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MySpace, Facebook: A Tale of Two Cultures

Emerging data suggest the two may not be direct competitors after all. Businesses that want to reach these audiences have more to learn

by [Maha Atal](#)

The blogosphere is buzzing about a provocative June 24 essay by U.C. Berkeley researcher Danah Boyd suggesting that [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#) users are dividing along race and class lines. Even as her timely ethnographic observations touch off debate among users and Web developers, they underscore a question businesses have been asking since MySpace first launched: Who really uses these sites and what are they doing there? What can businesses learn from the emerging information about growing audiences on MySpace and Facebook, the largest of the online social-networking sites? We took a look at current data to ascertain who's doing what, where, and how.

One thing's for sure: These networks—and questions—are big. According to [comScore](#), 68 million unique users logged on to MySpace in the last month; 26 million to Facebook. On both networks, adults predominate, but on MySpace, half of the users are age 35 and older, while users age 18-24 make up only 17%. On Facebook, older users make up 40%, with college students (29%) being the next biggest group. MySpace users tilt toward the lower middle classes, Boyd says. ComScore reports that the three lowest income brackets are overrepresented there, whereas on Facebook, the opposite is true: There, the three highest income groups dominate.

IDENTITY AND FANTASY

MySpace understandably has been defensive about these income and education differences. A spokesperson says that nearly a quarter (22%) of its users earn more than \$100,000. She adds: "The actual numbers according to comScore show that MySpace has a larger percentage of graduate students than Facebook."

One critical distinction between MySpace and Facebook is how users present themselves. Facebook originally flourished in college communities (it was founded by Mark Zuckerberg, then an undergraduate at Harvard), and students needed a ".edu" e-mail address to join the site. As a result, users stuck more closely to their real identities, and their online behavior in terms of manners and expectations tended to mirror their offline behavior. Although Facebook is now open to anyone, that tradition still holds. "On Facebook, you really have to be who you are, so it's more controlled and polite," says Jason Hirschhorn, president of [Sling Media Entertainment Group](#), formerly head of digital media for [MTV](#).

On MySpace, on the other hand, there is an understood degree of fantasy involved. Users reveal who they want to be, through their interests in music or movies, but people aren't always who they say they are. Says Jeff Jarvis of popular media blog BuzzMachine.com: "Facebook brings elegant organization to real identities and communities people already

have. MySpace is a gussied-up personal Web page, and it's about new publishing forms and mediums." If Facebook users are displaying their real-world relationships, MySpace users are self-promoters, concerned with making new connections through exaggerated, even fictionalized, personas.

DIFFERENT PURPOSES

Boyd's research and the sites' contrasting cultures suggest that although both networks are open to the public, they may not be direct competitors. "The press is saying MySpace is going out of business; everyone's switching to Facebook," says Boyd, but really, "they're hitting different audiences."

In truth, the same audiences are patronizing both networks—comScore reports a 64% overlap—but they are using the sites for different ends. MySpace helps users showcase their interests in music or film, find new artists to follow, and meet others with similar tastes. Facebook begins with relationships, rather than content, helping users keep in touch with friends from college or professional colleagues. "A lot of young users find that MySpace and Facebook can serve distinct functions in their lives," says Siva Vaidyanathan, a cultural studies professor at New York University. "Facebook and MySpace are achieving something close to an identity and a niche that can allow both of them to thrive."

For businesses, then, both networks continue to merit investment for different reasons. For consumer-products companies targeting younger audiences or entertainment companies, MySpace seems like the obvious best bet. According to MySpace, entertainment giants Sony ([SNE](#)), [20th Century Fox](#), and Warner Bros. ([TWX](#)) are among its top advertisers. "When it comes to discovering bands, promoting music, MySpace is still the place," says Vaidyanathan.

ATTRACTIVE MINIMALISM

But Facebook's minimalist approach to features can also be attractive to companies. While MySpace has its own media players and formats to which companies simply upload content, Facebook allows users and companies to build multimedia applications. Travel companies, such as [SideStep.com](#), have built interactive maps allowing users to share vacation ideas. The Washington Post's ([WPO](#)) Compass application allows users to share political beliefs. "Facebook is very Web 2.0," says Hirschhorn. "It is the 'unbrand' and it allows users to pick the best features and companies to showcase their own brands."

Advertisers continue to pour their dollars into MySpace, where a more traditional banner-advertising approach still applies. Google ([GOOG](#)), for example, paid \$900 million in August, 2006, for the right to put Google ads on the site. "Facebook's been pretty limited to a niche market," says Peter Gardiner, partner and chief marketing officer at advertising agency Deutsch ([IPG](#)). "But the audience is going to change dramatically," now that membership is open to the general public.

As these networks continue to evolve, the demographic divides noted by Boyd may give way to new distinctions. Our understanding of who the users are and how they use the sites is also on the rise as research companies are cropping up to help businesses measure and interpret online behavior. Now businesses need to turn that growing understanding into smart strategies for communicating with their customers.

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