Online Socializing: A New Agent of Socialization

*From Research Today, Sociology: A Brief Introduction, Schaefer, McGraw-Hill, 2011*

Membership in the online social networks Facebook and MySpace has grown exponentially in recent years. At first, young adults monopolized these social networks. Indeed, Facebook was created in 2004 as a way for students on a single campus to become acquainted with one another before actually meeting.

Even in the brief history on online networking, sociologists can see social trends. For example, older people are now creating profiles on these sites. As the accompanying figure shows, there is still a clear correlation between age and online profiles: in a national survey of community college students, younger people were much more likely than older people to be online. However, the fastest-growing age groups are now those over 30, including those who are much older. As a result, online socializing is becoming much less age-specific – more like socializing in the real world. Moreover, this new agent of socialization can continue to influence people throughout the life course. Twitter is largely the exception to this trend; it is still a very age-specific method of social interaction.

Online networks – especially those that indicate how many “friends” an individual has – can also be seen in terms of social capital. In fact, “friending” is one, if not the main activity on some online sites. Often the number of friends a person socializes with becomes the subject of boasting. By extension, individuals may use these sites o search for “friends” who may prove helpful to them in future endeavors. Becoming aware of new social opportunities, either social or economic, through friends is a significant benefit of social capital.

Researchers have looked at the relationship between the display of friends online and the number of real-world friends people socialize with, and have proposed two competing hypotheses. According to the social enhancement hypothesis (“the rich get richer”), those who are popular offline further increase their popularity through online networking sites. According to the social compensation hypothesis (“the poor get richer”), however, social network users try to increase their popularity online to compensate for inadequate popularity offline. The social compensation hypothesis, if correct, would be an example of impression management. Research supports elements of both hypotheses: neither hypothesis fully defines the participants in online networking sites.

Viewed from a societal perspective, socializing online can have both positive and negative functions. For members of some marginalized populations, it is a way to socialize with like-minded people. For example, Muslims in Great Britain connect with friends online to learn how to navigate through a society in which they form a distinct minority. For other people, such as members of neo-Nazi groups in Germany and the Mafia in Italy, online networking is a way to proclaim allegiance to socially objectionable organizations. Governments from on such online organizing, seeing it as dysfunctional, and periodically monitor these sites to see whether any laws have been violated. Little wonder during the Arab Spring of 2011, which was marked by popular revolts against the central governments of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, authorities cracked down on citizens’ access to social media.

**Staying Connected: Community College Students**



Note: Question asked was “How often do you use social networking tools, such as instant messaging, text messaging, MySpace and/or Facebook, Twitter, etc., for any purpose? (This does not include e-mail.)”

Source: Center for Community College Student Engagement 2009:8.

*Sources:* Donadio 2009; N. Ellison et al. 2007; Facebook 2011; Gentile 2009; Hundley and Ramirez 2008; Lenhart 2009; Miyata and Kobayashi 2008; Zywica and Danowski 2008.

#   Questions to Answer on Essay:

After reading the assigned article, you will write an essay, 250 words minimum; using Standard English and submit electronically on eCampus.  The minimum requirements for this assignment are to follow the “**Instructions for Writing Sociology Essay”** and answer each question thoroughly:

1. Specifically identify the social phenomena the article (provided by your instructor - – Online Socialization) is about and identify three main conclusions from the article.
2. Describe two important elements of data presented on the table/charts/graph and briefly interpret each data element.
3. Explain the ways in which the social phenomena discussed in the article can be defined as a social issue. Be sure to cite specific evidence from the article to support your position. Students should also include other social or cultural perspectives, where applicable.
4. Analyze how the social phenomena discussed in the article may or may not contribute to social cohesion, human suffering or prejudice or discrimination or inequality and/or affect life chances.
5. Based on your exploration on prompts numbers 1-4 above construct three recommendations including, but not limited to:
	1. A need for future research on the social phenomena discussed in the article.
	2. The development of new laws or public policies to address this issue.
	3. Relevant programs to assist individuals and groups regarding the issue.

You are encouraged to support your argument with direct textual evidence and your sociological insights (applicable terms and concepts learned over your semester of study).