, 2006) while at the same time maintaining a balance between fair use of media products and copyright violation.

The other acquisition is a bit older, but more pertinent to our discussion here. In 2005, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp bought the online social networking site Myspace for 580 million dollars (Mintz, 2006). Like You Tube, MySpace was a site originally envisioned by its founders Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe, as a place where musicians could independently distribute media content – and in their case, music. What the site has morphed into however is a cultural touchstone for America's youth. Through MySpace, a user creates a profile containing pictures of themselves, as well as lists of their interests, including favorite music, movies, and books. Users are then able to add other users profiles as “friends”, communicating with them through the site and creating a virtual social network of shared connections.

### *The Tangled Web 2.0*

Youtube and Myspace are at the front of the wave of what is known as the Web 2.0. Previously, the internet seemed more like a stationary object, a library where the flow of

information moved from the catalogs (servers) of the web out into individual lives. Despite its original democratic potential, the internet functioned very much like older mass mediums. The information was centralized within the power of a few, and available to all who were willing to click. New websites, such as Youtube and Myspace, however, move closer to the original democratic vision of the web. Instead of centralizing messages, these sites move the point of production for web content into the hands of the web user. In the place of home pages, where people would have to update their data by editing html, new blogging applications let users update personal websites within a matter of seconds. Sites like Flickr and You Tube allow users to upload their own photographs and videos, creating a user generated database of media on any topic. Myspace, in turn, allows its users to create a virtual persona, and in the process acts as a database of the lives of internet users. In a meta-analysis of these sites, it seems that Web 2.0 applications are merely frames through which users have the possibility to create their own Internet – one that is a close reflection of their own lives, or at least how they want their lives to be seen.

However, in looking back at these large internet acquisitions, the question that begs to be asked is “what is the big deal?” Why on earth would any respectable company spend so much money in acquiring these sites? The simplest way to answer is to provide the reader with a few statistics. For the month of August 2006, MySpace was the second most frequently visited website with 35 billion views (Rosenbush, 2006). The other large social networking firm Facebook.com—which caters mostly to college age students and groups internet social networks by locally based social networks--had 14.8 billion visits by the end of August 2006 (Rosenbush, 2006) and although facebook is still independently owned, it is rumored to be valued at somewhere between 600 million to 1.5 billion dollars.

But sheer traffic alone is not the only important bit of information in giving us a clue as to the value of these sites, especially in the eyes of media companies – what is more important is the target demographic of these sites. The average user of social networking sites is aged 16 to 24, a demographic that is seen as the most elusive by marketing firms (Rosenbush, 2005). Additionally, these users do not just simply visit these sites occasionally. Youth are spending some serious time at social networking sites, insomuch that the current generation of youth has been dubbed by some as the MySpace generation (Hempel, 2005).

### *The Multi-tasking Generation*

This younger generation differs in their media usage from previous generations. In a study produced by the Kaiser family foundation, the lives of youth in America is described as being “media saturated”, with 8 to 18 year olds having an average of 1.5 computers in their homes (Roberts, Foehr & Rideout, 2005). The Kaiser study also suggests that youth are becoming increasingly apt at media multitasking. According to the report, in a day, youth are cramming 8.5 hours of media content into a period of 6.5 hours of total media exposure (Roberts, Foehr & Rideout, 2005). Additionally, the way that adolescents are using media, particularly the web seems to be different from their older generational counterparts. The younger generation has been described as *Digital Natives*, having grown up in this environment, while the older generation is described as *Digital Immigrants* (Prensky as cited in Mee, 2006). Another author expands on this difference, commenting that adults “see the web as a supplement to their daily lives. They tap into information, buy books or send flowers...But for the most part, their social lives remain rooted in the traditional phone call and face-to-face interaction” (Hempel, 2005, p.

89). Youth on the other hand “use social networks as virtual community centers, a place to go and sit for a while (sometimes hours)” (Hempel, 2005, p. 89).

In a testimony before Congress on social networking, Amanda Lenhart (Internet Child Predators, 2006) offered an explanation of why sites like MySpace are so popular among youth. She commented that social networks have two primary functions that are useful to young adults: The first is purely utilitarian: to communicate with others. danah boyd (2006) discusses how the High School generation has informally adopted social networking sites as a communications structure, she says “MySpace is a cultural requirement for American high school students. Or, as one teenager said, ‘If you’re not on MySpace, you don’t exist.’ Not all MySpace users are teenagers, but most American teenagers have accounts on MySpace” (para 3).

The second use that Lenhart mentions is that social networking allows users to play around in the creation of their own identities (Internet Child Predators, 2006). Upon closer examination, this is essentially the primary function of all social networking websites. On each site, users are able to create their own profile—a virtual version of themselves. Whether or not this version is truthful or deceitful, it must be acknowledged that it is still a representation, only containing a limited amount of information. The situating of this limited amount of information creates an identity through which other users view that individual.

This ability to shape identities may be the reason that MySpace has been seen clearly ahead of the pack in terms of the amount of users frequenting the site. Unlike other social networking sites, Myspace was created with an easily customizable interface. Users are able to “pimp” their profiles, changing their layout by downloading codes available from a number of websites. Similar to the ways in which youth try to stick out from the crowd in their own high

school, users attempt to customize their page in an attempt to create a place that is truly “their space”.

### *Who's Space is This?*

Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolf's vision for MySpace was that it would be a place where independent artists could distribute their music. This ability has been demonstrated through countless bands, such as the Arctic Monkeys, who have often found commercial success by building up a fan base through the site. As mentioned previously, much of the sites popularity could be attributed to its customizability. Users are able to embed video from external sites like You Tube; video that they feel expresses their feelings or view on the world. Another attribute that may account for MySpace's success is the simple design it carries. In its 3-year history, the design of the site has remained simple and functional, and Tom, the founder always introduces himself as your first friend. Upon first glance, MySpace exudes a DIY (Do it yourself) aura, making you believe that Tom spent months staying up late, hand coding the site himself while eating Taco Bell. In fact, much of the success of social networks seems to be related to this homegrown, youth centered approach (it was Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg who programmed Facebook). Such a youth centered approach may account for the reasons that youth are spending so much time on these sites (Bradley, 2005). They feel that it is a place for them to socialize that is separated from the mediated world of their parents. boyd (2006) comments that social networking sites

“...serve as digital publics, substituting for the types of publics that most adults took for granted growing up, but are now inaccessible for many young people – neighborhood basketball courts, malls, parks, etc. Youth are trying to map out a

public youth territory for themselves, removed from adult culture. They are doing so online because their mobility and control over physical space is heavily curtailed and monitored” (para 4).

It is the transformation of MySpace into a virtual youth community center that has prompted groups such as News Corp to fork over the big bucks, although some critics have felt that such business ideas are a bad choice. One person commented that anyone who buys YouTube is a “moron” because it has still yet to run on a profit-making model (Rosenbush, 2006b). Rupert Murdoch obviously disagrees. He commented that when he bought MySpace, he was essentially buying “30 million portals for advertising” (Rodgers, 2005). Since the takeover MySpace and Google struck a deal for 900 million dollars in shared revenue for the placement of Google search boxes within the site (Mintz, 2006). Analysts suggest that the site could be worth 15 billion dollars within three years (Rosenbush, 2006b).

Obviously the value of these sites is the possibilities that they open up for marketing to youth. The question that remains to be addressed is what will be the effect of this advertising? Because MySpace is such a personal medium for the youth that use it, how will advertising content shape and change their experience? Will it create a similar experience like unto television where the commercial content becomes a given part of the medium? Or will they be fed up with this content and move on to another way of expressing themselves online?

### *Youth and Advertising*

An abundance of advertising research has been focused upon the effects of advertising upon a youth population. This is mostly attributed to the fact that youth are viewed as cognitively simple, and they may have a hard time distinguishing between advertising content

and programming (Giles, 2003). Because youth have a hard time distinguishing between these two forms of content, advertising content fosters consumerism and brand preference in youth. Pine and Nash (2001) compared the television exposure of youth with the items on a child's Christmas wish list. They found that the more a child watched television, the more likely they were to put more items on their list, as well as more branded items. They then compared the data with youth in Sweden where advertising to children is banned, and found that those youth had less items, and less branded items on their lists.

Looking at these studies, however, we see that most of them are focused on the relationship between advertising and pre-adolescent youth. In fact, Valkenburg and Cantor (2001) argue that youth reach their final stage of consumer development by the age of 12. At this point they have become sufficiently critical of media forms and are moving on to more mature forms of entertainment. However, there seems to be no doubt that advertising still affects them; this is the whole reason that social networking sites have become such a valuable commodity. The problem with advertising content on social networking sites, however, seems to be its placement. While youth may have become sufficiently able to identify commercial content on television by adolescence, internet social networking is a relatively new medium and advertisers are finding new ways to integrate content unobtrusively. Ian Shafer, the CEO of Deep Focus, an internet marketing group (as cited in Rodgers, 2005) talks about the marketing potential of social networking sites: "It's this huge place where a hard to reach demographic communicates." Youth are "a very cynical audience. They don't necessarily want to respond to... advertising. You need to create integrated and engaging promotions" (para. 30).

When one logs onto MySpace you can see a wide gamut of advertising. The first thing you notice is that it is not overbearing. The creators seem to understand that users don't want

banner ads to overshadow their experience. Murphy (as cited in King, 2006) comments, “Many people who don't understand this medium will feel they need to break through the noise by creating a really disruptive experience on the site, and nobody likes to be disrupted less than this audience...A disruptive advertising experience in our space is likely to create a bad brand experience” (para. 11).

Today, when an individual logs on, the MySpace home page has the same familiar features to greet them. There are several featured videos that have been uploaded by MySpace Users. There are also featured profiles – random people that are new to the social networking sites. Neither of these features seems to be commercial at all – but rather functions of the fact that this is a social network based on shared relationships and shared media content. Then on the other end of the spectrum there are two identical banner ads. Today, the banners feature two heads in profile, sticking their tongues out at one another. Then on the tip of each tongue a small man is walking. It is an advertisement for a new show on adult swim – cartoons that are aimed at college students. This ad seems to be in the right place to hit their target demographic -- This too, however, seems fairly straightforward – it is traditional advertising. However, moving past these first few features, the line between ad and site content becomes a bit blurred.

### *MySpace and Music*

Next there is a featured MySpace music artist. Today it is Matt Wertz. His profile has been customized by his record label – his name spelled out in a flowery modern type that is typical of every advertisement today that attempts to hit the 20 something demographic. Matt himself is a bit bleary eyed. On his album cover he stands in a white blazer with two buttons attached to the lapel and a fashion graphic t-shirt. He has curly, shaggy hair, as he stares into

space presumably pining over the girl that he desires (easily transferable to any girl that listens to his album). His music is overproduced, folky, and like every other piece of music that plays during the latest teen drama that plays on the WB. In looking more closely at his profile, he has an assortment of banner ads that users can place on their own profile or their “friends” profiles, he has links to merchandise – cds and t-shirts – that his fans (“friends”) can buy. In fact at the latest count he has over 57,000 friends, and the thing is that most people have never heard of him.

That is the ultimate blessing and bane of MySpace. As mentioned previously it was started as a place for musicians to independently distribute their music, and for many it has been a blessing in that way – independent artists have been able to share their music with an audience that would be unreachable previously. However, there is no requirement that says that you need to be an independent artist to use the site to promote your band. Frankly, it is difficult to determine if Matt Wertz is signed to a record label. Similarly, for any group that a user is not familiar with, it is difficult to determine if the person running the website is the artist himself – sitting in their studio apartment – shipping handmade cds to any person who is interested in hearing. Or if the MySpace page is kept up by a major record label trying to push their own artist. Now this should not be interpreted as a statement suggesting that record labels should not take advantage of social networking distribution methods, but rather a suggestion that the lines between user generated content and media products are being blurred. Users may make certain assumptions about media content produced for MySpace, that it is homemade, that it comes from people like them. Because of this assumption, they may feel a greater affinity towards that artist – because they feel that they have discovered the artist for themselves. This parasocial

relationship that is created however, can foster one's liking for the commodity rather than the artist himself.

### *MySpace and Video*

Back on the MySpace homepage there is another add for content that is hosted by MySpace. In this case, a user can watch an episode of the show *Vanished* for free. By clicking on the profile, they are brought to a page where they can watch a variety of videos. They are all of television shows: *Prison Break*, *American Dad*. It is an easy guess on which networks these shows all come from-- this seems to be the most direct manifestation of Rupert's power over his new acquisition. Although this content might seem like a benefit to many social networking users, this feels a little bit more like the banner ads mentioned earlier – they seem to be separated from the normal MySpace content – an advertisement more than anything.

However, upon further inspection of the main video page is where things become a bit blurrier. To the left are smaller windows, each which feature a video that was submitted by a MySpace user. These seem to represent the democratic ideal that is manifest in user generated video sites like You Tube and MySpace. They are relatively low budget, sophomoric in their humor, and without any explicit commercial intent. They have the ability to be rated by users, creating a marketplace where the truly great will rise to the top. Again these videos show the democratic possibilities of social networking sites. Truly great videos receive distribution and airplay not because of the creators are buying that airtime, but rather because it has been passed among members of a social network. Such a phenomenon has been referred to as “viral video” and it exhibits web 2.0 at its finest.

To the right on the video page there are several other videos, which appear in larger windows. The first has a small logo over the top of it, indicating that Chrysler sponsors it. The video is a commercial showing a man whose car is switched unknowingly for a Chrysler, along with his wife. The commercial seems like a far cry from traditional television commercial fare. Instead it has more of a post-modern feel – it is kitschy and self-aware. What seems to be happening is that advertising campaigns are recognizing their new younger audience, and as a result, their advertising content is taking the approach of the “viral video” which can be passed around these sites. In fact, the web may be the future hope for advertising content. Experts project that by 2010, television will be a third as effective as it was in the 90’s (Rose, 2006). In looking at the Chrysler commercial, it seems like something that wouldn’t normally be aired on television. That is because it was made with the social networking user in mind – with hopes that it will be enjoyed and passed around. The problem, however, once again lies in the blurring distinction between user-generated media content and commercial content. While no youth will mistake a Chrysler commercial as user generated content – it is possible, that as the line becomes less clear, it may be difficult to decipher the commercial intentions out of what may be perceived as a user created video.

### *MySpace as a Branded Landscape*

Some may ask again, “What is the big deal? Is social networking really different from any other medium?” While the lines may be blurry at first, over time, the distinction between user generated messages and messages with commercial intent may become clearer. And while social networking has the potential of democratizing internet content, there is no doubt that it still has to make money, in particular to support the high traffic that the site produces. And the

easiest way to do this, without having users pay a subscription fees, is to allow advertisements. The problem, is not in the existence of advertisement, but rather how a place that many teens feel is so important to their socializing is being co-opted by companies with the intent of developing brand affinity.

In her book *No Logo*, author Naomi Klein (1999) gives a thorough although often uneven critique of corporate culture and how companies are increasingly branding our experiences. In one chapter she discusses how schools have given into corporate sponsorships in order to subsidize the rising costs of education that aren't met by funding from the government. She discusses Channel One, a news service that is available to schools for a price. Klein discusses the price,

“They asked them to open their classrooms to two minutes of television advertising a day, sandwiched between twelve minutes of teenybopper current affairs programming...Turning off the cheerful ad patter is not an option. Not only is the programming mandatory viewing for students, but teachers are unable to adjust the volume of the broadcast, especially during commercials. In exchange, the schools do not receive direct revenue from the stations but they can use the much coveted audiovisual equipment for other lessons and, in some cases, receive “free” computers (p. 89).”

Such an extended quote is only included to emphasize a point: That places that are seen to be in the public sector are being encroached upon by commercial interests, and in order to provide a good experience for that public, institutions are giving in. Often without realizing the cost of such a move. In the same way, MySpace, a place that is the centerpiece in youth culture

is becoming increasingly branded. An experience that was once considered as completely social may run the danger of becoming subtly commercial.

Another example Klein (1999) gives is particularly pertinent to our discussion here. Zap Me! Is an internet browser that was placed in schools in the early stages of internet adoption. What users didn't realize however, is that Zap Me! also "monitors students' paths as they surf the Net and provides this valuable market research, broken down by the students' sex, age and zip code, to its advertisers. Then, when students log on to ZapMe!, they are treated to ads that have been specially 'micro-targeted' for them" (p. 94). Through research, no policy about whether or not MySpace uses profiles to track the interests of users and "micro-target" them could be found. But what is more important is the possibility of such an occurrence. Users tend to look at MySpace primarily in social terms, and as is illustrated from previous studies (Govani & Pashley, 2005; Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Jones & Soltren, 2005), they tend to not think about who is reading their information, or how that information is being used. The possibility exists then while users may think they are sharing their information as friends, they are instead using their information as a "subscription fee".

The best way to put this all in perspective is to think about MySpace in terms of a real world equivalent. danah boyd (2006) describes social networks in the following terms,

"Although youth are able to socialize privately with one another in the homes of friends, most are not allowed to spend time hanging out in public, unaccompanied by parents or adults. They view MySpace as a place where they can be who they are, joke around with friends and make certain to stay in the loop about everything that is going on around them" (para. 9).

When framing social networks in this fashion, they appear to resemble the ideal community center, places established where youth can spend time with one another while being independent from adult figures. While we may allow our community centers to be sponsored by corporations in order to maintain operations, we would be hesitant if those same centers were turned into spaces where youth become subjects for market studies. Once again the line between the two worlds is indeed fine.

### *The Future of Our Space*

The future of social networking sites like MySpace remains to be seen. Companies could be pouring billions of dollars into these sites, only to have them come crashing down like the internet companies they were putting money into at the end of the 90's. Equally, the user-generated base of these web sites makes them equally tenuous. That is the lesson that social networking pioneer Friendster learned, as it lost its share of the market to the then rising MySpace. And maybe that is the ultimate hope, a yearning back to the democratic ideals that the web that was based on. If the ad experience of MySpace becomes too much, the users can simply change the channel and move on, and marketers will be left once again to find a way to reach that ever elusive target demographic.

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