



FEATURE



Race, Ethnicity, and Parent Education Predict Facebook Use

[By Wendy Leopold]

New research from Northwestern University finds that college students' choice of social networking sites — including Facebook, MySpace, and Xanga — is related to their race, ethnicity, and parents' education.

The findings challenge discourse about the democratic nature of online interaction and fly in the face of conventional wisdom suggesting that all college students communicate via social networking sites (SNS).

“That race, ethnicity and the education level of one’s parents can predict which social network sites a student selects suggests there’s less intermingling of users from varying backgrounds on these sites than previously believed,” says Eszter Hargittai, author of *Whose Space? Differences Among Users and Non-Users of Social Network Sites*.

That study, now in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, finds that Facebook, which was launched in 2004 by a Harvard undergraduate, is the social networking site of choice for white students, that Hispanic students prefer MySpace, and that Asian and Asian-American students are least likely to use MySpace.

While prodigious users of Facebook, Asian and Asian-American students were found to use the less popular social network sites Xanga and Friendster more than students from other ethnic groups. It found no statistically significant SNS choices for black students.

The study did find statistical relevance between parental schooling and SNS

preference. “There seems to be a positive relationship between years of parental schooling and Facebook and Xanga use and a negative one between years of parental education and MySpace use,” says Hargittai, assistant professor of communication studies and sociology at Northwestern University and faculty associate at the Institute for Policy Research.

Students whose parents have a college degree are significantly more likely to use Facebook than those whose parents have some college experience but no degree. MySpace users, on the other hand, are more likely to have parents with less than a high school education than those whose parents had some college experience.

Hargittai surveyed 1,060 freshmen from the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC). In 2006, U.S. News & World Report ranked UIC among the nation’s top 10 universities in regard to student ethnic diversity.

She also compared SNS usage by students living with their parents to that of students living on campus, with friends or on their own. Paradoxically, those living with their parents — the students who might be expected to benefit most from the online social opportunities that SNSs offer — were considerably less likely to use Facebook than their more socially connected peers.

That finding is inconsistent with ideas about the web’s potential to improve people’s lives by sidestepping physical constraints. “In this case, it is the already constrained students who miss out on the web’s potential benefit,” Hargittai said.

What’s more, it suggests that social networking sites actually may contribute to a two-tier social system if, as the study suggests, people who already are interacting less with others on campus are also doing less interacting online.

“In a two-tier system, some college students cultivate lots of networks and social capital, while others benefit considerably less from this important part of the college experience,” she said.

“Everyone points to that wonderful New Yorker cartoon of the dog at the computer telling a canine friend by his side that ‘on the Internet nobody knows you’re a dog,’” said Hargittai. “In reality, however, it appears that online actions and interactions should not be viewed as independent of one’s offline identity.”

Consistent with other research, the study found women, regardless of race and ethnicity, are more likely to engage in person-to-person online communication than men.



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The 2007 survey found Facebook the most popular SNS, with four of five students using it, and three of four reporting frequent use. Only one in 1,060 students claimed not to have

heard of any of the six social network sites included in the study.

MySpace was used by 54% of students, with

slightly less than 40% reporting frequent use. Ranked by popularity, Xanga, Friendster, Orkut, and Bebo each was used by less than one of 10 students.

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