

Face to face

I've been reading a lot about Facebook™ recently. According to the company, the social networking site now has 500 million registered 'active' members. That's more than the population of the USA.

If you don't know what a social networking site is then I should tell you that its aim is to connect people with old and new friends. Once you have set up your page you can search for friends or invite people to be your 'friend'. According to the Facebook™ site, the average user has 130 friends.

When I saw that statistic I immediately became depressed. I'm a Facebook™ user but I don't have 130 friends. I'm not even sure I've ever had 130 real friends in my whole life. Is there something wrong with me?

I also have a MySpace™ page and a LinkedIn™ profile. I have even fewer friends on both those sites. According to MySpace™, which started in 2002, the site has more than 122 million active users. It has always been associated with younger users and music lovers. Bebo™ is another site aimed primarily at young adults and teenagers (I don't have a profile there) while LinkedIn™ is business-oriented site for professional people.

When Facebook™ started in 2004 it was designed to be used by students at Harvard University. The concept was popular and spread to more universities in the United States and then around the world. Although the majority of users were university students, it soon attracted older and younger users. Today you have to be aged 13 or over to create a profile at the site.

With so many people of different ages using the site, there have inevitably been problems. One of the biggest problems is with the site's privacy policy. Knowing how to protect your privacy is important when using any social networking site. Apart from the dangers of allowing strangers to have access to your personal details, you might also find your employer is interested in what you do and think when you're not at work.

Sharing information with 'friends' can also have its problems. Do you really want to communicate in exactly the same way with friends from school days, university, jobs past and present, people you meet on holiday or social events (not to mention your family)? I doubt it. We all communicate with people we know in different ways. The differences can be subtle but they're important.

So I'm not too worried that I'm not as popular as the average Facebook™ user. The site may have 500 million registered users but sharing thoughts with my virtual friends can never be as satisfying as being in the same room and having a face-to-face conversation with a real friend. Or am I being old-fashioned?

1 Match the words in the box to the definitions.

family friend member population stranger student teenager user

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 1 | a group of people who are related to each other | _____ |
| 2 | a person who belongs to a club or group | _____ |
| 3 | a young person between the ages of 13 and 19 | _____ |
| 4 | all the people who live in a particular area | _____ |
| 5 | someone who goes to university or school | _____ |
| 6 | someone who uses a service | _____ |
| 7 | someone you don't know | _____ |
| 8 | someone you know well and like | _____ |

2 Read the article and write the social networking site for each group of users.

- 1 professional people _____
- 2 young adults and teenagers _____
- 3 anyone aged 13 or over _____
- 4 music lovers _____

3 Decide if these sentences are *true (T)* or *false (F)*. Correct the false sentences.

- 1 The writer has a lot of online friends. T/F
- 2 The writer belongs to several social networking sites. T/F
- 3 MySpace™ is older than Facebook™. T/F
- 4 Facebook™ started as a site for school students. T/F
- 5 The site has had problems protecting the privacy of users. T/F
- 6 The writer prefers communicating with people online. T/F

4 Choose the correct verb and write it in the correct form.

be communicate connect create protect use

- 1 The aim of the site is _____ people.
- 2 You can invite people _____ your friend.
- 3 It was designed _____ by other students.
- 4 You have to be aged 13 or over _____ a profile.
- 5 Knowing how _____ your privacy is important.
- 6 Do you really want _____ with different people in the same way?

5 Answer the questions in your own words.

- 1 Are you an 'active' user of social networking sites?
- 2 Do you use English to communicate with people on the Internet?
- 3 In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of social networking sites?
- 4 Do you communicate with different people in different ways?
- 5 Do you think the writer is old-fashioned?

Glossary

according to (*preposition*) – saying where information or ideas come from

aim (*noun*) – the thing you hope to achieve

oriented (*adjective*) – directed towards

overtake (*verb*) – to become better or more successful

profile (*noun*) – a description of someone

satisfying (*adjective*) – making you feel pleased or happy

spread (*verb*) – to cover a larger area

statistic (*noun*) – numbers that represent facts or describe a situation

subtle (*adjective*) – not obvious