Social Networks

-Survival of the fittest-

by

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Abstract

This paper covers the largest social networking sites available today. Facebook is currently the largest site. Twitter is growing fast and these two sites are the options that people choose when it comes to communicating and socialising online. MySpace is a social network that has completely crashed in popularity and has lost all of its former characteristics due to the downfall in their user base. They have decided to concentrate on promoting unknown music talents.

The survey that was carried out underlines Facebook’s dominance and suggests that Twitter is a force to be reckoned with. The survey explains why Facebook completely shattered MySpace when it comes to popularity and number of active users.

Facebook and Twitter are put head to head and their pros and cons are examined. Although Facebook dominates in number of users, Twitter definitely has some factors over and above Facebook.
1. Introduction

Social networking sites such as Facebook have changed the way people communicate with each other. The site includes features like live chat and also more e-mail like communication. Nowadays Facebook is a big part of people’s everyday life and especially among the younger generation. But what is it that people seek from those sites? That question along with others will be answered in this paper. A survey was carried out to see just how popular the available social networking sites are within the students of Reykjavik University.

Facebook is currently the leading social networking site and that is the point of view that will appear in the paper. This point of view is of course based on the fact that Facebook has 600 million users[5] while Twitter has 190 million[6] and Myspace 34 million[7]. MySpace seems to fading out while Twitter is growing fast. Might we expect to see Twitter knock Facebook out of first place as the biggest social network?

In the paper Facebook will be compared to MySpace and Twitter and the reason is to try to find out what Facebook has over and above those sites. The main objective of the research is therefore to find out why one social networking site is more popular than another and why people stop using one site and switch to the next. The survey will look into how people are using the social networking sites and how it is changing human interaction.

These social networking sites are not just places where people catch up and communicate with each other. In recent years, these sites have become very powerful news sources where information can be shared and received 24/7. Chapter 6 will cover this topic and and explain why these sites are important part of the modern society when it comes to news distribution.

It is worth mentioning that the paper is written from my own point of view which is based on the social networks that I am most familiar with. Sites like LinkedIn and others will not be a part of this research paper. The sites that will be the focus point in the paper are; Facebook, Twitter and MySpace. This should clarify any situation that might come up where the discussion suggests that these sites are the only social networking sites available. These three sites are the most internationally spread and therefore only the three will subjected. This is a paper on social networking sites which have the same form as Facebook. Other social networks like flickr and YouTube will not be a part of the paper unless they are used in a comparison of some kind.

The paper will start off by introducing all the social networking sites which were named above including the site that seems to have started this revolutionary kind of online communication.

2. The social networking sites

2.1 The pioneer – Friendster

Friendster was founded before the launch of MySpace and Facebook so they were the first social networking site of the form like we know Facebook today. This site has been losing traffic fast in America over the past few years but is more popular in Asia[1]. The main reason for the decline in Friendster’s popularity can be traced to the rise of Facebook. Now the Friendster site is available in languages like Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese and Indonesian[1]. It is therefore obvious that the
executives of Friendster are concentrating on the Asian markets. Actually, the vast majority of Friendster users are in the Asia/Pacific region[8]. After reading a description on what kind of service Friendster provides, it can be seen that it has all the same features and concepts that Facebook has. It is difficult to explain why Friendster lost its traffic in America but kept being popular in Asia. If Facebook would never have been launched Friendster might as well be the leading social networking site today. Their position in Asia though appears to be strong and the market over there is big and ever growing, so the pioneer site should stay around for some time to come.

2.2 MySpace

After the launch of Friendster, the founders of MySpace saw the potential of such a site and decided to mimic the website. In August, 2003, after only 10 days of work and preparation, the first version of the site was ready and at the start of 2008, Myspace was considered the leading social networking site [7]. Like we have now found out, that was about to change. After the launch in 2003, MySpace led the so called “Web 2.0” revolution in which users could create their own profile pages and share content with their friends[12].

The MySpace profile has from the beginning been very colorful and often loaded with unnecessary stuff. Each user can have a different background and have a song on their profile which plays while you are browsing through their profile. All this makes the browsing a bit slow and it is not user-friendly.

Since its launch, MySpace has always been somewhat music orientated. In 2005, they launched their own record label, MySpace Records, and the objective was to discover new and unknown talent. Lily Allen and Sean Kingston are among those who gained fame through MySpace[7]. The artists could upload their own songs to a MySpace music profile. This is something that none other social networking site had. Nowadays it is more common that people are discovered on YouTube rather than on MySpace and Justin Bieber is a good example of that. With that in mind, one can state that MySpace has lost the only thing that made them stand out from other social networking sites. That must mean that the future can’t be bright for MySpace.

2.3 Facebook

Facebook was founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg and a few of his college roommates in Harvard. At first it was limited to Harvard students but in September 2006 anyone over the age of 13 could open an Facebook account of their own[5]. Facebook is currently the largest social networking site with over 600 million users like was mentioned earlier. Today it is ranked 2nd by Alexa which ranks websites according to worldwide traffic[22]. In October 2008 Facebook users had uploaded over 10 billion photos onto Facebook, making the site the largest online photo storage site and dominating popular photo sharing sites like flickr[9]. 50 billions photos have currently been uploaded by Facebook users[5]. The site has drastically changed the way people behave socially. Nowadays if a group of people goes to a party, they bring a camera with them just so they can post the experience online to Facebook. Facebook has therefore motivated people to capture their social experiences by allowing them to upload their photos in an easy way and share them with their friends.
2.4 Twitter

Of the three social networking sites already mentioned, Twitter is the youngest site and was launched in 2006[6]. Twitter is continuously growing, especially in America, and over the past few weeks I have noticed that Twitter is mentioned a lot in the media. Tweeting was a big part of one Grey’s Anatomy episode e.g. and Jay Leno asks his guests if they are on Twitter but not if they are on Facebook. That might be because Twitter is in its “bloom” and rising fast in popularity. Maybe Jay Leno finds no need in asking his guests about Facebook because it seems it is becoming a norm that everyone has a Facebook page.

Twitter enables its users to send and receive text messages called tweets. These tweets can be up to 140 characters and are displayed on the users profile page. This limitation in characters is due to the fact that Twitter relies mostly on cell phone text messages[10]. Twitter has even been called the “SMS of the Internet”[11]. Due to this fact tweets cannot include anything other than text, such as pictures. The definition of the word twitter is “a short burst of inconsequential information,’ and ‘chirps from birds’”[6]. So the main concept of Twitter is short messages which differs from sites like MySpace and Facebook.

On Twitter you do not add friends like on MySpace or Facebook but instead you invite other people to receive your tweets or you can follow others members’ posts[10]. Therefore you can follow whichever member you like without having to send a request to the person. This enables everyone to follow whichever one they want and receive and read their tweets.

3. Survey

I carried out a survey among several students in Reykjavik University. The survey was carried out over a three day period, from March 22 to March 24 and 89 students participated. The sample is perhaps quite small but it gave some pretty distinct results and the matter of opinion among the individuals is clear. The survey was presented to students on paper and consisted of 10 questions. The data was gathered by hand and results are displayed on graphs which were made in Excel. The results will be presented in this chapter and also in the next two where Facebook is compared to both MySpace and Twitter. Furthermore, some results of the survey will explain how the individuals use their social networking site in chapter 7. Some of the questions were designed to find out why Facebook defeated MySpace in the race between the sites to become the world’s biggest social network and to learn a little bit about the rise of Twitter and how it stands against the leading site, Facebook.

The numbers of male and female participants were pretty even with 48 males and 41 females. The participants were chosen completely randomly. The first question was to find out on which of the following three social networks people have accounts, and the results can be found on a graph on the next page.
According to these results 87 out of 89 participants have a Facebook page. It underlines how popular the site really is. Before the survey I expected every single one of the participants to have a Facebook page but I have at least found two students in Reykjavik University that do not have one. According to graph 1, MySpace is the second biggest social networks with a total of 18 users while Twitter has 11. Earlier in the paper it was shown numerically that Twitter is the second largest site and the explanation for this inconsistency can be found in the next graph.

Graph 2 shows that those who were active on MySpace still have their profiles but don’t use it anymore. This could mean that the MySpace user base is even smaller than the numbers say. But of course these users are not active and that is another important factor which is taken into observation when determining the popularity of the site. So despite graph 1 showing MySpace as the second largest site, graph 2 proves that it definitely is not and confirms expected results. As can be seen, none of the participants have a MySpace profile and use it regularly. This goes to show that MySpace is a site on its deathbed, at least as a site of the form that it got famous for. Maybe it will put its
emphasis even more on music and to help people to start their music career. But why did MySpace lose so many users? The next graph takes us closer to the answer to that question.

![Why did you leave MySpace?](image)

A vast majority of the participants left MySpace because they opened a Facebook account. So the short answer to why MySpace lost all those users; Facebook was launched!

Among other answers given by the participants is that the site got outdated, everyone moved over to Facebook so there wasn’t any fun on MySpace anymore and that Facebook was simply more efficient and convenient in use. The next chapter covers this topic and compares the two sites, looking mostly at the advantages Facebook has over MySpace.

### 4. Facebook vs. MySpace

It is clear that Facebook has won the battle between the two sites. Ever since Facebook joined the market, the two sites have been competitors. MySpace grew a little bit faster in the beginning than Facebook. In 2007 MySpace had just under 100 million users while Facebook had about 50 million users[3]. Over the next months things started to change. Facebook started to grow more and more popular while MySpace was losing a lot of users. Then finally on April 19, 2008, Facebook overtook MySpace as the number one social networking site on the Web[13]. Facebook currently dominates MySpace based on unique visitors with over 600 million users, and in October 2010, Chief Executive Mike Jones said that the site is no longer competing with Facebook as a general social networking site. Instead MySpace would be music-orientated and target younger people[7]. So it is official that MySpace has thrown in the towel and admitted defeat to Facebook in the battle of the most popular social networking site in the world. As with Friendster it seems that internet users

![Facebook overtakes MySpace as the no.1 social networking site](image)
simply prefer Facebook over MySpace. Ever since Facebook was launched, MySpace started losing users over to Facebook. Do MySpace and Friendster have anything in common? They at least seem to be unable to provide their users with what they want and therefore lose them over to Facebook. Facebook’s success can be largely attributed to its founder Mark Zuckerberg. Mark is young and some say that his personality as an intelligent guy coming fresh out of college is embedded in Facebook and attracts a lot of users[14].

Facebook’s home page is very clean and simple. There is no unnecessary stuff in the way and all of the features are easy to access. The home page provides you with all the posts and other interesting stuff going on. On the MySpace page you had to manually type in or select all of your friends’ profiles and find out what they were up to. The home page of Facebook centralises all the information you need and therefore you browse through one page instead of possibly dozens. Another thing worth mentioning is the difference in the users profiles. The profiles on Facebook all have the same basic layout. This keeps the overall look of the page clear-cut. Facebook also has very few ads and they fit well in so you hardly notice them. The MySpace profile on the other hand is quite different, and in a bad way. It allows users to edit their own profile so you end up with a bunch of glitter texts, big flashing ads and pictures all over the page that do nothing but slow the page down. All this stuff crammed on the profile is just unpleasing for the eye. This stuff might appeal to some group of teens. However, the biggest user base are people between the age of 35-44[15], so that means that MySpace doesn’t appeal to most of the people who are using the social networking sites. This fact gives Facebook a big advantage and is surely a part of the reason why social networking users switched from MySpace to Facebook.

In my opinion, Facebook is a far better site than MySpace so in the survey I simply asked what the participants think make Facebook a better site and gave a few options, but also gave an option for those who think that MySpace is better.

Graph 4: Lists the things participants think makes Facebook a better site than MySpace.

As expected, a minority of participants, or only two, think that MySpace is a better social networking site. The majority think that Facebook is more user-friendly and that just might be the biggest factor
in Facebook’s success. The site is very simple in use, its features are straightforward and the site is free of all unnecessary objects which are meant to be decorative. Other advantages mentioned were that Facebook works faster and looks better. All the profile songs and objects you could put on the MySpace profile did nothing but to slow the site down and make it less attractive.

5. Facebook vs. Twitter

Unlike MySpace, which is a site that is fading out, Twitter is getting stronger although it is not nearly as popular as Facebook. The sites are quite different and offer different things and different possibilities to their users. Twitter was founded in 2006 and is therefore two years younger than Facebook. To put it in perspective, when Facebook was the same age as Twitter is now, the site had already triumphed as the Web’s biggest social networking site, leaving MySpace behind. Twitter has already exceeded MySpace and currently stands as the second largest social networking site, based on unique users. Maybe that isn’t such a success based on the fact that MySpace seems to be a site on its deathbed. Let’s not take anything away from Twitter though. Their micro-blogging service seems to be working just brilliantly. During the World Cup in South Africa in the summer of 2010, Twitter users broke a record in Twitter’s history as 3.283 tweets per second were published by users at the close of Japan’s victory over Denmark[16]. For comparison, normal daily activity consists of average 750 tweets per second[16].

Comparing these two sites can be difficult because of their different features. In my opinion an explanation from Colette Martin does a pretty good job distinguishing the two sites:

“Twitter and Facebook are both good at what they do. Twitter is like Times Square on New Year’s Eve – noisy and open to all. Facebook is more like a party invitation with an RSVP.”[17]

That’s exactly the point. They are both very good at what they do, they just have different approaches to the communication form. Like the statistics of tweets published during the World Cup show, Twitter can get quite “noisy” and that underlines the brilliance of Colette’s explanation. Using Twitter, you send out tweets which can be seen by anyone who follows you and you don’t get a saying in whether the person follows you or not. This makes it easier for the users to widen their network of friends. That is something that Facebook does not have, because each user cannot have more than 5000 friends while you can follow an unlimited number of people on Twitter.

Twitter seems to work a little bit like a search engine. You can ask a question in the form of a tweet and you are able to get an instant response from anyone of the people you are following or from people following you.

Facebook appeals to people who are looking to connect with old friends or family members that they haven’t seen in a long time or simply to the ones that are looking to meet new people online. What makes Facebook a very convenient communication tool is that it gives its users a single alternative to different applications such as MSN Messenger, Gmail, Hotmail, Flickr and YouTube[18]. It features a live chat so you don’t need MSN anymore. It has a messaging system which works just like e-mail except for the fact that it is only for messages between two or more Facebook users. But last year, Mark Zuckerberg, announced that Facebook has come up with a new messaging system and in his opinion the email form like we know today is dead[20].
Like mentioned in the Facebook chapter earlier Facebook is currently the largest online photo storage site and that makes flickr an unnecessary site for Facebook users. Users can upload videos to Facebook, but despite that fact it will not be a force that will throw YouTube out of the market in my opinion. At least not any time soon. YouTube dominates as the largest video site but Facebook has already exceeded popular video sites like Hulu[19].

In the survey that was carried out, a statement, which can be seen on graph 5, was presented to the participants.

![Graph 5: Results on whether participants in the survey believe Twitter will rise above Facebook in size or not.](image)

Most of the participants were unsure or unwilling to choose sides on this matter. Of the ones that did have an opinion, the largest group were the ones that totally disagreed with the statement hence don’t think that Twitter will become a bigger social networking site. Those results don’t necessarily shock anyone due to Facebook’s huge popularity. It is difficult to imagine that Facebook will lose its superior position, but we have to keep in mind that MySpace was the largest site once but still almost nothing but downsides have been mentioned about the page in this paper because the page doesn’t appeal to users anymore. As time goes on, Twitter might close the gap between the sites and even exceed Facebook in user size.

A minority of the participants in the survey are active on Twitter. But the ones that are, were asked to answer the following question: “What do you think that Twitter has over and above Facebook?”

Among the answers given was that it is easier to track celebrities on Twitter than on Facebook. It is a fact that gossip and the life of the rich and famous will always interest other members of society and therefore the participants of the survey consider this to be a pro. One of the participant pointed out that on Twitter the celebrities have official profiles which confirms that the person behind the profile is the celebrity itself but not some random person writing under their name. That gives a certain feel of closeness to the celebrity which can’t be obtained anywhere else.

Another reason that was mentioned is that the concept of Twitter is simpler and that it does not demand as much personal info like Facebook does. Some find Twitter to be a better way to find and
share information without all the personal pictures, groups and last but not least all the spam that has been on Facebook in recent weeks.

This chapter has covered a comparison which is a lot harder to execute than the comparison in the chapter before. Both Twitter and Facebook are excellent social networking sites. They both have their pros and cons and at the end of the day both provide their users with excellent services and features that enable them to communicate with one another and send and receive information on everything they desire. Facebook currently leads the race but Twitter has every potential of giving the site a fierce fight.

6. Social networking sites as a news source

Nowadays you can be browsing on almost any site and post an article, or any interesting stuff you see, on Facebook. So these social networks are not only used to communicate but now you can log on to your Facebook or Twitter account and find out the top stories. You don’t necessarily have to visit the news web pages to find out what’s going on. Especially if you are not that interested in reading news in general you might use this as your only news source. As far as talking about the social networking sites as news sources, Twitter and Facebook stand out and MySpace does not have adequate features to be considered as a news source. So, of the two sites, Facebook and Twitter, Facebook partly stands out as a news source due to its massive user base and does therefore reach out to a bigger group of people. Let’s though not forget that one of the reasons people go to Twitter is to find out what is going on, and therefore it works as an important news source although it does not have as big of a user base as Facebook. This is reflected in Twitter’s slogan: “Twitter-The best way to discover what’s new in your world”[23].

The social networking sites can even be faster to publish breaking news than the major news networks. Following Michael Jackson’s death in June 2009, Twitter and Facebook users all over the world reported that Michael had died from cardiac arrest before any news network did. Celebrities posted tweets about Michael’s death and Twitter users retweeted the celebrity tweets[21]. So the word got out fast and possibly at a faster rate than any other news network online is capable of producing. Lindsay Lohan posted the following:

“NO OMG … sending my love and prayers out to Michael and his family … i feel sick..”[21]

Tweets that come from celebrities can reach a very large group of people since most of them have a lot of followers. This doesn’t just go for celebrities though. A person that gets his hands on a breaking story can immediately tweet and all of a sudden possibly hundreds or thousands of his followers have found out. Then these people tweet again thus distributing the story to a very large group of people in a snowball effect kind of way.

All the tweets (this goes for posts on Facebook as well) are short and don’t have to contain any specific details. They are more like headlines. If a news network gets a breaking story they have to do some research before they publish the story, getting all the facts together etc., thus making the process slower than a tweet or any other post. They cannot just publish “Michael Jackson has passed away” but the Twitter and Facebook users can. And that message is enough to spread the word and get the message out. Than people can visit the news sites for more information. These news networks are though a vital part of the distribution on the sites. Most of the bigger news sites have
an option for readers that allows them to either “Like” or “Share” an individual news piece. This allows readers to post the link to their Facebook or Twitter page allowing other users to read the piece and all they did was browse through their social networking site. The social networking sites consist of such large networks of people all over the world that they are capable of distributing content efficiently. One way to look at it is that the sites contain millions of news reporters who are always on call and ready to report news 24/7, all over the world.

I think it is obvious that sites like Facebook and Twitter are becoming quite massive news sources and more and more people browse through these sites for information and news updates instead of news sites like mbl.is, visir.is etc. They have advantages that have been mentioned and consist of huge user bases which makes distribution of news and information real easy. It might be a possibility that in the future the news sites might converge with the social networking sites. Today you can “like” mbl.is on Facebook and get a few news articles every now and then. This might get bigger in the near future. These sites might even operate entirely on a social networking site like Facebook. Due to the power that these sites have as news sources, the other news sites must react or adopt to the situation. It is though important to keep in mind that the news sites are often the real source of information that is distributed on Facebook and Twitter. People read the news article and then share it with their friends and in that way the story is distributed. So both parties are vital, with the news site creating the story and the social networking site distributing the story over a large network which consists of millions of people.

7. How people use the networks

Some people have both an Facebook account as well as an Twitter account. Some might use Facebook for one purpose and Twitter for another. Facebook seems to be more of a communiction site where you chat up your friends and stay in touch with the people in your life that live abroad for example. Twitter is more of a news and information site where short messages are dominant. So users go to Facebook if they want to have a live chat with their friends or send them a message, and go to Twitter to find out what is going on in the world. If you want to use Facebook as a news source, you have to depend on that someone of your friends has already posted the news story. On Twitter, you can type in a search word and have all the tweets that contain that word come up. This makes Twitter a more efficient news source. To sum up, if you want news, go to Twitter!

The participants in the survey were asked how they used their social networking site and the results were the following:
Graph 6: Usage of the social networks

It isn’t surprising that most of the participants use the sites to communicate with friends and family, considering that the majority has a Facebook page, as was seen in graph 1. The main concept behind Facebook is of course to communicate with the people in your life which explains the results on the above graph. A lot of people seem to browse through the sites just to kill time. It is apparent that people have a lot of spare time on their hands, and that would mean that a lot of the traffic through the sites is just people that have nothing better to do. But for some reason they choose to be on Facebook or Twitter, so apparently the sites have some kind of an attraction force. We like to know what is going on around us and these sites are capable of providing us with exactly that.

Participants in the survey were asked to estimate how much time they spend on anyone of the social networking site on an average day. Graph 7 displays the results.

Graph 7: Most of the participants spend between 0-3 hours per day on social networking sites according to the survey.

The majority said that they spend on average 0-3 hours a day on their social networking site. A total of 15 participants spend 3-6 hours a day while 10 individuals answered that they are online almost all day long.
day long. It has to be taken into consideration that the participants might not be completely honest when answering questions like that. Most people reduce the amount of hours because they feel a sense of guilt spending too much time on sites of that kind. But the fact is that these sites are changing the way we communicate and human interaction is moving more and more online. Perhaps we shouldn’t evaluate the time we spend on these kind of sites as wasted time, we are just a part of an evolution that is going on. Then it can be argued whether that is a positive or negative evolution, but that dispute will not be solved here.

8. Conclusions

When it comes to maintaining popularity and number of users and therefore securing the survival of social networking sites, there are some key ingredients that the site must contain. It is important that the site is user-friendly and that the look of the page is clean and simple. The site has to provide its users with some kind of value and if a site comes along with better solutions to the users needs, directors have to act quick or else the site might end up in the gutter. These factors apply to the war between Facebook and MySpace. Facebook simply offered a site that contained features and applications that attracted millions of users and most importantly attracted the majority of the MySpace users.

Facebook dominates social networking market while Twitter trails. Despite that fact it is difficult to state that Facebook is a better site than Twitter. They are different in their structure and offer different kinds of service to its user although the concept between the sites is similar. Facebook’s huge user base may be explained with the fact that the site appeals to a wider group of people because it offers more variety when it comes to applications. Twitter is more focused on providing news and information and hence appeals to a smaller number of users.

At the moment there is nothing that suggests the popularity of Facebook and Twitter declining and it is a fact that the sites have established themselves as a major part of online communication. MySpace got behind in the social networking race and the main reason was that the site wasn’t providing the factors that users were after.

Facebook and Twitter serve a role as huge news sources and that might be one of the reasons why the sites have had so much success in recent years. A big advantage that the sites have as news sources, is the fact that they consist of millions of people, all around the world, that are always ready to inform other users. This fact makes the sites even threaten the existence of large news networks.

It’s difficult to imagine Facebook losing its massive market lead and being defeated in active users by another social networking site. The directors of Facebook have done a brilliant job in providing users with exactly what they want. In the nearest future, the site must continue to evolve and improve its features. Else, Twitter or possibly a new social networking site, might come along and throw the site off the market. We have already seen it happen, so why shouldn’t it happen again?
9. References


