Preface

Social networking communities have been around since the 1980s and are among the largest e-commerce sectors in terms of sales revenue, participant numbers and social impact. The industry provides opportunities for people to exchange ideas, meet, date, and possibly marry—much more efficiently than through chance face-to-face meetings.

We define social networking communities as online communities that focus on the building and verifying of social networks for whatever purpose. Indeed, social networking communities offer a range of services. Some are merely blog hosting services, some offer the option of joining groups temporarily (through chat rooms) or for longer periods of time (through electronic bulletin boards, newsgroups or online groups). Some social networking communities encourage their members’ creativity through sharing of music and video clips, while others enable members to meet, develop relationships, and possibly marry (e-dating services).

While the social networking industry (and its sub-category, e-dating) started in North America, it is now a global phenomenon, as it includes services in South America, Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Indeed, recent research on the proliferation of social networking services shows that the biggest growth areas for the industry at this time are outside North America and particularly in Europe, South America and Asia. As for social networking being a global phenomenon, this is not just a result of the geographical location of social networking services but also of the fact that many users of these services interact and possibly marry users from other countries.

The best indication that social networking Web sites are becoming big business is the acquisition in 2006 of YouTube by Google for 1.6 billion dollars. The social networking video Web site, developed by its 29-year-old CEO, Chad Hurley, and its 28-year-old chief technology officer, Steve Chen, in their garage in 2005, has managed to increase its hit rate from zero to over 100 million visitors per month in one single year.

Most commentators agree that the reason for this phenomenal growth is that social networking Web sites provide an entry point into the Web for consumers who otherwise would not be members of online communities. By playing the role of gate keepers of the Internet, social networking Web sites are helping to expand the scope of cyberspace, as well as revolutionize society as we know it today.

As for the reasons for establishing social networking communities, some of the earliest services have been created by companies as virtual communities of customers. They were intended to serve as platforms for conducting market research, venues for customer support, and means for promoting customer loyalty. Some companies (e.g., Amazon.com) used their social networking services for selling their products by enabling customers to read other customers’ comments about the products and services that the company sells. Some companies, for example, eBay, took the concept of community one step further by inviting their users to buy and sell from each other through the biggest auction house in the world.

Recently, corporations have been establishing social network Web sites as a means for connecting employees within and beyond the company boundaries. The Web sites are intended to enhance employ-
ees’ social connectivity with the hope that better connected employees are more effective managers of the company’s environment. Business associations are creating similar networks to connect business professionals by industry, functions, geographic areas and areas of interest.

The new social and business reality created by social networking services calls for appropriate research and scholarship. Instead of playing a catch-up game with this unknown monster, it is necessary that conscious and deliberate initiatives be made by academics and leaders of industry to understand and tame it. It is also necessary that appropriate texts be created to teach students and the general public how to understand and cope with the new reality that social networking communities have created.

Our book, *Social Networking Communities and E-Dating Services: Concepts and Implications*, addresses this goal. By providing an overview of the major questions that researchers and practitioners in this area are addressing at this time and by outlining the possible future directions for theory development and empirical research on social networking and e-dating, this volume contributes toward closing the gap that currently exists in this area.

Before we consider the specific issues that are covered by the authors of this volume, it is important to discuss how the two focus areas for our book, social networking communities and e-dating services, relate to each other.

A useful theoretical concept that can help us chart the social networking terrain is that of the business model. Thus, we can think of the different sub-categories of social networking communities, one of which is e-dating services, as different business models. All the business models that fit under the category of social networking communities share the same purpose, namely, they all provide electronic platforms for social networking among their users. However, the services differ in the manner in which they provide support for their users and in the type of users that they attract.

Considered from this perspective, the social networking arena can be divided into four major subcategories or “types” of communities. These subcategories can be seen as a continuum, where each type represents a different level of involvement on the part of the company that provides the service. Thus, while the first type in our categorization, (sub-category 1), represents a relatively low level of involvement on the part of the company that provides the service, the last type of in the categorization (sub-category 4) represents a high level of involvement of the company in the interactions that take place on its Web site.

Based on this logic, we distinguish between the following four types of social networking communities or services:

1. **The blogging service:** Examples of this type of social networking community would be MySpace or Facebook. These services provide a space for bloggers to set up a presence on the company Web site. Even though bloggers can join groups and can contact individuals that are members of the service, the company does not get involved in these interactions in any active way. YouTube is another example of this type of service. Even though the company does provide an added service, the ability to display one’s home videos and to see videos of other members, the company does not actively “match” users with other users. A similar concept is also demonstrated by SecondLife, a virtual reality Web site that offers customers the opportunity to create a “home” and interact (through avatars) with other users. Here again, even though the company offers users “space” and enables them to interact with each other, it does not actively match them to each other.

2. **The groups creating service:** An example of this type of social networking community would be YahooGroups. Even though the company invites users to select the groups that they wish to join and/or establish, and even though users can be contacted by other users through the service (if they choose to make their Web site public), the company’s involvement in the activities that take
place within the groups is minimal and the benefits that it reaps from helping individuals match themselves with appropriate groups are minimal too.

3. **The support service:** An example of this type of social networking community would be the virtual communities established by companies for their customers. The virtual communities serve different purposes ranging from customer support (Del.com), to active selling of the company’s products (Amazon.com). The principle in all cases is that new prospective buyers are invited to interact directly or indirectly with a group of people who share their interests in the company’s products and services. We consider this an example of a relatively high level of involvement by the company because the company developed unique “matching” algorithms to create the group(s) and to match individuals with the pre-existing group. The major contribution of the company here is in the matching process. And, yes, the matching process is not intended just for social networking but for selling the company’s products and services.

4. **The e-dating service:** All e-dating communities would fit this category because they are all examples of communities where individuals are matched with other individuals based on criteria that the users specify and/or on criteria that the company gleans from information that is provided by users. We consider the fourth sub-category of the model an example of the highest level of involvement by the company because the company does not just set up the platform that enables the social interaction between users but actually provides value adding matching services. Thus, even though users are expected to establish a Web page (or a profile) and even though some services do provide discussion forums or chat-rooms, the major service that the company provides is the matching of individual users to each other. And, yes, just like the previous type of social networking service, here too, the company is making a profit by charging both parties a fee for its matching service.

It should be noted that even though the above categorization suggests that the four types are distinct, this may not always be the case. Thus, SecondLife, a relatively new player in the social network arena, demonstrates that several of the above types can be combined into one service. The uniqueness of SecondLife is that while offering users “space” to build their virtual home (which appears to represent the first sub-category in our categorization), it also encourages users to engage in buying and selling among each other, which can be seen as a variation of the fourth category in our categorization, where individual users are matched to each other.

To reflect the double foci of this book, we organized it in two major parts: the first part deals with social networking communities and the second part deals with e-dating services. Each part follows a similar internal structure in that the discussion moves from the individual level of analysis (in the very first sub-sections) to the group level, and, then, to the global or societal level of analysis.

Each of the two major parts of the book is further sub-divided into a number of sub-sections. In the following sections, we present each of these sub-sections with some detail on the issues that are discussed in them.

**SOCIAL NETWORKING COMMUNITIES**

**Why People Join Social Networking Communities**

The first section in the social networking part of the book presents two chapters that focus on individual aspects that motivate people to join social networking communities or explain their behavior once they have joined.
In Chapter I, Harsha Gangadharbatla discusses the impact of five individual level factors, Internet self-efficacy, self-esteem, need to belong, need for information and gender on users’ attitudes to social networking sites and their inclination to join such sites. The most important finding from this research was that females’ attitude toward social networking sites is dependent on their need to belong and on their self-esteem while males’ attitude toward SNS is only dependent on their Internet self-efficacy level. Furthermore, while females’ attitudes toward social networking Web sites predict their behavior, this link is not as strong for males.

In Chapter II, Hugo Liu, Pattie Maes, and Glorianna Davenport discuss a technical facet of the interaction between individuals and social networking services, namely, the algorithms that enable matching of individuals based on their self-reported tastes. The data source for this investigation was the text of over 100,000 social profiles in which users described their taste in music, books, films, food, and so forth. The researchers inferred from the data “a semantic fabric of taste,” demonstrating that this mechanism can help “sanitize” knowledge resources from personal idiosyncrasies, thus enabling a system to match individuals to each other without “knowing” who they are.

Social Networking as a Community Building Experience

The second section in the social networking part of the book, which is the heart of the book and its longest section, presents six chapters that cover different types of social networking communities, including: (1) mobile communities networks, (2) virtual reality networks, (3) war-game networks, (4) community building networks, (5) political activism networks, and (6) professional communities networks.

In Chapter III, Nina Ziv discusses the ways in which users of mobile virtual networks have become important sources of innovation rather than simply users of a technology that is provided by a service. The basis for this chapter is data gleaned from three case studies of mobile social networking services, Upoc, Dodgeball and Tapuz. Based on the three case studies, the author demonstrates that by participating in these networks, users provide feedback to the companies on the performance of existing products, the development of new products, and the marketing of products to potential new users.

In Chapter IV, Jonathan Bishop analyzes a fascinating phenomenon, the use of avatars for social interactions between members of social networking communities and the degree to which selecting one’s avatar influences one’s status in the community. As noted by the author of this chapter, members of social networking communities can select appealing or repelling avatars to represent them in the community. Utilizing an ecological cognition framework, the author demonstrates that members of social networking communities who use avatars with anti-social connotations are more likely to be rated less positively than those who use more sophisticated avatars with positive connotations.

In Chapter V, Nicolas Ducheneaut and Nicholas Yee explore the social dynamics of the players of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), an incredibly popular form of Internet-based entertainment attracting millions of subscribers. The authors use data collected about the behavior of more than 300,000 characters in World of Warcraft (the most popular MMOG in America) to show that most players spend time in the game experiencing a form of “collective solitude,” namely, they play surrounded by, but not necessarily with, other players. They also demonstrate that just like in work-related organizations, the most successful player groups are cohesive, well-managed entities that expect their members to adhere to their rules of behavior.

In Chapter VI, Sylvie Albert and Rolland Labrasseur discuss community development networks and the impact that collaboration has on innovative projects. The theoretical basis for this chapter was a change management framework, which denotes the role that the researchers played as change agents in the projects that they describe. The chapter considers the phases in the project development in terms of
both content and process, exploring the effect that user involvement had on technology appropriation. The chapter concludes with insights for policy makers on how to plan and manage successful community networks over time.

In Chapter VII, Pippa Norris describes the impact of electronic-based social networks on cause-oriented and civic forms of political activism. The chapter is based on a model that links the use of Internet-based social networks with the propensity to engage in social movements and interest groups. Survey data and key measures of political activism are used as the data source for this chapter, drawing upon the 19-nation European Social Survey, 2002 to examine the relationship between the use of the Internet and indicators of civic engagement. The findings indicate that the most important factors predicting political activism are political efficacy (a feeling that the person could influence the political process), age, education, region and civic duty. As expected, after these factors, the use of the Internet proved the next strongest predictor of political activism.

In Chapter VIII, Malte Geib, Christian Braun, Lutz Kolbe, and Walter Brenner analyze the design factors of community systems in two real-world professional communities—a learning network and an expert network—that employ a mix of communication modes, that is, face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication. The objectives of this action research study were to determine which design factors influence community activity and therefore community output. The findings demonstrated that since the interactions in these communities started in the face-to-face mode and only at a later stage migrated to the online environment, that systems that would support community output had to improve both face-to-face communication and online work processes.

**Social Networking Sites for Teenagers and Young Adults**

The third section of the social networking part of the book discusses one of the most important growth areas for social networking services, the teenagers and young adults market. While the first two chapters in this sub-section focus primarily on the positive aspects of the utilization of social networking by teenagers and young adults, the third chapter elaborates on the risks that are associated with social networking, including the way in which adults (particularly employers) take advantage of young people’s self-exposure through social networking sites.

In Chapter IX, Maryann Mori reviews a number of key papers and statistics on the use of social networking by teenagers. The chapter discusses the ramifications of social networking on teenagers’ behavior, adult concerns, possible restrictions on teenage use of social networking services, potential educational benefits of social networking participation by teenagers, and future directions of teenagers’ use of social networking services.

The discussion of young people’s use of social networking Web sites continues in Chapter X, in which Tamara L. Wandel presents information on the usages and intent of social media by college students and university administrators. The author utilizes primary and secondary quantitative data, as well as qualitative information obtained from interviews with multiple constituents. Theories of self-esteem, interpersonal communication, decision making, and innovation diffusion are integrated throughout the chapter to present a coherent set of recommendations to university policy makers on how to utilize social networks in the university environment.

The section concludes with Chapter XI, in which Katherine Karl, and Joy Peluchette examine the relative impact of “inappropriate” postings on job candidates’ Facebook profiles on hiring decisions by employers. Such postings included negative work-related attitudes, the use of profanity, and comments regarding alcohol abuse, use of drugs and sexual activities. Respondents to the survey employed in this study indicated that all five types of information were relevant to hiring decisions and that they would
be unlikely to pursue candidates who posted such information. However, female candidates were more likely to suffer negative consequences in terms of hiring than were male candidates. Also, although negative work-related attitudes and drug use were considered relevant to hiring decisions, respondents were more likely to pursue candidates with profiles containing information related to sexual activities, drug use and profanity than candidates whose profiles contained negative work-related attitudes and alcohol use.

Social Networking in a Global Context

This section concludes the first part of the book with a discussion of the cultural and philosophical aspects of social networking.

In Chapter XII, Max Kennedy and Toru Sakaguchi develop a conceptual model that relates culture to trust in social networking services. The authors propose that trust in the context of social networking communities is associated with the degree to which the culture is high (or low) on individualism and uncertainty avoidance. It suggests that members of cultures that are relatively high on individualism and low on uncertainty avoidance (the U.S.) are more likely to trust social networking services and accept the exposure that social networking services imply than members of cultures that are low on individualism and high on uncertainty avoidance (Japan). The chapter proceeds to explain, based on case study data from Japan, what features need to be introduced to a social networking service in Japan in order to make it acceptable to members of the culture.

In Chapter XIII, Celia Romm-Livermore and Gail Livermore discuss the differences between virtual and real worlds and how these differences can predict clashes between the two. This last chapter of the first part of the book uses examples from a range of different types of social networking and e-dating services, thus, linking the two parts of the book and introducing the second part that focuses on e-dating. Because of its wide-scope, this chapter also introduces philosophical issues such as the nature of reality and virtuality that are central to the book as a whole.

E-DATING SERVICES

Exploring the Individual Aspects of E-Dating

The second part of the book, which focuses on e-dating, is organized in a similar way to the first part. Here too, we move from the individual level of e-dating to the dyad and then to the societal and international aspects of this phenomenon.

The very first section in the e-dating part of the book deals with the individual perspective of e-dating in that both address the relationship between individuals and the e-dating industry. The first chapter in this section discusses segmentation practices in e-dating, while the second chapter looks at how individual e-daters experience the different types of services offered by the e-dating industry.

In Chapter XIV, Linda Jane Coleman and Nisreen Bahnan present an investigation of the current practices and strategies used by marketers of electronic dating services. The chapter uses secondary data sources to document the segmentation basis and niche targeting strategies utilized by providers of e-dating services, including the various sub-categories of services for older adults, younger adult, blacks, whites, pet lovers, religious, spiritual, gay, straight and other niche markets of individuals seeking relationships. The chapter discusses the major players in the industry and the nuances of their business strategy as it relates to provision of e-dating services.
In Chapter XV, Jonathan Bishop uses the Ecological Cognition Framework (ECF) as the basis of a study of the individual aspects of e-dating. Two investigations are presented in this chapter. The first uses a case study approach to identify and describe online dating services from the perspective of a specific individual e-dater. The second investigation assesses the effectiveness of existing online dating services based on guidelines developed from the case study.

How E-Daters Behave and Evolve

The second section in the e-dating part of the book focuses on the developmental process that takes place when e-daters interact with each during the e-dating process. The first chapter in this section presents a five-phase model of e-dating development, while the second chapter focuses on the differences between males and females in how they experience e-dating.

In Chapter XVI, Monica Whitty examines the differences between the development of online relationships and the more traditional face-to-face courtships. The chapter presents a model for the phases of online dating and compares this model with Givens' (1979) work on a traditional model of courtship. It argues that e-dating follows different “phases” than other courtship models and that these differences pose challenges and create benefits that are different from the challenges and benefits that traditional daters face.

The second section concludes with Chapter XVII, in which Celia Romm-Livermore, Toni Somers, Kristina Setzekorn, and Ashley King introduce the e-dating development model. The model focuses on the changes that male and female e-daters undergo during the process of e-dating. The discussion in the chapter focuses on findings from a preliminary empirical research undertaken by the authors. The findings supported all of the model’s hypotheses, indicating that: (1) male and female e-daters follow different stages in their e-dating evolution; (2) the behaviors that males and females exhibit as e-daters are different; and (3) the feedback that male and female e-daters receive from the environment is different too.

E-Dating as a Global Phenomenon

This section concludes the discussion of e-dating by introducing one of the most important growth areas for the industry: the matrimonial e-dating sector in developing countries. The first chapter in this section deals with how e-daters present themselves online and how culture influences e-daters’ self-presentation. The second chapter discusses changing practices of e-dating in India, exploring the interactions between the tradition of arranged marriage and the modern use of e-dating by parents to facilitate the marriages of their offspring.

In Chapter XVIII, Sudhir H. Kale and Mark T. Spence consider the marketing and cross-cultural aspects of mate-seeking behavior in e-dating. The study that is presented in this chapter is based on a content analysis of 238 advertisements from online matrimonial sites in three countries: India (n=79), Hong Kong (n=80), and Australia (n=79). Frequencies of the following ten attribute categories in the advertiser’s self-description were established, including, love, physical status, educational status, intellectual status, occupational status, entertainment services, money, demographic information, ethnic information, and personality traits. The results support several culture-based differences in people’s self-description in online personal ads.

And, finally, in Chapter XIX, Naimika Seth and Ravi Patnayakuni use an ethnographic approach to examine the role of matrimonial Web sites in the process of arranging marriages in India. The chapter explores how e-dating Web sites have been appropriated by key stakeholders in arranging marriages and
how such appropriation is changing the process and traditions associated with arranged marriages in India. The investigation undertaken by the authors suggests that the use of matrimonial Web sites have implications for family disintermediation, cultural convergence, continuous information flows, ease of disengagement, virtual dating and reduced stigma in arranged marriages in India.