

From [Social Computing Magazine](#), 5th of July 2007:

35 Perspectives on Online Social Networking

by Malene Charlotte Larsen

There are many different perspectives to put on online social networking and it is important to know where one is coming from when talking about social networking and youth. The perspective(s) one has will be very different whether one is a parent with a teenage daughter on MySpace, a marketing executive interested in the target group "14 to 20", a journalist looking for the next big news story on young people and new media, a youngster using a social networking site as part of everyday life or a researcher investigating how young people are using social networking sites.

In this article I try to list the different perspectives I can think of. Mostly, the list is based on my own experiences with Danish social networking sites for youngsters between the age of 12 and 18.

The following 35 perspectives on online social networking sites can be sorted into different overall categories (or different actors or discourses). As a researcher I certainly do not agree with all of the mentioned perspectives, but some of them do represent the opinions (or prejudices) I hear when I am out giving lectures on social networking to adults. After my list, I propose six overarching categories.

But first, here are thirty-five perspectives on online social networking:

1. **The consumer perspective**
Social networking sites are money-making machines creating a need for added value among young people causing them to spend all their pocket money on extra features such as VIP profiles, widgets, gifts for friends and so on.
2. **The youth perspective**
Social networking sites are places that help young people be young and let them "practice" youth. Therefore, the sites are mainly a reflection of youth culture.
3. **The friendship perspective**
Social networking sites are places where young people can maintain and nurse their existing (offline) friendships and create new (online) friendships.
4. **The identity perspective**
Social networking sites are spaces for identity construction. Here, young people are continuously constructing, re-constructing and displaying their self-image and identity. Also, the network sites make them co-constructors of each other's identities.
5. **The body and sex perspective**
Social networking sites are sexual playgrounds for young people where they portray themselves in a provocative or soft porn-style manner. It is all about appearance and body making the youngsters superficial and shallow.

6. **The paedophile and predator perspective**
Social networking sites are an El Dorado for paedophiles and predators who want to harm young people. The people behind the sites are not in control of safety and do not put enough effort into keeping predators out of the sites.
7. **The bullying perspective**
Social networking sites are places where young people bully and threaten each other and the sites are reinforcing and urging bullying between young people.
8. **The reassurance perspective**
Social networking sites are forums for reassurance and confirmatory messages between young people constantly reminding them that they are all right and someone likes them.
9. **The genre perspective**
Social networking sites are places where young people imitate and copy different genres, e.g. fashion magazines, music videos, song lyrics, commercials etc. which can be found in their profile texts.
10. **The branding perspective**
Social networking sites are places where young people learn the mechanism of branding and learn to sell and brand themselves in a positive manner.
11. **The network perspective**
Social networking sites are places where young people learn the crucial importance of being able to network which they can benefit from in their future professional life.
12. **The love perspective**
Social networking sites allow young people to express themselves in a loving manner, thus creating a space for a love discourse that do not exist outside cyberspace.
13. **The source critique perspective**
Social networking sites force young people to be sceptical of what they see and read online. They know that people can create faker profiles which make them extra aware of the identity of the people they communicate with.
14. **The sincerity perspective**
Social networking sites make young people present themselves in a sincere manner in order to avoid being mistaken for a faker. This also creates a sincerity discourse among the users and people who do not follow this are disciplined.
15. **The democratic perspective**
Social networking sites are places that allow young people to have a voice in society. Here, they can be heard and express their opinions.
16. **The materialistic perspective**
Social networking sites are all about materialism and about having the right brands. Youngsters need to be successful with the right clothes and things in order to be accepted on social networking sites.
17. **The language perspective**
Social networking sites aggravate the written language of young people. They develop bad habits of misspelling on purpose, which makes them unable to write correctly. On the other hand, their online language is really creative and they do know how to tell right from wrong.
18. **The public perspective**
Social networking sites are "open diaries" of young people, but they do not think about the fact that the whole world can read their text and see their pictures online.
19. **The surveillance perspective**
Social networking sites are surveillance. Everything young people write online are saved and can be used (against them) by marketing people, future employers and so on.
20. **The group work perspective**
Social networking sites reinforce group work mechanism and young people often work together on profiles and are often willing to help each other.
21. **The time consuming perspectives**
Social networking sites are places where young people spend way too much time

preventing them from performing healthy spare time activities such as sports and outdoor time.

22. The anti-social perspective

Social networking sites make young people anti-social and incapable of communication with others face to face. They lose important social competences.

23. The social perspective

Social networking sites make young people more social and help them communicate with others. Especially, the sites help youngsters cope with shyness or loneliness.

24. The generation-gap perspective

Social networking sites are creating a greater gap between young people and adults such as their parents and teachers who do not understand the youngsters' need to be online all the time.

25. The learning perspective

Social networking sites are places where young people gain important IT competences such as HTML design, layout and graphics.

26. The entertainment perspective

Social networking sites are places young people use for entertainment just like any other medium. Here they watch videos, play games, upload pictures, listen to music etc. Thus, for many youngsters social networking sites have replaced the function that the TV set had for previous generations.

27. The communication tool perspective

Social networking sites are merely a communication tool for young people and they use the sites similar to how they use their mobile phones. In this connection I can mention that the most frequent message I have seen displayed in young people's guest books is "Hi, what are you doing?"

28. The creative perspective

Social networking sites allow youngsters to be really creative and mix and play with different types of content. My colleague [Thomas Ryberg](#) refers to this as 'patchwork' or 'remix' culture in his upcoming PhD thesis on young people, ICT and learning.

29. The space and place perspective

Social networking sites are spaces that allow young people to create their own place(s). And those places are as real and important as the offline places where they meet. Also, young people talk about social networking sites as places referring to them as e.g.. "in here".

30. The Nexus of Practice perspective

A social networking site could be seen as a 'Nexus of Practice'. This concept comes from [Ron Scollon](#) and it "*simultaneously signifies a genre of activity and the group of people who engage in that activity.*" ([Scollon, 2001](#)). People are rather loosely connected in a 'nexus of practice' and I think it is a good metaphor for social networking. (I used the term defining [Arto](#) in my thesis.)

31. The Community of Practice perspective

Social networking sites are therefore not communities in the original sense of the word. However, they do provide the possibility that young people can join in more closely connected interest groups which in [Etienne Wenger's](#) terms could be labelled Communities of Practice (CoP's). Thus, a social networking site could be viewed as a 'Nexus of Practice' with numerous 'CoP's' incorporated.

32. The collection perspective

Social networking sites are places for young people's collection mania. Here they collect friends, guest book messages, picture blog comments etc. (Thanks to Jette Agerbo for pointing out this perspective [on her blog](#).)

33. The fun perspective

Social networking sites are "just for fun". Jette Agerbo also mentions this perspective calling it the 'play perspective'. However, I must say that I do not include the more game or play oriented websites (like [Habbo Hotel](#) or [Netstationen](#)) in my definition of

social networking sites. But of course some youngsters could be using a social networking site as a way of playing or just having fun.

34. The technological perspective

Social networking sites are part of the Web 2.0 and social software technology generation in which case focus on the technological possibilities is predominant.

35. The hardcore business perspective

Social networking sites are hardcore business for the big corporations behind the sites (like Fox). I don't think I quite covered that perspective in my last list mentioning the consumer perspective.

I have touched upon many of these perspectives during my research, but some of the views are still to be explored. However, I must say that I certainly do not agree with all of the mentioned perspectives, but some of them do represent the opinions (or prejudices) I hear when I am out giving lectures to adults.

Different Categories

It is important to know that all of these different perspectives belong to different overall categories (or different actors or discourses). Based on my - currently 35 - different perspectives I propose the following six overarching categories:

Research perspectives

In this category we find e.g. the identity perspective, the youth perspective, the language perspective, the genre perspective, the materialistic perspective, the learning perspective, the creative perspective, the Community of Practice perspective and so on. All of those perspectives could (and should) be a way of researching online social networking and youth. (I am on it :))

User perspectives

In this category we find the point-of-view from the users of social networking, e.g. the social perspective, the friendship perspective, the democratic perspective, the love perspective, the reassurance perspective, the sincerity perspective, the public perspective etc. Those perspectives could also be viewed as different motives that the users have for using social networking sites.

Professional or learning perspectives

To this category belongs the perspectives that consider the learning possibilities of social networking or see how it can be used in a (future) professional life. We have here the network perspective, the group work perspective, the source critique perspective, the technological perspective, the creative perspective, the Community of Practice perspective and more.

Adult or parents perspectives

In this category we have the voices from the worried parents or other adults who have a hard time understanding why the youngsters spend so much time in front of the screen. This is for example the time-consuming perspective, the anti-social perspective, the generation gap perspective, the language perspective, the consumer perspective, the public perspective etc.

Moral panic or news media perspectives

Some perspectives emerge out of a public concern or a news media discourse where creating selling headlines comes into play. Thus, we have in this category the paedophile and predator perspective, the bullying perspective, the sex perspective, the network perspective, the youth perspective, the public perspective and so on.

Marketing perspectives

In this category we find the marketing or business perspectives such as the consumer perspective, the materialistic perspective, the branding perspective, the surveillance perspective and the hardcore business perspective.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above, some of the perspectives will fit into more than one category and could be taken up by several actors. But I do think it is important to know where one is coming from when talking about online social networking and youth. In any case, mapping out the different perspectives has been a good exercise for me as a researcher.

Can anyone think of other perspectives?

Also, check out my colleague Anders Albrechtslund's [21 perspectives on surveillance](#).

Malene Charlotte Larsen is a PhD Student in the Department of Communication, Aalborg University, Denmark, doing research on youngsters and online social networking. She blogs at <http://malenel.wordpress.com>.

Citation:

Larsen, Malene Charlotte (2007): 35 Perspectives on Online Social Networking, [Social Computing Magazine](#), 5th of July 2007