You've Got a Friend in Me: Exploring MySpace Users' Ad Friendships

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The article explores the online social network friendships between people and advertisements on MySpace. The research includes how people represent themselves on MySpace, how they view MySpace friendships, their motivations and expectations for brand friendships on the site, and their attitudes toward ads on MySpace. Future marketing and managerial implications are discussed at the end of the report.

INTRODUCTION

Online social networks such as MySpace and Facebook have gained mass popularity in recent years. The first of these social networks was Friendster, which formally began the social networking era in August 2002 with its site launch.[1] Today, MySpace is the largest social network on the Internet and studies show that 72 million people use the site and its 2007 profits were estimated at $200 million. Social networks are collections of personal websites, or "profiles," where users can post information about themselves for other users to see. These profiles are searchable within the networks and users can make "friends" with other users by inviting them to be a part of their personal social network. A user's friends are featured in a special, searchable section of their profile, called their Friend Space, and other users can browse the list. The original purpose of MySpace was to create a platform for Web users to connect with old or current friends and create new ones.

Marketers have always had a presence on MySpace, which is the reason that the site can invest heavily in technology and allow users to post a virtually unlimited amount of content without charging their account holders. As MySpace has evolved with time, so have the marketers and their advertisements. What began with banner ads and on-site promotions has turned into highly sophisticated profiles of brands that have their own MySpace accounts. These brand profiles span from movie or television characters, such as Disney's pirate of the Caribbean, Captain Jack Sparrow, to inanimate objects like PepsiCo's Aquafina, and merchandise lines such as Nike Soccer.

The idea of personifying a brand is not a new one. The process of assigning human qualities to an inanimate object, anthropomorphizing, has been studied in depth by researchers such as Susan Fournier. In her article, Fournier argues that as a result of marketer's efforts and their own contact with a brand, the consumer perceives a brand as a behavioral entity.[2] The behavior

of the brand indicates its personality to the consumer and a relationship is born. In possessing a personality, the brand becomes like a human and an active participant in a consumer/brand relationship. Some of the things marketers need to consider in the online social network marketplace are what motivations and expectations the consumers have for asking brands to be their "friends," and the way that other people in the social network perceive the people that become friends with the brand.

A brand becoming part of a consumer's identity on MySpace has large implications for the company. On one hand, the person literally becomes a direct, free advertisement for the company to others on the site. On the other hand, the ways others perceive the person or the type of person that would include the brand in their identity could have negative effects. The marketer loses control of the brand when consumers decide to take it into their own hands.[3] The relationship between the consumer and the brand may also suffer greatly if the brand friend is unable to fulfill the consumer's expectations in the mutual friendship.[4]

The purpose of this report is to investigate consumers' motivations and expectations for including ads in their "social network" on MySpace. The researcher will use MySpace users' responses to research-based interview questions regarding online profiles, relationships, and brand friendships to uncover these consumer ideas.

This article begins with a grounding in prior research. Using literature on friendship, personal relationships with brands, and brands and the consumer's self identity, a conceptual framework for the research was developed. Then, the methodology of the data collection and analysis are outlined in detail, including the strong use of Levy's autodriving research technique.

After the methodology, the researcher will report the findings found in the in-depth interviews related to the following questions: (1) How do consumers create and view MySpace profiles? (2) What do MySpace users think about online friendships? (3) What are consumers' motivations for becoming friends with ads on MySpace? (4) What do consumers expect will result from their friendship with ads? and, (5) How important is the idea of projecting a self-identity to other members on MySpace? The discussion section will outline six guidelines for marketers derived from the findings related to MySpace users' relationships with ads, address future trends in social networking, and recommendations for further research.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Because the relationship between people and advertisements on MySpace is called a friendship, the literature on friendships, including the nature of online friendships and the phenomenon of anthropomorphism friendships, sets a foundation for understanding the motivations and expectations people have for being friends with ads.

Friendship

Friendship relationships in research are usually characterized by their tie strength, ranging from strong to weak. Marsden found that the best predictor of tie strength is the "closeness," or intimacy level in a relationship that indicates a high level of self-disclosure and mutual trust.[5] Research on online friendship social ties has been divided. Early researchers on computer mediated social ties were skeptical of

closeness within friendships because of the lack of social cues in that setting which make the environment more conducive to weak ties.[6, 7] More recent research has found that anonymity, isolation, and searchable profiles that enable users to find others with similar interests, have led to less discretion in revealing personal information and thus, stronger ties among online social networkers.[8] In addition, the researchers found that study participants identified their online relationships as having a lower quality than their offline relationships with others.[9]

Peter et al. studied the formulation process of adolescents' online relationships, including introversion/extroversion, online self-disclosure, motive for social compensation, and frequency of online communication as predictors of motivation. The report presents a model of adolescent friendship formulation that shows how an individual's personality characteristics, motives, and Internet use frequency all effect the online friendship formulation. Results from the study showed that introverts are just as likely to form online relationships as extraverts, and that they are more likely to represent their real life (RL) identities in their online communication, which leads to stronger ties. Extroverted adolescents in the study self-disclosed more information and spent more time communicating online.[10] The introvert/extrovert factor may have an effect on the online friendships that people form with ads on MySpace as well.

Gennaro's research on online relationships explores the degree to which people use the Internet to make new relationships or friends and touches on the type of person, demographically and psychographically, that is most likely to form relationships online and to meet their e-relationship partner in person. The study results indicate that the most influential factors driving a person to form an e-relationship are (1) the person's experience and exposure to the Internet and (2) the social networking programs and its features. Therefore, it may be the case that the longest-standing members of MySpace have the most friends in their social network, and consequently, the greatest number of brand friends. If this is the case, the motivations for friendships may differ across consumers that have varying lengths of membership with MySpace.

Friendships that people form with brands are related to the idea of anthropomorphism, which was defined earlier as the behavior of humans to attribute human characteristics to nonhuman entities. Kennedy asserts that anthropomorphism is a part of human nature, stating that the practice is "built-in to the human repertoire."[11] Burghardt goes as far as to say that anthrophomorphism is an unavoidable "inherent human propensity."[12]

Literature on consumers' personal relationships with brands will expand the knowledge on their motivations and expectations for their MySpace relation-ships.

Personal Relationships with Brands

There has been some recent research on the ways that people think about brands as having human characteristics and subsequently form relationships with brands that are similar to their human relationships. Fournier created a spectrum of types of relationships that people have with brands, including flings, best friendships, arranged marriages, and enslavements.[2] McGill's research indicates that people attach animistic qualities to objects, indicating that non-human entities have souls and a consciousness.[13] Continuing in this line of

thinking, Aggarwal and Law[14] studied two types of relationships that people have with brands and the norms that are present in each type: exchange relationships and communal relationships. Exchange relationships are ones in which both members provide an advantage to the other in a give-and-take manner and each member benefits from the relationship. Communal relationships are those in which both members genuinely care about the other's well-being, such as within a friendship or family relationship. When consumers take on a communal relationship with brands, they not only take into consideration their own self-interest, they make judgments about the brand with the brand's "feelings" and "interests" in mind. Whether the consumers on MySpace view their friendships with brands on the site as exchange (i.e. access to exclusive perks) or communal (i.e. connection to a meaningful piece of their life/identity) may affect their motivations and expectations in the relationship.

Other research investigated the relationship between the sincerity of a brand's personality characteristics and the effect of transgressions on the consumer-brand friendship in terms of the implicit contractual agreements behind brand-consumer bonds. Aaker found that the more sincere the consumer perceived the brand, the more damaging transgressions were to the relationship with consumers stating things such as, "This brand is not as concerned about me as I thought."[15] This literature is interesting to the study as it may provide insights into what consumers expect from their brand friends in a MySpace friendship and the damage that could arise when brands do not fulfill their side of the friendship "contract."

The literature in this section of the review raises an additional question. At what point in the consumer/brand relationship does the brand actually become a rational entity in the consumer's mind, responsible for upholding its "side" of a friendship? This phenomenon is disjointed from the actual consumption of the product. The consumption activity may in fact be the participation in the consumer/brand friendship itself, removed from any purchasing behavior.

The literature presented on brands and self-identity can provide a guide for research on consumers who make friends with brands on MySpace to create a personal online identity and to project a certain related image to other members.

Brands and Self-Identity

Belk has been referenced by countless researchers studying the relationship between brands and the consumer's self-identity, since his influential research on the topic in 1988. Among the insightful claims made in his work was the idea of a person's identity being constructed through consumption.[16] Each purchase, use, or association adds to one's identity. He identified four different stages of possession in consumer development: (1) distinguishing self from the environment, (2) distinguishing self from others, (3) constructing and managing identities, and (4) achieving continuity and preparing for death.[17]

The question posed earlier now becomes whether or not Belk would consider the act of creating or maintaining a friendship with a brand on MySpace the same as consuming that brand. Since the brand's friendship is displayed within the online social networker's profile, it is similar to a consumer's possession in that it

communicates to others something about the "owner" or creator, much as wearing a brand's clothing would. Perhaps a stronger reason that people develop friendships with brands on MySpace is to construct an identity for themselves to learn more about their own selves, not as much for others to learn about them.

The literature on friendships, personal relationships with brands, and brands and self-identity have provided a basis of knowledge on which to create a primary research study exploring MySpace person-brand friendships. The research method is described below.

METHODOLOGY

The Data

The exploratory nature of this project required the use of phenomenological depth interviews to gather most of the information, rather than approaches that are more rigid.[18] Depth interviews allowed for the consumers to develop ideas naturally about their motivations and expectations for their brand relationships and to express them in detail.

The interviews will rely heavily on the autodriving approach to qualitative data gathering. The term *autodriving* describes a process in which the interview is "driven" by respondents who are seeing and hearing their own behavior.[19] The technique presents participants with their own behavior and asks them to comment on it, leading the discussion to the behaviors that consumers feel the need to explain or justify. In this study, the MySpace pages of the respondents will serve as the autodriving tool since they are self-created and self-representative

Informant Selection. Eight Students at the University of Arizona were asked to participate in the study. To be considered for the interview process, students were required to have at least one friendship with an advertisement or other inanimate object on MySpace. Friendships with ads may include places, products, brand names, tag lines, logos, and other company-identifying names/objects. These individuals were contacted through Eller College elective classes and the Eller interview pool. The respondents received research participation credit for their classes as an incentive to participate in the study.

Interview Protocol. The interviews were conducted in person in an interview room at the University of Arizona. The room had a laptop that the interviewee could use to log into his or her MySpace account and to use the website as an autodriving tool. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each and were recorded for reference purposes. Names were not used in this report to protect the individuals' privacy.

Each interview consisted of questions from 5 categories: Profile/Identity, Friendship, Ad Friendship Motivations, Ad Friendship Expectations, and Company Motivation/ Advertising on MySpace. A copy of the question outline that served as a foundation for discussion is included below:

Profile/Identity Questions

What does your profile look like?
Why did you include those things in your profile?
What about your profile do you especially like?
Do you think you could get a good idea about what a person is like by looking at their profile?
Could someone get a good idea of who you are by looking at your profile?

Friendship Questions

Who are your friends on MySpace?
Did you friend anyone you haven't met personally?
Did you friend any characters from movies or shows?
Did you friend any places?
Did you friend any products, brand names, or companies?
What are these [brand] profiles like?

Ad Friendship Motivations

What made you want to friend these [brands]?
Do you buy [the brand]?
What do you like about [the brand]?
What type of person would be friends with [Coke, Budweiser, Playboy, etc.]?
Are you selective in what brands you would consider friending? Why/ why not?
Can you get anything from these brands on MySpace that you cannot get in real life?

Ad Friendship Expectations

What would make a company a good MySpace friend?
What would make a company a bad MySpace friend?
What could they do to make you remove them from your Friend Space?

Company's Motivation

Are these profiles created by the companies or by fans?
Why would a company/fan want to make a MySpace profile?
How critical would you say you are of advertising on MySpace?
How frequently do you feel you are exposed to advertisements on MySpace? What ads?

Data Analysis

The consumer-created documents (MySpace profiles), and taped in-depth interviews served as the data for the study. These sources were analyzed for deep meanings after collection. The observations about the consumer-created documents provided evidence of self-presentation and identification by brand relationships. The interview recordings served to explore the consumers' stated purposes, desires, and demands for and from their ad relationships and their ideas about profiles and identity, MySpace friendships, and MySpace advertisements.

The methodology that was used for interpreting qualitative data was influenced by Glaser and Strauss' approach to grounded theory. The idea behind grounded theory is that research theories can be developed after an in-depth data search, independent of the kind of data used. Qualitative data, as stated in the text on grounded theory, is often the best method for gathering data for sociological theory because it is often (and in this case) the extension of research in a substantive area.[20] A more extensive study of the theories presented in this report, with a greater number of participants, would serve to make the following findings more established. However, this report can serve as a foundation for further research on MySpace brand friendships.

The interviews were reviewed extensively and coded by theme. Themes were then organized and relationships between them explored through the report of the study's findings. By interpreting the data through this exploratory method, a thorough understanding of the participants' thoughts and common themes among different sets of individuals resulted. Opportunities for further expansion of these research efforts

are mentioned at the conclusion of this report.

FINDINGS

Data analysis revealed that MySpace is a place for people to connect online, mostly to people that users have met in RL, and display their interests and personalities. MySpace friendship motivations and expectations are different from RL friendships, yet influence RL friendship dynamics. Users view their friend connections with brands differently than they do with individual users and have a different set of motivations and expectations for brand friends than they do for their other friendships.

MySpace is a Connection

All of the interviewees in this study mentioned that their primary reason for being a part of the MySpace social network was to be connected to other users. Usually these connections were with friends and acquaintances that the participant had met in RL. Table 1 outlines the categories of friends that participants identified as their MySpace friends.

Many of the participants stated that the reason that they are on MySpace is to have a constant and convenient connection to people that they do not see on a regular basis, but who they are still interested in knowing about.

> *Respondent 1:* The only way I can keep in contact with these people is through MySpace.

> *Respondent 3:* Mine is pretty much just so my friends have a chance to talk to me when they can't call me on the phone.

They use MySpace as a way to stay updated on what their past friends are doing, where

they live, and who they are dating. They are not on MySpace, for the most part, to meet people that they do not already know.

> *Respondent 1:* I'm not here, you know, to make friends. I'm here to keep in touch.

> *Respondent 2:* I don't have MySpace to meet people I don't know. It's to keep in contact with people I knew…MySpace is meant to connect to people that you know mostly, and then have a few celebrities if you like.

> *Respondent 4:* People use MySpace to find their friends that they already have, not to meet people.

Table 1

Self-Identified Categories	Respondent
Family	1,3,4,5,6
Close friends	1,3,7
Friends from high school	1,2,7
Friends from college	2,4,7
Coworkers	3,4,5
Acquaintances	3,7
Sorority sisters	1,5
Friends from my home town	2
Celebrities and bands	2
People that randomly friended me on MySpace	3
Friends outside school	4
Past friends	5
Friends with dorky profiles	6
Friends with sexy profiles	6

To stay "connected," users visit the profile pages of their friends and gather information. They do not usually directly communicate with their friends by sending messages or posting comments on friends' profile bulletin boards, but rather pass through the site collecting information as one would with a magazine or newspaper.

Profiles and Identity

Truth versus falsehood. In general, there seemed to be an evident inconsistency in the

manner in which people viewed the relationship between MySpace profiles and identity. Many of the interviewees stated that they felt they could get a good perception of a person's personality by looking at their MySpace profile or they would be comfortable making a judgment about a person by just looking at their MySpace profile. Yet, the same respondents stated later that often a person's profile is not an accurate portrayal of their personality because a lot of MySpace users make themselves seem better, more interesting, or more likeable than they are in RL.

> *Interviewer*: Do you feel like you could look at someone's profile and get a good sense of their personality?
>
> *Respondent 1:* Absolutely.
>
> *Interviewer*: Even if you had not met that person before?
>
> *Respondent1*: Yeah, probably. Definitely. …The essential idea of MySpace is "virtual you" in every way possible, a shrine to yourself. And you want—if anything, what MySpace is, is a display of everyone's strengths because you don't want to make yourself look bad in any way, you know. And you know that other people are going to judge you. You obviously put everything on there [your profile] to be judged in a positive light.

Respondent 1 feels like she could get a good idea of someone's personality by looking at their profile, yet also admits that people portray an inflated image of themselves to impress others. Respondent 4 also mentioned that sometimes people put information on their MySpace pages that is not entirely true about themselves.

> *Respondent 4:* Your profile reflects, sort of, your personality. But sometimes people fake it and put that they are a kind of person that they're really not, so it's kind of hard to—like if you don't know them, it's kind of hard to find out if that's true or not.

Interviewer: What do you do in those situations to find out if it's true?

> *Respondent 4:* You can look at the kind of pictures and kind of stuff they have. Like, this friend of mine. [*Navigates to a friend's profile*] You can see he likes cars and stuff. He has a lot of pictures here with different cars from a thing he went to. And he's with his family here.

Respondent 5 also mentioned that she would not necessarily believe that a profile accurately represented an individual without first looking through the person's pictures.

> *Respondent 5:* The thing that would make me have judgments that would stick is if I looked through their pictures. Like their profile set up and stuff, their song, I feel like that kind of stuff changes monthly—weekly, even for some people—daily, even for some people. But their pictures and who they post as the people who they hang out with and what they do with their lives and their free time, that's how I would know who they are and how I would judge them.

Take others into consideration. Many of the participants that I spoke with mentioned that they take other people into consideration when creating their pages. Other people affect their decisions about layout, content, privacy, language, and writing style. Their MySpace page is about them, but in a format that they think is appropriate for and appealing to their MySpace friends. One of the participants described how he went as far as to change his layout after other MySpace users commented negatively about it.

> *Interviewer:* Tell me about some of the choices you made about your profile.
>
> *Respondent 2:* The main choice I made, and I know everybody tells me, is that it's very colorful. I actually used this new thing that they have, it's like the profile editor thing, and I was able to do weird things that most people don't do. Like you see this is upside down [*pointing to the heading on his MySpace page*], so you can kind of like invert everything on your page. And at first I did that to everything, but then I'm like,

'no that's too confusing,' and like nobody liked it. They said, you know, 'your page freaked me out,' but I kept it up here. I like it here still…Another thing that I did on purpose is to have my videos on top over here because I know people never go to the videos section. Everyone clicks on pictures but nobody goes to the videos, so I was like, you know what, I'm just going to put my videos available like right there. Right away at the top.

Interviewer: When you created this page, did you take other people into consideration, and what they might think about it?

Respondent 2: I think I did kind of think of other people. Yeah, because like I have a lot of different types of friends, I guess. Like some are from Mexico and some are American; I took both of them into consideration. For example, for my Mexican friends I definitely want them to know that I like our music and I put Rodrigo y Gabriela there [*gesturing toward a video of the band with links to their website*] because they are my favorite…But then I also kind of put in information for people who don't know anything about Mexico. That way they can still get an idea about me.

Another respondent told about how she recently changed the content of her page because she was concerned that employers will look at her profile and judge her for it.

Interviewer: Walk me through your profile. What are some decisions you made when creating it?

Respondent 1: Ok, well it used to be a lot fancier but I figured now that I am graduating, and like companies actually take the time to look at all these social networking sites, I figure I should be really conservative. For the most part, I keep it pretty plain. I used to have all this information but I realized it was probably not professional to have a lot of it up. So I was like, forget it. I try to keep it non-incriminating, you know. A lot of my friends go into so much detail on their pages and I guess I just don't see the need to do that because it could come back and bite me in the butt.

These responses indicate that MySpace users see their profile pages as more for other people than for themselves. The information may be all about them, but the "users" of the page are others and are very important to the construction. Choices that creators make about their pages involve the consideration of other people who will use the page to judge them or look at information about them.

The use of humor. Many respondents also mentioned that they included pictures, videos, or quotes on their profile or added certain brand friends because they thought they were funny. The male respondents, especially, included elements that they thought others would find humorous, even if they themselves did not understand what they mean.

Respondent 2: [*Pointing to the About Me section that he created*] Let's see, it says 'Swinger.' I don't really even know what a swinger is, but it's my status. [*Laughs.*]

Respondent 2: Oh yeah, I'm friends with this thing call the Guru, or something. Me and my friends just friended Guru somebody, and that's Mike Meyers, actually. And this is great, I mean, this is—I've been going to this back and forth…This was featured on MySpace right before you log in, he was featured, "Hey, let the Guru whatever…" I don't know. This guy's hilarious. I don't even know exactly what he's promoting, I'm just going there because he says such funny things on his videos. There's these really funny pictures of like him and celebrities. Sex and the City, Ashton Kutcher, Britney Spears, Amy Winehouse, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. I don't even know what he does. It's just funny to go on his page and look at his pictures, you know…As soon as I saw it I went and told my friends about it, you know, "Hey dude, check this out." It's like hilarious. But you know what? To be honest I can't even remember like what's the main point of this. You know, he's not promoting a movie or anything. It's like, what's Mike Meyers doing here? …I don't even know what they're trying to sell. I know they're trying to sell something.

Respondent 3 also mentioned a comedic TV character that he is friends with on the site.

> *Respondent 3:* Jiminy Glick, he's hilarious. That's Martin Short's character, he has a show.
>
> *Interviewer:* What made you want to friend that character?
>
> *Respondent 3:* Mainly just to support the show. I think it's really funny and not many people know about it. It's on Comedy Central. It's pretty much just ridiculous and slapstick. I saw the show a couple of times and thought it was hilarious, so I had to post it. [*Laughs*.]

Overall, there did not seem to be a clear way to distinguish between parts of the respondents' profiles that were meant to be taken as jokes and parts that were meant to be taken seriously. Serious comments, particularly in the "About Me" section of the users' profiles, were intermingled with facetious comments, and until the respondent verbally explained their profile content, it was unclear to the interviewer which was which. During the explanation process, however, it was important to the respondents that I was aware of which pieces of information were true. For example, one of the respondents talked about the "Interests" section of his profile:

> *Respondent 7:* Ok, over here on the other side I've got my interests like what sports I like to do and that sort of thing. I've been skiing since I was like two; it's a big part of my life…And then over here, there are details about, you know, body type, sexual orientation, stuff like that. And I sort of joke here, but I think that's kind of funny, about my egg count.

Another person talked about surveys that MySpace users like to fill out and post on their profiles. While explaining another user's survey, she spoke confidently about which sections were meant to be jokes and which were serious.

> *Respondent 1:* A lot of these answers, if you look at them, they're not directly serious answers. A lot of them are, [*reading from a friend's survey*] "Do you swear? F*** no." You know? Or "Do you eat a box of Oreos by yourself? Not a single Oreo! Do you play an instrument? Does an iPod count?" It's their way of showing their personality, I guess.

What is interesting about the use of humor within the "About Me" and "Interests" sections is how the creators do not explicitly distinguish the jokes from the truth. They assume that observers will know the difference and will be able to tell which responses to take seriously and which to laugh at. In addition, observers confirm this assumption by their assertive explanations of others' profiles. They assume that they know which content the creators included as fact and which as fiction. The observers also gather information from the facetious profile content about the creator's personality. Comedy is admired and remembered by MySpace observers and often the goal for creators.

Profiles and Interests

When asked about the relationship between a MySpace profile (or brand friends) and the creator's personality, some respondents commented that a profile gives more insight into the creator's *interests and preferences* than their personality. The interviewees agreed that profiles communicate information about creators, but some were hesitant to make statements about creators' personalities as they believed there could be many reasons for a creator to include content in their profile or friend a brand.

> *Interviewer:* If you were to see that someone was friends with Budweiser on MySpace, would that catch your eye at all?
>
> *Respondent 8:* I guess so; I mean it implies something about the person, definitely.

Interviewer: How so?

Respondent 8: Well it implies that they enjoy Budweiser. Like, I don't think that you would be friends with somebody like that if you didn't. Plus, if you were friends with somebody like Miller instead of Budweiser, then it would say something about you as well.

Interviewer: Would the friendship imply anything about the person's personality?

Respondent 8: I mean, I guess socially it can imply that they're a heavy drinker, but I don't know that I would take that much away from it.

When asked if their own profiles reflected their personalities, some respondents were unsure and stated that their profiles said more about what they like than their personality.

Interviewer: If I were to look at your profile without having met you, do you think that I could get an accurate idea of who you are as a person?

Respondent 3: Well depending on who you are and how you view other people, you could probably get a lot of *information* from it. I don't know how far I would go in terms of getting to *know* someone. But you know, you learn more about them, that's for sure. You learn stuff like what they like, what their interests are, what appeals to them, what calls to them. You know, because obviously we put stuff on here for different reasons, right? Some of it just appealed to me visually, but some of it, like this one, I just like her as an actress. There's stuff for various reasons.

Interviewer: If someone who didn't know you were to look at your profile, could they get a good sense of your personality?

Respondent 6: I think that they could get an idea of at least what I'm portraying of myself. I think somebody can get an idea of what type of music I like. They can see that I like acoustic music more than I like hard metal.

There was a strong theme that emerged from both creators and observers about the difference between personality and interests.

Both groups believed that MySpace profiles can accurately portray a person's interests, but not necessarily their personality. They emphasized the idea that a creator can have many reasons for their interest in a particular brand, and it that would be difficult to assess someone's personality based on their profile.

MySpace Friendships

The three main themes that participants mentioned with regard to MySpace friendships were that they are different from RL friendships, they can drive or affect RL relationships, and that just because someone is your "friend" on MySpace does not mean that you are friends. To many, the title "friend" seemed either too general, because they have some MySpace friends to whom they are extremely close in RL and some that they are not, or too personal, because many of their friends on MySpace are acquaintances, or even strangers.

Respondent 6: Keep in mind the general way that MySpace works, like how people conduct themselves on MySpace, because it's not the same as real life, or whatnot.

Interviewer: OK, how so?

Respondent 6: Well like, things don't really matter on MySpace, right? Like you can friend somebody who lives all the way across the country and it's no big deal if you never talk to them or don't have time for them, or whatever. And, it might be somebody really weird that you'd never really want to know in real life, but you know, they're harmless because they're just a MySpace friend. Or somebody that wants to date you but you have absolutely no interest in them. You know, like it's ok because you don't have to fend them off in person or anything like that. Just generally speaking, there's like the unspoken rules, like "It's not that serious if it's on MySpace." Like you have to meet someone in real life before you can start to expect things from them.

Interviewer: OK, so there's a real difference between MySpace friendships and other friendships?

Respondent 7: Yeah, it's sort of like chat rooms or something like that. You can't claim that you know someone just because you've met them on MySpace.

The title "friend" appeared to be just that—a title—and not necessarily related to what many people would consider a RL friendship. In turn, the expectations for MySpace friends are not the same as for other RL friends; users are much less demanding of their MySpace friends.

Concerning the topic of the "Top Friends" feature of MySpace, there was much discussion. This feature allows MySpace users to rank their MySpace friends in order, with their #1 Top Friend being their best or closest friend, their #2 Top Friend their next closest, etc. The list is displayed on their profile page and friends that are in the Top Friends list are notified when they are added, subtracted, or moved within the list. Two of the respondents spoke about how the Top Friends list on MySpace actually affected RL friendships of individuals they know. In these cases, MySpace friendships are defining RL friendships, rather than the other way around. Respondents said that Top Friends lists can cause hurt feelings, jealousy, and even fights between friends.

Respondent 1: These are my Top Friends. And the funny thing is about it, it's like this whole Top Friends idea. A lot of people get offended if like, A) they're not on your Top Friends, if you, say, were to be really close or if you switch them around to different places. Some people really get offended. And I see it more in my sister's generation, as far as high school kids. They have a problem with that. But I think it's kind of funny because people take it really seriously, as much as they take Facebook seriously where if you're in a relationship or not in a relationship. I know a couple broke up because he wouldn't confirm her as his girlfriend on Facebook. It's

really kind of weird how it's gotten to the extent where people take everything really seriously.

Respondent 7: I don't know, I think this Top Friends thing is sort of corny, to be honest with you, just because I think it's like a competition, Like if you're not friends with someone anymore, like they hooked up with your ex-girlfriend or something, you take them off your top friends. I don't know, I just think it's kind of…

Interviewer: Do people take it seriously?

Respondent 7: Well, I don't because I've matured a little bit more so I really don't think it's a *big* deal. I mean if someone takes me off their Top Friends, I don't necessarily take it personally. Unless, like, they're one of my best friends. But you know, if I'm acquaintances with somebody and one day I'm on there and the next day I'm not, it doesn't really affect me much. But I think for the younger generation I would say that might be true. If you're on somebody's Top Friends list and then they take you off, they'll wonder why, you know.

Connection equals friend. Another theme that emerged from the interviews is the idea that it is not as important to users that they are actually friends in RL with someone in their Friend Space as it is that they feel a connection to that person or thing. The connection can be strong or weak, but it is what qualifies the entity as a "friend."

Respondent 6: I put pictures of my friends here. And I put this picture of my favorite artists, Little Rain, Robin Thick, Ferrell Williams. Even though they're not really my friends I'm like, yeah they look like friends right there so I'm like, hey well they'll be my friends too then. Along with all my other friends. I put Rodrigo y Gabriela in my friends section. They're not really my friends, I just love them. So, yeah, they're there.

The respondent has not met these "friends," nor has he purchased all of their music. Yet, he likes them as artists, so therefore, to him they are friends. They look like friends in the picture he has, so they are friends.

Brand Friendships

The literature review conducted prior to the primary data collection gave the impression that while there were many brand profiles on MySpace, their reach was limited and only a small segment of users had friend connections with them. The interview process revealed that brand friends are much more prevalent and most MySpace users have at least one in their Friend Space. In fact, every single person that was interviewed for this study had at least one brand friend in their Friend Space, and four respondents had five or more brand friends. The brand friend names and types that were revealed in the interview process are listed in Table 2. They include events, night clubs, music groups, and TV characters, among others.

Exchange relationships with brand friends. Most of the interviewees talked about their brand friendships as exchange relationships. Recall from the literature review of this report that an exchange relationship is one in which both members benefit because each provides an advantage to the other in a give-and-take manner. MySpace user motivations for friending brands included receiving convenient or exclusive information about tour schedules, bar or restaurant specials, and musicians' upcoming album releases. For these users, MySpace offers a platform for them to have information from their favorite brands either delivered to them or listed in an easily accessible profile format. They expect that the brands will keep their information up-to-date, provide exclusive offers and promotions, and conduct themselves professionally, as a good business would in any other context. In return, they feel that they are benefiting the brand by allowing it to advertise to them and their other MySpace friends.

Respondent 1 had many brand friendships with night clubs from Scottsdale, AZ, and Las Vegas, NV. She explained the benefits of these relationships as follows:

> *Respondent 1:* Napkin Nights is a promotional company, actually located in the southwest region, and they do club promotions. They're the ones that go to the different night clubs and take pictures of people and post them on their website or whatnot. I guess I'm friends with them because they always either have updates or promotions as far as, oh, "Get into this club for free," or "There's an event tonight, come here."
>
> …And if you go to my homepage, there's always—they update themselves with bulletins and they do a lot of promotional stuff. And that's how I stay updated on "Oh, tonight there's something going on here," or whatever.
>
> …As far as the night club industry, MySpace gives me a platform to have that kind of connection to get free access and things. You know, I've utilized this as far as trying to, for like my birthday parties, I always hold them at night clubs up in Scottsdale. So, this way, I can have an easy way to connect to them instead of calling them up and trying to get a hold of them, I can go online, message them and say, "Hey I'm interested in bringing seven girls into the club tonight. Can you get us on the list?" It's just an easier way to connect with a business.
>
> *Interviewer:* And they will message you back in a situation like that?
>
> *Respondent 1:* Yeah. And the thing about this, I feel that a lot of these companies, at least the people that are running their MySpace pages, check them [their MySpace messages] so often that it would be faster for me to connect to them this way than to leave a message on their company voicemail.
>
> …It's more of an event calendar to have them as a friend, versus anything else.

Three respondents talked about their MySpace friendships with events. The

event friend's sites keep them updated on dates, locations, and agendas, while giving other attendants the opportunity to network with one another and share pictures. Respondent 3 mentioned an anime convention that he's friends with:

> *Respondent 3:* TUS-CON, that's a convention for anime people that one of my friends sent me the link for because some of my favorite authors go there and I wanted to go and see them, so I signed up for that.

> *Interviewer:* So what does that profile look like and what kind of information does it tell you?

> *Respondent 3:* It's pretty much just for disseminating information about when the events are going to be, and I think it also—I mean, I haven't looked into it all that much because it's not generally something that I am that connected with. See, a lot of my friends are on here, too.

Respondent 5 friended the 2007 Tucson AIDSWALK. The site has information about the participating teams, the amount of money that was raised last AIDSWALK, and who to contact to get involved. There is a Wall, a location for others to post comments on a user's MySpace page, where other friends of the AIDSWALK have posted comments such as "You are amazing! On behalf of those who may never have an opportunity to thank you... Thanks! for your heart of compassion." She said that the reason for her friendship with the brand is so that she can get information about the event from year to year.

Seven of the eight respondents had friend connections with musicians. They gave reasons for their brand friendships with music artists that included getting concert and tour date information, listening to their songs on the site, and finding links to their official websites

Table 2

Brand Friend	Type
Auld Dubliner	Bar
Napkin Nights	Promotional company
Carlos Mensia	Comedian
Brad Williams	Comedian
TUS-CON	Event
2007 AIDS Walk	Event
La Cochela	Event
Monterey, CA	Geographic location
The Simpsons Movie	Movie
X3 (X-Men Movie)	Movie
Jason Mraz	Musician
Marilyn Manson	Musician
Mark Johnson	Musician
Divotchka	Musicians
Puddle of Mud	Musicians
Friend's Band (3)	Musicians
3 AM Drift	Musicians
The Guru	MySpace character
e4	Night Club
Various Vegas Clubs	Night Club
LEVEL	Night Club
Thinking Pink	Philanthropic organization
God Bless Generica	Political idea
Jiminy Glick	TV character
Trudy Wiegle	TV character
Brooke (Rock of Love II)	TV character
Jaqui (Rock of Love II)	TV character
Sex and the City	TV show

> *Respondent 1:* I looked up Jason Mraz [a musician] because most of the time, as far as their sites go, their MySpace pages [musicians' pages] I go on there because they have their music clips, or music on there and if I want to listen to their new songs I can go directly to their MySpace and they'll usually have those full songs that I can preview, which is nice. I think MySpace has done a really good job distinguishing bands as MySpace music users. They're on there more on a professional level.

They're a separate category. Instead of just being a MySpace everyday-person, they're an actual music artist. And music artists have this [*pointing to the MySpace Music header at the top of the Jason Mraz MySpace profile page*] part right here that other people don't have.

In exchange for these perks, respondents felt it was only fair to offer brand friends something in return—and stated that their side of the exchange was allowing brands to advertise to them and through them to other friends.

> *Resopondent 2:* I think they're all out there for the same reason. Puddle of Mud is advertising for Puddle of Mud. You know, they want to promote their tours, they want to promote their CDs, they want to promote their music. They want to promote their everything. So they're trying to promote themselves. I think they're all there for the same reasons.
>
> *Interviewer:* Is that fair for them to do?
>
> *Respondent 2:* Um…yeah, I mean. It's not one of those things like they're going to force me to go to their show. It's just like, if I want to go to a show I can look them up and see when they're doing shows. I don't really care. It's just kind of cool to have that way to find out, you know.

Communal relationships with brand friends. Some interviewees also referred to their brand relationships in a way that was more communal. As defined earlier, communal relationships are those in which both members genuinely care about the other's well-being, such as within a friendship or family relationship. When reasons for brand friendships included the respondent's enjoyment of the brand, desire to share the brand with others, and feeling of connection to the brand, they were describing a mutually caring relationship that extends beyond a give-take exchange.

Any time respondents talked about their brand friendships with characters from TV shows or movies, they described their relationship as communal. The following excerpt from Interview 3 that was mentioned in an earlier section about humor applies here as well:

> *Respondent 3:* Jiminy Glick, he's hilarious. That's Martin Short's character, he has a show.
>
> *Interviewer:* What made you want to friend that character?
>
> *Respondent 3:* Mainly just to support the show. I think it's really funny and not many people know about it. It's on Comedy Central. It's pretty much just ridiculous and slapstick. I saw the show a couple of times and thought it was hilarious, so I had to post it. [*Laughs.*]

Respondent 3's motivation for friending Jiminy Glick had nothing to do with receiving any benefits from the relationship, such as promotions or broadcast information. He simply thought the character was funny and wanted to virtually connect to him through MySpace and "introduce Jiminy" to his other friends on the network. Respondent 6 also wanted to connect with a television character just to learn more about her life and personality:

> *Interviewer:* Are you friends with any characters from shows or movies?
>
> *Respondent 6:* Yeah, actually, Jaqui. She's from that TV show, Rock of Love II. On their show, they advertise to go on their MySpace a lot, like, "Hey, check out Rock of Love II on your MySpace to learn more about so-and-so." Definitely did it. So her, and I think I have another one of those girls from there.
>
> *Interviewer:* What made you want to friend Jaqui?
>
> *Respondent 6:* On the show she caught my attention, because like on the TV show there's like a bunch of skanky girls but she was different because she didn't get kicked off, like all the other ones, but she actually decided to leave…I started thinking about it and I was like, "Wow, she was really like attractive, really hot, she was really sexy," so she caught my attention more

than any of the other contestants in that show. And so then they even talked about it, "If you want to learn more about her, go on her MySpace." So I definitely did.

Interviewer: So did you take the time to look through her profile?

Respondent 6: Yeah, I definitely did. I wanted to know like where she was from—Huntington Beach—I saw her pictures. I wanted to find out more about her personal life. I wasn't really looking at her information from the show or anything. I would have even been more interested if I had found Jaqui that didn't say 'from the TV show,' I would have been more interested in her actual MySpace.

Respondent 7 friended Monterey, CA, his hometown because he felt a connection with it and identified with it personally. He stated that he had never used the profile to get information or look for promotions, but sometimes went on to see pictures of the beautiful sunsets or the ocean.

Respondent 7: A place is sort of, I think a cool way to have a friend on MySpace because, I don't know, I don't think it's too far fetched. Because like, whether or not you can relate to someone's band or music or something just because calling them your "friend" on MySpace, I mean, you're not really *friends* with them. But yet, a place, I mean if you live in that place I think it's more… That's why I've sort of given in to a place as a friend.

The difference between the profiles of the exchange relationship and communal relationship brand friends was that the communal relationship ad profiles looked more similar to regular, non-brand pages. They had information and pictures for people to enjoy simply for the sake of learning more about them, not to try to promote any upcoming shows or new product lines. They did not look like advertisements and were not overly trying to sell anything. Instead, the profiles presented the brands' "real" side and allowed customers to explore without feeling like they were being advertised to.

When things go wrong. Brand friendships can easily be severed if the brand does not act appropriately, according to the MySpace user, or uphold their side of the friendship. Too much communication to the user, presenting false information or a misrepresentation of the brand, and failing to stay updated are all examples of bad behaviors on the part of the brand.

Interviewer: What could a brand do to be a bad friend or what would make you remove them from your Friend Space?

Respondent 1: Basically, overdo it. Sometimes I just get really annoyed with all these updates and I'm just like, "Uh, I don't care for them anymore," and I'll take them off my friends.

Interviewer: What would make a company a bad MySpace friend?

Respondent 4: Probably a company that's trying to show something that they're really not. Like to pretend that people like that brand when it's really not a good brand. Or to say that they are better than they really are in real life.

Interviewer: What would make a company a bad MySpace friend?

Respondent 5: No updates. Then it's like, "what's the point?" That's pretty much it.

Discussion

The findings address the motivations, expectations, and strategies employed in constructing and observing MySpace profiles and making friend connections with advertisements or brands. From the data analysis, six main suggestions for marketers interested in utilizing MySpace as a tool can be extracted. Following these six recommendations should lead to stronger connections with MySpace users and yield more effective marketing results.

1. **Balance truth with fluff.** MySpace users already expect a certain degree of self-bias and an emphasis on the positive aspects of the brand on the brand's profile. They are familiar with the practice of making themselves look more attractive or more popular on MySpace than they are in RL, and admit that their other friends do the same. However, there is an expectation that brands be honest and upfront about their level of quality and information about their products and/or services. People want to know that the integrity of the brand is being extended through their MySpace profile, just as it would be on their corporate website, over the phone, or in person. Users are already critical of the validity of profile information among their other non-brand friends, and companies should expect MySpace consumer friends to be much more skeptical of their profile content as they have a vested interest in the friendship exchange. Companies should use pictures of their product or service to promote believability, in accordance with the theme that respondents revealed when they said that looking at a person's pictures was the best way to judge them accurately.

2. **Take users into consideration.** Creators take other MySpace users into account when they design their page layouts and make choices about content, language, and writing style. They expect that their friends do the same for them, commenting negatively if their friends have unattractive or difficult-to-navigate pages. Everything on a brand MySpace profile should address a consumer need, be presented in a consumer-friendly manner, and show evidence of the brand's consideration for the consumer friend.

3. **Use humor.** The brand friends that were the most memorable and spoken about the most enthusiastically by interviewees were those in which humor was the overriding element. Not only did funny brand friend characters Jiminy Glick and the Guru get consumers to keep coming back to their pages, they got consumers to send links to their brand profiles out to their other MySpace friends. Recall that the respondent who talked about his brand friendship with the Guru had no idea what the purpose of the page was, but could not get enough of the pictures, videos, and profile information on the page. After some discussion, he concluded that the Guru was probably advertising something, but he did not know nor care what that was. His reason for visiting the site was to review the comedic content and share the jokes with his other MySpace friends. If a company is clever enough to use humor, either by creating their own humorous character or some other slapstick forms of entertainment, they can develop a highly-trafficked site that has the potential to reach well beyond their current customer set. The point would be to create a profile that could stand on its own, without the need for product promotions or other perks. Those extras can be added later, after the humor elements drive expansion and retention of the brand's profile hits.

4. **Offer a connection.** If a connection equals a friend on MySpace, the purpose of a brand's profile should be to introduce itself as likeable and "part of the consumer world." The brand should look comfortable, familiar, and friendly, and offer a connection to something that the consumer values.

A good example is the Doritos Crash the Super Bowl campaign that Doritos ran for the 2008 Super Bowl. The campaign was a contest in which fans could send in music videos of themselves singing and others could go onto Doritios' MySpace page and vote for their favorite. The winner had the opportunity to film a professional music

video that would play during the Super Bowl as a commercial. The ad campaign provided a connection to consumers through music, voting, and a collective experience. In running this campaign, Doritos looked like a friend—providing publicity to an amateur singer, instilling a sense of community, and celebrating an American tradition.

5. **Be a communal brand.** A company should concentrate on positioning their brand presence on MySpace as a communal friend to consumers. Communal brand friend connections occur when the consumer wants to friend the brand because they enjoy them, feel a connection to them, and/or want to share the brand with others. Deemphasizing friend "rewards" and concentrating more effort on personal contact and mutual enjoyment of one another can strengthen communal feelings. These relationships should be long-term oriented and provide connections to the consumers that extend beyond the product or service.

In the case where Respondent 6 friended Jaqui from Rock of Love II, he was not looking for the commercial side of her—the TV character that she, in fact, is—but the "Real Jaqui" that other, non-MySpace friends don't get to see. Consumers want to feel like they really know who the brand is, not the commercialized version, but the authentic, "stripped" side. If companies can provide that feel on their MySpace page, communal friendships are possible.

6. **Don't push the advertisements.** At this point, consumers know on some level that brand friendships are really advertisements, but they are not skeptical of them like they are of pop-ups and banner ads. If companies are too explicit in their advertising on MySpace through brand profiles, consumers

may become wary of making friend connections all together. The best technique is to let consumers feel as if they are the ones who found the brand friend and sought out the promotions and special perks. Pushing too much information and advertisements onto them will likely push them away forever. Companies should be subtle and concentrate on building a relationship with the consumer first. Consumers seek out the sales promotions and give companies signals about what they want from them as a brand friend. Some promotions are helpful, but brands should reinforce the idea that the relationship is the most important and valuable part of the MySpace friendship with consumers.

Future trends in social network ads. With the success and mass popularity of MySpace and Facebook among Generation Y, other online companies will continue to enter the social network scene, with a primary focus on connecting consumers with businesses. Just this February, a startup social networking company from Long Beach, CA, called Lymabean launched their site, www.lymabean.com, targeted at college students at the University of Arizona and Arizona State University. The website connects Arizona university students with local businesses with a focus on word-of-mouth advertising for these businesses among the students.

As the social networking marketing technique grows and the number of social networks and their capabilities expand, companies should keep in mind the six techniques discussed in this report and conduct more extensive market research on social network consumer behavior.

Implications for future research. The next step in this research initiative should be to study the relationship between ad

friendships and purchase behavior. It remains unclear whether a person is more likely to consume a product or service if they are friends with the provider on MySpace. Further, it is unknown whether the consumption behavior leads to the ad friendship or the MySpace friend connection influences future purchases. Lastly, a follow-up study in a few years time that addresses consumer attitudes toward brand friends may reveal whether in time, consumers become more wary of MySpace profiles as advertisements.

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