An Ethnography of Social Network in Cyberspace: The Facebook Phenomenon

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Introduction

Facebook was founded by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 in a Harvard dorm room. At first it was originally designed only for students in Harvard to replace the printed directory. 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 programme developers. It has been very popular in the West since its change of policy. According to Hitwise UK (2007), Facebook is the 4th most visited website in the UK and 9th most popular domain in the US for the month of October 2007, and its members have tripled in the past year, making the total of 50 million members around the world (Hitwise US 2007). In the past few months, this trend has spread to Hong Kong. I can always hear people talking about Facebook on the street and in the mass media. Older social networking sites, like Friendster and MySpace have never attracted so much attention in Hong Kong.

The paper aims to reveal what Facebook is and what young people are actually doing on the site. There must be some reasons why Facebook is so popular and this paper aims to find out more about the reasons why Facebook is so popular and which enables us to understand more deeply into this Facebook phenomenon.

Methodology

I conducted ethnographic interviews and participant-observation with 18 Facebook users and I myself am also on Facebook, so I kept track of what my informants did on their Facebook by reading their "profiles" and "news feed" (a function that automatically deliver news about your friends' latest actions on Facebook to your homepage) regularly. Interviews were conducted in September and October 2007. These interviews were done mostly face-to-face, and two out of these 18 interviews were done through video conversations on MSN messenger due to the fact that they were living abroad. I interviewed these overseas informants because they might be able to give insights on how foreigners, in this case, Americans, might use Facebook differently from Hong Kongers.

I interviewed 18 people, three males and 15 females, aged from 19 to 22. They were all originally from Hong Kong, with 14 local Hong Kongers (two of whom studied abroad for four years and one year respectively), one Hong Kong born

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American exchange student, one Hong Kong student and two Hong Kong immigrants in the States. Thirteen informants are undergraduate students, two are graduate students, and three are fresh graduate/working. The students are currently studying in six different tertiary institutions in Hong Kong and three American universities. Some of the informants are my own friends, while the others were introduced by some of my friends. The sample is not balanced; it is certainly biased in some sense. There are more females than males and some of them share the same background as they are my friends. Despite that, they give a lot of interesting insights into the Facebook phenomenon in Hong Kong. Each interview lasted for half an hour to 50 minutes. Among the 18 interviews conducted, four were conducted when the informants were using Facebook. This gave me invaluable opportunities to participate and observe in person what they usually do on there and it stimulated the informants in answering my questions. I prepared some questions in mind before conducting each interview. I did not have a fixed set of questions but the questions I asked were quite similar in different interviews.

Literature review

As more and more people gain access to the Internet and with the advance of computer technology, a great variety of tools are available for people to interact with others on the Internet and there have been some research studies on computer mediated communication and different social networking sites.

1. IM is taken for granted as a necessity

Instant messaging (IM) is a very popular way to communicate online nowadays. Teens have already taken instant messaging for granted as "part of the substrate of everyday life" (Grinter and Palen 2002:29). Teens are using it for social event planning and maintaining relationships with distant friends, and other friends "outside the places and times that socializing is traditionally permitted" (Grinter and Palen 2002:26). This enables IM users to communicate even when they cannot meet and people will get annoyed if someone does not use instant messaging because contacting him/her will be less convenient without instant messaging (Grinter and Palen 2002:23).

2. "Impression management"

On social networking sites, users are contacting people online and at the same time engaging in what Erving Goffman calls "impression management" (Dwyer 2007, boyd In press). They are consciously or unconsciously trying to present an image of themselves by putting their nice photos, interests, and conversations with friends in public on the site. Dwyer (2007:5) thinks that impression management "seems to be the main point of social networking sites" which can be seen from many users distorting the truth by using pictures that do not show their appearance clearly, and there are lies and exaggerations everywhere on MySpace. Facebook, on the other hand, is also like an "online community theater", with the Edit Profile page as the backstage makeup area, and our every Facebook act is our own performance on the

public stage (Mathias 2007).

3. Profiles as conversations

Nonetheless, profiles are not only a representation of self. Friendster profiles are used to "perform social identity and relationships" and it can also "become a conversation when it is not simply viewed, but becomes a dialogue", that is, when they exchange information through the profiles (boyd and Heer 2006:1, 5). Through changing their profiles to engage with others, users are setting the stage for conversation and communicating (boyd and Heer 2006:6). boyd and Heer (2006:6) also mention that "profiles are interpreted as conversational anchors similar to clothing, providing valuable cues about the individual such as potentially shared interests."

4. Creating public connections

Donath and boyd (2004:77) believe "the main point of social networking sites is to help people make new connections". Dwyer (2007:8) holds a similar view, thinking that "the ability to develop new relationship seems to be a stronger feature on social networking sites". No doubt, in the profiles of social networking sites, users are creating a visible network of connections, and Donath and boyd (2004:73) say that this public display of connections is "an implicit verification of identity" since these connections are linked to one's profile, which they should have viewed and verified, the profile should be an honest self-presentation. And social networking sites users view that as a "signal of reliability of one's identity claims" (ibid). So, a profile with a lot of connections is a relatively reliable signal. Furthermore, social networking sites make all of one's connections public and this leads to the unavoidable overlap of "incompatible contexts of our lives", which in physical world can be kept separate using time and space (Donath and boyd 2004:78). However, "social networking sites remove the privacy barriers that people keep between different aspects of their lives", "when people from different contexts in one's life meet, it is possible that the different facets of one's life will be revealed to each other" and create discomfort (ibid).

When comparing Facebook and MySpace, Facebook users tend to trust the site and its users more, and they are more willing to include identifying information in their profile as Facebook members tend to use the site to manage relationships initiated offline (Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini 2007:7). On the contrary, MySpace users are more active in the development of new relationships and are "more likely to extend online relationships beyond social networking sites" (ibid).

5. Social searching

What people can do on these social networking sites include social searching and social browsing and Facebook members mainly engage in social searching (Lampe Ellison, and Steinfield 2006). They are not likely to find people for offline connection (ibid). They use it as a "surveillance tool" to learn more about and maintain their existing relationships (Lampe Ellison, and Steinfield 2006:169). Other social networking sites, such as Friendster and MySpace are used to connect with long lost

friends as well, but they are more often used to flirt than connecting with existing relationships like on Facebook (boyd 2006a). Other than that, MySpace is used to advertise bands and activities too (ibid).

6. New definition of "friend"

Before having social networking sites, for many people, the word "friend" would "carry an aura of exclusivity and intimacy", however, on social networking sites like Friendster, members connect with many "acquaintances or contact, which suggest familiarity but not closeness" (boyd 2006b). Indeed, not everyone is serious when adding friends, so the distinction between friends and acquaintances is lost on Facebook (ibid). It is also actually an awkward process to reject acquaintances to be friends on social networking sites. Whether to add someone as a friend or Top friend can be chaotic since you are announcing to everyone that person is your friend or Top friend, it can stir up jealousy among friends. And "friending" is a social act; social networking sites users are building an image of who they are through their friends (ibid). Despite the fact that people may have a lot more friends on social networking sites, "the number of strong ties an individual can maintain may not be greatly increased by communication technology… but that the number of weak ties one can form and maintain maybe able to increase substantially, because the type of communication that can be done more cheaply and easily with new technology" (Donath and boyd 2004:80).

7. The fad question

Friendster was a fad but MySpace is not a fad (boyd 2006a). MySpace could only become a fad if the teens using it grow up and feel that it is no longer a cool thing to go on MySpace; they "feel spammed and invaded by advertisers"; or there is something more innovative for identity production and sharing, which they are doing on MySpace now (ibid). Therefore, MySpace will not fade in the same way as Friendster did (ibid). With the challenge of Facebook, can MySpace really survive after a few years? Will Facebook become a fad like Friendster? This shall be discussed in the coming sections in this report.

Facebook is…

A social networking site

When people talk about Facebook, they usually categorize it as a social networking site (SNS) and they sometimes have the impression that these social networking sites are for dating or making new friends. This is not totally wrong. However, the majority I interviewed (14 out of 18) never make new friends on the website. The remaining four informants who do make new friends on Facebook also claim that making new friends is not their main purpose using Facebook.

A website with useful tools people need

Facebook is a website with a combination of many useful tools that we need on the Internet. It allows us to do the things we normally do on different, separate websites and software all at one place. It has a large variety of functions, which includes:

1. private messaging,

2. a "wall" where people can post public messages,

3. one's personal information,

4. photo albums with unlimited storage space,

5. videos,

6. groups,

7. "notes" which functions like a blog,

8. "events" which allows users to organize social gatherings, and

9. lots of applications developed by third party developers.

Some popular applications among my informants include "SuperPoke"/"X me"/"poke pro", which are all applications that allow people to virtually hug or do many other virtual actions on others. Different kinds of gifts-giving applications are popular as well: there are "Free Gifts", "Holiday Gifts", "Hatching Eggs", "Grow-a-gift", "Naughty Gift", etc. Other popular applications would include "iLike", photo slideshow, and other mini games.

In short, one can do just almost anything in one great website instead of joggling between three or four websites plus some other software. It certainly makes people's life easier and more interesting.

Facebook is a friend finder as well. It enables people to find their friends online because real names are widely used on Facebook. One informant, Anna reports that Facebook is a way to communicate with friends and a networking tool for work. Jane comments that it is "an online notice board, bulletin board, message board, address book, Xanga, blog, friend finder all together". Liz holds a similar view, saying that Facebook is like "the mixture of Xanga and My Space", and it is for "keeping in touch with friends and spying on others". Jane adds that people including herself are like "putting your real life networks and everyday life online to let others know" since Facebook lets them do almost everything and put everything about them on their page called "profile".

The interface of Facebook

When logged into Facebook, the first page users can see is called the "homepage". It contains all the "news feed" of friends on their friend list, status update ("status" is something people can fill in, usually in a sentence, about how they feel), "friend requests" and all kinds of application invitations. Then the "profile" page is the page which can be seen by friends or other people as well depending on personal privacy settings. The profile includes the basic functions described in previous paragraphs, personal selection of applications, and a part called "mini-feed"

which is like a report of what friends did on one's profile and what s/he did to his/her friends. Random selection of people's friends and their networks are also shown publicly on this page. Others can see the number of friends they have, who they are, and how they knew each other.

Things young people are doing on Facebook

Time spent

Among the 18 informants, on an average day, half spent less than half an hour on Facebook and the remaining half spent 30 minutes to more than 3 hours. Yet, this only reflects the time they spend on the site on an average day. The time they spend on the site depends on the amount of free time they have. Many report that they spend many hours on Facebook when they have nothing to do but they would not spend long time on it when they are busy. But most of them still check Facebook when they are busy and some would spend a few hours on Facebook even when they got other work to do. These people admit that they are addicted to Facebook. So, what are these people doing on the site? How they spend so much time on the website? In the following section, I shall discuss their common routine on Facebook.

Routine

Generalizing from the results I got, every time they login Facebook, they will first reach their "home", and they will either read the friend requests or notifications they received. They will then choose to accept or ignore these requests and invitations depending on their own personality. Some tend to accept most requests and invitations while others may choose to ignore them. Next, they check if anyone has written on their wall (which is like a public message board), sent them private messages, or poked them. The majority will reply these wall posts, messages or poke, but they do that selectively. They do not always reply to everyone. Then, they will check their profile and "play" with the applications, such as sending all sorts of gifts, SuperPoking friends, taking care of their pets, and playing mini games, including "Rock, Paper & Scissors" and "hangman". After that, they usually go back to their homepage to read the news feed to see who has updated, and visit these people's profiles if they feel interested or have a lot of free time. If they feel like expressing themselves, they will update their status or write a note as well. After doing all these matters, they would have already spent more than 15 minutes on the site. Hence, one can easily spend more than 30 minutes on Facebook.

Keep in touch with people

The routine on Facebook shows that people are keeping in touch with others using the website. The most used features on Facebook, according to my informants, are *the wall* and *message system*. Every time they login they will check these things first. They write on their friends' walls when they want to leave them messages. This shows the importance of these features and that people are using Facebook basically to communicate with others. They post up photos, videos and notes, displaying and

sharing their daily life on the site. Friends can conveniently know what their friends are up to. There is a function called "events" on Facebook, which can be used for organizing social events. The organizer can easily fill in the information of a gathering and invite all or some of the friends on his/her friend list to the event by a few easy clicks. In this way, it saves a lot of energy and time to contact people one-by-one about the event and makes the whole process much easier, and thus facilitates face-to-face communications between friends. No wonder that Facebook is always believed to be a way to communicate with friends rather than merely a dating site.

Find friends

Some people use the search function of Facebook to search for their long lost friends. Since the majority is using their real names, it is not very difficult to find one's old friends if they are on Facebook too, especially for Hong Kongers as their Chinese names do not coincide easily. As a result, one thing people do on Facebook is to connect with old friends, keeping in touch and reconnecting with them.

Make new friends

Nevertheless, for some users though not many, they also use Facebook to make new friends in addition to using it as a tool to communicate with friends already known offline. This may not be something they must do everyday they go on Facebook, but occasionally when they have time and feel *mou liu* (無聊); boring and dull, and looking for something fun to do, they may surf around their friends' profiles and check out the friends of their friends and add them as friends on Facebook if they feel interested in them. Or, they simply search for the people they met in the party a moment ago when they return home. Occasionally, some totally random people may request to be their friends and they only refuse if these people do not look good.

Kill time

"Playing" (*waan* (玩) is the verb some informants employ when talking about visiting Facebook) Facebook is also a good way to kill time or they put it as *hea si gaan* ("hea" 時間) literally meaning "just to pass time", according to the informants. Around five of them say they can spend a lot of time on Facebook, especially when they have nothing to do. For example, Liz spent 6 hours a day on Facebook when she was doing her summer internship because she did not have much to do at work. As a result, she spent her office hours on Facebook, playing hangman, sending flowers, poking others, playing with the "Travel IQ challenge" and having discussions in groups about Beethoven. She says once she started playing with all these applications she just couldn't stop. Some applications and mini games on Facebook are considered addictive as there are different levels and when people play more or use them more often, they can reach higher levels. Applications that involve gift-sending and poking give users larger variety of gifts or actions to choose from when they reach higher levels. In games like "Vampire" and "WereWolf", users will turn into different creatures when they reach another level. Thus, in order to have something new to send

or simply being curious about what they are going to look like, users keep playing these applications and games. Yee and Petra especially enjoy sending friends naughty gifts. It is something they must do everyday. Jane, Jacqueline, Yee and Petra admit that they are addicted to Facebook. The way they are using Facebook is a little bit different from other informants. They login Facebook whenever they are at home and they keep the browser open, and refresh it around every 15 minutes or half an hour to see if there is anything new on there. So, they can easily spend a few hours on Facebook everyday.

Information sharing

On users' profiles, each puts up a nice picture as his/her profile picture. They have their personal information, ranging from date of birth, relationship status, political and religious view, interests, to schools attended, working experiences and contact information. Not all users fill in all the information because they are aware of the potential danger if they do fill in information like phone number and address. Only one among the 18 informants put her land phone and residence address there. She says the information is only be available to her friends, but as someone not on her friend list, I was able to see her phone number and residence address prior to my interview with her, probably because she did not set it for friends only, but to be available to people in the same network, and we belong to the same network. Users do not always change their personal information, unless they want to add some more information, for example, adding a recent book she read to her favourite books. Things that people update more often on their profile pages are their status, notes, and photos. People update their status whenever they want to express how they are feeling or what they are doing at that moment. This normally consists of one sentence, like "Andy Wong is sick...... =(." Or "Emma Kwan is going to Shanghai from 2nd-5th Nov!". Sometimes they update their status as frequently as a few times a day. Some people write notes to express opinions or post up articles. Not everyone is using this function and they do not update this as often as their status mainly due to the fact that most of them also use Xanga as their online diary or journal, and Xanga as a weblog has more functions when comparing to the notes on Facebook. Moreover, there are still more people using Xanga than Facebook, so Xanga users using Facebook will not easily abandon their Xanga sites. They still write their online diaries on Xanga instead of writing notes on Facebook. For photos, most people who have a camera create photo albums and upload the photos they took to Facebook as soon as they got them uploaded to their computers. They will also tag their friends in the photos, so that their friends will know they are in the photos, and the friends of their friends will also know these people have new photos, because there will be a news feed when someone is tagged in a photo. Some of them explain that they are using the system to share photos. In fact, Facebook allows users to upload unlimited amount of photos, so their friends can see and save their photos themselves instead of having to send them the photos separately. Yin tells me that she uses Facebook as a photo album. All her tagged photos will be linked automatically to her photos page, so she can get her photos from her friends easily without the troubles to ask her friends to send her the photos.

Friends

Number of friends

The number of friends at the time I interviewed my informants ranged from 15 to 300. The range seems very big but actually only four of them had less than 100 friends, and which is apprehensible. Three of the four had joined Facebook for less than a month, they had not found and added all their friends out there on Facebook yet. Yolanda is not one of these newbie on Facebook, she has been a Facebook member for more than a year but she still has less than 100 friends largely because she has a strict policy for adding friends, unlike other informants who have joined Facebook for this long. She only accepts friend requests from her close friends. She does not add acquaintances or classmates who she is not close with. As a result, the number of friends she has on Facebook is more or less the same with the number of close friends she actually has offline. But her practice is somewhat quite different from most other informants. She thinks she may be a bit rude to ignore so many friend requests too, but since she really does not want to add those people, she decides to stop adding people to avoid embarrassment. Other informants' friends are not restricted to close friends. They usually accept a friend request as long as they know the person and the person "is not very creepy". Some say they do not send out friend requests to "hi-bye friends" (people who they rarely have conversations with) or acquaintances but they would not ignore their friend requests if they want to add them. Hence, their friend lists consist of many old classmates or friends of friends who they are not close with and they can easily add more than 100 friends in this way. Besides, those who have more than 200 friends are people who would like to make new friends on Facebook and who also party more or go clubbing regularly - so it seems to make sense that they are having more friends than others on Facebook.

"Friending"

Obviously, for most users, the definition of "friends" on Facebook is not the same as true "friends". In reality, we normally consider people we know reasonably well and hang out with to be friends. The majority reflect that their close friends only constitute only 10 to 20 per cent of their friend lists. The remaining 80 to 90 per cent are family members, classmates, colleagues, acquaintances, strangers, and sometimes people they know but do not really like. For people who do add strangers as friends, they decide whether to add a stranger by whether his/her appearance is attractive. As for not-so-close friends, they are adding them because they are still sort of considered as friends and they somehow still want to keep in touch with these people in a casual way. They accept acquaintances and sometimes someone they do not like due to different reasons. Ling thinks that it is a bit rude to ignore their friend requests and she adds that "they can be useful in the future". She says she has these "friends" on Facebook and there was once she needed participants for her psychology experiment and these acquaintances in the same school did accept her invitation to do the experiment for her. Anna also believes it is good to keep a larger circle of friends, especially as she is working in the business field - some of these people might be able to help her in the future, you never know.

1.   Frequency and ways of interactions

In view of the fact that they have so many friends on their lists, it is unimaginable that they really communicate or interact with all of them on Facebook. So, there are always some people on their lists they never interact on Facebook. The ones they interact with most are their closet friends or friends living or studying abroad and they sometimes interact with friends that are not very close, usually during festivals and birthdays or when they suddenly think of them.

Not only is the frequency people interact with on Facebook depends on the closeness between friends, how they interact with different types of friends on Facebook is different too. Anna points out that the interactions on Facebook can be categorized into three levels. First, writing on wall are mainly between closer friends since people really have to write out a message, which means they must have something to talk to the other person. Second, while people do not always write on the walls of more distant friends, they may send these friends gifts. She says it is like socializing with people as you are allowed to write a sentence or two to your friend but not a long message when sending a gift, so these acts do not convey much meaningful message. Finally, the lowest level of interaction is different kinds of poking. This is simply because poking does not carry any text message at all. 'It is somehow meaningless – just like saying "hi", "keep in touch" or "I am still alive!",' Anna comments.

Reasons to use Facebook

2.   To connect with friends

For informants who have joined Facebook for more than a year, they usually signed up at their own will to connect with friends overseas or make new friends and to replace their Friendster. These people are usually those who are more westernized in the sense that they have more overseas friends, they have higher proficiency of English, or they studied or lived abroad. According to other informants who have joined Facebook within a year, most of them open their Facebook accounts due to peer pressure. Friends overseas and local asked them to sign up, saying it is great fun, and Facebook is always referred to in their conversations.

Peer pressure

Peer pressure could be enormous. Like the extensive use of MSN messenger and Xanga among Hong Kong youth; if a person is not using MSN messenger, he/she may be complained by his/her friends who use MSN messenger and he/she maybe missing-in-action, and his/her friends need to do additional work to contact him/her (Grinten and Palen 2002:23). As for Xanga, Hong Kongers mainly use it for keeping online diaries, so people can know more about their feelings and everyday happenings. If someone does not have Xanga, others know less about what he/she is up to. For the same reasons, in order to exist in their circle of friends, people join Facebook. Then they can have more topics in conversations and be more connected instead of being left out.

They joined Facebook to please their friends. Then they explore and learn how to use it, accumulating friends and applications, and start using its functions. But some of them do not know how to use it or why it is fun even after joining Facebook. They feel annoyed by the invitations to use different applications. There are too many applications and functions available on Facebook and they do not know how to deal with them.

Crowd psychology

A few point out that many Hong Kongers flock to Facebook because of crowd psychology (羊群心理). They join Facebook because it is popular and widely discussed in the mass media. During the period I was doing the interviews, many DJs on CR2 (FM90.3), which is a popular radio channel among young people, talked about their joining Facebook and the fun they were having, and there were news articles about Facebook on local newspapers and magazines too. So more people have heard about Facebook and they join in the fun only because they want to see what Facebook is like. It is similar to following trends. Since many of the youth's popular fashionable icons are having Facebook, young people who like to follow trends all flock to Facebook without much thought.

Behaviours on Facebook

Self-presentation

Probably no one would disagree that young people are participating in presentation of self with their regular use of Facebook, because whatever they do on Facebook and what they put there can be viewed by many people, including friends and acquaintances from different circles. They are consciously or unconsciously showing a lot of clues about themselves on Facebook: their conversations with others, status, profiles, and selected collections of photos. Facebook gives a stage for people to present, to show off and to indulge in "self-branding", constructing and showing an image of themselves which they want to project (Stein 2007). This is similar to branding with clothes, hairstyles, speech, and style, etc., yet, Facebook extends these processes online, and people are probably branding in front of a larger audience and having more control over how and what to present to others.

Expressing themselves publicly

In fact, they really provide a lot of information for at least all their friends on Facebook to see. As discussed earlier, friends on Facebook may not be really friends, and these people (or even other Facebook members depending on privacy setting) can see a great deal of information about a person. They can learn about his/her age, interests, friends… they can get clues of his/her personality, his/her daily life and habits from the photos and posted items. A lot of information is displayed publicly and they do not mind showing these details to people they know. However, some say they are a bit surprised when their friends really spend time to read their notes or profiles in detail. They sometimes just put what they want to express on Facebook

without really expecting their friends to read them.

Neglect of potential privacy danger

Comparing Americans and Hong Kongers on Facebook, Americans are even more open about their personal information; they do not mind putting more personal details on their profiles. For instance, Yolanda says that her dorm mates in Virginia put their phone numbers and residence addresses on their profiles and their profiles are not restricted for friends to see. "They treat Facebook like a personal resume," says Yolanda. They put all their personal details on Facebook. She also thinks their disclosure of too many personal and contact details is a bit dangerous as their information can be seen by all people from the same school network, and her dorm mates are more willing to make new friends on Facebook. Yolanda's friend once searched for a classmate she did not know but thought was cute in a class they took together. She found out the guy just lived nearby and she and her friends immediately went to his dorm to find him. This shows that one can easily stalk somebody in the same network in the US and American students seem to be less concerned or aware about potential privacy dangers on Facebook.

Comparison with other social networking sites

Facebook is only one of the most popular social networking sites globally and locally and there are many other social networking sites, including MySpace, Bebo, Friendster and LinkedIn. And some people consider blog a place for social networking as well. Different social networking sites may target different user-groups and they usually have different selling points. Some informants had used other social networking sites other than Facebook and they compare these sites with Facebook. Some even compare these sites when I asked them to tell me what Facebook is. This reflects how these sites are similar to users.

In my study, the users who had used other social networking sites all think that Facebook is the best of all social networking sites. These other social networking sites are Friendster, MySpace, and Xanga. They think that Facebook is more user-friendly, reliable, and secure. Friendster and MySpace give informants the feeling that users on these sites are making new friends indiscriminately, as Winnie says, MySpace is *taai laam* (太濫): people are making friends too discriminately, and that is why she does not like it and she is not using it. This also explains why many users have thousands of friends on Friendster and MySpace.

MySpace

1. MySpace users come from different backgrounds

Informants who know about MySpace also feel that it is mainly for bands and music because there are many celebrities and bands on MySpace. Of course, the celebrities' MySpace pages are not managed by themselves but by their managers or record companies. This makes Liz feel that MySpace is for bands rather than for individuals,

while Facebook is for individuals. Liz says that she just uses MySpace to find music. She does not use it to communicate with friends like she is doing on Facebook. Since not only individuals are using MySpace; bands, groups, and politicians all set up their accounts on MySpace for promotion and other ends, so, all kinds of people are on MySpace, and some do not like that. Winnie says in disgust, "those who use Facebook are students, but all kinds of people use MySpace". She does not like the social networking sites to be open to all kinds of people. She prefers a more exclusive space for students. She also says that "MySpace is like a dating site" and she obviously does not want a dating site because she does not make new friends online. However, Facebook is open for the public already and "the percentage of active members who are over 25 years old and out of school has risen to some 40 percent of the overall population of about 45 million" according to Paul Sahre and Jonathan Han (2007). Winnie does not know about that and when I told her, she comments that it is weird to have all these older people on Facebook. She thinks Facebook would "get more and more *jaap* (雜)"; meaning mixed and impure, and she would have to change her privacy setting to a higher level even though she reports that only her friends can see her profile then. boyd (2007) finds out that different social classes tend to use different social networking sites, for instance, working class and militaries tend to use MySpace, and the more educated ones tend use Facebook in the States. My informant, James seems to hold a similar view. He says, 'Facebook is a higher class of MySpace. MySpace is for guys to check out girls. Facebook is "cleaner", 'cause it is only for people in college'. Like Winnie, he misunderstands that Facebook is still only for people in college, but he points out that Facebook has a higher class feeling; MySpace is more for high-schoolers, but Facebook is for college students. Some comment that Facebook still has "a classy, upmarket feel to it – a whiff of the Ivy League still clings" (Grossman 2007). People seem always want to sound higher or more sophisticated. Maybe they feel that a place being more exclusive means that it is more private and safer. Thus, Facebook users generally think that Facebook is a more secure and clean place for communication, and their main purpose on Facebook is to keep in touch with friends rather than making new friends or dating.

2. MySpace looks less organized

Another thing that distinguishes Facebook from MySpace is the sites' different designs. Most people would agree that Facebook looks more organized than MySpace. This is partly due to the fact that MySpace allows its users to do a lot of personalization on how their pages look like. MySpace users can even change the HTML of their page, so everyone's page can look pretty much different. Facebook lets its users to choose what to be shown on their profile page, but it does not let them change their page's HTML or skin. Some might think that users should be happier having more freedom to customize their page. Yet this is not the case. One of the things Winnie does not like about MySpace is its layout. She says that it is too personalized. She likes the neat and organized look of Facebook. Ling also complains that she has a MySpace account but she is not using it because MySpace looks messy and she does not know where to start. She finds Facebook easier to use, partly because of its neat and organized layout. Therefore, Facebook users like the simple and organized layout more than something fancy like MySpace. It also gives a more professional feeling.

Friendster

Friendster is a more well-known social networking site in Hong Kong when compared with MySpace. The informants who know about MySpace are those who either lived abroad, studied abroad or they are music fans. Other informants have never heard of MySpace. Though more people in Hong Kong know about and had used Friendster, its popularity was certainly not comparable with Facebook. Friendster is no longer popular now, many left it for Facebook. But even before Facebook appeared, Friendster did not get a lot of attention in Hong Kong like Facebook does now. People who used Friendster before all say they like Facebook more than Friendster for four main reasons: reliability, ease of use, layout, and speed.

1. Friendster is for making new friends

There are five informants who have a Friendster account but they rarely login now. They all agree that Friendster is more for making new friends than for communication with friends they already know. Four of them admit using Friendster to make new friends and they are making new friends on Facebook too. The fifth informant rarely used Friendster even before opening her Facebook account and she does not really have much interest in making new friends online. Casey has the feeling that Friendster allows people to communicate on the site, but people mainly use it for making new friends. She says that more of her friends are on Facebook, so she can use it for communicating with them. This can hardly be done on Friendster because not many of her friends are using it. For the previous four informants, since they sometimes use these sites to make new friends, their concern is whether these new friends they are making online are the real person. In other words, they want to make sure the person they meet online in these social networking sites is the real person; he/she is not telling lies or creating a fake personality. They all think that people on Facebook have less to lie about because there are various ways to check whether he/she is a real person. Jane points out that "Facebook shows your network of friends, school or work networks, so there are evidences to prove you are the real person, the possibility of giving fake identity is lower". Rebecca thinks that Facebook is more serious. It asks people to use their real names and many people do use their real names, whilst many people on Friendster create fake identity. Jacqueline also feels that there are more fake or irrelevant profiles and photos on Friendster than on Facebook.

2. Friendster is not user-friendly

Facebook is also more user-friendly than Friendster. This is why Jacqueline and Ling both like Facebook better. Ling actually did not figure out how to use Friendster so she just gave it up. Jacqueline says Friendster has ads everywhere and she always accidentally clicked on them, which really annoyed her. She and Pam also complain that Friendster's server was very slow, which further pushed them to abandon Friendster.

Xanga: Xanga is only a blog for Hong Kongers

Xanga is not formally considered as a social networking site, but people sometimes compare it with Facebook because Facebook has a function called "note", which is to some extent similar to blog and Xanga has been a popular site used by young people in Hong Kong. Xanga is mainly used as an online diary while Facebook is used more for maintaining or managing friendships and ties. People can do many things on Facebook that cannot be done on Xanga. However, they do have some similarities, for instance, the groups on Facebook are like the blogrings on Xanga, readers can leave comments on both sites…etc. Yet, Xanga does not show people's networks of friends publicly, "meaning you can't really see the ties and links between the various people involved. People can check out the blog and see who has left comments but it is not known what the relationship among them all is" (Henderson 2007).

Summary

Through the comparison between Facebook and these three similar sites, we could conclude that Facebook users who know about or have tried using other social networking sites choose to use Facebook instead of other alternatives sites, because they want to have a safe and secure space to keep in touch with friends they already have and make new friends.

Attractiveness of Facebook

Many people love Facebook, some even say they are addicted to it. Why are they so attracted by Facebook? The answer is simply **"it's useful and fun"**. To be a popular site that young people like to spend so much time on, it must have both of these attributes. Its usefulness can attract people to sign up and the fun experiences can keep them spending more time on the site.

Easiness to find old friends

The most impressive Facebook function to the informants is the ease to find long lost friends. Since Facebook requires people to fill in their full name when they sign up and they have a policy to block potential fake names (though ironically it blocks real names too), people tend to provide their real names, so, it is not difficult to search for long lost friends on Facebook, especially if they have gone abroad as Facebook is way more popular in America and the UK than in Hong Kong, the possibility of them having Facebook is high (Parker 2007). Even if they are using their nicknames, it is still quite easy to find them. Through joining school networks or student groups, people can browse through the member lists to see if there is anyone they know, and add them as friends. This enables people to re-establish connections with long lost friends, usually old classmates among young people in Hong Kong. This brings surprises and excitements to them as oftentimes they have never thought they can connect with these friends again so easily. It makes reunion with long lost friends easy and quite a few of the informants have really reconnected with their long lost friends. They find it a good thing to keep in touch with their old friends once again and know

about their life.

A low-cost and secure means of communication

Other than finding long lost friends, Facebook offers an alternative method to communicate and interact with friends and acquaintances. Informants believe Facebook is a more secure and convenient place to communicate with people. It is secure in the sense that people can make sure the people they contact can receive messages they want to send out. They think it is convenient when comparing to using MSN messenger to deliver messages because friends from other countries or places, like mainland China and the US might not have MSN messenger, which is the prevalent instant messaging used in Hong Kong, they usually use QQ and AIM (AOL instant messenger) respectively instead. Even for people who have MSN messenger, they still have to wait for them to online to send them the message. It is possible to send offline messages, but Ling points out that if the person accidentally closes the offline message window and does not have the habit of saving conversation history, then he/she will not get the message. As a result, leaving message on Facebook can ensure the person will be able to read her message.

Facebook is also better than emailing because young people see emailing as a way that is too formal to leave message to a friend. It is only used to contact more distant people, for example teachers or people they do not know. Some even say they rarely use email.

Sending short message service (SMS) is very popular in Hong Kong, it is instant and people always carry their mobile phones with them. It should be a secure way to pass out messages; but young people are using Facebook instead of SMS to leave these messages, because only sending SMS to people using the same mobile services company is free, otherwise they will have to pay. Normally, they only send cross-network SMS to close friends. So Facebook provides a cheap and convenient way to communicate, especially with not very close friends. Jane says it is a "very cost-effective way" to communicate.

Removal of time and location constraints

People find Facebook useful that it makes communication which will otherwise be difficult possible. It lifts the time and location constraints of communication, and makes communication with friends difficult to contact in other ways easy. People can contact friends living overseas easily. They do not have to make long distance calls, or wait for their friend to online in midnight due to time difference. Sometimes they do not even use the same instant messaging, and can hardly contact each other unless they use email. However, young people do not always email each other for it sounds too formal. Consequently, Facebook becomes a really useful tool for communication between friends separated in different parts of the world.

I have discussed the time constraint in earlier section; in short, Facebook lets people interact with friends with just a few clicks. Moreover, people often use it to organize social events with its events function, which is a very good function that let people reply with a RSVP and events can be organized in a more convenient and

efficient way.

A safe place to share lives

They also think Facebook is a safe platform to share their lives with friends because they can easily control who are allowed to see their profiles. Some people choose to write their random thoughts on Facebook because they think there are many random and unknown people reading their blogs posted on other sites. Sometimes, they do not want to share so much about their life with everyone. They only want to share with people they know, or at least people they trust.

An alternative and fun way to interact with close friends

Furthermore, Facebook provides another way of communication between close friends. Anna, who is working in the business field, explains, "As I need to work, there isn't much time to meet all my friends face-to-face". Even for students, they have university friends, secondary school friends, maybe even primary school friends, and friends they meet in other occasions, they might not have so much time to meet or call all the ones they actually care to communicate with them. So it can be imagined how difficult it is to find time to meet friends after work and training. Hence, Anna says Facebook lets her interact with friends whenever she can connect to Facebook. It helps overcoming the time constraint of busy people. Although they are busy, they can still spend a little time online to interact with some of their friends.

For less busy people, like students, they extend their offline interactions to Facebook. Many informants say they interact with close friends most on Facebook and they usually meet, call and IM their close friends regularly as well. They treat Facebook as an addition to their existing ways of communication. Jane says, "It's an alternative way to show my gratitude and love to friends", and "it spices up (*gaa do d cing ceoi* (加多 d 情趣)) their relationships". It gives friends another platform to "fool around" when they are not meeting each other.

Things happening on Facebook or things discovered through Facebook can become topics of daily conversations between friends too. Therefore, people generally find Facebook good for them in maintaining relationships with friends and acquaintances.

Connecting with larger circle of people

Many Facebook members do not only add close friends as their Facebook friends, they add friends who they are not so close with or merely acquaintances as well. Pete feels that people are keeping superficial contacts with friends one knows but not close with. Anna also thinks that sometimes the friends on Facebook are not truly friends. It is true that people are maintaining ties with this type of friends or acquaintances, but many consider that useful. Anna and Ling both believe these contacts could be useful social capital, which might help in some ways in the future. And sometimes people do care about these people though they are not really close. So they want to maintain ties

with these people and Facebook gives them the opportunity to do all these in a non-threatening way. If they keep in touch with these people on instant messaging, they will have to reply soon, if not immediately, but interacting on Facebook does not require so. People do not expect others to be online on Facebook all the time, so they will not expect them to reply their posts, messages, or other actions quickly. As mentioned earlier, these people are not close friends, they probably will not have a lot to talk about, and so the less immediacy of Facebook communication avoids possible embarrassing moments of having dead air when talking on instant messaging.

Convenience in learning more about friends

Facebook acts like a social newspaper about friends. The news feed reports everything one's friends are involved in. Friends can know more about each other. For friends already know each other well, they can know their latest news. For not-very-close friends, they can learn more about the person if they wish. Winnie says that even close friends do not disclose their entire life, everything about them to each other, but on Facebook people can get a fuller picture of the things happening around a person. News feed also helps remind people of some people they forget, and prompt them to see what they are up to.

Shorten distance between strangers

Some people reflect that they like Facebook because it draws them near to people they do not know in reality. There are politicians and famous people in different industries on Facebook. Liz is fond of classical music and she is a fan of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra. She has some friends in the orchestra and through these friends' profiles, she discovers her idols' profiles. She feels the distance between the musicians and her is very distant (in reality) but also very near (on Facebook) at the same time. The easiness to search for people on Facebook also makes knowing about someone not very difficult. People can learn more about someone they do not know in person through Facebook as long as their privacy settings allow. People who make new friends on social networking sites also love it due to the fact that it is more reliable. They think people on Facebook are more trustworthy. They provide a lot of information that one can verify. And their networks, connections and photos show what kind of people they are. People can learn a lot about the person before deciding whether or not to befriend him/her. The risk is thus smaller to make friends on Facebook than on other social networking sites.

Benefits to the self

There are some benefits which are more for the individuals. People can express themselves better with Facebook. For instance, people can join a large variety of groups or support some causes to express their views on current issues. There are advocacy groups like "Support the Monks' protest in Burma" and "Save Hong Kong's Street Markets". These groups give people opportunity, which they do not always have in everyday life, to express their opinions and stand points. Another thing is that, people can draw others' attention fairly easily. They can update their status, tag people

in their notes or photos, then their friends can see that when they log on their homepage. It can also boost people's self-esteem with the use of Facebook. On birthday, and festivals, users report that they receive many greetings and gifts on Facebook, from both close friends and acquaintances, many of whom they do not expect. Though they know it is all due to the birthday reminder that appears on everyone's homepage, and the festival gifts are probably sent out in mass, they accept them and feel surrounded with love of friends. Ling says the greetings and gifts she received on her birthday boost her self-esteem to the highest point and she knows that these people do not remember her birthday themselves, but that is not important. The important point is that they care to send her greetings and gifts.

Concentrate platform that meets people's needs

Most importantly, Facebook is a concentrate platform with everything people want. It provides all the functions of email, instant messaging, photo album, events organizing, address book. One site can meet all the needs people originally have to do on separate sites or software makes it very attractive. It makes life easier and things can be done more conveniently and effectively. Tools that are fun attract young people, and its usefulness makes it ever attractive. Its applications are developed by third party developers and there are always new applications coming out. This makes it a place people will never get bored. Thus, it receives the wide support of young people in Hong Kong. In short, this is something needed in the market, like email and IM. Email and IM are tools, whilst Facebook is like a "workship" with all kinds of tools/functions. And Facebook is not only a workshop; it is one user-friendly and fun-making workshop. It will soon become part of young people's life.

Is Facebook a fad?

Some considerations over the case of MySpace

A fad is a practice or interest for a time with exaggerated zeal. boyd (2006a) believes Friendster was a fad but MySpace is far more than a fad. Her reason is that the primary value of MySpace is identity production and sharing among teenagers and there is no sign that the teenagers are "growing up" and wanting to leave MySpace (ibid). It is believed that MySpace would fade away if users feel invaded and bombarded with spam and advertisements, or if there are some new and more interesting ways to do the same thing they are doing on MySpace. However, there was not much evidence that this was going to happen at the time boyd wrote the article (ibid). On the other hand, "growing up" might not be a reason to leave the site, because the fastest-growing age group of Facebook members is the middle-aged adults. "Grown-ups" flock to social networking sites too, so ageing should not be a factor making a social networking site a fad. Whether the sites can satisfy the needs of different age groups seems to be a more important factor influencing whether they can stay. Further, there are actually other new social networking sites, like Facebook, which many people find more exciting. There are some members leaving MySpace, but that does not hurt very much as it is still the most popular social networking site in October, 2007 and the most popular website, even more popular than Google, in August, 2007 in the US (Hitwise US 2007).

Facebook will become part of our life

MySpace is not a fad, but how about Facebook? From the foregoing sections of interviews and expositions, we understand why Facebook is so popular and most loved, and it is growing fast. Facebook will not fade away in the near future. It is not just a fad and it will continue to grow. It will soon become part of our young people's life.

To remain as a popular site, the basic requirement is being able to keep its members coming back and attract new people to join. Facebook can do that. Facebook users will not easily leave the site because they find it useful. It is a convenient and low-cost way to maintain ties and relationships with friends and acquaintances. People may argue that interacting with people on Facebook lacks the human quality of face-to-face communication, but how could a person contact so many friends if they have to meet all of them all the time? Urban people are busy and they have limited time to socialize with friends, Facebook is therefore the place where they can have different kinds of innovative interactions with friends but which will not take as much time as face-to-face communication. It is also a useful communication tool that makes communication between geographically distant friends more visual and fun. They can share their lives and interests easily on the platform. Facebook allows convenient and cheap active interactions between people, and also works "as a way of staying in touch passively with people" as the news feed feeds users with latest news of their friends (Rose 2007). They can know what is happening around their friends just by reading through their news feed, which is described as "a newspaper about one's own friend network" by Jane. Its unbeatable usefulness in helping people maintain ties with others makes it almost irreplaceable by other websites or tools. Existing users will certainly keep using Facebook constantly, and it is attracting more and more members too. For the time being, it is most unlikely that Facebook will become a fad.

Furthermore, the users on Facebook should be quite sticky because they all have their network of friends and contacts there. They will not rashly leave the site unless their friends are all leaving, or else they will lose a convenient place for communication with all of them.

So they would not leave Facebook for no reason. They would only leave it when they find somewhere that could satisfy their needs better. Or that they do not have that kind of needs anymore.

Fresh and fun experience

What makes people less likely to leave Facebook is its dynamic nature. Since Facebook opened its platform for third party developers to develop applications, there have been already almost 8,000 applications on Facebook at this moment (November 13, 2007), and the number is growing everyday. There are new applications appearing regularly, so users will not easily get bored on the site. There are always something interesting that they can do or play. This can keep them from abandoning the site because it gives fresh and refreshing feeling (*san sin gam* (新鮮感)) to users and fulfils all their online needs. It can incorporate other services and things people do on

other sites into Facebook. In fact, Facebook is already a very convenient site that has its own message system that works like other web mail, a message board, forums and discussion groups, photo album, and so on. People can actually do all kinds of things on Facebook and save their visits to other websites.

The best SNS so far

Facebook is very positive to users' feedbacks. It often responds to opinions and complaints quite efficiently. Even though it sometimes announces new features that users do not like, they always try to make changes to appease them. This user-oriented attitude is very much welcomed by the users. If it can always satisfy users' needs, I cannot see it fade away in the future.

Indeed, most users think that Facebook is the best social networking site available so far. This reflects their satisfaction with the site. Therefore, I cannot see people leaving the site in the near future unless a site that can provide something better than Facebook appears. I think Facebook will last for at least a few more years

Conclusion

With the never-stopping advancement of information technology, the Internet has become almost a necessity for everyone in more economically-developed areas around the world. Undoubtedly, access to the Internet depends on a lot of factors: wealth, availability of Internet services, knowledge about the technology, style of living, level of education, etc. It is not very clear to me the accessibility to the Internet in economically less developed areas, but it is amazing that people in Burma (Myanmar) could report the news of the monks' protest with pictures and videos on Facebook faster than TV and radio stations in groups like "Support the Monks' protest in Burma". The Internet hence undeniably shortens the time lag for the exchange of information, and further reduces the distance constraint in communication.

The invention of Facebook gives people another cheap and convenient way to keep contact with others as well as make new connections. From what the informants report, they are keeping contact with many more friends and acquaintances than they could before having Facebook. Although they can maintain ties with more people now, that certainly does not mean having more friends. The number of friends they contact more frequently on Facebook is more or less the same with the number of friends they meet more often in face-to-face situations, whom they are closer with. Yet, they can keep in touch with friends overseas more often than before. And people can learn much about their friends and acquaintances as they might not know every single thing about their friends and acquaintances in their daily interactions. Keeping contacts might be superficial but doing so is sometimes useful. Like in previous researches, having many friends may also project a better self-image to other friends. It may be a signal of having good personality. After all, people often feel good to have many friends; it increases their self-esteem when they have more friends than others and can catch more attention.

Keeping contact with acquaintances is also a reflection of people's social

interactions practice in face-to-face world. People are maintaining both their own and others' face (Goffman 1967:11). In not rejecting to be friends with their acquaintance, they are trying not to be rude to them, to maintain their nice image and save others' face for not making them feel bad. Many other actions they do also involve face-work. Users will think carefully before they initiate any interactions with people who are not so close with them, to ensure they are doing appropriate things that will not make either side lose face.

At the same time, people are also cumulating social capital, which refers to "various kinds of valued relations with significant others" (Jenkins 1992:85). Their friends and acquaintances are all their social capital, but acquaintances are more apparently viewed as their social capital because many do not interact much with these people but they still keep them on their list due to the fact that they think these contacts can be useful in the future; their acquaintances might be able to help them or they can cooperate later.

These two explanations of social interactions were proposed by Erving Goffman (1967) and Pierre Bourdieu (Jenkins 1992), originally to deal with face-to-face interactions, but they can be applied to social interactions on Facebook as well. This shows that interactions between people on Facebook or maybe the Internet in general are basically an extension of their face-to-face practices. They are extending their habits and etiquettes online. There is something different but they are basically quite similar.

In fact, the arise of Facebook and other social networking sites signify a point of change in human life where the Internet has evolved to web 2.0, and allows more interactions and users' control over their content. It creates a new dimension of human communication, where people can exchange a lot of information in different formats and "play" on a single platform conveniently. Though this kind of information exchange arouses a lot of concern, for example, critics think that we are blurring the private and public and constantly living "for show" lives, I do not think this will hinder its growth (Green 2007). Everything has its good and bad sides, and if users do not want to live like they are "for show", they can very well alter their privacy settings or be selective on the content they are showing to others.

To conclude, Facebook is certainly a part of the Internet's evolution. It is just like the invention of emailing system and instant messaging years ago. When email and instant messaging were introduced, people were curious and excited too. Looking back, ICQ was very popular among youth and there were a lot of concerns about security and young people making friends online. ICQ might be a fad but instant messaging has not vanished, and email is still widely used nowadays. Thus, I believe, Facebook is not a fad and it will soon become part of our life. It will probably become our daily online necessity somewhat equivalent to and alongside with email and instant messaging. Even if Facebook unfortunately fades, the idea of social networking site of the like will continue to exist as there is the need for such kind of wonderful and interesting services. However, I am quite optimistic about Facebook's future. It will stay and it will not easily fade because it is such a marvelous all-in-one platform that includes everything people need to do on the Internet. Its fast growing in fact challenges the need for emails and other web services outside the platform.

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數碼空間的社會網絡：Facebook 現象民族誌

本文藉探討 Facebook 現象，以了解年青一輩在這個社交網站上
的活動。透過訪問參與其中的年青人，本文分析 Facebook 在年
青人之間流行的原因、以及 Facebook 與他們日常社交生活的關
係。