Age Matters on Social Networks

A recent survey conducted by Illuminas explores the influence of age on attitudes among members of social networks.

By Eric J. Adams

Ten years ago, the term *social networking* meant group luncheons and after-work mingling. Several years ago, social networking started to mean something very different. Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and a host of other social networking websites changed the meaning of the phrase and altered the Internet landscape. Today, the notion of social networking continues to evolve, and according to recent research, age plays an important role in that evolution.

Because social networking is a recent phenomenon, it's not surprising that younger members of social networking sites, between the ages of 13–24, are the most ardent users. This younger age group is also more optimistic than its older counterparts (those aged 25–54 and those 55 or older) in its view of how social networking will evolve in the future, expecting it will improve many common online activities. What is surprising, however, is how age is a key determinant in the way people use, think about, and feel about social networking. These findings were released in early 2008 following a survey of social network users in the United States, conducted by Illuminas and commissioned by Cisco Executive Thought Leadership.

The data from the survey can help enterprises, service providers, and marketing and advertising professionals identify the factors that motivate online audiences, as well as the features and functions users are increasingly expecting in their online experiences.

Social networking portals range from general sites designed to bring friends together, such as Bebo, Facebook, Friendster, MySpace and Orkut to career, business and academic sites like Classmates.com, LinkedIn, Plaxo and Salesforce.com, to entertainment destinations such as YouTube and Last.fm.

Today, however, there's also a growing contingent of social networking and community sites built around lifestyle interests, hobbies and passions such as books, cars, cooking, film and TV, photography, politics and myriad others. Corporations are slowly realizing the extension of social networking functions from the large portals to their own,

branded websites, and are getting into the act with sites designed to make it easier to connect with subject-matter experts, promote discussion and encourage content-sharing among employees, vendors and customers associated with a particular company or brand.

Younger Members Fuel the Social Networking Surge

While younger social-network users spend slightly less time online than their older counterparts, they spend the greatest portion of that time social networking, according to the survey results. In fact, respondents aged 13–24 estimated that a full 33% of their entire social lives is spent online, compared to 27% for those aged 25–54 and 18% for those 55 or older (see Figure 1). Those aged 13–24 spend an average of eight hours a week on social networks, while 25–54-year-olds spend seven hours a week and those 55 or older only spend three hours a week on average.

Figure 1
Percent of social life spent online

Age 13–24	**33%**
Age 25–54	**27%**
Age 55+	**18%**

Source: Cisco Executive Thought Leadership/Illuminas 2008

It's also interesting to consider the differences among age groups while comparing social networking—commonly characterized as a "Web 2.0" activity—to the more traditional "Web 1.0" activity, e-mailing. While those aged 13–24 spend more time on their social networks than their older counterparts, they spend considerably less time on e-mail—just seven hours per week, compared to 10 hours for both the 25–54 and 55-or-older age groups.

The hallmark of traditional social networking sites is socializing, and the survey results indicate that younger users are also more likely than older users to engage in participatory social networking activities like chatting online, posting content and customizing personal profiles.

While younger members are generally more engaged in social networking, the survey did reveal one interesting area in which older social networkers stand out (see Figure 2). It appears that older members are the most likely to engage in communities of common interest, while younger respondents are most likely to be interested in general online socializing. Instead of just socializing with existing friends, older users are increasingly looking to social networking as a way to interact with, and around, a common interest, such as a hobby, company or topic.

Regardless of age, the majority of social networkers do not feel overwhelmed by the number of sites or the number of friends that they have to keep up with. This suggests there is still opportunity to build or expand social networking hubs.

Push Power

As social networking technology becomes more pervasive, attitudes toward how social networkers interact with entertainment content are beginning to show significant differentiation across age groups. While the majority of respondents still find pleasure in the thrill of the hunt, preferring to search for content, younger users are the most open of the three age groups to having targeted content pushed to them. Among those aged 13–24, 23% prefer to have the entertainment content they like "find" them, compared to 15% for the 25–54 age group and 11% of those 55 or older.

A similar pattern was revealed in terms of attitudes toward content tracking, as younger users are also less concerned with security issues associated with it. Only 20% of those 55 or older and 30% of those aged 25–54 indicated that the benefits of content tracking trump security concerns, while 42% of respondents 24 or younger feel the same way.

In a good sign for companies marketing to younger demographic age groups, young users are also more tolerant of targeted online advertising and more apt to consider products and services targeted to them.

Many companies are examining how best to take advantage of Web 2.0 within their organizations, but employee-focused social networks within businesses are only beginning to emerge, according to the survey. Just 22% of working respondents indicated that their employer offered an internal social network. However, of those with employers that do offer a social network, 75% said they use it. This should give employers with an eye toward catering to the future workforce confidence that such efforts will be well adopted.

In conclusion, while social networking may be a new phenomenon, it is also one that is already evolving in terms of its application and definition. As adoption of social networking technologies continues, it will have wide ranging impacts on business as today's social networkers carry their beliefs, attitudes and expectations about how companies should interact with them into their personal and professional lives.

Figure 2
Percent of respondents with memberships on the following types of social networking/community sites

General
Age 13–24 — 90%
Age 25–54 — 86%
Age 55+ — 76%

Entertainment
Age 13–24 — 67%
Age 25–54 — 55%
Age 55+ — 27%

Lifestyle
Age 13–24 — 46%
Age 25–54 — 51%
Age 55+ — 56%

Source: Cisco Executive Thought Leadership/Illuminas 2008
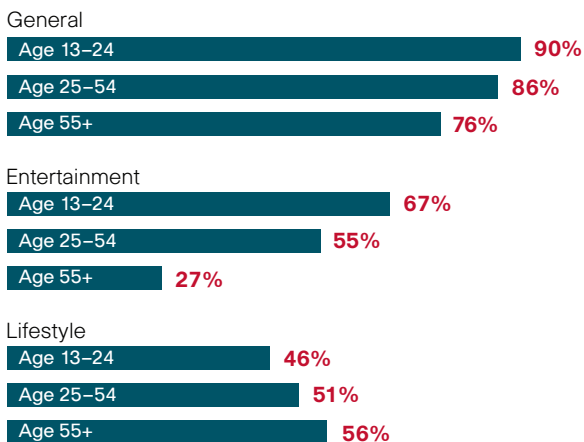
What the Future Holds

No one can predict with accuracy how social networking will evolve, but current members of social networks have some clear ideas about how they will use them in the near future. And once again, not surprisingly, social networks of the future hold more promise for younger respondents than their older counterparts.

While older respondents largely indicated that in the future, social networks would have "no impact" on many common online activities—such as messaging, photo sharing, finding and making friends, listening to music and watching TV or movies—the largest portion of those aged 13–24 expressed that social networks will "improve" these activities. This indicates that younger respondents believe that these disparate online activities will be increasingly integrated into social networks as these sites grow as the hubs of their social lives online.

While virtually all respondents indicated that they access social networks on their home computers, younger networkers are more "location and device independent." They access their social networks more often than older users from schools, libraries, Internet cafes, and mobile hotspots. They are also less averse to using their cell phones to conduct social networking.