

# Online Social Networking: A New Virtual Playground

Siti Ezaleila Mustafa

Azizah Hamzah

Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya,

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

ezaleila@um.edu.my

azizah@um.edu.my

**Abstract**—The technology of computer networks does not just connect computers but it also connects humans. The technology keeps evolving from time to time. From online bulletin boards to the system of computer conferences and Internet, the technology has now led to the emergence of online communities with the introduction of Web 2.0 technology. Social interaction in cyberspace by using new media applications such as social networking has been adapted by more and more people and has changed human communication. This article will discuss the global activity of online social networking which includes some early findings in the Malaysian context.

**Keywords:** *social media; Malaysia; social interaction; online community*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Statistics show that the Internet is increasingly being used and has become a must for some people. Besides being a source of reference or “library” for all forms of information and knowledge, this medium is also used as an effective means of communication tool in social interaction. Because the computing and Internet technology keeps changing over time, people shall always find new ways to use them in communication.

Since the introduction of 2.0 Web technologies, the interactivity elements that are offered to the user had turned the Internet into a modern social platform that involved mass participation. It has evolved into this new form of social media that can transmit multimedia content and eased the interaction between readers and the authors. This media has led to the formation of a new form of communication that has consolidated mass communication and interpersonal communication into new interactivities such as chat groups, virtual groups in workplaces, and online communities (van Djik, 2006).

## II. COMMUNICATION & ICT REVOLUTION

For McLuhan, new forms of media have changed the human experiences (Baran & Davis, 2009). Harold Innis’s words reflected the truth when he said that media technology that was present in a society at a certain period of time would affect the individual in society, in their thinking, communication, and behavior (Narula 2006: 114). Therefore, the notion of an evolving technology as alluded to by McLuhan, may be seen in the four eras of the development

of human communication such as following: (i) the tribal era, (ii) the literacy era, (iii) the era of printing, and (iv) the electronic era (Lister et al., 2003; Narula 2006; McQuail, 2001).

This is supported by McQuail (1994) which states that there is a relationship between the dominant communication technologies in each era with the important features of community. Thus, in each case, the changes from one era to another era brought a new mode of communication that lead to significant changes in human life and society. For Brody (1990), we are now entering the fifth era, an era that emphasised interactive communication compared to oral, writing, prints, and telecommunication in the previous development of human communication.

This shows that communication modes are changing and has now crossed such distances with the help of computerization and digital technology especially the emergence of Internet and its various new applications. Communication and interaction now can be done through online or in virtual world/cyberspace without having to face with others at the same place and same time.

## III. SOCIAL MEDIA: ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING

With technological advances from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, new media is changing and growing. According to O’Reilly, Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of web development and is often associated with social media applications. The important feature of this media is the development of software that enabled mass participation in social and collective activities (Mustonen, 2009) that can often be seen as “playful”.

Web 2.0 helps the user to overcome the technical obstacles that were in the way earlier and making the Internet an instrument for and by the mass user. One can easily consume (read, listen, watch, download, search, and buy), create (personalize, aggregate, and contribute), share (publish, upload), facilitate (tag, recommend) and communicate (send messages, post comments, rate, and chat) online.

The new media technology evolved to meet the technical requirements for creating an effective online social networking, namely (i) bounding: to form an online group meeting, (ii) tracking: the list of community involvement in discussions, (iii) archiving: to maintain records for easy discussion, and (iv) warranting: ensuring the identity of the participants (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2003).

This social media where individuals can meet and chat with others who share their same interests have sprouted rapidly and has become a very popular sector of the Internet. The rapid adaptation of this technology by individuals, groups, organizations, and communities have created "online communities", and "virtual social life" (Igarria et al. 2001). which is created with four basic elements based on Preece (2000: 10): people, sharing purposes, policy, and computer system.

This community is formed and maintained through the Internet. According to Horigan (2001), "...an online community has become a 'third place' to the public and it is different from home and workplace." Among the main activity of this "third place" is conversation and the mood is established as "playful", "frivolity, verbal wordplay, and wit", and by the feeling of "human warmth" deriving from "being apart together" (Oldenburg in Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006).

Usage of this social media creates excitement to the user and they are used more often than other media. This is consistent with the McQuail's (2001) opinion that one of the characteristics of new media is related to the degree of "playfulness", the degree to which a current or potential user believes that the social network site will bring him/her a sense of enjoyment and pleasure (Sledgianowski & Kulviwat, 2009).

Cyberspace now becomes a new playground and online interaction where people to get together and form groups based on interest with the use of social networking and virtual world sites. Millions are logging in, joining up, and participating. It is become more fun, interactive, and "live" with elements of video, audio, and digital animation offered by this new media.

According to Damien Cummings (www.the-open-room.com), the year 2008 witnessed the growth of online social networking via social networking sites and virtual worlds. Statistics from comscore showed that from 1.1 billion users accessing the Internet in may 2009, 734.2 million or 65% of them, visit at least one social networking site. In fact, it has become a social utility in the friend relationship management with 74% of consumers using it to send messages to their friends. These sites connect people globally and universal McCann's research has shown that more immigrants such as Filipinos (83%), Hungarians (80%), Polish (77%), and Mexicans (76%) use this social media.

#### A. What is Online Social Networking?

Mew (2009) sees online social networking as "social software that has been used to develop social networks." Sites that provide online social networking allows users or members to form a perception or impression, maintain, and acquire new relationships (Tom Tong, 2008). Therefore, according to Boyd and Ellison (2007), although these sites use a variety of technical features, the backbone of these sites is the profile that displays a list of "Friends" which is also a user of the system.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social networking sites as web-based service that allows individuals to do the following: (i) build public or semipublic profile in a system, (ii) share a

connection, and (iii) view and cross-list their relationship and by others in the system. Social networking site often have a portal, forums, blogs, and galleries (usually a photo gallery). Each element is used by the user of a social networking site to connect with each other and contribute to the formation of a community. If the user is in the blog space, they will receive the latest information from the portal space, gallery, or forum. This online community is always in relation to each other through this communication in cyberspace.

Online social networking has been characterized by sharing activities, trends or preferences, and information for socializing (Albrechtslund, 2008). It becomes a place to meet people who have similar interests, expresses it and act. It has been used as a tool and utility for people to connect with each other. This social media as a public medium has four characteristics that make friendship seen as "immortal": persistency, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences (Boyd, 2007).

#### B. Global Phenomenon of Online Social Networking

Online social networking is considered as a new phenomenon after the existence of the Internet and web (Wilson, 2008). In this online world, users can also display the status and distinction to the audience that consist of friends, colleagues, and others by stating their taste performance (Liu 2007), or listing of their interests, sports, books, music, video, favorite movies, and so on.

Social networking sites have increasingly been used by more and more people around the world because of its ability to connect people all around the world easily. There are various types of social networking sites and this creates a variety of online communities.

TABLE I. THE GROWTH OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES USED BY REGION, JUNE 2007 VS JUNE 2008

	Visitors ('000)		
	June 07	June 08	% Changes
World	464,437	580,510	25%
Asia Pacific	162,738	200,555	23%
Europe	122,527	165,256	35%
North America	120,848	131,255	9%
Latin America	40,098	53,248	33%
Middle East - Africa	18,226	30,197	66%

Source: comScore World Matrix

Statistics released by comScore World Matrix showed the increasing use of online social networking all over the world, especially in the Middle East-Africa area, which shows a growth of 66% since June 2007 to June 2008.

Overall, the use of social networking sites shows a growth of 25% since June 2007.

The fact is that two-thirds of the global Internet population now visits social networking sites. An estimated 800 million users will start using their mobile devices for social network access. Based on VisualEconomics.com report ([www.visualeconomics.com](http://www.visualeconomics.com)), among Internet users, 80 percent in Brazil use social network sites. Other countries with high percentages include Italy (73%), Spain (75%), Japan (70%), United States (67%), United Kingdom (69%), France (67%), Australia (59%), Germany (51%) and Switzerland (51%).

Studies by Universal McCann in Wave 3 shows 31% of active users manage their social networking sites every day, while 33% use it regularly ([www.universalmccann.com](http://www.universalmccann.com)). According to comScore, Facebook is the most popular site with 370 million users, followed by MySpace (123 million), Hi5 (59 million), Orkut (55 million), and Twitter (52 million). More than 35 million Facebook users update their status each day. Photo uploads to Facebook have increased by more than 100%. Currently, there are around 2.5 billion uploads to the site each month.

The trend towards a form of network communication and online community can be seen when more people are using it, especially young people who are categorized as versatile and optimistic consumers that are always trying something new. They tend to use the Internet for entertainment purposes and communication with family and friends (Jones & Fox, 2009). Online social networking is one of the more popular activities amongst them. They utilize this social media to socialize with others, play games, use applications, send private messages, and discuss about various topics.

The social networking activity in Malaysia, based on the report by comScore World Matrix is quite high, which is 67%, behind the Philippines (87%), Indonesia (84%) and Singapore (77%). In terms of average minutes spent per visitor on social networks, Malaysia ranked second with 181.2 minutes, Korea (227.8 minutes), followed by Singapore (175.6 minutes).

#### IV. USAGE OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING IN MALAYSIA: EARLY FINDINGS

A pilot survey was conducted to get an early indication of this activity in Malaysia. A questionnaire was distributed to 40 respondents (f=20; m=20), who are considered as active users of online social networking. Majority of the respondents are between the age of 26-35 years olds (60%), not married (65%), works in the private sector (40%) and were university/college graduates (87.5%).

##### A. Trends of Usage

In terms of period of usage of this social media, 62.5% of them had used it for more than three years and 45% of these respondents maintained accounts of two to three social networking sites. The main reason for their participation in online social networking is due to the fact that it is the current trend (37.5%), and curiosity/ wants to try a new thing (30%).

TABLE II. PERIOD OF USE

	Frequency	Percent
1-2 years	8	20.0
2-3 years	7	17.5
More than 3 years	25	62.5
Total	40	100.0

TABLE III. FACTORS OF USAGE

Factors	Frequency	Percent
Influence of friends	5	12.5
Current trend	15	37.5
Invitation from people who already have accounts in certain social networking sites	4	10.0
Curiosity /wants to try something new	12	30.0
Total	36	90.0
999 (Missing)	4	10.0

Based on this survey, 60% of the respondents have accounts in global/international online social sites and only 10% used local sites and 11% have accounts in both types of sites. In line with the global phenomenon, Facebook is the most popular social networking site because this social media is used by 30.1% of the respondents, followed by Friendster (21.1%), MySpace (13%), Tagged (13%), and Hi5. Other local social networking sites are Myfriends2u and FriendX.

TABLE IV. USAGE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

	N	Percent
Facebook	37	30.1%
Friendster	26	21.1%
Orkut	1	.8%
MySpace	16	13.0%
Tagged	16	13.0%
Hi5	10	8.1%
Bebo	4	3.3%
Kaneva	1	.8%
Myfriends2u	2	1.6%
LinkedIn	1	.8%
Google Buzz	2	1.6%
FriendX	1	.8%
Others	6	4.9%

Frequency of log in shows 87.5% of respondents log in into their account a few times a day and 37.5% spend more than two hours at each session. The finding shows that a majority (32.5%) spend 11 to 20 hours per week with social networking and most of the time they use it at home after office hours, from 6.00 pm to 12.00 a.m.

##### B. Friends and Groups

Online social networking has been used as a place for users to get together and make a connection. This social media is increasingly used to create new relationships and

expanding the existing social networks. It does not just allow users to meet other people in cyberspace, but also allows users to state and demonstrate their social networks clearly (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and maintain relationship with others (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Studies by Universal McCann in Wave 4 show that active Internet users use their social network profiles as hubs for their social media. There are significant increases in number of users finding new friends or joining a group (www.universalmccann.com).

Through the survey that was administered, a majority of the respondents (35%) have 251-500 “friends” and 20% have more than 1,000 “friends in their profiles. Only 10% of them have less than 100 “friends”. A majority of the respondents’ friends are their schoolmates and university friends (65%).

TABLE V. NUMBER OF FRIENDS

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
< 50	1	2.5	2.6	2.6
51-100	3	7.5	7.7	10.3
101-250	7	17.5	17.9	28.2
251-500	14	35.0	35.9	64.1
501-1000	6	15.0	15.4	79.5
> 1000	8	20.0	20.5	100.0
Total	39	97.5	100.0	
Missing	999	1	2.5	
Total	40	100.0		

52.5% of respondents join between 1-10 online groups, while only 12.5% joined more than 50 groups. The main reason for joining this group is to always get updates of information regarding their profession/interest.

Based on the survey, there are several activities that seem popular among the respondents. One is to respond to the comments in personal profiles (47.5%), browse friends’ photo albums (42.5%), read friends’ comments on their own photos (45%), and read comments in their own wall (40%). Besides that, the users always use this social media to send wishes to their friends (45%)—such as birthdays, anniversaries, graduation days, and so on—and browse their friends’ walls (37.5%).

Many social networking sites provide games and quizzes and, the survey shows those features are very popular among the respondents. The respondents still act as users to this media because they do not actively play the role of content providers. This can be seen from the survey that shows mode to create new quizzes/application is 1 (which means “never”) and they just post something to blogs/notes only occasionally.

TABLE VI. THE FREQUENCY OF RESPONDENTS’ ACTIVITIES IN SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

	Mode	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Standard Deviation
Play quizzes	1.00	2.10	1.00	5.00	1.19

Update the profile	2.00	2.85	1.00	5.00	1.05
Respond to the comments in personal profile	4.00	3.85	2.00	5.00	.86
State the daily activities	3.00	3.02	1.00	5.00	1.17
Sends private message	3.00	3.28	1.00	5.00	.96
Upload photos	3.00	3.23	2.00	5.00	.96
Browse friends’ photo album	4.00	3.60	1.00	5.00	.84
Comment on friends’ photos	3.00	3.50	2.00	5.00	.91
Read friends’ comment in my photo album	4.00	3.75	2.00	5.00	.81
Play games	1.00	2.12	1.00	5.00	1.18
Send comments to friends’ status	3.00	3.58	2.00	5.00	.93
Read comments in my wall	4.00	3.90	2.00	5.00	.87
Send a wish to friends	4.00	3.75	1.00	5.00	.93
Create new quizzes/application	1.00	1.38	1.00	3.00	.70
Post something to blog/note	3.00	2.50	1.00	5.00	1.24
Find /see an interesting people’s profile	3.00	3.10	1.00	5.00	1.03
Browse friends’ wall	4.00	3.55	2.00	5.00	.90
Shares video or links from other web	3.00	3.05	1.00	5.00	1.22
Promote product or online business	1.00	1.75	1.00	5.00	1.17
Read friends’ note/blog	3.00	3.02	1.00	5.00	1.07
Chatting using IM	3.00	3.42	1.00	5.00	1.17
Send and accept friendship invitation	3.00	3.22	1.00	5.00	1.10
Use poll feature	1.00	1.95	1.00	5.00	1.11
Search the same interest groups	3.00	2.85	1.00	5.00	1.17
Check comments in online group that I joined	3.00	2.97	1.00	5.00	1.19

### C. Reason for Usage

The early findings show that there are many reasons for the usage of this social media. Some main reasons in this survey show a similarity with previous studies, namely for relationship management:

- Interact with families/relatives (strongly agree=32.5%; agree=37.5%)
- Connects with old friends (strongly agree=60%; agree=35%)
- Knowing the situation/news of existing friends (strongly agree=45%; agree=50%)
- Finding friends who had long been separated (strongly agree=45%; agree=50%)
- To manage and maintain the friendship (strongly agree=40%; agree=52.5%)
- Broaden the friendship networking with those who have same interest/profession (strongly agree=32.5%; agree=32.5%)

Some of them use the online social networking to get and distribute information easily anytime anywhere. Therefore, they usually join online groups and take part in group discussions and become friends with famous persons/celebrities. Diversion is also one of the reasons in using this new media. 47.5% agreed that it has been used to avoid boredom and 40% agreed that it is for self entertainment.

#### CONCLUSION

The development of media technology has expanded the reach of communication across space and time by allowing anyone to interact with individuals or groups outside of the physical environment to create, maintain, and enhance their social relationship. Although face to face communication is still a very important form of communication in all cases, it is gradually being replaced and equipped with mediated communication, namely interpersonal and new media, including online social networking.

Online social networking has become a new playground for Internet active users to meet and interact with their friends. Early findings showed that they spent quite many hours in this new media and log in into their profile or account a few times a day. With this social media, they can gather all their friends in one place and keep in touch with each other easily. The comment tool is a popular format of sending messages to their friends and their online groups. This shows conversation and playfulness are important elements for the active users in using this social media.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] "How The World Spends Its Time Online" - VisualEconomics.com. [www.visualeconomics.com/how-the-world-spends-its-time-online\\_2010-06-16/#xzz13GaaFwLG](http://www.visualeconomics.com/how-the-world-spends-its-time-online_2010-06-16/#xzz13GaaFwLG) (retrieved on Oct 24, 2010)
- [2] A. Albrechtslund, "Online social networking as participatory surveillance." *Monday First*. Jilid. 13, Bil. 3., March 3, 2008, [firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2142/1949](http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2142/1949) (retrieved on May 15, 2010)
- [3] A. Feenberg & M. Bakardjieva, "Consumers or citizens? The online community debate", A. Feenberg & D. Barney, Eds. *Community in the digital age*, pp. 1-30, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003.
- [4] A.A. Matei, "From counterculture to cyberculture: Virtual community discourse and the dilemma of modernity", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(3). 2005. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00262
- [5] D. M. Boyd & N. B. Ellison, (2007). "Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1). pp. 210-230, doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x
- [6] D. McQuail, *Mass communication theory*. London: Sagem 1994.
- [7] D. Sledgianowski & S. Kulviwat, Using social network sites: the effects of playfulness, critical mass and trust in a hedonic context." *Journal of Computer Information Systems*. July, 1, 2009. [www.allbusiness.com/marketing-advertising-overview/127223438-1.html](http://www.allbusiness.com/marketing-advertising-overview/127223438-1.html). (retrieved on November 13, 2010).
- [8] E. W. Brody. *Communication tomorrow: New audiences, new technologies, new media*. New York: Praeger, 1990.
- [9] J. Preece, *Online communities: Designing usability, supporting sociability*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000.
- [10] J. Van Dijk, *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media*. Edisi kedua. London: Sage, 2006.
- [11] J.B. Horrigan, "Online communities: Networks that nurture long-distance relationships and local ties." Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2001, [www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2001/PIP\\_Communities\\_Report.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2001/PIP_Communities_Report.pdf) (retrieved on August 12, 2008)
- [12] L.Q.L. Mew, "Online social networking: a task-person-technology fit perspective." Ph.D. Theses School of Business, George Washington University, 2009.
- [13] Liu, H. (2007). Social network profiles as taste performances. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 2007. pp. 252-275, doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00395.x
- [14] M. Wilson, "The comparison of online social networks in terms of structure and evolution", PhD. Theses, Bowie Stat University, Maryland, US, 2008.
- [15] N. B. Ellison, C. Steinfield & C. Lampe, "The benefits of Facebook 'friends': Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites.: *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 2007. pp. 1143-1168, doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x
- [16] P. Mustonen, *Social Media: A New Way to Success?* Turku: Turku School of Economic. 2009. [info.tse.fi/julkaisut/kr/Kre1\\_2009.pdf](http://info.tse.fi/julkaisut/kr/Kre1_2009.pdf) (diakses pada 2 Mei 2010)
- [17] S. Tom Tong, et al. "Too much of a good thing? The relationship between number of friends and interpersonal impressions on Facebook", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(3), 2008, pp. 531-549. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2008.00409
- [18] Wilson, T., Azizah Hamzah & Khattab U, "The cultural technology of clicking in the hypertext era: Electronic journalism reception in Malaysia." *New Media & Society*. 5 (4), 2003, pp. 523-545