2010

# Social networking sites in the UAE emerging market: in pursuit of knowledge about users

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** Social networking sites have become embedded in everyday life. Additionally, they have become a research focus indicated by the burgeoning literature. However, little is known about social networking site users in emerging markets. This paper focuses on this gap and begins to address the question: What is the reach of social networking sites in an east-meets-west emerging market?

**Design:** The information presented, herein, is the exploratory phase of an empirical study guided by three objectives that consider user demographics and the constructs of purpose and privacy: (1) to what extent do demographic factors influence the use of social networking sites, (2) to what extent does purpose play a role in use of social networking sites and (3) to what extent is privacy a concern when using social networking sites?

**Research Implications:** Two expert interviews and an extensive literature review support the eleven suggested propositions for the empirical stage to follow. Findings from the interviews acknowledge that little is known about users in the UAE emerging market, thus, creating a need for information relevant to marketers who use the medium to reach consumers and for additional academic research.

**Originality/Value:** The UAE setting provides knowledge about the influence of demographics such as age and nationality as well as including the cultural impact on purpose and privacy. The findings ultimately contribute to understanding users within the wider population of an emerging market which has been a slow-to-close gap in the literature.

**Key Words:** social networking; emerging markets; users; purpose; privacy

**Paper type:** Research paper

## Introduction

Social networking sites have been instrumental in shrinking the world more than other technological developments, i.e. aviation, have been able to accomplish. Initially developed for personal networking purposes, businesses have begun to tap in as a way to directly reach target markets. The impact of social networking sites extends from developing relationships and networks, personal and business, to becoming key tools used by business for marketing activities (Shih, 2009; van Zyl, 2009).

Research has only recently begun to focus on social networking sites with little attention, yet, on the way the phenomenon has reached into emerging markets. This study addresses this gap in knowledge with the research question: What is the reach of social networking sites in an east-meets-west emerging market? The setting is Dubai where approximately eighty percent of residents are expatriates from every corner of the globe

The remaining twenty percent are the indigenous people of the United Arab Emirates, affectionately called 'locals'.

In addition to the two constructs, purpose and privacy, the influence of demographics on the use of social networking sites guided the study through literature review and in-depth interviews. Three objectives provide the research framework: (1) to what extent do demographic factors influence the use of social networking sites, (2) to what extent does purpose play a role in use of social networking sites and (3) to what extent is privacy a concern when using social networking sites?  The literature review and early exploratory fieldwork identified the four sites that are most likely to be used by Dubai residents: Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter.  Propositions to empirically advance this study are suggested.

## Social networking sites, defined

A seminal social network sites definition used in the literature is from boyd and Ellison (2008, p 211) who describe such sites as '… 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. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.'  The distinction between network and networking, made by boyd and Ellison (2008), is that network intimates communication amongst parties whose tie to the greater discussant body is visible to all.  On the other hand, networking assumes that relationships with strangers, friends and acquaintances are pursued and accumulated into a network.  Arguably, the term network can be applied to sites whose attraction is primarily social such as Facebook.  Yet, where business intent drives membership then networking is likely the narrative. Some users may access a site like LinkedIn for this purpose.  Regardless, recent research notes that '… the membership of certain online communities mirrors people's social networks in their everyday lives …' (Hargittai, 2007, p293).  Whether network or networking, social engagement is likely to reflect the connections and associations, personal and business, that exist outside the virtual setting (boyd and Ellison, 2008; Ellison et al, 2007).  Network and networking are thus similarly related as to be used interchangeably.

## Social networking sites, evolution in progress

Technology progression has moved computers forward from the large and cumbersome mainframe setups, to the smaller and more powerful PC's, to the Internet evolution and ultimately to the social networking phenomenon that is prevalent today.  Hardware continues to transform and now, almost in lock-step, are the advances in communication that make it easier to develop and to maintain connections with others.   A by-product of social networking is acceptable familiarity that is grounded in informal relationships (Shih, 2009)

The social network evolution has its roots in the mainframe era of the 1970's.  An early precursor to the social network sites known today was the Bulletin Board System, or BBS (Nickson, 2009).  The reach into the user market was most often local, impeded by the need for access via telephone line modem.  Downloading was time intensive making long distance connections often cost prohibitive.  Additionally, users were early technology 'geeks' with shared interest and patience to learn, if not master, the online features.  BBS' popularity increased as more people embraced the new technology and as the internet, still in its infancy, became a mainstream medium.  Arguably, through the 1980's and 1990's, a cultural change was taking place and BBS was at the cusp for the shift from an anti-social to social world facilitated by online network communication possibilities.

About this time, CompuServe initiated public access for file sharing and news retrieval. However, more significantly to social network communication was the introduction of an e-mail facility that functioned outside the business domain. E-mail adoption soared amongst every day users and has never looked back.

Other early sites that were intended to connect people included Theglobe.com in 1994, Geocities, The WELL and Tripod. The introduction of Amazon.com and Yahoo.com followed soon after. Amazon's innovative capabilities allowed people to buy and sell items thus transforming the internet from a read-only tool to a Web 2.0 interactive tool. Computers were moving from businesses into homes by the mid-1990's. The time was right for the new media to spawn electronic communication in the form of social networking. Classmates.com, which continues today, found a niche market initiated by user's interest in reconnecting with friends and acquaintances from school-days past. SixDegrees.com was also one of the first but failed to sustain its growth and closed down completely in 2000 (boyd and Ellison, 2008; Nickson, 2009). However, according to the definition from boyd and Ellison (2008), SixDegrees.com was '… the first recognizable social network site …' (Ibid, 2007, p 214). Ryze.com, a site primarily designed to expand business networking, was introduced online in 2001. Ryze.com failed to achieve mass popularity but remains an accessible site with five hundred thousand members across two hundred countries (www.ryze.com).

More social networking sites launched or evolved from older formats as interest amongst users increased. Friendster.com, set-up in 2002, used the degrees of separation concept from SixDegrees.com, but reduced it to four. boyd and Ellison (2008) note that the site designers had a two-prong approach to the market: (1) it would be the social arm complement to the business oriented Ryze.com and (2) it would compete with the online dating site called Match.com. The Friendster.com mandate was to connect friends-of-friends. More than three million people had joined by the end of the first year (Nickson, 2009). By 2007, only six percent of Friendster's overall traffic was from the U.S. market while almost seventy-eight percent was from members in four countries: Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia (Goldberg, 2007).

LinkedIn was launched in 2003. It is now recognized as the social network site for business and continues to attract members adding to the current thirty million who have already joined (Nickson, 2009). LinkedIn serves a niche market and '… attempts to recreate a conference or trade show environment on the web' (Keenan and Shiri, 2009, p 446) within the one-dimensional two degrees of separation. A distinct feature is the pay version where job seekers can sign-on and receive notices about upcoming employment possibilities.

MySpace.com's launch in 2003 was virtually unnoticed until members began migrating from other sites such as Friendster.com. Differentiation to other sites was the facility for users to personalize pages and also, MySpace answered user demand by adding features regularly (boyd and Ellison, 2008). Membership numbers were pushed higher as teenagers entered the online social network scene using this site as the springboard. However, difficulties for MySpace ensued with safety concerns that young people were being enticed to sexual interactions with adult predators. MySpace continues to be popular despite gradually losing ground to Facebook (Nickson, 2009).

Facebook.com was founded by college students in 2004 as part of a Harvard University exercise. It was initially confined to university campuses (Nickson, 2009). In 2005, the site expanded to high school students provided that administrators approved the access and to companies through a recognized .com address (boyd and Ellison, 2008). In 2006, the site opened to the general public (Nickson, 2009). It is arguably the most widely used social networking site today largely as a result of its appeal to all age groups.

Twitter.com, released in 2006, uses a micro-blogging format to keep users up-to-date in one hundred and forty characters or less (Nickson, 2009). 'Twitter is quick, direct and multi-modal' (Keenan and Shiri, 2009, p 448) differentiated from other social network sites by the niche technology platform and simplicity for use. The site continues to gain popularity (Snyder, 2008). However, as the year 2010 begins, 'tweet' is listed on the 35th annual list from Lake Superior State University as a word that should be banished from vocabularies (www.lssu.edu).

**Figure 1: Timeline of social networking sites**
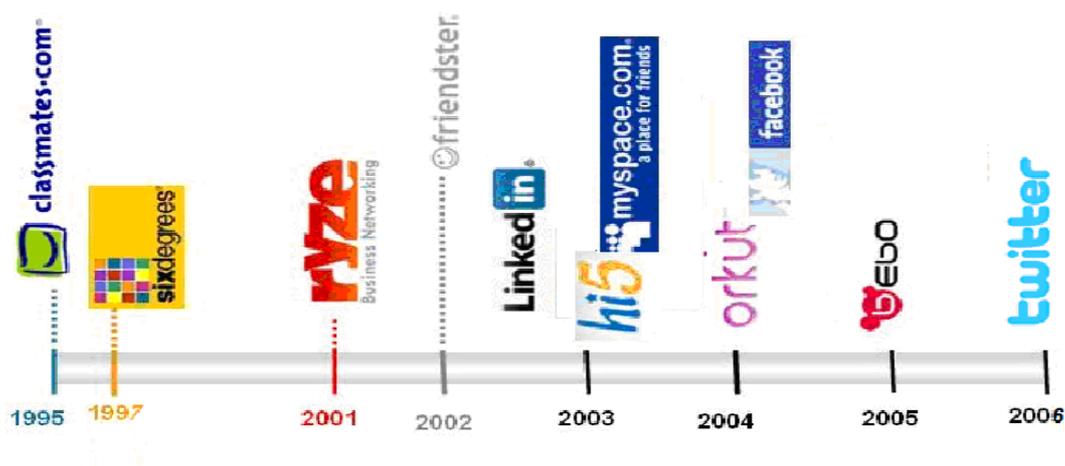


Source: abridged from boyd and Ellison (2008, p 212); adapted from
http://digital.leadnet.org/2008/02/social-networki.html

Certainly the evolution of social network sites includes more than those included in this discussion. However, the sites named herein are easily recognized with, arguably, LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter being the most common. The timeline that denotes when the sites were launched is illustrated in Figure 1, above. Notably, sites such as YouTube and Flickr are social media sites defined as '… Web sites that allow people to share UCC's' [user-created content] (Kim et al, 2010, p 217) and are outside the scope of this paper.

**United Arab Emirates, an emerging market**
United Arab Emirates is a small country bordering the Arabian (Persian) Gulf. It is made up of seven emirates, or city-states, of which those best known are the oil-rich Abu Dhabi and the investment-driven Dubai. Population statistics estimate approximately eight million people living in the country by early 2010 (www.uaeinteract.com; 2010) of which approximately eighty percent of residents are expatriates and twenty percent are the indigenous people called Nationals or the more affectionate term 'locals'. Despite recent negative financial reports about Dubai, the tiny country continues to attract attention as a key emerging market of the future (www.uaeinteract.com, 2009).

Recent research identified that the UAE ranked second in the world for membership in online social network sites at forty-six percent (Menon, 2008). It led other more developed countries such as Canada and the United States whose membership percentage was forty-six percent and forty percent, respectively (Ibid, 2008). These statistics are not surprising given than mobile phone penetration is estimated to be three hundred and fifty two percent (Staff Writer, 2010) and internet use had jumped to an estimated seventy-five percent of the

population by early 2010 ([www.internetworldstats.com](www.internetworldstats.com)).  Technology is deeply embedded in the country's consumer culture.

Of the four websites which are the focus in this paper, Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace and Twitter, it is Facebook and MySpace which bring unique cultural challenges.  These portals are more socially-driven than the business focused LinkedIn and the mini-blog Twitter.  In 2008, telecommunication officials announced that areas within the social portals would be blocked (Glass, 2008).  The reason given was that site elements which appeared to breach the country's cultural and religious values, such as online dating, would not be accessible to users.  However, despite the government's intervention, Facebook membership continues to grow (Shen and Khalifa, 2009) and companies in the country are increasingly using the platform as an important marketing tool (admin, 2010).

Over a span of only a few months in early 2009, Twitter membership was estimated to grow at a rate of three hundred percent (Menon, 2009) with an estimated fifteen thousand members signed on by early 2010 (Shabandri, 2010).  Notably, user demographics have shifted from internet professionals who had previously dominated to individuals now using Twitter for building virtual relationships.  Companies are also turning to Twitter as a marketing tool to reach potential customers (Lowe, 2010).

Recent developments within the Middle East region include two new sites, d1g.com and Faye3.com (Gale, 2007).  Developed with the Arab culture in mind, these sites seek to capitalize on the social network activities that attract users to such sites.  Facebook, however, remains an important site for social engagement as well as being considered as '… an organizing tool of choice for people in Arab countries attempting to promote freedom of speech, human rights, and democracy' (Kim et al, 2010, p 216).

**Users are the common denominator**
Research that focuses on social network sites is proving to be far more complex as scholarship is being influenced by '… diverse disciplinary and methodological traditions …' (boyd and Ellison, 2008, p 219).  Additionally, the technology platforms of social network sites are changing rapidly which is making it difficult for many but the most ardent social science researchers to keep pace (Kim et al, 2010).  As the number of studies increase, research typically focuses on the consumer or user as the unit of analysis.  Descriptive information has included identifying users' demographic characteristics (Hargittai, 2008; Shen and Khalifa, 2009) and psychographic interests (Liu, 2008).  Empirical studies have addressed various constructs including privacy (Brown et al, 2008; Young and Quan-Haase, 2009), trust (Sledgianowski and Kulviwat, 2009), and sociability (Hart et al, 2008; Lampe et al, 2008; Viswanath et al, 2009; Ferebee and Davis, 2009; Thelwall, 2009) or social capital (Java et al, 2007; Valenzuela et al, 2009).  From a business perspective, research has addressed the value-add of social network sites noting that number of users is one of the three significant drivers to revenue generation (Enders et al, 2008).

Regardless of approach, users are the common denominator.  A recurring theme is the interest that social networks hold for prospective users and the attraction that draws people to join.  Yet, despite the attention that is being focused on the social network phenomena, caution about subsequent findings is being recommended.  Hargittai (2008, p 277) explains '… that researchers should tread lightly when generalizing from studies about the use of one SNS to the use of another such service'. The suggestion is that random selection, one social network site over another, is not likely to guide the prospective user's decision to join. Rather, users attract other users (Hart et al, 2008; Java et al, 2007), which is the underlying premise of social network sites.  Thus, it is important to understand the characteristics that define and describe user segments including information about demographics and the extent to which purpose and previous experience with the sites is likely to influence selection.

Generalization is also cautioned because studies typically focus on only users and exclude non-users (Hargittai, 2008). The risk here is that an important population segment may be excluded which may influence the interpretation of results.

**Methodology**

The design for this study is exploratory. Initial research focused on the need to understand which social networking sites are most prominent and attract the most attention from consumers. The acceptance across cyberspace, generally, and Dubai and the United Arab Emirates, specifically, was considered. Undertaking the literature review identified the extent that research about the social networking phenomena has been recorded in the academic domain. The research question was narrowed to 'what is the reach of social networking sites in an east-meets-west emerging market?

Two in-depth interviews were conducted with respondents who use social networking sites to reach potential customers in the marketplace. One interviewee represented the Dubai branch of an international company that has established a strategic alliance with Facebook (discussed as interview 1). This organization measures the attention received by various advertisements on the site for information about success rates and brand recognition results. The second interview was conducted with a marketing representative of an education institution that is known for its reliance on non-traditional advertising activities to reach and recruit students (discussed as interview 2).

The first interview provided key knowledge about the marketplace for social networking sites, generally, while the second interview gave insight into the importance that age group demographics may hold for companies using the social networking sites to reach their target markets. Both interviews were recorded and transcribed for later review. Both interviews were attended by two of the three researchers on this project. Questions to both respondents included their views about the product life cycle stage of social networking and the challenges that social networking sites present in the marketplace. The use of such sites for business purposes as a means to reach target markets as well as the users' engagement with the sites were explored in both interviews.

**Findings**

*Interview 1:*

The respondent's expert knowledge provided valuable insight into the issues that appear to be influencing the sites' penetration and adoption in the Dubai, United Arab Emirates and larger GCC marketplace.

This respondent felt that social networking sites in the Dubai marketplace are in the growth stage of the product life cycle, reasoning that the high percentage of young people in the population would sustain membership levels as upcoming age groups set up accounts. Another key factor for social networking sites' success in the Middle East, according to the respondent, is the conservative culture of the region, especially Saudi Arabia. The sites make it easy for people, particularly females, to maintain communication and keep in touch with others of the same or opposite gender. However, in settings where western cultures have moderated conservatism, such as in Dubai, the need for social networking sites as an intermediary mechanism may not be as relevant. The respondent noted "there is only so much you can do through technology and that personal touch becomes less and less. You believe you're in touch when you see people's status online but this is not really being in touch. It goes back to surface level relationships versus deep relationships".

When asked the response amongst demographic groups towards advertisements posted on social network sites, the interviewee indicated that few official studies currently exists. However, culture and economy are important considerations when addressing usage patterns

which suggest that it may be possible to extract demographic information, such as nationality, income, and education. The respondent holds the view that "personal attributes definitely drive people into using Facebook" where they either like Facebook and use it regularly or do not like it and stay away from it. The respondent is not a Facebook member saying that 'I'd rather have deep relationships with the people I know rather than surface level relationships with different people'. This comment suggests that expectations about relationship quality rather than quantity may be a factor that attracts site membership and participation.

*Interview 2:*

This interview narrowed the research focus to the use of social networking sites to target and recruit students within the education sector. The respondent's expert knowledge was derived from key involvement with marketing activities that reached from Dubai, across the United Arab Emirates, to the larger GCC and Sub-continent (India, Pakistan) and to West Asia and Eastern Europe countries.

This respondent felt that social networking sites in the region had reached a plateau stage and that the hype would wear-off to be replaced by another phenomenon. Currently, however, Facebook was felt to be the market leader followed by LinkedIn and Twitter. This respondent noted that in the education sector, it is increasingly possible to distinguish and to target specific consumer segments using each site. For example, undergraduates are more likely to be reached through advertisements on Facebook whereas LinkedIn is the preferred site for potential graduate students. Regarding nationality differences, those of Pakistani descent appear to be more responsive, than do others, to advertisements on Facebook.

As a business using social networking sites to target potential customers, this respondent noted that some challenges exist. For example, a business must determine which cost format, charge per click or per impression, provides the best outcome measurement of advertisement success. LinkedIn typically charges per impression which makes it more expensive to advertise on the site. However, a greater challenge is the number of student groups that appear on Facebook at any given time. This fragments the market into ambiguous segments because groups are easily set-up. The respondent explained "It is very difficult to control what goes on in these groups since students can post up to anything online" adding that being able to control the content and message is unrealistic. The risk is that the ad-hoc group's informal writings are not consistent with the formal message that the education institution seeks to convey. Additionally, expressing dissatisfaction through the sites does not give administrators the opportunity to correct problems or concerns.

When asked about personal, or individuals', use of social networking sites, the respondent's view was that "now everyone is using them" reasoning that the sites appeal to all age groups as a means to keep in touch with family, friends and colleagues. This respondent has accounts with Facebook and LinkedIn but tends to use Facebook for personal relationships and the latter for business networking. From a personal perspective, this respondent considered that greater care should be taken by individual users to prevent private information from entering the public domain.

*Interview consensus: four key sites*

Facebook is the more popular and effective social networking website amongst student age groups according to interview 2 respondent. LinkedIn ranked second. Overall, Facebook's broad reach into the target market segments has greater promotion power for advertisements than MySpace and Twitter. Interview 1 respondent considers Facebook to be the favorite suggesting that time spent online is a key determinant; users might log-on for hours compared to only minutes spent on Twitter. Yet, Twitter is viewed as one of the top four sites currently attracting users along with Facebook, LinkedIn and MySpace. Generally, the respondents

agreed that marketers must engage with target markets through online mediums in future if they are to keep pace with consumers' activities. To varying degrees they felt that print media was losing effectiveness in some settings.

**Propositions for future research**

Three objectives developed from the research question. After conducting and analyzing the interviews, propositions were written to guide the study's continued research activities. The objectives and propositions, with explanations, follow.

*RO1: to what extent do demographic factors influence the use of social networking sites?*

Information supported by the interviewees' views suggests that the social networking sites potentially reach different demographics. Within the literature many studies have relied on tertiary level students as the empirical respondents, thus noting the findings according to a general age group such as 18 to 19 year olds (Hargittai, 2008), between 18 and 30 years (Sledgianowski and Kulviwat, 2009), those in undergraduate study years (Lampe et al, 2008) and 17 to 25 years (Young and Quan-Haase, 2009). Gender response to the social networking sites is less clear (Shen and Khalifa, 2009). Findings within the Valenzuela et al (2009, p 894) study note that an unexpected contribution is '… the demographic portrayal of Facebook users'. The findings from student respondents, age 18 to 29 years, refute the '… popular myth is that Facebook is dominated by idle, young, female, upper-middle class college undergraduates' (Ibid, p 894). A seminal study from Pfeil et al (2009), which focused on age and use, compared teenagers with a 60+ years group. Notably, the findings suggest that teenagers' network includes others in a range of +/- 2 years whereas the 60 and over age had a much more diverse friend network. Additionally, in practice social networking sites target different age groups and users migrate from one site to another they age and their interests change. For example, MySpace attracts a younger age demographic, typically the youth and teenage population. Upon leaving school, these users are likely to shift to LinkedIn when entering the workplace (Shih, 2009).

Thus, the following two propositions address age and gender noting the need for more research where respondents cross a wider age range, from young to older, as a means of understanding the influence of demographic factors on the use of social networking sites.

P1: Age influences the pattern of behaviour/use of social networking sites;

P2: Gender influences the pattern of behaviour/use of social networking sites;

The interview respondents share similar views about nationality as a demographic variable to segment users. In the first interview, the respondent intuitively felt that specific nationality groups are likely to respond differently towards social networking sites but admitted that empirical studies are needed to support the assumption. However, the respondent of interview 2 noted that the education institution had found that users from the Asian subcontinent, particularly those of Pakistan descent, respond more to the university's advertisements on the sites than do other nationalities. Race and ethnicity are among the demographic variables in the Hargittai (2008) study where 18-19 year old college students are the respondents. Although the study is limited to the campus of a large mid-western university in the US, the findings identify that '… it is important to note that in this sample, users from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are not equally drawn to the various social network sites' (Ibid, p 291). In practice, users have swayed social networking sites to different cultures and demographics. For example, Friendster and Hi5 are more common in countries where English is not the first language. A country's regulatory actions may have blocked a site from being used within its borders such as the move made by UAE towards Orkut (Bardsley, 2007).

Thus, the following two propositions address nationality as a demographic variable important to understanding social networking site preference and use. The Dubai population is comprised of many nationalities which facilitates a diverse sample.

P3: Site preference, i.e. which of the four named sites, can be identified from users' nationality;

P4: The likelihood to spend time on social networking sites can be identified from users' nationality;

*RO2:       to what extent does purpose play a role in use of social networking sites?*

The purpose for which users engage with social networking sites remains a topic of interest for academics as well as practitioners. The respondents to the two interviews acknowledge the need for businesses to establish a virtual presence. Both interviewees note the marketplace value of tapping into the networking and creating a virtual setting where users can acquire information about products or services which may hold interest for them. In some instances, the contact with a target market was accomplished through banner advertisements whereas interviewee 2 acknowledged that the education institution maintains its own Facebook page and will converse with current and prospective students through the portal. Regarding the social aspect of these online communities, the respondent for interview 1 expressed the view that "'I am already connected to the people I need to be connected to. We already have groups of friends and I would not like to share information to people I don't know. I'd rather have deep relationships with the people I know rather than surface level relationships with different people'. This perspective suggests that joining and/or using social network sites is not a decision taken lightly and that purpose may be an important factor to consider.

The term 'social networking' suggests that such sites facilitate social interaction and social engagement. There is general agreement in the literature that social capital is a derivative of joining or belonging to an online social networking community (Ellison et al, 2007; Tong et al, 2008; Zywica and James, 2008; Pempek et al, 2009; Valenzuela et al, 2009). The caveat, however, is that interaction intensity is not necessarily the same across the temporal frame of any relationship or association (Subrahmanyam et al, 2008). Rather, '… over time social links can grow stronger or weaker' (Viswanath et al, 2009, p 37). Sledgianowski and Kulviwat (2009, p 75) suggest that users look for playfulness wherein 'Perceived playfulness is 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'. Generally, then, a common theme is that joining and using social networking sites '… foster social interaction in a virtual environment' (Pempek et al, 2009, p 228). Yet the purpose of interaction and the extent to which interaction activities have become inculcated into daily routines generally remains a knowledge gap requiring further study (Ibid, 2009). According to the Shen and Khalifa (2009) study set in the UAE, significant differences towards Facebook activities are apparent amongst male and female university-age students. The research grouped eleven pursuits into four needs' categories: information, social, entertainment and development. Notably, the findings indicated greater activity amongst females than males.

Beyond the social aspect, networking sites are being used to provide information and increase awareness about issues. For example, swine flu was the most talked about topic on almost every social networking site. According to Nielsen's statistics in the US, swine flu was the 'trending topic' found on Twitter, and it helped educate users about this terrible virus (Nielsen Wire, April 27th, 2009). Additionally, Michael Jackson's death attracted much discussion online (Nielsen Wire, July 8th, 2009). Increasingly, social networking sites are becoming portals for information beyond engagement in basic interaction activities.

Thus, the following three propositions address purpose from the perspective of (a) social interaction such as staying in touch or making new friends, (b) the temporal nature where time is saved and/or spent, and (c) information use either providing or seeking.

P5: Social networking sites are used for networking – to stay in touch (i.e. with friends, family, business associates), to make new friends and acquaintances (i.e., social and business)

P6: Social networking sites have a key time feature – to save time (i.e., for other activities) or to spend time (i.e., self-entertainment activities)

P7: Social networking sites are used for information – providing and seeking

*RO3:        to what extent is privacy a concern when using social networking sites?*

The decision by a user to join a social networking site involves the understanding that '… communication is facilitated through information posted in the profile (i.e., the user's personal page), which often includes a photograph of the member and personal information describing his or her interests, both of which provide information about one's identity' (Pempek et al, 2009, p 228).  During the discussion with the respective interviewees, both suggested the need for people to manage the profile content and extended caution given that words, pictures, videos, or anything recorded on a member's personal page risks exposure in the public domain.   Privacy has been a topic of interest for many studies (Buchanan et al, 2007; Lewis et al, 2008; Debatin et al, 2009; Fogel and Nehmad, 2009; Young and Quan-Haase, 2009).   For example, Fogel and Nehmad (2008) found that women have greater concerns about privacy than men.  The Young and Quant-Haase (2009) study discovered that students using Facebook had opted for various strategies such as sending personal emails rather than doing wall postings for privacy protection.  These students also admitted to blocking users, deleting messages and removing identification from pictures and images.  Lewis et al (2008, p 83) address privacy as '… simply another taste, in keeping with the broader menu of cultural preferences that characterizes an individual'.  Liu (2008) notes that users post their interests, such as music, fitness or reading, to their profile which is intended to inform other users about taste preferences.  Thus, according to Lewis et al (2008) the setting selected for privacy may be established in a similar context as recording taste preferences within a personal profile.   Arguably, then, privacy has contradictory elements which require further study.  In practice, the ability to maintain the preferred degree of private persona is constantly being challenged within virtual communities.  The United Arab Emirates is no exception, despite the regulations on internet and telecommunications activities within the country.  A recent report from Dubai Police noted the increasing incident reports about extortion, threats and defamation related to social networking sites (McArthur, 2010)

Thus, the following three propositions address privacy according to the degree of concern that users may or may not have towards the protection of their personal data – initially when joining and/or throughout the membership tenure.

P8: Privacy infractions are a concern when publishing personal information on social networking sites

P9: Security of information is a concern when publishing personal data on social networking sites

P10: Concern for personal image is an issue when publishing material on social networking sites

P11: Personal information that is published on social networking sites is reviewed and managed on a regular basis.

**Conclusion**

Although the literature about social networks and social networking is growing rapidly, there is still much to be learned about the spread of the phenomenon into emerging markets. In a setting such as the United Arab Emirates, where east-meets-west geographically, economically, and culturally, understanding the users who are the common denominator is enmeshed in complexities. However, unraveling the characteristics begins with the basics which are framed in the three objectives that guide this paper: (1) to what extent do demographic factors influence the use of social networking sites, (2) to what extent does purpose play a role in use of social networking sites and (3) to what extent is privacy a concern when using social networking sites?

The literature review and the two expert interviews conducted for this study support the relevance of demographics and the purpose and privacy constructs. Notably, many studies in the literature have focused on students as the respondents but few have included non-student age groups which is the case with this research. Understanding users within the wider population, particularly in an emerging market, is a gap in the literature that has been slow to close. With these issues in mind, eleven propositions have been suggested for advancing the research into an empirical stage, thus, obtaining findings through qualitative, i.e., focus groups, and quantitative, i.e., surveys, data collection. The research question which underpins this early exploratory stage is expected to apply to the descriptive phase and likely to remain as: 'What is the reach of social networking sites in an east-meets-west emerging market?

Two issues have been identified as caveats given the exploratory nature of this study. First, two expert interviews provide information about current social networking practice. Although both were in-depth and detailed, it will be important to conduct other interviews in the second phase of the study as adoption and patterns of use change quickly. Second, the study context remains quite broad and generalizing to the larger population may present difficulties. This may require that the future focus is narrowed to a more defined population and sample selection. Lastly, the study thus far makes an important contribution to the literature through the recognition that future research possibilities exist for understanding users and social networking practice in emerging markets.

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