Talkin' Bout MySpace Generation: The Presence of the Young-Old In Virtual Networks

Hailee Gibbons and Lydia Manning, MGS, Miami University

Abstract

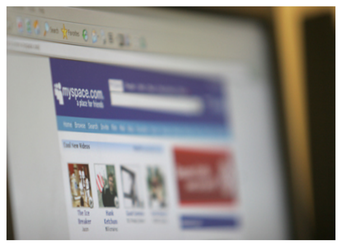
This poster illustrates our study exploring the presence of older people (defined at age 65 or above) involved in virtual communities such as MySpace. This network is typically perceived as youth-dominated; however, the number of adults on MySpace is increasing steadily. We explore reasons why older people create profiles and interact through MySpace, as well as determine what benefits it has for their social support networks, and find that many older adults on MySpace are using it to stay in touch with family and friends, but undoubtedly some are also hoping to meet new people. This study is significant to the field of gerontology because it investigates the use of technology by older adults for social purposes. As the baby boomers age, a greater percentage of older adults will be using the internet on a daily basis to maintain connections with family and friends and sustain intimacy at a distance as well as expand their social circles.

Computer Usage among Older Adults

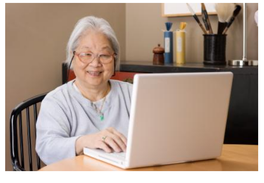
According to a study conducted by Microsoft, the average age of computer users is rising. "People who range from 55 to 65 years old today currently use computers in the workplace at a higher rate than people in their 60s and 70s did at earlier ages. As current 55 to 64 year-olds mature into their 60s and 70s, they will continue to use computers. Therefore, in 10 years, there will be 2.5 times as many adults who range from 65 to 74 years old using computers than there are today."

What is MySpace?

MySpace is a "social networking" web site. Currently, there are more than 200 social networking web sites, each with a different focus and a variety of features. Some of the most popular networking sites include Facebook, Twitter, Eons, and MySpace. The success of social networking sites can be largely attributed to changes in geographical proximity, advances in technology, and the human need for connection with others.



People use MySpace and other social networking sites for a variety of reasons, such as:
(1) Staying connected with real-world friends and acquaintances
(2) Expanding their circle of real-world and virtual friends and acquaintances
(3) Finding people with similar interests.
(4) Meeting romantic partners.
(5) Recreating the self through virtual means. (Pospisil, 2006)



MySpace is currently one of the largest social networking in the United States. While it is often considered to be geared toward youth, an analysis by comScore found that more than half of Myspace users are now age 35 or older. This demographic represents a continuous changing shift. Jack Flanagan, executive vice president of comScore Media Matrix, stated that, "Myspace.com has the broadest appeal across age ranges."

comScore's study showed that approximately 11% of Myspace's users are aged 55 or older.[3] The majority of older Myspace users are considered the "young-old," which means they fall within the age range of 65 to 74.

Methods

Data Collection
MySpace used as search engine and database for older adults 65 and older with public profiles.
Profiles downloaded and printed for the purpose of content analysis and coding.
N = 100
Search criteria:
- MySpace users 65 and over
- 50 women
- 50 men
- Most recent log-in (users who had logged into MySpace within the last month)

Data Analysis
Data were analyzed using a *collaborative inductive approach* and *content analysis* (systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Berelson, 1952; GAO, 1996; Krippendorff, 1980; and Weber, 1990)). During the initial coding process, each profile was explored in its entirety, noting perceptions of common themes that seemed to appear on multiple profiles, and cognizant of the search criteria. The researchers then met to discuss collectively these common themes and came to an agreement about initial codes, patterns, and themes of the profiles. This included looking for evidence that both supported and did not support working definitions of these sub-themes. Collectively, these sub-themes contribute to our understanding of the usage of MySpace in mid and later life.

Findings

Through content analysis, the following themes emerged:

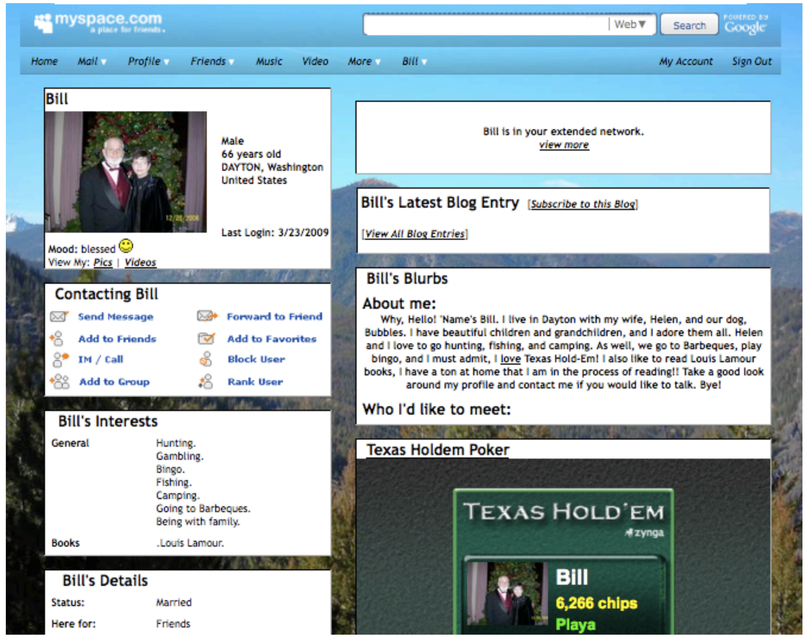
▪Sustaining and Maintaining Relationships
- Keeping in touch with family: People's profiles' friend and comment sections revealed that they use MySpace to communicate with family, particularly children and grandchildren, promoting intergenerational relationships.
- Keeping connected to friends: People are corresponding with acquaintances that are within the same cohort and/or have similar interests.

▪Expanding Social Networks
- Group Membership: Many people belong to MySpace "Groups," which is a virtual collection of people who choose to join a sub-community within MySpace, often based on a common interest, topic, or issue/situation. Groups are often composed of a variety of people from various locations, allowing people to meet and converse with others outside of their real-world social networks.

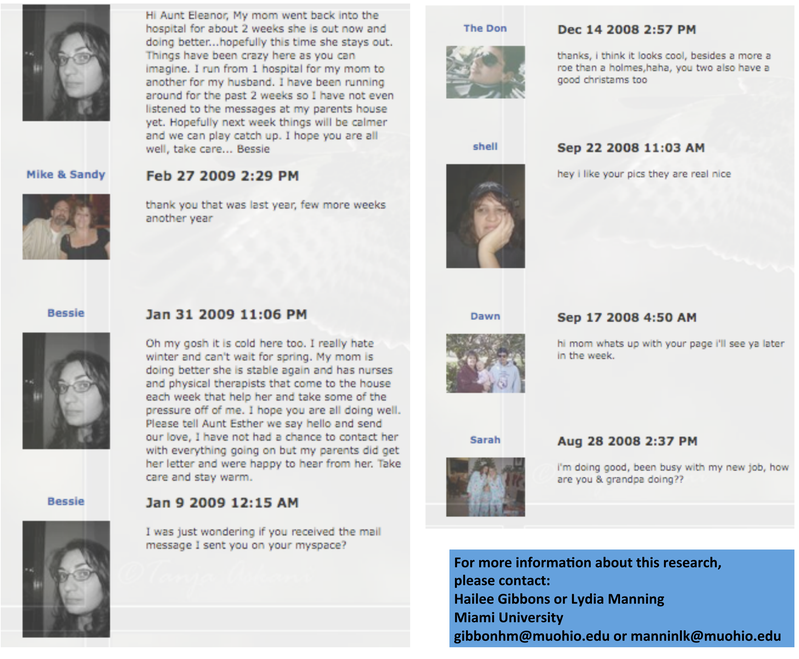
▪ Virtual Identity and Presence
- Public display of personal interests, aspects of person, and self-promotion: People use the "About Me," "Interests," and "Details" sections to represent their personalities and life situation. They also display pictures and graphics visually representing themselves or important aspects of their lives. Users often utilize these sections to portray themselves in a positive light.
- Energy investment regarding appearance of profile page: People use MySpace profile editors (such as pre-made HTML codes), comments, pictures, graphics, and songs to liven up their page and use it as an outlet for creative expression. These aspects are frequently updated.
- Gender differences: Men tended to embed games in their profiles. They also engaged in competitive displays of accomplishments, and many mentioned veteran status. Women's profiles contained more pictures and graphics, and made frequent mention of relationship/familial roles.

Sample Profiles

The following is an example of the "About Me" section on a MySpace Profile.



The following is an example of a "Comments" section on a MySpace Profile:



For more information about this research, please contact:
Hailee Gibbons or Lydia Manning
Miami University
gibbonhm@muohio.edu or manninlk@muohio.edu