

The Social Aspects of the Web-Based Social Network Sites: The Greek Case

Yiannis Koumpouros, Panagiotis Kalagiakos, Anastasia Kadda

Abstract— *The current research identifies the social implications and dimensions of the several web-based social networking sites. It targets the multiple aspects behind the need for socializing using the Internet, while revealing the results of such kind of socialization in Greece. The paper examines the statistics of the Greek population by focusing on eight major axis: membership issues, socializing, cross-cultural communication, transmission of social messages, commercial and business perspective, information technology awareness, general issues, users' profiles. It concludes with the need for socializing through such services, the profile of the Greek users, the major reasons for having net-friends, connection statistics between different social layers, as well as the use of web social networks for business purposes.*

Index Terms— *Social Network Sites, Socialization, Social Capital.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Through social interaction everyone has the opportunity to exchange ideas, viewpoints, experiences and become wiser. According to Wenger [1] people wish to accede to a community for the sake of social acceptance, self-esteem, widening of interests, but the main objective is the learning and knowledge, the “know what” and “know how”. Nowadays, as we live in the digital era and technology has made strides in digital systems, communications, computers and the internet, being wired is possible for almost everyone [2]. At that point Social Network Sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Twitter, myspace, Hi5, LinkedIn, etc, which appeared have presented massive spread in all over the world. The most known and widespread web-based social network among all is Facebook; with more than 835 million members one could support the idea that almost anyone has an account on Facebook. It is worth mention the fact that there are many persons who have not had any “contact” with computers and they established one using Facebook [3].

II. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

This has been a quantitative research with a population sample consisting of 1367 persons. Data got collected by questionnaires published online as well as promoted and pushed to people using social networks. Simultaneously, we gave the same questionnaires to be answered by our university students and their families and friends, as well as, in printed form, to the general public.

The questionnaires were anonymous and they were consisted of 67 questions either with open answers or using multiple choices.

The questions were selected according to the purpose and the individual objectives of the research. The first group of questions concerned the membership of individuals in SNSs, the second group concerned the reasons of membership in SNSs, the third group had to do with usage frequency, the fourth group examined the social characteristics of social networks such as socializing, transmission of social messages and public relations, the fifth group dealt with cross-cultural communication issues, the sixth with commercial and business aspects of social networking, the seventh with issues related to information technology (IT), and the last one with more general issues. The process of the research longed for almost seven months and the results were collected and processed appropriately in order to give us a clear view of the situation on the usage of web-based social networks and their societal dimensions. A number of 1300 answers were collected, while the target group was of all ages, gender, educational level, etc.

Eight major categories were distinguished as measurement axis in order to identify the desired data and combine them to more societal aspects, such as membership issues, socializing, cross-culture communication, transmission of social messages, commercial and business perspectives, information technology awareness, general issues, and users profile.

III. RESULTS

A. 1st Measurement Axis: Membership Issues

According to the collected data, the biggest percentage (85 per cent) of the interviewees remained an account in Facebook while 38 per cent of them had an extra one in another SNS (19 per cent of them in LinkedIn, 26 per cent in Twitter, 16 per cent in Hi5, 16 per cent in MySpace, 23 per cent in other SNSs). A not negligible percentage (almost one third) answered that being a member in a web-based social network was a societal need. Additionally, most of them (almost 40 per cent) update their profile and observe their friends profile in a constant base. Another interesting characteristic is that 52 per cent of them log-in to the network every day, 36 per cent log whenever this is possible (when an internet connection exists) and almost one third of them stay connected for more than 60 min. The point of view (parameters taken into consideration) of the members when they ask from someone to become a net-friend is also another interesting aspect (figure 1). The answers given revealed that the first thing that someone looks for another user is his/her photos.

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Secondly, his/her motto for life, and follows an interesting job, interesting hobbies, and other. As far as the role of gender in approaching individuals via social networks is concerned, the research conducted reveals that this characteristic is not very important for the majority (69.8 per cent) of the interviewees. Instead of this, only 23.8 per cent approach the opposite gender and a very small percentage (6.3 per cent) approach the same gender.

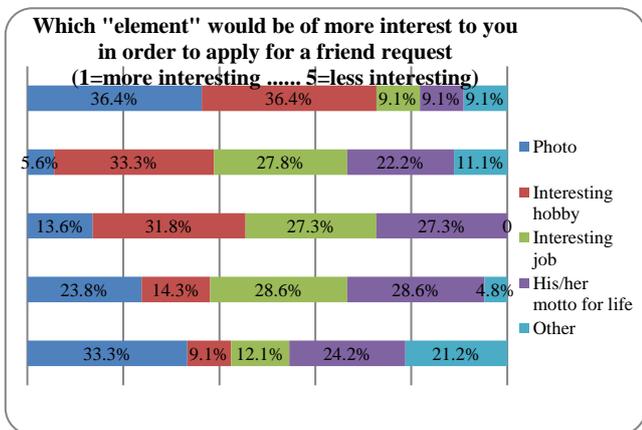


Figure1: Membership Issues

B. 2nd Measurement Axis: Socializing

The first aspect monitored in this axis was the importance of net-friends. The results are revealing that a big portion of users (41.2 per cent) have a big number of net-friends (more than 201), while an even bigger percentage of them (50 per cent) considered important to increase this number (figure 2).

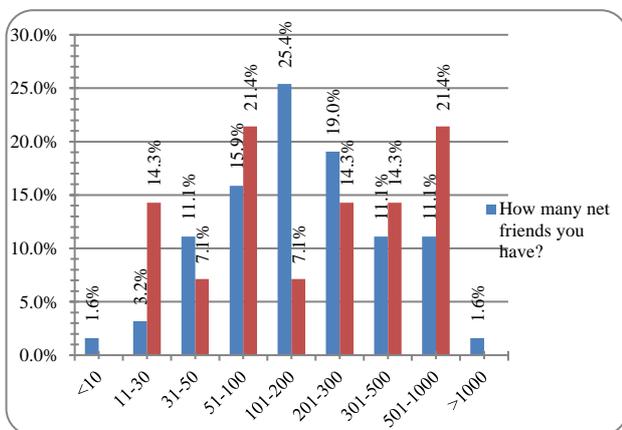


Figure 2: Socializing

More specifically, the most common way of communication between users seems to be through chatting (41.9 per cent). A significant percentage of users (32.3 per cent) also use the wall, while 14.5 per cent of them communicate with other people with photos and 9.7 per cent with other ways of communication (i.e. personal/private messages). A small number of users (1.6 per cent) prefer commenting on uploaded videos. Furthermore, most of the users (82.3 per cent) express themselves like in reality (in the same way, i.e. using the same phrases, dialect, etc) when communicating with someone else through the web platform and only 17.7 per cent of them express more friendly or more “freely”.

More than a half of the interviewees (54.7 per cent) believe that social networks don’t help their socialization and this opinion is further verified by the next question in which most of them (54.1 per cent) replied that they have

not make any new friends via the social networks that otherwise would not ever know. Among the characteristics that users looked for in the profile of an individual prior applying for friendship it seems that photos (49 per cent) and interests (18 per cent) are prevailing, followed by other. A not negligible percentage (21 per cent), under the “other” category, answered that in order to send a friend request he/she has to know this person, and 4.8 per cent of them looked for common friends. Another interesting issue is the connection of the virtual to the real world where almost half of the interviewees had a physical face-to-face communication with no more than 10 per cent of their net-friends. Furthermore, 75 per cent of them answered that they tried to arrange a real meeting with less than 10 per cent of their net-friends with no success. It is also noticeable the fact that 13.8 per cent of the users achieved to meet in real life more than 90 per cent of their net-friends. The following figure (fig. 3) depicts the percentage of net-friends that each category of users would like to meet in real life. The categories of the users (the label at the right hand side of the figure) are defined according to the percentage of net-friends they had already a face-to face meeting.

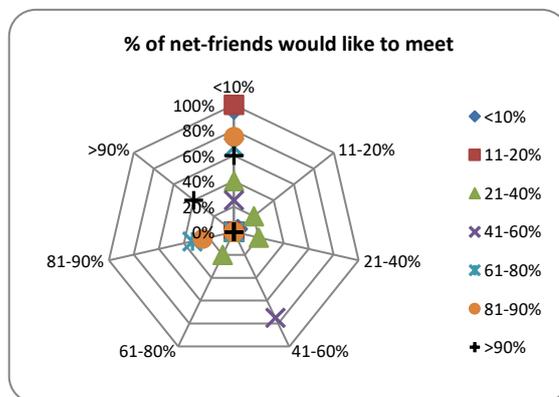


Figure 3: Percentage of net-friends to meet

Furthermore, SNSs are top priority when natural coexistence is not feasible, while 9 per cent prefer using the telephone, 10 per cent email, another 10 per cent skype, and 13 per cent some other way. Another issue under this axis is related to the need of people to become more popular or to widen their cycle of contacts. More specifically, most of the users (86.2 per cent) are in favor to be reconnected with individuals with whom they had lost contact for a long time and 38.7 per cent of them use the SNSs to approach and connect with individuals with common interests.

C. 3rd Measurement Axis: Cross-cultural communication

According to the results depicted in this axis, a great number of SNS users (87.1 per cent) make friends from different social layers expressing in majority (64.3 per cent) how much significant is for them the communication with individuals from other social layers. Another important finding was the fact that most of the users (68.3 per cent) did not have or even tried to have net-friends from other countries or different cultures.

D. 4th Measurement Axis: Transmission of Social Messages

The current axis relates to the transmission of “social messages” or the motivation of the members using the web-based social networks on “sensitive” social. The results reveal that a significant percentage of social network members (76.2 per cent) would be motivated via a SNS in order to provide assistance in case of an emergency, 68.9 per cent of them use or share services of social content via the SNSs, while 78.1 per cent of the users participate in teams with same ideologies or interests. On the other hand, the importance of being a member of the above mentioned teams (with the same ideology) is little for the majority of the members (57.4 per cent), medium for others (24.31 per cent), a lot for 16.7 per cent of them, and very much important for an extremely low percentage (1.9 per cent).

E. 5th Measurement Axis: Commercial and Business Perspective

Considering the viewpoint of the interviewees regarding their potential contribution in commercial and business related issues using the web-based SNSs, six are the main findings:

- (1) While a great number (60.3 per cent) of social network members would use the SNSs to market product or services, almost none of them would use it for e-shopping (95.2 per cent) or for facilitating his/her job (77.8 per cent).
- (2) Social network members have a little interest (29 per cent) to comment on certain events (parties, concerts, etc) they participate, 25.8 per cent of them have a medium interest on it, while only 12.9 per cent and 3.29 per cent have a lot and very much interest accordingly, and 19.4 per cent of them are not interested at all. A very small percent (9.7 per cent) would be interested in commenting only if the event was real interesting to them.
- (3) Most of the social network members (28.6 per cent) have a little or no interest to report in the social network their experience in regard to certain restaurants, clubs, etc, 27 per cent of them have a medium interest, 6.3 per cent share this experience only if it is interesting to them, while very small percentages (7.9 per cent and 1.6 per cent) have a lot or very much interest on it.
- (4) The majority of social network members (27 per cent) have a little or no interest to report in the social network their experience with regard to certain products or services, 17.5 per cent have a medium interest on this, 15.9 per cent report their experience only if it is of interest to them and just a few of them (11.1 per cent and 1.6 per cent) are interested a lot or very much.
- (5) Almost half of the interviewees (49.2 per cent) would not participate in competitions with rewards in the SNSs, while only 22.2 per cent of them would participate depending on the prize. A very small percentage (9.5 per cent) would participate only if they knew that the competitions were “crystal clear”.
- (6) Most of social network members (61.3 per cent) would not comment, if asked, on certain products, services, etc, and only a few (17.7 per cent) would comment only if they had own “profit”.

F. 6th Measurement Axis: Information Technology Awareness

The questions under this axis were related to the knowledge of the users in terms of information technology. According to the answers collected, 58.7 per cent of the sample questioned had read the terms of privacy and security of the used SNS, while 1.6 per cent could not understand the question. 69.4 per cent of the interviewees would be annoyed if knowing that their sent or uploaded data would be used for targeted advertisements or statistical purposes. A great percentage (48.5 per cent) is aware about emoticons and knows how to create them using shortcuts, while 1.5 per cent don't understand the question and 11.8 per cent don't know what emoticons are about. 53.6 per cent cannot understand the commonly used abbreviations (ASAP, lol, etc), while 1.4 per cent could not even understand the question.

G. 7th Measurement Axis: General Issues

According to interviewees, the reasons people use SNSs are the following:

- to attract the opposite gender for the majority of users (59.4 per cent);
- to find new friends (20.3 per cent of users);
- to find people with common interest (12.5 per cent of users), and
- for other reasons (7.8 per cent of users).

Among the characteristics that social network members don't like in the used SNSs are:

- the fake way of communication (23 per cent);
- the fear that some net-friends' profile may be fake (23 per cent);
- the fact that they cannot see the facial expressions during communication (20.6 per cent);
- the isolation caused using this way of communication (19.8 per cent);
- the fact that users do not achieve to meet in real life their net-friends (6.3 per cent);
- the fear that if someone (i.e. employer) find that they maintain an account may causing troubles to them (4 per cent).

On the other hand, the positive effects of SNSs are the following:

- they offer to someone the possibility to find old friends (32 per cent);
- they provide an easy way of communication (31.1 per cent);
- their “nature”, as being behind a computer, drive the users to be expressed more freely (16.5 per cent);
- they give the chance for someone to be known (7.8 per cent);
- they offer a unique opportunity to know people and make “friends” without problems (4.9 per cent), and
- they give the opportunity to the members to reveal and show their real personality/character (3.9 per cent).

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I. 8th Measurement Axis: Users' Profile

As far as the main characteristics of the interviewees are concerned, the gender's distribution was almost balanced (47 per cent male instead of 52.9 per cent female). Furthermore, it is found that most of social network users (42.9 per cent) spend much time in the internet (more than three hours per day), while only a few of them (11.4 per cent) spend 0-10min daily in the internet (figure 4). Moreover, 52 per cent of the users log-in daily, 12 per cent every two days. The preferred time for logging-in is at night (24 per cent) or in the afternoon or noon (10.7 per cent for each option), or whenever they find an internet access point (36 per cent).

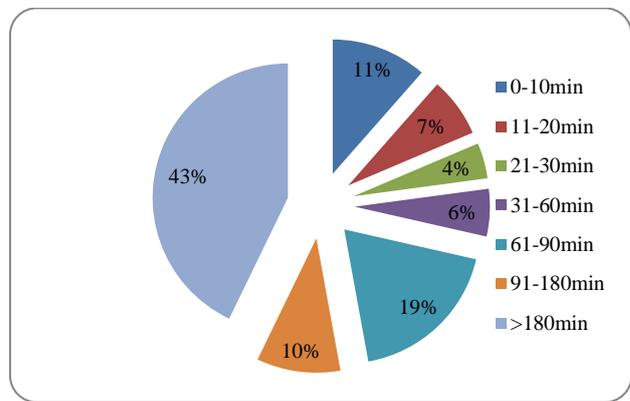


Figure 4: Users' Profile

Half of social network members are in the age group of 18-25 years old, only 15.7 per cent are younger, 11.4 per cent of them are between 26-30 years old and 14.3 per cent are between 31-40 years old. Ages over the 40s count for a small percentage of users (1.4 per cent-2.9 per cent).

A big part of social network users (40 per cent) are found to be undergraduate students, 15.7 per cent have obtained a postgraduate degree or they are postgraduate students, 14.3 per cent are graduate students, 10 per cent have finished the lyceum and 2.9 per cent-7.1 per cent have finished elementary and secondary education.

Finally, according to our sample, a percentage of 32.8 per cent of social network members didn't work at that time and were looking for a job, 13.4 per cent of them earned 300 euros per month, 10.4 per cent earned 301-800 euros, 4.5 per cent earned 800-1000 euros, 7.5 per cent earned 1,000-1,500 euros and a very small percentage (3 per cent-4 per cent) had a monthly wage of 1,500-3,000 euros.

IV. DISCUSSION-CONCLUSION

Since their introduction, Social Network Sites (SNSs) and especially Facebook have attracted millions of users in all over the world, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices. The current research reveals that SNSs is a social phenomenon that in our days is widely common in our country as well. More specifically, among Social Network Sites, Facebook is in the first choice for a great number of Greek users considering it as a clear current societal need. Facebook usage is daily and for a long time. But what is the feature that makes users to apply for a friend request over an SNS? According to the results presented, photos is the most important feature of a user's account that could attract the interest of some other member, followed by the motto for life, an interesting job and interesting hobbies. However, in a similar question photos appeared again in the first place, but the second most common answer was that they don't apply for friendship if they don't know already the other member. This situation reveals that physical attraction is a major characteristic, as in real life, prior even thinking for applying to somebody for becoming a net-friend. We used scattered, in different places and sections, some similar questions in order to find out possible contradictions on the same issue; nevertheless this was not the case of photos in the profile of a member.



Based on these data we can conclude that SNSs, like Facebook, are used mostly to find “interesting” people on the basis of physical attraction, with interesting jobs and motto for life. Thus, a real life scenario appears as far as the kind of people someone is looking for “friend” or net-friend. Hoping maybe for something more in the future?

A great number of SNSs members seem to have many friends and many of them support the idea that the number of net-friends reflects how important and appealing is someone. The desire for more net-friends was mostly mentioned from members in the middle category (neither little nor many friends). These data attest the fact that in most of the cases, both the low and the high number of net-friends is a personal choice. The significance of the number of net-friends that have someone is absolutely confirmed by other researches. More specifically, according to the sociologist Scott L. Feld [4], “friendship is not generally only a source of satisfaction and security, it is also a way that individuals evaluate themselves and others. In Social Networks, people with greater numbers of friends have an increased likelihood of being observed among one's own friends”.

As far as the communication means is concerned, chatting was dominating among all other features, as it is the best way for someone to express his/her own thoughts and feelings in real time. Posting on the wall and commenting on photos was also important for many SNSs members. This way of communication (not in real time) was considered an asset for those that don't feel very confident and they should think a lot prior answering or proposing to someone else. The same characteristics applied in real life scenarios for those users. They couldn't make facile comments or speak with ease to others. Notwithstanding most of the SNSs members express themselves as in reality, a great percentage of them (18 per cent) found SNSs the key to unlock their real character, speaking and expressing in a more freely way. We could support the idea therefore, that their desire for another hidden character appeared behind the keyboard of SNSs.

The claim of socialization seems to be vitiated by a great percentage (more than half of them) of the interviewees, who declared that they do not apply for net-friends if they don't know them already. Furthermore, those with only a few friends (up to 100) achieved to meet in real life more than 80 per cent of their net-friends, while members with more than 200 net-friends have met and wanted to meet less than 10 per cent of their net-friends. It is obvious therefore that there is a critical threshold of friends (around 100) that if exceeded there is no actual interesting as for friends in real life, but rather other reasons are hidden behind this “action” of making more net-friends. The major reasons are feeling important and recognized. Moreover, SNSs like Facebook seem to be used mostly in order someone to be reconnected with old friends. The above mentioned findings about socialization through SNSs are strongly related to the role of Internet in general in interpersonal communication and sociability. According to another research by Nie & Hillygus [5], Internet's use at home has a strong negative impact on time spent with friends and family as well as time spent on social activities, but Internet use at work has no such effect. Similarly, Internet use during weekend days is more strongly related to decreased time spent with friends and family and on social activities than Internet use during weekdays. However, it is the location and timing of Internet

use that determines how interpersonal relationships are affected.

The gender becomes basic prior approaching someone via the SNS for almost one third of the interviewees. This could be a conflict opinion in regard to the physical attraction issue mentioned above. Thus, we could conclude that SNSs like Facebook are not used mostly to attract the other sex, as it may be a prevalent opinion of the general public. Another interesting conclusion is that for the majority of the SNSs members connecting with people from different social layers is a must. However, connecting with individuals with different cultures is not the main scope of SNSs' users. This could be due to the fact that most SNSs are used for communication purposes with near-by individuals. The idea behind pen-pal seems not to be the issue in SNSs. Social Network Sites could help to build a new social mix where, hidden from the eyes of the general public and the public opinion, anyone can be “friend” with anybody without problems (independently from social status, ethnicity, race, etc). This could be very interesting in more strict societies or where castes exist (this is not of course the case of Greece). SNSs in this way could push the development and the progress of such societies, by revealing that individuals can be equal apart from the societal classification or caste they belong to. According to a study by Schaefer [6], Facebook has largely become a substitute for the face to face intercultural interactions on campus.

A new great concern is related to fake profiles in SNSs. There are many cases where someone created a fake profile in order to harm another person or to attract net-friends [7]. According to Perez [8], fake social network profiles are a new form of identity theft. Our research also supports the idea that fake profiles is a misleading and unwanted characteristic that many times makes the users to think twice prior applying for friendship. The fake profiles could also be very harmful in cases of attracting children in dangerous situations (i.e. inappropriate material, etc). Furthermore, a very interesting characteristic of SNSs is their power to motivate the crowds in case of an emergency (i.e. earthquakes, floods, tornados, etc), or to provide assistance in certain sensitive circumstances (i.e. poverty, health problems, disappeared persons, etc), or even to galvanize into action (i.e. crowd sourcing, strikes, protests, etc). For example, joining the Facebook someone can find relative links such as “Hello Humanity: Help Change The World”, “The community of Global Health and Humanitarian Health Submit”, “Humanity helping humanity”, “Looking for help”, etc. Recently, we faced such initiatives through Facebook in Spain and Greece and many other countries around the world as a resistance against the financial crisis and the International Monetary Fund.

Social network sites and services like Facebook appeared to have no commercial or business interest in terms of utilizing them to promote and market products. However, a great percentage of their members could see an opportunity to market their own products through them. By the point of view of the users most of them would not comment or send any kind of feedback regarding products or advertisements; nevertheless the same users identified the SNSs as a great opportunity for promoting their own services and products. Even though this appears to be contradictory, it isn't.

The users are get annoyed at receiving marketing tricks (advertisements, etc), but simultaneously they observe the crowd of the SNSs and they believe that this target group would be useful for their own promotional activities. At that moment they forget the attitude of the simple user and see only the potential of such crowd sourcing. Almost the same situation appears in the case of events (parties, concerts, etc) or clubs, restaurants, etc. As far as contests and competitions is concerned two are the main issues mentioned: they have to be crystal clear and the prize must be meaningful to the users in order to participate or even to comment on these. Apart from this, most of the users (almost 70 per cent) would get annoyed knowing that their actions and data could be used for statistical or advertising purposes.

One of the most valuable characteristics of SNSs is that they attract people with even no prior experience or knowledge in information technology (IT). Thus, they provide the mean for those persons to get acquainted with technology and the digital world in general. We could support therefore the idea that SNSs help to fill the dangerous digital gap [9].

The age group 18-25 years old is into SNSs, while the percentage of users aged over the 40s is very small. This conclusion is verified by other performed worldwide research by Burbary in 2011 [10] (according to Facebook Demographics Revisited – 2011 Statistics, the higher number of active Facebook users are young adults in the 18-25 group age), comes in contradiction to the already mentioned statistics that refer the age of 25-34 years to be the dominant one for Greek users. A good explanation could be that the sample of the interviewees was initiated from the Technological Educational Institute of Athens, where the ages belong in this category. We therefore could assume that the persons they promoted the questionnaire was mostly close to their age. This could be verified also by the fact that 40 per cent of the interviewees were undergraduate students.

Another significant outcome is that almost 20 per cent of the users had only the basic education. A small percentage (almost 10 per cent) of users earned more than 1,000 euros per month, and a rather big one was unemployed. These data support further the idea of young interviewees but the lack of similar researches about the demographical characteristics of Greek users does not make easy the evaluation of this finding.. In contrary, in American society, according to results of a new USA Today/Gallup poll [11], both Google and Facebook attract young, affluent, and educated Americans in large numbers. Another study [12] that released by the Pew Research Center in America showed that the majority of social media users are college educated.

Isolation and alienation along with the ignorance related to whether a profile is fake or the fact that this kind of communication is fake were considered as the main disadvantages of SNSs. As far as the isolation and alienation is concerned, according to a new study from the Pew Research Center of America [13], despite technology and the Internet have taken a beating in the past for potentially limiting people's social interaction, this has hardly changed since 1985 especially for adult population who have "no one with whom they can discuss important matters or who they consider to be 'especially significant' in their life".

The major advantages of SNSs, as it was anticipated, were its main use for communication purposes when distance becomes an obstacle, or in case of finding old friends, as well as the option to be able to discuss and

express in a more freely way. The communication between users through SNSs seems to be developed given the fact that the majority of them choose chatting than other web facilities expressing themselves like in reality. This signifies that they prefer and need a more interactive way of communication and this possibility of easier on line communication, in comparison to email and most compatible forms of interaction, is concerned as one of SNSs biggest advantages. This way, social capital is enforced inducing benefits to persons' socializing and psychological well-being (self-esteem and satisfaction with life) by having access to useful information and culturing ties with friends and neighbours, as to the society linking to a variety of positive social outcomes such as better public health, lower crime rates and generally more efficient socio-economical and cultural development. It is also interesting the fact that even though a high degree of interactivity in communication is crucial, video conferencing facilities were not used by most of the users, because they preferred not to be shown in their net-friends.

As a conclusion, we could support the idea that what the SNS users really need is to make a statement and be heard by others. Their real need is to be listened and reveal their thoughts in a "safe" and not criticized way. After that, they just wait to have "likes" or positive comments on their written thoughts as a signal of being right.

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