

The Use and Abuse of Online Social Network Sites by Gen Y in the EU: Can Marketing Make a Difference?

Alan Hirst, D Bednall, Marie Ashwin and Orhan İçöz

This paper discusses the qualitative data collected during the pilot study phase of research investigating positive and negative behaviours of members of social network sites (SNS). Five collaborating universities recently applied for EU research funding under the FP7 programme for cross border collaborative research. As a result of a meeting of international colleagues in Caen, France during the autumn of 2008 a pilot study was undertaken in their home institutions to establish the feasibility of a research idea that had been germinating over several months. A preliminary review of the literature, discussions with other colleagues around the world, and this pilot study amongst Generation Y students in four EU countries have enabled us to map the territory and develop a focus for the project which seeks to understand the new digital world that has been evolving in recent years, both in terms of its potential and threats to individuals, organisations and countries. The EU has recognised this same need as in the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7 - SSH-2009- A) Socio-economic and Humanities Part 8 section 3.2.1. it calls for collaborative research projects which investigate "The new trends in consumers' behaviour in Europe and their social, cultural and economic underpinnings; Their social, cultural and societal implications, including the mutual impacts of consumers' behaviour on other collective issues in the short, medium and long terms; and the factors influencing consumers' choices." From a business perspective the McKinsey Report (2007) identified how online tools were being used and where, and to whom they were most important. From the data collected it also identified which companies planned to spend more on these tools in the future. The follow up report in 2008 revealed that companies were using more Web 2.0 tools and technologies than in the previous year, sometimes for more complex business purposes. The results of the pilot study saw users reporting both the positive and negative aspects of online activities using social network sites. Of the students in the four countries which returned data for this pilot study students 89% reported using Facebook, 59% MSN and 10% MySpace. Others SNSs were rarely used.

KEY TERMS: Social networks, social networks sites (SNS), technological disruption, communication tools, photo / video sharing, positive behaviour, negative behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2008, lactating mothers and rioters in Greece had something in common. They used Web 2.0 technologies known as Social Networking Sites to organise and promote their causes (Sweeney 2008, Jones 2008). These sites, of which Facebook, Twitter and MySpace are well-known examples, promise and threaten radical change in many areas important to the EU.

Dr Alan Hirst, Faculty of Business Computing and Information Management, London South Bank University, LONDON UK. Email: hirsta@lsbu.ac.uk

Dr D David Bednall is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Deakin University Melbourne Australia. Email: david.bednall@deakin.edu.au

Dr Marie Ashwin is Professor of Marketing and Management at the Ecole de Management de Normandie, CAEN, France. Email : m.ashwin@em-normandie.fr

Professor Ohran Icoz is Professor of Tourism Marketing at Yaşar University (UY), Izmir, Turkey: orhan.icoz@yasar.edu.tr

Recent policy development in the EU has recognised the importance of “ ... Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, podcasts, wiki, or video sharing, [which] enable users easily to create and share text, videos or pictures, and to play a more active and collaborative role in content creation and knowledge dissemination.” (EC 2008a, p.19).

The research team aims to investigate how these rapidly-developing, ‘disruptive technologies’ (Danneels, 2004) will affect the EU and in particular, what marketers can do to influence these outcomes. The proposed project addresses the call in SSH-2009 - 3.2.1 for collaborative research projects which investigate:

- The new trends in consumers' behaviour in Europe and their social, cultural and economic underpinnings;
- Their social, cultural and societal implications, including the mutual impacts of consumers' behaviour on other collective issues in the short, medium and long terms; and
- The factors influencing consumers' choices.

To map the territory a pilot study was undertaken in the autumn of 2008 in four countries, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey and Sweden. The team began by defining Social Networking Sites (SNSs), then went on to consider how they are used. This was followed by an account of the current knowledge, limited though it is, on the role of SNSs in branding, in fostering inter-country travel and understanding, and in terms of the personal consequences of use.

The following definition has been adopted :

„, web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. .

Major SNSs of interest to Gen Y in Europe include Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and MSN. These include blog sites where the individuals are known to one another. Given that most of the SNSs used originated in the United States, they are conveying a form of US culture to European users.

As this paper is being written FaceBook is approaching its fifth anniversary. On 4 February 2004 Mark Zuckerberg, Chris Hughes, Dustin Moskovitz, and Eduardo Saverin founded Thefacebook.com as a way to keep in touch with their Harvard colleagues. It was developed by students, for students. Facebook, as it is now known, is regarded as one of the most trusted websites in the world. In a blog celebrating the anniversary Mr Zuckerberg confirmed that currently the site has an estimated 150 million active users worldwide. (<http://blog.facebook.com>)

Characterisation of Social Network Activities

Social Network Sites have a number of typical features. First of all, each individual has his or her own site or home page which links to all the material available to them. This consists of a personal profile, where people can post a photograph or image (avatar) to represent themselves, and provide details such as their birthday. They can also post picture albums of themselves, families and friends; list their current activities and use one of the messaging options available. It is also possible to invite others to join a group campaigning for a certain cause as in the “million people against the new interface in Facebook”, or more seriously, to join a riot. Some SNSs, like Twitter have a more restricted, limited messaging option. Second, people have the right to decide who can be in their network, though there is obvious social pressure (a *push* factor) on people if an acquaintance asks them to become a friend or colleague and they do not want to accept. We would expect that there are some natural limits on the number and size of networks (Hill & Dunbar 2003) that people use.

LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL REVIEW

The project addresses a range of theoretical perspectives as it is designed to assess the impact of potential intervention strategies and hence answer the call’s requirement that the research should “... assess possible policy instruments and market incentives that can contribute to reconcile individual aspirations and consumer expectations, consumer markets and societal objectives such as sustainable development.” The proposed project focuses on three areas of significance to the EU – the commercial effects of SNS use on European brands, the role of SNSs in fostering travel and cross-cultural communication in the EU and the effects on the individual.

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are producing new social phenomena affecting many areas of the individual’s life. It is now possible to stay in touch with friends and family from the remotest areas of the globe with instantaneous written and voice communications (Tapscott 2008). Tracking down old school friends and acquaintances from the past has become an everyday event for many. Even President Obama used Twitter during the 2008 election campaign (Dickerson 2008). SNSs have enabled people to stay in touch and have facilitated work and study workgroups. Indeed many universities have exploited this use in their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) by developing discussion forums and Second Life domains.

The speed and scope of such communication is commonplace to Generation Y (those people born between 1980 and 1995), the ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001) who have never known a world without computers. Their social groups are no longer bounded by geographical and personal contact zones.

Once people start using a new technology like SNSs, the range of applications is likely to grow and grow, just as it has for the mobile phone. Some of these will be highly positive for business (McKinsey 2007) and other groups, others highly negative. Europe needs to know where these rapid social developments are heading.

Motives for joining SNS sites

The literature suggests a variety of motives for joining a SNS which the research took into account. Primarily those with high gregarious needs (Lucas et al. 2008) were expected to be longer term and more frequent users of these sites. Beyond this, the individual's circumstances – change of jobs, travel and interests – are likely to affect participation. For example, when people move into a job, start a course of study or backpack around Europe, they are likely to meet people who they like. SNSs allow them to keep in touch. Where this has involved group activities, such as a study tour, prolonged contact is even more likely. Finally, those who describe themselves as socially isolated may be expected to join and participate. The act of joining is likely to be motivated either by an invitation to join (a *push* factor) or by people hearing about social networks and deliberately seeking them out (a *pull* factor).

It might be expected that the two genders have somewhat different approaches to social networking, with females placing more emphasis on maintaining social relationships and males placing more emphasis on instrumental (outcome oriented) uses such as making dates (Thelwall 2008).

Branding

In the area of branding, SNSs can be used to pass on accepted wisdom, both positive and destructive. SNSs have the capacity to pass on word-of-mouth information about companies, products and brands (Bonhard & Sasse 2006). 'Word of mouth' communication takes on a whole new meaning in this environment, for individuals and organisations alike. Two key elements exist, the instant nature of the communication, and its unpredictable reach. The use of SNSs enables a message to be shared, not only by those who have been given authorised access, but also by their one-step-removed contacts, and then theirs, and so on. In this way the control over the communication is lost almost immediately.

In general, members of SNSs are likely to exchange information about their purchases, especially those they have enjoyed or those where they felt they had been ripped off. Particular interest groups (e.g. Mellins 2008) may also be lovers of products or brands and use SNSs to exchange word-of-mouth information with other members. Such exchanges of information are likely to have a profound

effect on what brands Gen Y buys and what they aspire to buying once they have jobs and careers.

Of particular importance are brands to do with mobility, especially mobile phones like those provided by Nokia and Sony-Ericsson or communication providers like O2 or T-Mobile. Other interests are likely to include European clothing brands such as Sean John and Akademiks, or even Mecca music and entertainment venues. In terms of personal mobility, Gen Y might aspire to high status European brands like Audi, Porsche or Ferrari.

For organisations moving into the virtual communication world, many as yet unknown challenges will need to be faced. Positive communication can increase the reputation and sales of European brands. Negative communication in the form of false rumours, hate groups and other misinformation can damage them greatly. Other negative social use of brands may come through the theft of intellectual property such as software, games and multimedia.

European travel and understanding

Encouraging European travel, building social cohesion and fostering mutual understanding is of great significance to the EU, as the recent Green Paper shows (EC 2008b). This has grown in importance as more countries join or seek to join the EU. Because of their ability to foster travel and contacts around the region, SNSs have the ability to enhance understanding and empathy amongst the peoples of the EU zone. More practically, they could play a role in lifting the proportion of tourism devoted to Europe rather than elsewhere. On the negative side, SNSs could be used to organise hate groups or violent protests therefore promoting disharmony, distrust and vilification among the countries of Europe.

Through user-controlled profiles, SNSs allow individuals to express their identity as they would like others to see them (Liu 2008). By having a broad and supportive network of friends, individuals may grow in self esteem. On the negative side, SNSs are frequently used for undesirable or even illegal activities that affect the self-esteem of individuals – bullying, stalking, identity theft and malicious advice (Feinberg & Robey 2008, Howie 2008, Hrabluk 2008, Harvey 2008, Ibrahim 2008). Even where the incidence of extreme behaviours like sexual solicitation may be low (Ybarra & Mitchell 2007), the damage done to particular individuals, countries and commercial interests could be devastating.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1 To identify the reasons why users join SMS sites
- 2 To identify contemporary behaviours of generation Y users of SNSs
- 3 To record examples of positive and negative experiences

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

This pilot study was conducted in universities in the European Union countries of UK, France and Sweden, and in one associated country, Turkey. A convenience sample of Generation Y students was used as they are known to use social networks. These students were chosen because they are Internet literate and are likely to represent the target population.

The aim of this preliminary investigation was to seek clarification from active users about their behaviours, as well as asking them to identify both their positive views and their concerns about such activities. To this end the study used largely open-ended questions to map the territory and explore topics of interest. A semi-structured questionnaire was used, enabling responses which covered as wide range of experiences as possible, in a manageable format.

Sample

This convenience sample of individuals was drawn from Generation Y students studying on programmes within the four institutions: all had visited one or more of the social network sites within the past six months. They were asked to complete a questionnaire which covered a range of areas.

Of the 800 students surveyed, 200 in each institution, 315 responses were received from four countries. This represents a response rate of 31.50 percent. Of these returns 76 were unusable, due to omissions or errors in completion, resulting in 239 useable questionnaires for data analysis (23.90 percent).

Developing the Instrument

The testing and retesting of the items amongst small groups of individuals, together with several drafts of open-ended questions ensured the focus of this preliminary investigation was to determine the respondents' usages of social network sites.

The survey instrument, a semi-structured questionnaire, was designed to measure attitudes towards using social network sites. It asked respondents what prompted them to join such sites, as well as soliciting their comments about their social network experiences. Specific questions were asked about where they access social networks sites and what their main activities were. They were also asked for their input on whether they make recommendations to friends, via these sites, for specific purposes; with the open-ended questions they were able to provide details about these actions. A section dedicated to experiences whilst

using SNSs enabled them to provide data on whether they or any of their friends had had a negative experience whilst using such sites. Data was also collected to determine the demographic profile of the convenience sample.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was reduced using a six-stage process, from the transcription, through reduction to the interpretation of the qualitative data obtained. The framework used (Ashwin and Hirst, 2007) outlines the stages used to manage qualitative data from recording to detextualisation. Stage one of the framework involves the development of an appropriate instrument for the data collection linked to the research objectives and drawing upon the literature to identify appropriate variables. The second stage takes this further using the variables to develop a coding frame.

The third stage is transcription of the data onto a template which enables the recording and location of relevant data during the process of analysis. The fourth stage covers the first level of data reduction, to identify key elements which are then used to develop a coding framework to manage the data. Stage five is the interpretation and synthesis of the data using relevant themes drawn from the literature.

Stage six takes the results from the previous stage and, through comparison with other respondents, develops more detail of the issues including, for example, the identification of similarities and differences between them.

RESULTS

We received 48 usable responses from France of which 39 had a positive view on the use of social network sites and nine reported a negative view of the SNS. 19 agreed to be contacted in the future for follow up research. UK produced 43 usable responses of which 26 were positive and 17 negative attitude towards SNS. 24 of the UK respondents agreed to be contacted for future research. Sweden produced 114 responses of which 76 were usable and one third (38) had to be discarded. Of the usable responses 62 reported a positive attitude towards SNS and 19 negative attitude. Out of these 34 respondents agreed to be contacted in the future. Turkey returned 72 completed questionnaires. Of these 63 said they were satisfied with their SNS and nine reported that they were not satisfied with 28 agreeing to be contacted again for future research.

A total of 239 usable questionnaires were received from the participating universities. Out of these 190 had a positive attitude towards SNS whilst almost one-third reported a negative attitude towards SNSs. Encouragingly over half of the respondents supplied their email address and agreed to be contacted for future research.

The following sections assemble a selection of the verbatim responses received :

What prompted you to join?

Push factors, such as peer pressure, were identified as being a strong influence upon decisions to join a SNS. There were examples given where this was through receiving an invitation from a friend and not wanting to say no. Two quotes illustrated the pressure, this need to connect and belong to a certain peer group : “all my friends are members of Facebook” and “all my friend have the same social network.”

Pull factors included reports of 'feeling left out' or the feeling that they were missing out on something. As one French student put it “ every one else has a site.” Another interesting description was that of being “curious to find out what it was all about.”

Respondents cited word of mouth as a motivating force. Without any pressure being put upon them they were spurred up to join a site because they heard their friends and families talking about exchanges of information, and a wide range of other things.

Examples of wanting to meet up with old school friends, or keeping in touch with friends or family whilst travelling or studying away from home, were also given. Others used the sites because they wanted to find friends with whom they had lost touch.

Many respondents identified this as a way to maintain friendships as it was “easy to keep in contact with friend whilst abroad”, or “socialise with friends all over the world.” One German respondent who was studying in France at the time of the data collection said she had been able to “keep in touch with Erasmus students” she had met the previous year when she had been studying in the United States.

The number of people within the different social network groups varied but it was agreed that the students were “able to keep in touch with lots of friends at the same time.” It was unanimous across the four nations that a key benefit of such sites was that it is possible to manage your social life on the Internet for free. Avoiding the high cost of using telephones was noted by several participants.

Some of the the additional capabilities of these sites identified by the respondents had different drivers. The possibility of sharing photographs with contacts was a more social activity, whilst the exchange of documents during assignments was a study-orientated activity.

One dedicated fan took great pride in the fact that he could find out “information about the soccer team I support” and keep up to date on the latest transfer details etc...

Interestingly many respondents said they “wanted to have fun” when describing their motivation, and saw the networks they were building as something very personal. The benefits included the ability to develop relationships with new friends and the convenience of having everything “in one place.”

It was revealed that a significant number of respondents from all countries reported that they had migrated en-masse from Microsoft Social network (MSN) to FaceBook and MySpace in 2007. Neither the differing national cultures, or the prevalent technologies in their countries were found to be barriers to this change in behaviour.

What do mainly use it for?

The social application of the SNS was, without doubt, identified as the main focus during this preliminary mapping of the territory. Using the sites to talk to friends, gossip, or just keeping in touch, was common practice. Many revealed it was the means by which they could talk daily to friends although these conversations were “nothing specific” or “gossip.” Messaging and circulating pictures (digital images) meant that people in the network group were all kept up to date about the latest events.

Identified as a good way to meet new people and “find new friends” the respondents could hold conversations and share other content, such as photographs and video clips, whilst on-line.

Sites were used to plan many activities, especially parties. It was revealed that Facebook even provides tools to plan them. Other planning was for more general things on a daily basis, or even for university work with other students.

Cost again was identified as a key driver, enabling them to communicate without having to use a telephone, both whilst at home and overseas. Whilst travelling one student in the UK stated that they could “tell people about my travel adventures and share travel images whilst I was still away.”

Do you use the network to discuss specific things such as films, music, product, parties, and events?

The overwhelming impression from the responses to this question was a sense of sharing things with friends. This sharing extended beyond forwarding videos and music “I send music to everyone”, “I share music with my friends.” sharing

advice or opinions with friends was also mentioned, for example on recent films or new products. One student reported that not only did they watch films online but “I always give comments when I watch a film.” Another commented that “if I have seen a bad movie I do not recommend it to my friends.” Other discussed product “we share and discuss computer problems”, “I use Fashionspot.com to discuss clothes and fashion trends.”

Organising their social lives was high on the activity list, including parties and other events of many kinds. From arranging birthday parties, to booking concert tickets and even promoting a music event. “I support some artists and keep my friends informed of events and arrange invitations for them.”

The respondents used the sites for gathering and disseminating information. In the UK students confirmed they had used SNSs to search for “holidays”, “jobs”, “houses.”

Other uses of the networks included “to look for competitions,” “taking part in online quizzes,” “showing my pictures,” “to send links of video clips.” Relating to their studies many said they “discussed projects” and “have the latest documents” during online interactions. For one assignment “even the American elections were discussed by my group.”

Travel figured highly in the results, whether for “organising travel arrangements,” or to “organise and buy flight tickets” for holidays or simply weekends. “It’s easier than email to make an appointment with a friend”, “it’s more interactive than email.”

Further analysis revealed that gender differences did indeed exist, with male respondents revealing more instrumental orientations, whilst female respondents emphasised the use of SNSs for developing and maintaining social relationships.

Negative experiences

Some people in social networks risk being shamed, flamed or abused by others and shunned in their attempts to communicate. Significantly, 30% of respondents, both male and female, reported bad experiences of one form or another. These were either personal stories of events whilst using a social network site, or stories from friends and family.

These negative experiences covered a range of things, from deeply personal attacks to the impact upon professional life and career progression.

There were many comments about security of computers as well as self in the section on negative experiences. One example given by a student in France was

that they had their “password hacked and malicious virus put on my PC” , another reported that their password had been hacked on the university server .

Being harassed by “unwanted friends” and receiving “unwanted contact” from certain individuals linked security with the issue of privacy. Three students reported having been stalked on the internet, some by friends with whom relations has ceased prior to this new internet connection.

Other privacy issues included unwanted “ugly photos” being circulated, “the wrong photos uploaded,” “images I did not want to be published were published.”

Concerns about not knowing the person on the other end of the connection were voiced by some respondents. From the student who reported “meeting annoying people“ to the more serious and worrying “meeting people with wrong (hidden) identity”, “people pretending to be someone else to obtain information” there were a significant number of reports of such events. Examples of “people you do not know send you message that you do not want”, “people contacting you without your permission” were evidence of this. In one case a student found that an “ex partner was on the same network” and found out details of their current life.

There were stories of “personal information being leaked to others”, and “my account was stolen.” Threats to individuals and their computers resulting from issues with network security included “access to accounts led to junk emails and computer viruses”. This was evident across different network sites: “My MSN address was used to send messages from another computer”, “a friend’s MSN login and password details were stolen and negative emails sent to his friends.” “My MSN account pirated and upsetting messages sent to my current friends list.” “My password was stolen; there is no security or privacy on Facebook.” “I received a virus from an unwanted message on Facebook .“

A student purchased a holiday through a network and lost the money when it was found to be a scam.

Two students from the same university cited an event where a comment by an individual about his leisure activities on his Facebook site was seen by a company to which he had applied for an internship. The company informed him this was the reason they chose not to employ him. Others gave examples of negative messages posted on the Facebook “wall” both about them and others. “Peoples were sending me hate emails containing bad language and threats.”

The administration at one university were thought to be “judging students groups” by looking at the content of individual Facebook sites. (security and privacy), (security and privacy)

DISCUSSION

On the basis of the findings of this research, a profile of Generation Y's usage of social network sites was developed. Respondents of both genders are members of more than one social network. Facebook was the first site mentioned by the majority of respondents, followed by MySpace and then MSN.

Social network sites users tended to use the sites for social uses and the older groups also use the sites for information and job searching information, both groups are willing to provide personal information for the social network sites. Many reported using Googlemail.com for general and occasional communications, such as keeping in touch with parents and acquaintances, whilst preferring instant messaging, using FaceBook and MySpace, for regular communication with friends. More specifically it was identified that major motives for joining SNSs were "keeping in touch" (31%), contacting friends (28%) or participating due to "peer pressure" (14%).

One of the benefits of SNS is the ability to connect people in different countries (e.g. CouchSurfing 2008) with one another (Baker 2008). One student in the UK stated that whilst travelling they could "tell people about my travel adventures and share travel images whilst I was still away." Others saw the possibility of meeting new people and "finding new friends" without having to travel as they were able to hold conversations and share other content, such as photographs and video clips, whilst on-line.

To the EU this could have two major benefits. First, there is an opportunity for increasing mutual understanding and tolerance of the values of others through SNS usage (Donath, 2008) leading to a more tolerant approach to those in other countries. Second, the contact may expand the number of social visits between countries in the region, adding to sustainable jobs and diverting travel away from non-EU regions. The use of barter systems (Içöz & Günlü 2002) would work well in a SNS context.

At the same time, one possible downside of SNS is the formation and growth of undesirable social networks, including those who are quasi-political hate groups who take pleasure in stigmatizing out groups and other countries within the EU. Similarly, there may be adverse reactions to prospective EU members, such as Turkey. While SNSs have a legitimate and effective role in organising peaceful political activity and participation, such activity may spill over into violent protest, as the December 2008 riots in Greece showed.

It is also possible that people who project themselves as vulnerable may be more subjected to bullying and harassment. Those who report being more exposed to these activities are likely to suffer a loss of self esteem (Lane et al. 2002). It is anticipated that people who belong to more networks and hence extend their contacts beyond their more immediate circle of family and friends are more likely

to be exposed to negative aspects of SNSs. Avoiding these negative consequences is consistent with EU objectives to eliminate, “Stigmatisation, discrimination and non-respect for the human rights ...” (EC 2005, p. 3) and to protect children (EC 2008c) using the Internet.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL NETWORKS

SNSs have the capacity to pass on word-of-mouth information about companies, products and brands (Bonhard & Sasse 2006). Online social networking differs from ordinary word-of-mouth studies, given its written, visual and published form. Some understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying participation in social networks is necessary. In particular, social networking makes opinions visible to others, which may encourage in-group and other exaggerated behaviours. Gender issues are likely to be very important, as the way males and females interact within and between groups is likely to be quite different. Facilitators of expressing extreme opinions online also needed to be studied. Issues of trust and commitment in and with others are also likely to be important.

On the negative side, SNS participation may lead to negative opinions, rumours and malicious opinions about brands, or the companies that own them, such as this found on a blog discussing the Italian brand Benetton:

Their ads are bright and colourful (some are bold and insulting too actually) which try and draw you in. I've been in this store and I am not impressed at all. The sales people treat you like dirt if you don't look like a mannequin and the prices are ridiculous. I can find all this stuff and more everywhere else and at much better prices! I hate the ads, I hate the store, and I hate anything else to do with this company. You couldn't pay me to shop here! (Chickadvisor 2008).

Benetton is one example of a European brand which has been subjected to false rumour and vilification. Although it probably illegal to post defamatory comment about brands, such behaviour is difficult to detect and to counter. Generation Y tends not to distinguish the credibility of user-created content, such as Wiki sites, from thoroughly prepared and professionally reviewed content. Thus EU brands are at danger from this activity, particularly from Generation Y who may gain social approval from their network for posting outrageous comments.

LIMITATIONS

The self-reporting measures used to collect the data make the results subject to individual differences. The patterns observed may only be limited to the study sample (Generation Y who frequently uses social network sites). While the selection of student members of Generation Y from our home institutions was

convenient, the approach may limit the generalisability of the research findings. Finally, this pilot study, like other survey research, is subject to common limitations such as non-response error, incomplete sampling frame, and many other factors.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Based on the findings of this pilot study, a larger-scale research project is being designed to extend and expand its scope. Thus, the relationships between social network convenience values (process) and the social network site attributes need to be further explored. While this initial study examined the attitudes of Generation Y to scope the domain, it would be interesting to explore how attitudes are related to social network site attributes in different usage contexts.

Future research needs to address the measurement issue in relation to the quality of the social network sites experience and to closely investigate Generation Y's experiences and the various factors that determine future social network sites patronage. Based on the qualitative findings of this study, a multi-dimensional scale could be developed to include salient factors, such as value, service, security, fun, convenience, and others. Future research may examine alternative actionable strategies to improve social network sites experience online. As the social network sites have become a permanent fixture in business portfolios of the future (McKinsey 2007, 2008), more research effort is needed to better understand the nature of the social network process and experience.

REFERENCES

Ashwin, S.M. and Hirst A., (2007) "So What do I do now ? Handling Qualitative Data", ECRM Conference Proceedings, Lisbon, Portugal.

Baker, V. (2008), "Travel: going local: Vicky Baker is travelling around Central and South America guided by the local people she meets on social networking websites. This week, she is in Bogota, Colombia", *The Guardian* 5 April, p. 18.

Beer, D. (2008), "Researching a confessional society", *International Journal of Market Research*, Vol. 50, No. 5, pp. 619-629,

Blitz, R. (2007). "Expedia plots its expansion through fresh destinations", *Financial Times*, 17 December, p. 23.

Bonhard, P. & Sasse, M.A. (2006), "'Knowing me, knowing you' – using profiles and social networking to improve recommender systems", *BT technology Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 84-98.

Boyd, d. m. & Ellison, N. B. (2008), "Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* Vol. 13, pp. 210-230.

Chickadvisor (2008). "United colours of Benetton – Ottawa". <http://www.chickadvisor.com/store/united-colours-of-benetton.html> . Accessed 10 December, 2008.

CouchSurfing. (2008), "Participate in Creating a Better World, One Couch At A Time", <http://www.couchsurfing.com/>. Accessed 9 November 2008.

Danneels, E. (2004), "Disruptive technologies reconsidered: A critique and research agenda", *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 246-258.

Dickerson, J. (2008), "Don't fear Twitter", *Nieman Reports*, Summer 2008, pp. 5-6.

Donath, J. (2008), "Signals in social supernets" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 13, pp. 221-251.

Ellison, N.B., Steinfield, C. & Lampe, C. (2007), "The benefits of Facebook "Friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social networks", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 12, pp. 1143-1168.

EC. Commission of the European Communities. (2008a). *Green Paper: Copyright in the Knowledge Economy*. Brussels. COM(2008) 466.

EC. Commission of the European Communities. (2008b). *Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion: Turning Territorial Diversity into Strength*. Brussels. COM(2008) 616.

EC. Commission of the European Communities. (2008c). *Towards a Safer Use of the Internet for Children in the EU – a Parents' Perspective: Analytical Report*. http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/eurobarometer/index_en.htm. Accessed 7 January, 2009.

EC. Commission of the European Communities. (2005). *Green Paper: Improving the mental health of the population. Towards a strategy on mental health for the European Union*. Brussels. COM(2005) 484.

Feinberg, T. & Robey, N. (2008), "Cyberbullying", *Principal Leadership*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 10-14.

Guo, R.M. (2008), "Stranger danger and the online social networks", *Berkeley Technology Law Journal*, Vol. 23, pp. 617-644.

- Harvey, M. (2008). "MySpace suicide trial – is lying in cyberspace a federal offence?" <http://timesonline.typepad.com/technology/2008/11/myspace-suicide.html> Accessed 11 December, 2008.
- Hill, R.A. & Dunbar, R.I.M. (2003), "Social network size in humans", *Human Nature*, Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 53-73.
- Howie, M. (2008), "Police target 200 children in 'Bebo' swoop", *The Scotsman*, June 3, p. 13.
- Hrabluk, L. (2008), "Secrets and shame: Identity theft hits home." www.canada.com/topics/technology/features/security/story.html?id=920130 Accessed 28 November 2008.
- Ibrahim, Y. (2008), "The new risk communities: Social networking sites and risk", *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 245-253.
- İçöz, O. & Günlü, E. (2002), "Barter system as a means to increase hospitality sales: A case of Turkey", *First Tourism Congress of Mediterranean Countries*, Akdeniz University, School of Tourism and Hotel Management, Conference Proceedings, pp. 375-381.
- Jones, K.C. (2008), "Greek riots, teen tribute flood messaging, video sites", *Information Week*, December 12. http://www.informationweek.com/news/Internet/social_network/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=212500157&cid=RSSfeed_IWK_Internet. Accessed 1 January 2009.
- Kline, R.B. (2005). *Principles and Practice of Structural Equation Modelling*, 2nd edition, New York, The Guilford Press.
- Lane, A. M., Jones, L. & Stevens, M. (2002), "Coping with Failure: The Effects of Self-Esteem and Coping on Changes in Self-Efficacy", *Journal of Sport Behavior*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 331-345.
- Liu, H. (2008), "Social network profiles as taste performances", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 13, pp. 252-275.
- Lucas, R.E., Le, K. & Dyrenforth, P.S. (2008), "Explaining the extraversion/positive affect relation: Sociability cannot account for extraverts' greater happiness", *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 76, No. 3, pp. 385-414.
- McKinsey (2007), "How businesses are using Web 2.0: A McKinsey Global Survey." *The McKinsey Quarterly*, September, No. 2048. http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/How_companies_are_marketing_online_A_McKinsey_Global_Survey_2048. Accessed 28 December 2008.

- McKinsey (2008), "Building the Web 2.0 Enterprise: McKinsey Global Survey Results" *The McKinsey Quarterly*, July, No. 2174.
www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Building_the_Web_20_Enterprise_McKinsey_Global_Survey_2174. Accessed 6 January 2009.
- Mellins, M. (2008), "The female vampire community and online social networks: Virtual celebrity and mini communities: Initial thoughts", *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 254-258.
- Pascu, C., Osimo, D., Turlea, G., Ulbrich, M., Punie, Y. & Burgelman, J. (2007), "Social computing: Implications for the EU innovation landscape", *Foresight*, Vol. 10, No.1, pp. 37-52.
- Patomäki, H. & Wight, C. (2000), "After postpositivism? The promises of critical realism", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 213-237.
- Prensky, M. (2001) "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part I.", *On the Horizon*, Vol. 9, No. 5, pp. 1, 3-6.
- Sekaran, U. (2003), *Research Methods for Business: A Skill Building Approach*. New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons. Fourth edition.
- Stopcyberbullying (2008), "Preventing cyberbullying",
<http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/prevention/index.html>. Accessed 10 December 2008.
- Sweeney, M. (2008), "Mums furious as Facebook removes breastfeeding photos", <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/dec/30/facebook-breastfeeding-ban>. Accessed 1 January 2009.
- Tapscott, D. (2008), *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*, New York, NY, McGraw Hill.
- Thelwall, M. (2008), "Social networks, gender and friending: An analysis of MySpace member profiles", *Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology*, Vol. 59, No. 8, pp. 1321-1330.
- Wasserman, S. & Faust, K. (1994), *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Ybarra, M.L. & Mitchell, K.J. (2007), "How risky are social networking sites? A comparison of places online where youth sexual solicitation and harassment occurs." *Pediatrics*, Vol. 121, No. 2, e350- e357.
- Zuckerberg, M. (2009) <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=51892367130>

