# What Young People Pursuit? The Value in Social Interaction Platforms

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**Abstract:** The reach of social interaction platforms (SIP) has rapidly risen to 2nd place, just falling behind major portal websites. Due to the communication features and possibilities that social interaction platforms offer, it became extremely easy for web users to become unconsciously "hooked" to the platform. To examine the user value sought by SIP, this study drew on the Means-end Chains (MECs) method as a theoretical basis. *Soft Laddering* method was also adopted as a tool for in-depth interviews. Content analysis was used to analyze the "Attributes-Consequence-Value" for SIP players, then converted into a Hierarchical Value Map (HVM). The study found that. Results of the study revealed seven primary factors of consideration for respondents in their selection of social interaction platforms, namely: *rich in functions*, *multiple users*, *real time interaction*, *simple and easy-to-use interface, ample news topic*, *peer strength* and *high level of control*. Respondents identified eight platform usage results, including *resource sharing*, *kill time*, *save costs on connection, high repetitive browsing rate*, *boost interaction*, *relieves stress*, *boost efficiency* and *a sense of excitement.. Fun and enjoyment of life, warm relationships with others, sense of belonging, sense of accomplishment* and *security* and *being well respected* were the six fundamental perceptions of value that social interaction platform users experienced.

**Keywords:** Means-end Chains, Social Interaction Platform, User Values.

## INTRODUCTION

According to a report by InsightXplorer [1], the reach of social interaction platforms has rapidly risen to 2nd place, just falling behind major portal websites. These social interaction platforms are frequented by the majority of the web user population and have changed the habit of internet use for many. In recent years, social interaction platforms have initiated a popular trend around the world and set numerous records, with Facebook's web-based games being the most well known. Back in the 90's (1996), Tamagotchi (digital pet) introduced a one-way interaction between owners and their "pets". In contrast, the games available on Facebook allow users to directly engage in multi-party interaction with their friends and family on a social network. Through interactions during the game session, the platform created a positive influence on users. Due to the communication features and possibilities that social interaction platforms offer, it became extremely easy for web users to become unconsciously "hooked" to the platform. In another report by InsightXplorer [2], the number of Facebook subscribers grew by an incredible 8.37 million in 2009 alone. Pollster [3] also pointed out that as many as 85% of their respondents have used Facebook and merely 5.62% of the respondents claimed to have never tried the web-based games available on Facebook. Based on these statistics, it is evident that social interaction platforms have shortened the feeling of distance among people; through features that allow real-time interaction and exchange of information, users acknowledge the value of such platforms and in turn become loyal fans of these platforms. With a growing population of loyal users, operators of social networking services could easily achieve sustained operation.

Most of the past researches on social interaction platforms were case studies and few studies have been conducted on the discussion of these platforms as a whole or offered a profound understanding of users' psychological needs. Social interaction platforms have been studied widely in the recent past for studying cases [4-7], ages of players [6,7], motivations[5,8]. Social interaction platforms are websites that provide a place to share experiences, ideas, interests, provide and receive feedback, and to keep in touch with others in their communities [9-13]. Boyd and Ellison [14] pointed out that users are not looking to meet new people or to network, but rather to sustain contact with their existing group of friends and acquaintances. According to Wikipedia, Social interaction platforms include the ability to browse, search, invite friends to interact, share film reviews, comments, blog entries, favorites, discussions, events, videos, ratings, music and more. Examples of social networks include Wikipedia (for reference), Facebook (for social activity), YouTube (for video sharing) and Amazon (for book). In addition, as the social interaction platforms spirit emphasizes user's interaction and involvement, users are the key to a successful website [15-16].

Social interaction platforms enables users to present themselves, connect to a social network, and develop and maintain relationships with others [17-18]. According to Boyd and Ellison [14], Social network sites (SNSs) are "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system". These sites facilitate interaction and feedback from the friends of your list, as well as input from the user in creating a profile. However, they also make it easy for users to lurk while looking at others' content.

Past research shows that 83% of teenage social networking users have added comments to pictures that friends have posted, 77% have posted public messages to a friend's page, 71% send private messages to friends, 66% post comments to friends' blogs, and 54% send instant messages or chat through these sites, and most users (nearly 90%) visit the sites to keep in touch with people they already know [19]. Jones and Fox [20] reported that more than half of America's teens and young adults send instant messages and use social networking sites, and more than one-third of all Internet users engage in these activities. Karlin [21] pointed out that "Almost 60% of students who use social networking talk about education online, and more than 50% talk about specific school work". CyberAtlas [22] reported that 84% of Internet users having contacted at least one online community.

Social interaction platforms are network platforms that enable users to stay in touch with their friends and relatives through multi-party communication channels. These platforms offer the feeling of pleasure and satisfy users' deep-rooted desire for interpersonal interaction. Not only has that, these platforms also provided an emotional experience that emphasizes interaction between people by allowing users to express their feelings, emotions and mood from their inner self. The value of a social interaction platform lies in its capacity to allow users to express themselves from the deepest part of their minds. And as such, the discussion on the customer value of social interaction platforms presented in this study can also serve as a discussion on the value that users stand to gain from their use and experience of these social interaction platforms. Based on these concepts, this research will make the proposition that customer value is a subjective preference for specific products or services offered by network platform operators based on a user's individual experience.

For the purpose of this research, a means-end chain model has been adopted as the research method; a total of 30 subjects were interviewed in a one-on-one, open laddering interview fashion. By examining the nature of interaction between different platforms and users and the values that were created during the process, one could gain insights into users' psychological needs of social interaction platforms as a whole and discuss the correlation between attributes of social interaction platform products, the results of use and ultimate values. Through the process of converting abstract emotions into text, the research shall go one step further to satisfy users' needs for value and present a value hierarchy chart that will illustrate the general process of platform selection by social interaction platform users.

## EXPERIMENTAL SECTION
### Participants

There are many means-end studies that have sample sizes of 30 informants. As a general rule of thumb, a mini of 20 respondents should be included in any single subgroup. Also, 20 respondents can provide the full range of attributes, consequences, and valued associated with the key brands in the category, when the respondents are carefully specified and screened [23]. Hence, 30 SIP users who were all college students were invited in this study.

Lenhart [24] pointed that as high as 72% of 18-29 year-old internet users are using social interaction platforms (SIP), representing the demographic with the highest ratio of SIP usage. And as such, students in the group of 18-29 year-old (male to female ratio at 1:2) that have used 2 or more SIPs were chosen as subjects for the purpose of this study.

### Design and procedure

For the purpose of this research, a means-end chain model has been adopted as the research method; a total of 30 subjects (frequent users of social interaction platforms) were interviewed in a one-on-one, open laddering interview fashion. Using a soft-laddering technique, respondents attended individual interview sessions, of between 45 minutes to 1 hour. The research asking user the following questions: 1) Which attributes influence your SIP use? 2) Why are these attributes important to you? 3) What consequences do these attributes provide after you use the SIP? 4) What value do you obtain from these benefits, and why?

### Measures

Content analysis and coding of the data was performed according with the relevant literature [25]. The data collected from the interview were coded and categorised independently by three researchers who have experience of using social interaction platform. The index of reliability was 0.94 (as shown in Table 1).

**Table-1:Intercoder Reliability**

| Researchers | A | B | C |
|---|---|---|---|
| B | 0.83 | | |
| C | 0.74 | 0.74 | |
| D | 0.87 | 0.91 | 0.74 |
| Average of agreement：(0.83+0.74+0.87+0.74+0.91+0.74)/6=0.805 Reliability：(4*0.805)/(1+3*0.805)=0.94 | | | |

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
### Coding

The research will identify ACV level elements through content analysis of interviews with subjects. Based on the definitions of ACV, one may sort out the key phrases, derive word stems and categorize the rules for code analysis. From the elements at each level, the characteristics have been named and coded to derive 7 attributes, 8 consequences and 6 values (as shown in Table 2). Concrete attributes include: *rich in functions*, *multiple users*, *real time interaction*, *simple and easy-to-use interface* and *ample news topic* with abstract attributes such as *peer strength* and *high level of control*. With regards to the consequences that users obtain through SIP attributes, concrete consequences include *resource sharing*, *kill time*, *save costs on connection* and *high repetitive browsing rate*; abstract consequences include *boost interaction*, *relieves stress*, *boost efficiency* and *a sense of excitement.* Values reflect the extent of satisfaction that users experience through their use of SIP and *fun and enjoyment of life* turned out to be the ultimate core value for most subjects, followed by the feelings of *warm relationships with others, sense of belonging, sense of accomplishment, security* and *being well respected*.

**Table-2: Item codes of the SIP data and frequency**

| | | Element | Frequency | % | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attributes | A01 | Multiple users | 23 | 31.08 | 74 |
| | A02 | Real time interaction | 4 | 5.41 | |
| | A03 | Peer strength | 15 | 20.27 | |
| | A04 | Simple and easy-to-use interface | 2 | 2.70 | |
| | A05 | Rich in functions | 25 | 33.78 | |
| | A06 | High level of control | 2 | 2.70 | |
| | A07 | Ample news topics | 3 | 4.05 | |
| Consequences | C01 | Kill time | 3 | 3.49 | 86 |
| | C02 | Boost interaction | 27 | 31.40 | |
| | C03 | Boost efficiency | 2 | 2.33 | |
| | C04 | Relieves stress | 15 | 17.44 | |
| | C05 | Resource sharing | 25 | 29.07 | |
| | C06 | Sense of excitement | 10 | 11.63 | |
| | C07 | Save costs on connection | 2 | 2.33 | |
| | C08 | High repetitive browse rate | 2 | 2.33 | |
| Values | V01 | Fun and enjoyment of life | 39 | 52.70 | 74 |
| | V02 | Sense of belonging | 10 | 13.51 | |
| | V03 | Warm relationships with others | 15 | 20.27 | |
| | V04 | Security | 3 | 4.05 | |
| | V05 | Sense of accomplishment | 6 | 8.11 | |
| | V06 | Being well respected | 1 | 1.35 | |

The study tallied the number of direct and indirect links among the ACV level elements and a total of 74 value ladders were created with each participant mentioning 2.47 ladders on average. Attributes such as *multiple users, peer strength* and *rich in functions* have been found to be key elements, and these can be attributed to the fact that SIPs are community organizations that have a specific group awareness that connect people in the same environment through the links between users. The result is an intimate world that belongs strictly to users and their friends/family in the same community. Through SIPs, users could find out the latest news of their loved ones on the platform and show their concern without temporal or spatial constraints, and their relations may be sustained at specific levels regardless of distance. The consequences of *boost interaction, relieves stress* and *resource sharing* reflect the SIP users' wishes to learn more about other people's motivation through interactions (i.e. leaving messages, sharing photos) or relief the

tension they experience from their day-to-day life. Through *resource sharing*, users can share their blogs, pictures, messages and so forth to let their loved ones know how they have been doing as of late, and such records of day-to-day life also serve as memorabilia of past memories. Several participants revealed that they have resorted to using SIPs out of the hope that through interactions with their friends and family on the platform, they may be able to release the stress they get from their daily lives, thereby feeling happier and more pleasant. A portion of the subjects also expressed the wish to stay connected with friends and strengthen the bonds with the people they care about without being subject to time or space constraints. For the majority of the participants, the positive mood they get after using

their SIP happens to be the most important individual core value. Most of the users believed *fun and enjoyment of life* and *warm relationships with others* to be the most important values of using their SIP. This means that when they use the SIP, getting into a positive mood and forming close bonds with others through the platform are the things that mattered most to them.

### Hierarchical Value Maps

A hierarchical value map (Fig 1) has been created based on the correlations of various ACV implication matrix (as shown in Appendix A) links derived from the study. The following section will focus on key correlations between attributes and consequences.
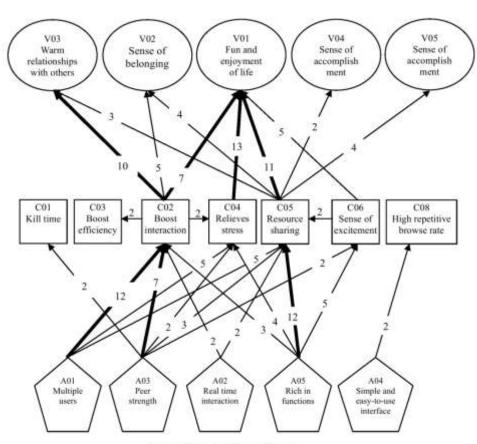


Fig. 1 SIPHVM (Cutoff : 1.5)

### Rich in functions (A05)-*Fun and enjoyment of life*(V01)

The fact that users are attracted to the functions and experienced different feelings and values (i.e. *fun and enjoyment of life*) shows that users utilize SIPs in a pleasant and happy mood to communicate and interact with their loved ones on their computer screens in order to be closely bonded with one another. The link between *rich in functions* to *resource sharing* (n=12) shows that users care a great deal whether the functions that SIPs offer allow them to share information and

various records with their loved ones. The link between *rich in function* to *sense of excitement* (n=5) also shows that users are willing to try out new things in order to make themselves happy and they are more motivated to take on other changes so that they could get the feeling of keeping up with the pace of time and trends.

### Multiple users (A01)-*Fun and enjoyment of life*(V01), *Sense of belonging*(V02) and *Warm relationships with others*(V03)

*Multiple users* is one of the primary incentives that has drawn the majority of internet users to become members of SIPs because it allows them to *boost interaction* (n=12) with their friends and families. The interactions would please them, thereby delivering the values of *fun and enjoyment of life* (n=7), *sense of belonging* (n=5) and *warm relationships with others* (n=10). Users hope that by maintaining their friendships and bonds, they may expand their interpersonal network and perhaps gain insight to the intricacies of interpersonal relationships (i.e. identifying acquaintances among the friends of friends).

### *Peer strength* (A03)-*Fun and enjoyment of life*(V01), *Sense of belonging*(V02) **and** *Warm relationships with others*(V03)

Being in a community with similar topics and interests on SIPs, users unconsciously grow accustomed to using the platform. Through SIPs, they could find out what has been happening with their friends and family in the community; share joyous news and messages with others; seek or offer solace and comfort in times of hardship and find solutions with the help of other users on the platform when obstacles present themselves. The link between *peer strength* to *boost interaction* (n=7) shows that participants signed up as members of a particular SIP out of the wish to enhance their interaction with the friends/relatives that invited them. The experience would lead to three ultimate individual values: *fun and enjoyment of life, sense of belonging* and *warm relationships with others*.

### CONCLUSIONS

Results of the study showed that most users have been drawn to SIPs due to the functions. SIP functions are extensive and cover a broad range of aspects, such as blogs, photos, web-based games, multimedia content sharing, real-time messaging, friend search, personality tests and so forth and all these functions would provide specific extent of interaction for users with their friends. When users put their blogs and photographs on the SIP, they are pleased to see that more and more information and content about themselves are made available to others and they would not have to worry about losing those contents. Whilst browsing blogs/pictures and reminiscing about the past, users get a sense of warmth and security through SIP. As users congregate on the same SIP, it helps to boost users' interactions with their friends and thereby delivering the values of *warm relationships with others, fun and enjoyment of life* and *sense of belonging*. Interestingly, no participants brought up the attributes of *free to use* and *platform popularity*, which have been perceived as important appeals to users. This could be due to the fact that since most of the subjects were students, they would not have signed up to become members of SIPs if membership was not free in the first place. In other word, free

membership has become a fundamental element in the minds of the participants. In addition, subjects also felt that SIPs with more friends is more appealing to them, and popularity alone would not have the same attraction. In other words, if few of their friends have signed up on a particular SIP, that SIP would not have much appeal even if it were to be the most popular.

Presently, there are more and more SIPs that have emerged in the market. If platform operators strive for differentiation and make an effort to find out more about the background, needs and individual values of SIP users, it would facilitate the process of creating functions and services that would be valuable to users and better satisfy their needs. And as such, it is recommended that SIP operators shift their focus of system development on *boosting interactivity*, to strengthening user interaction and cooperation (i.e. web-based games that allow users to send gifts/items to one another to gain levels more quickly, thereby providing a greater sense of achievement from the game). In addition, a portion of the subjects also mentioned in their friend groups that they would respond to different posters based on specific topics and their personal interests. And as such, it is recommended that SIP operators create different social communities for popular topics so that users sharing similar interests could engage in more active interactions and discussions. Alternatively, operators could also introduce new friend-making functions that not only helps users to expand their social network but also make them "stick" together more strongly to that SIP. SIP operators could also work with system developers to deliver new functions that integrate personal blogs and pictures to demonstrate their dedication and commitment to improving the SIP. Through periodical surveys and questionnaires, SIP operators could gain feedbacks from users after they have tried specific functions.

Results of the study show that subjects have fallen into the habit of interacting with their loved ones through SIPs, and sharing bits and pieces of their daily lives with others. This reflects the fact that the communication model of our society today has evolved from face-to-face communication in the past to online interaction today. Future researches could focus on the impact on internet users resulting from the changes in communication to better understand user expectations for SIPs in the future or its significance.

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Appendix A Implications Matrix of SIP-Cutoff：1.5

|     | C01  | C02   | C03  | C04  | C05   | C06  | C07 | C08  | V01   | V02  | V03   | V04  | V05  | V06 |
|-----|------|-------|------|------|-------|------|-----|------|-------|------|-------|------|------|-----|
| A01 |      | 12.00 |      | 5.01 | 5.00  |      | *   |      | *     | *    | *     |      | *    |     |
| A02 |      | 2.00  |      |      | 2.00  | *    |     |      | *     |      | *     | *    |      |     |
| A03 | 2.00 | 7.02  | *    | 2.01 | *     | 2.00 | *   |      | *     | *    | *     | *    | *    | *   |
| A04 |      |       | *    |      |       |      |     | 2.00 | *     | *    |       |      |      |     |
| A05 | *    | 3.00  |      | 4.02 | 12.01 | 5.00 |     |      | *     | *    | *     | *    | *    |     |
| A06 |      |       |      |      | *     | *    |     |      | *     |      |       |      |      |     |
| A07 |      | *     |      |      | *     | *    |     |      | *     |      |       |      | *    |     |
| C01 |      | *     |      | *    |       |      |     |      | *     |      |       |      |      |     |
| C02 |      |       | 2.00 | 2.00 |       |      |     |      | 7.02  | 5.00 | 10.01 |      |      | *   |
| C03 |      |       |      |      |       |      |     |      |       | *    | *     |      |      |     |
| C04 |      |       |      |      |       |      |     |      | 13.00 |      |       | *    | *    |     |
| C05 |      |       |      |      |       | *    |     |      | 11.01 | 4.00 | 3.00  | 2.00 | 4.00 |     |
| C06 |      | *     |      | *    | 2.00  |      |     |      | 5.03  | *    |       |      | *    |     |
| C07 |      |       |      |      | *     |      |     |      | *     |      | *     |      |      |     |
| C08 |      |       | *    |      |       |      |     |      | *     | *    |       |      |      |     |

**Note:* means the value of cutoff below 1.5**