



LiveJournal Users: Passionate, Prolific, and Private

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1. Introduction

This report was guided by the question "What makes LiveJournal unique?" The short answer is that if there is a defining characteristic of LiveJournal users, it is passion.

Long-term LiveJournal users speak passionately about how the site has connected them to other people; helped them meet their best friends or partners; encouraged lengthy and provocative conversations; and created a sense of engagement and trust between them, the site, and other users. The purpose of this document, however, is not simply to address the "what" question, but to investigate and understand "why." Why are LiveJournal users passionate about their journals, how do they demonstrate that passion, and what attributes of LiveJournal produce this passionate user base?

These users tend to think of LiveJournal more as a neighborhood than as a social network, an emotional affiliation built on trust that exists in both face-to-face and virtual relationships. This report is an examination of that user base and an attempt to identify and understand some of the key elements of LiveJournal that generate such passion.

LiveJournal is almost 10 years old and has 1.9 million active users. This is in spite of a feature set that even LiveJournal's most ardent users would acknowledge is behind the times and arguably more complicated than other social sites. However, many features that are now popular on contemporary social media sites actually originated on LiveJournal. This includes mem-cached, a memory caching system designed to ease database load on large Web-serving applications; the articulated social network; profile pages; and the Friends Page (which finds some similarity in Facebook's Feed and FriendFeed.com). The universal log-in standard OpenID was created in 2005 by LiveJournal founder Brad Fitzpatrick. It is possible that the verb "to friend" originated in LiveJournal. LiveJournal has sophisticated community and group functionality comparable to popular social networking sites, in addition to mobile integration; picture, video, and audio posting; and an open source development platform.

However, LiveJournal's present success can be attributed to what sets it apart rather than what it has in common with typical social media sites. Unlike Facebook, MySpace, or Twitter, LiveJournal's features encourage a long-term, deep engagement between users that is comparable to a real-life (usually abbreviated as "RL" on LiveJournal) conversation.

While a Twitter message (140 characters) or a Facebook status update (160 characters) is designed to be extremely brief, LiveJournal users frequently write lengthy entries that encourage and solicit substantial comments from friends. These comment threads can include dozens of people and multi-threaded conversations on both personal journals and community journals. LiveJournal also has full integration with a network of friends that encourages more meaningful relationships.

A Word About Users

A LiveJournal user is someone who keeps an online journal on the site, someone who reads other people's LiveJournals, or both. As on most social software sites, there are more readers than writers. Due to LiveJournal's network integration, many readers have registered accounts that they use for commenting, even if they do not maintain their own journal. This report focuses on registered users who both keep a LiveJournal and comment on other LiveJournals.

2. What Makes LiveJournal Different?

2.1 Depth of Engagement

LiveJournal promotes deep engagement with other users. Rather than encouraging users to write a status message or brief comment, the LiveJournal format prompts substantive entries that spark discussion with other users. Rather than updates or networking, LiveJournal supports conversation and discussion, which create a sense of connected community and shared discourse.

In general, LiveJournal users tend to post substantive entries, whether thoughtful, provocative, honest, funny, or creative, depending on the user, community, or subculture. LiveJournal entries are far more in-depth than a typical Facebook comment—in many cases, more like a blog entry or an essay.

Even when an entry is a simple re-blogging of a news story, YouTube video, or picture, it is the rare LiveJournal user who will not contextualize it with a comment. And, unlike on a blog, often the commenters know each other, or get to know each other through the comment process. This deepens the sense of community involvement. As mentioned above, a substantial body of academic work has focused on LiveJournal over the years. Cherny, for example, writes, "Because friends lists don't give a true view of who is reading whom, commenting behavior provides a far better glimpse of social networking at work than the static friends list attribute" (2004).

For instance, here are three examples of LiveJournal communities manifesting substantive discussion. The first is a posting to the LJ Economics community (<http://community.livejournal.com/economics/>) following the October 13, 2008, announcement that Paul Krugman had been awarded the Nobel Prize.

The 52-comment thread is intricately multithreaded, with arguments and discussions spiraling off in many directions. The community delves into detailed economic issues around the difference between "expansionary" and "hyperinflationary" as it relates to Krugman's theories, for example. It discusses the award in the context of the Bush presidency ("we live in an era when bashing Bush is reason enough to win a Nobel"). As in real life, debate and drama go hand in hand, as competing economic schools of thought dissect Krugman's trade theories versus his more public economic ideas. This single thread gives the very lifelike appearance of a coffeehouse debate amongst friends and colleagues.

The second example comes from Parenting 101 (<http://community.livejournal.com/parenting101>), a discussion group based around new parents looking for advice on early childhood issues. Recently, a mother of a newborn sought advice on burping and the kinds of bottles that could help minimize the baby's discomfort. What followed were 20 comments combining parenting advice with product recommendations.

Another subject that elicited substantial, impassioned commentary was one mother's question: "How do you all feel about getting a boy a baby doll?" (<http://community.livejournal.com/parenting101/3775505.html>). The result was more than 50 comments, all supportive of the mother's preference.

Methodology

This report analyzes qualitative and quantitative data from academic and industry reports on LiveJournal. Since the debut of LiveJournal in 1999, the academic community has written extensively on the service and its user base. Some of those sources are cited within this report; others are included in the section titled "Additional Reading." Research for this paper also included observation on popular LiveJournal communities and within individual user LiveJournals. Finally, approximately 25 long-term LiveJournal users in their 20s and 30s were surveyed. This evidence was synthesized to produce the conclusions in this report.

Disclaimers

- All users surveyed and observed were English-speaking
- The majority of academic research is on Western Europe and North America
- More research is needed on differences between LiveJournal use in different countries
- More research is needed on teenagers (13—17) and young adults (18—24) who use LiveJournal

After 50+ posts, the mother with the original post added this postscript:

Thank you guys. I definitely wanted to get him a doll, but I don't know . . . I was a little unsure. You guys have definitely reassured me, and now I can show everybody else that my mom and I were right when we originally came up with it to get it for him. Thanks again ladies :)

One might find this type of engagement in large, professionally produced blogs like Gawker, Boing Boing, or Fark, where users get to know each other and thus create relationships through the site. But on individual blogs—even highly popular ones—this type of back-and-forth rarely happens. On LiveJournal, these types of threads happen all the time—on personal sites as well as communities.

Finally, LiveJournal recently hosted a community focusing on the 2008 U.S. Presidential election (http://community.livejournal.com/us_election2008/). Journalists from outside the U.S. (U.K., India, and Russia) posed questions to U.S. citizens for comment and discussion around the Presidential election. Given the topic, and the personality of LiveJournal community members, the conversations have been provocative, hotly debated, and even playful. The amount of comments and the length of many of these posts are indicative of a complex issue, one that demands a detailed and thoughtful response.

On LiveJournal in general, and on this community in particular, any question can take on a life of its own. One question about Joe the Plumber is a perfect example, with more than 200 comments. Even one of the community members noted:

I was telling my husband about how this thread is making my head hurt . . . there's so many little trails and mini-threads within -- and I mentioned it started with Joe, but gets into taxation, school performance, health care plans, etc . . .

The comment is emblematic of the experience many LiveJournal members feel. The reciprocity of LiveJournal comments increases user engagement, further intensifying the emotional connections users have with the site.

Raynes-Goldie attributes this to the persistence of the Friends system and its integration into the system. She writes, "LiveJournal's profile and username system allows for the creation of reputations among its users. Building a reputation requires an investment of time and energy in your journal and within the community. Yet, the investment pays off with attention and praise from other users. Since such an investment is made, users feel more compelled to maintain their participation with LiveJournal in order to keep reaping the benefits of their efforts" (2004).

Paul Hodkinson's study of goth teens in England characterizes the back-and-forth commenting on LiveJournal as "conversations":

Nevertheless, motivations normally associated with diaries such as keeping a detailed personal record, expressing one's innermost personal feelings or indulging in private reflection or therapy, tended to be regarded as less important than use of the facility for conversation . . .

The importance of interaction and conversation also was underlined by the fact that individuals often spent more time reading and commenting on other people's journals than they did updating their own (2006, 189).

It is these conversations—the difference between a "journal" versus an "update" or "status"—that keep people coming back to the site. And it is the lengthy, funny, or interesting entries that spark conversations; conversations that mimic face-to-face conversational practice. These two aspects are the major differentiators between LiveJournal and other social media sites.

The passion around various topics and the culture of content at LiveJournal drive deeper relationships among LiveJournal users. These types of connections are less common on social networks, which tend to encourage the maintenance of weak ties but not the strengthening of new ones.

But passion is also a double-edged sword, as LiveJournal is rife with drama and disagreements. To those outside the community, this behavior can appear confrontational; to those within the community, however, this behavior is routinely seen as par for the course. Friends disagree, and because of that friendship they aren't constrained by the bonds of polite behavior. Using the Economics community again as an example, every community member knows that followers of the Austrian School disagree with the Keynesians. That's how it is in the real world, and that's how it is in their LiveJournal community.

There's also a good deal of passion from long-time users with respect to the LiveJournal "product." While there's general agreement that the usability of LiveJournal needs improvement, product enhancements are uniformly met with vehement reactions. The passion that keeps the community in place often manifests itself as a passion to keep things the way they are. While user concerns are taken seriously by any business, LiveJournal also recognizes that it is unrealistic to expect every member to be satisfied with every change to the service.

Depth of Engagement User Quotes

"A 100+ comment entry with conversations that spiral off in multiple directions could never happen on twitter or Facebook." (Lawrence, 30)

"LJ is ALL ABOUT the substantive entries and conversations that happen around those entries. It's not about changing your 'status' (unless you happen to be cursed with a friend that chooses to only post digests of their daily twitter feed as their LJ entries kill kill kill!). Few people just post a picture, or a link to an article, without saying SOMETHING about it. I think it is such a superior community experience to the Facebook's and Twitters of the world that it just doesn't even compare." (Marie, 29)

"Fwiw [For What It's Worth], I came to LJ to substitute for a previous online community in Usenet. People from the community had started migrating here and when a critical mass came here, the Usenet community totally died. So what we were looking for was a way to continue our previous online relationships based on substantive and personal entries, with lots and lots of discussion." (Jennifer, 27)

"You're totally on-point about 'substantive entries.' Four or five of my LJ 'best' friends are published/professional writers, yet they still get fired up re/ maintaining their LiveJournal." (Dean, 40)

¹ The widespread hatred among LiveJournal users of this practice (using a bot to dump Twitter entries into LiveJournal format) shows the cultural incompatibility of the two practices—even among LiveJournal users who also Twitter.

2.2 The Commitment of Friending

Although the term "Friend" is common to most social media sites—Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook all use "friends" as synonymous with contacts—LiveJournal's use of the term Friend, and the public articulation that this term takes, implies something different, and more serious, than other sites. danah boyd's paper on Friending on Social Networking Sites (SNS) names multiple reasons why people tend to affirm all "Friends" requests they get on MySpace and Friendster:

There are significant social costs to rejecting someone . . . While it's obvious why people would link to people that they know and like, it is sometimes difficult to explain why people Friend people they dislike, people who they hold power over or who hold power over them, and other awkward relationships. In short, it's socially awkward to say no . . . it's much easier to just say yes than to face questions about why the sender was ignored or declined (boyd, 2006).

However, unlike SNS, being a LiveJournal "Friend" implies a serious commitment: not only reading someone's content on a daily basis through the Friends Page, but also giving access to private entries via LiveJournal's filtering system (which gives users the option of public, private, Friends Only, or custom filters). Many LiveJournal users have "Friends Only" journals, which limit access to any of their content to Friends. One respondent explained:

You're encouraged to develop a web of *_quality_* connections -- instead of Facebook or MySpace, where 'friending' someone is a pretty low-impact commitment, friending someone on LJ means you want to have an extensive long-attention-span dialog with them. (Leah, 30)

Another respondent wrote,


I just got on Facebook and I don't even really like half the people who are finding and friending me, but I feel obligated to approve anyway. I love LJ for the actual friend connections and conversations that would happen and do carry over into real life. (Amanda, 33)

Fono and Raynes-Goldie's excellent study on the meaning of Friending (2005) found that while LiveJournal users had widely varying ideas of what it meant to be a "friend,"² social norms were emerging around friending and unfriending, many of which were echoed by the respondents interviewed for this report. For instance, for many LiveJournal users, identifying another user as a "friend" does not only mean that you enjoy reading that person's journal, but also that you "trust" or will "vouch for" the person.³

Since many LiveJournal users have long-term relationships with their Friends List, and the format of the Friends Page keeps users updated on the lives of their Friends, Friending can imply (and indeed create) a substantive relationship with another person.

²They suggest a taxonomy of seven types of meaning: "We found that there were seven key understandings of friendship on LiveJournal: as content; as an offline facilitator; as online community; as trust; as a courtesy; as a declaration; and as nothing. These understandings are in no way exclusive, as many interviewees reported having overlapping or multiple understandings." (2004, 3)

³Because of the seriousness of the Friends relationship, some LiveJournal users adhere to a code of social norms that require notification before de-friending someone; several of the respondents mentioned that on LiveJournal, de-friending someone is tantamount to a breakup.



Naturally, these relationships can stay "weak ties" or "acquaintances," but in many other cases interaction through the site functions as a "getting to know you" process, which may culminate in a face-to-face meeting and eventual real-life friendship (see 2.3). Reading someone's journal entries over months, or even years, provides glimpses into their lives that, in many cases, add up to a remarkably realistic self-portrait. Combined with commenting, which serves as conversation between users, LiveJournal can create friendships between people based on shared experiences over time.

LiveJournal's difference from other social media sites is clearly apparent in the area of Friending. On Facebook, for example, members add real-world friends, business contacts, and acquaintances to their FB network, whereas on LiveJournal, members forge online friendships and then (maybe) take them offline. There is tremendous value in an online central repository of business and personal contacts, but that is not the value of LiveJournal. LiveJournal manifests itself in fewer, deeper relationships.

Commitment of Friending User Quotes

"You also get a sense of a person's identity on LJ that you can't get from a social profile that basically just lists interests and favorite books and movies. It's not just what you like; it's what you're like." (Erica, 26)

"Yeah, I think that really differs from Facebook or MySpace too-- sure, I have a lot of LJ friends who are connected to each other, but I also have a lot who have nothing to do with my 'circle' and whom I would probably never know in RL. We are genuinely connected because of shared interests." (Carrie, 32)

"Also, the ability to connect with people not based on any intervening person connecting you. The person needn't be a friend of a friend to make a connection, you can just plug into the person based on an interesting icon or a funny quip in a larger community." (Jessica, 28)

2.3 Real Life – Friends List Crossover

The Friends List often crosses over into real life (offline interactions, or "face-to-face" interactions). This can happen for several reasons:

- 1) A preexisting online group might choose to move from a preexisting social medium to LiveJournal (as mentioned by Jennifer, in Section 1, whose Usenet group moved onto LiveJournal; or Hodkinson's paper, which interviewed a group who moved from forums and discussion boards onto LiveJournal).
- 2) One influential person in a RL friends group may get a LiveJournal, inspiring others to start a journal to communicate with him or her; this process often repeats itself until LiveJournal spreads through an entire group.
- 3) A group of co-located individuals on LiveJournal may begin to meet in RL and become "real friends." This research uncovered stories of friends, lovers, roommates, partners, and business associates first meeting on LiveJournal.

LiveJournal can also be used to keep in touch with loved ones far away. There's a persistence of friends over time that is not as developed in other social networks. Facebook, MySpace, and others have lacked the conversational norms of commenting that facilitate relationships in a way that mimics "real life" conversation, being limited either by character limits or usability.

Fono and Raynes-Goldie write:

Another common trend amongst interviewees was the use of LiveJournal as a convenient means of facilitating offline relationships. These users made a specific point of Friending any of their offline friends who also had journals. Often, these would be people with whom face-to-face interactions occurred on a frequent basis. In this case, communication on LiveJournal is used to organize offline interactions, such as posting a journal entry to announce a party or using comments to discuss meeting times.

One respondent (Jessica, 28), who had moved from Brooklyn to Croatia to live with her boyfriend, reported: "I think also [that LiveJournal bridges] distance in a powerful way. I live really far away from most of my RL friends but most of them have LJs so I am able to keep up with them and still feel reasonably 'in the loop.' Without LJ, this move would be unbearable. It is a life line for me, without a doubt." Similarly, other people use LiveJournal to meet friends in new neighborhoods or cities based on shared interests or to strengthen bonds between acquaintances in their home city.



Real Life – Friends List Crossover User Quotes

"The thing that I find about LJ is that the comment system plus the 'friends' page' system makes it incredibly easy for people to interact as part of groups, and there's something about that kind of group interaction and dynamic that really gives you a very realistic sense of what people are like. A few years ago, I was part of an LJ-clique (for want of a better term - I don't mean clique in a negative way, just a loose cohort of friends who all LJ-knew each other) where several of us would end up bored and online on a Friday night or whatever and someone would post, several people would comment and it would just spiral into loads of silly conversations. People would dip in and out of other people's conversations, people who didn't know each other would join in, you'd just get all this rapid-fire wit and silliness - it really did feel like being down the pub with a big group of friends... Since then, I've met a lot of those people in RL and I've never yet been surprised by who was chatty, who was shy, who was mouthy, who was flirtatious, who was liable to put their foot in it slightly, and so on. **The comment/friends system mimics real-life social dynamics better than any other system I've ever used.**" (Susan, 31)

"The one that resonates with me the most is the RL connection piece. If I don't know someone on LJ and they have public posts visible, it's acceptable for me to add them. Over time, I can see what they write, get a sense for who they are, comment back, perhaps they'll add me back, and then we may meet in person down the road. **This has happened to me many times and I've made great connections that I think I'll have for years to come this way. I can't think of another service that creates a space for this sort of thing to happen.** I feel totally weird stumbling upon someone on FB that I find interesting and want to interact with... it feels stalkerish and intrusive, even if the person has their profile public." (Matt, 30)

2.4 Versatility of LiveJournal

Unlike a site like YouTube, which has a single primary purpose—watching videos—LiveJournal is a toolset that can be used for a huge array of uses and conversations, from fashion blogs to role-playing communities to personal blogs to fiction writing to polls to research. This creates the potential for a very broad user base that spans demographics, ages, interests, and nationalities.

Beyond only journaling, users have used LiveJournal to organize charity drives, swap mix CDs, conduct reality show–like competitions, post photographs, and gain notoriety in a real-world community. For instance, Busse and Thomas both look at fanfiction writing on LiveJournal (Busse 2006; Thomas 2007); Thomas interviews a pair of teen writers who write LiveJournals in-character, known as Role-Playing Games (RPGs), popular throughout LiveJournal. Gorny's research on LiveJournal in Russia found that the site is used primarily by intellectuals, journalists, and other elite, educated community members (2004); unlike the popular perception of LiveJournal as a "teen angst" site, LiveJournal has potential appeal to older, more mature demographics.

Similarly, the LiveJournal community framework is flexible enough to use for communities about philosophy and politics as well as lighter topics like celebrity gossip and fashion. A few examples of successful, active communities in some of LiveJournal's more popular categories include:

Writing

More than 5,000 members regularly contribute to Six Word Stories (<http://community.livejournal.com/sixwordstories>), a writing community devoted to the art of brevity.

Thousands of members on hundreds of communities participate in National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) at communities such as <http://community.livejournal.com/nanowrimo>.

Jaida Jones (<http://ladyjaida.livejournal.com>) and Dani Bennett (<http://danibennett.livejournal.com>) are two young authors who met on LiveJournal, collaborated on a novel over a period of approximately three weeks, and recently signed a deal with Bantam to publish two additional novels.

Volunteerism/Local Communities

The LiveJournal-RL interplay is apparent in communities such as Davis Square (http://community.livejournal.com/davis_square) in Somerville, Massachusetts, where the members recently organized to raise money for charity.

The Big Apple (<http://community.livejournal.com/newyorkers/>) is a popular New York–based community that is approaching 200,000 comments since its founding.



Lifestyle

Fashion and beauty communities include MadRadHair (<http://community.livejournal.com/madradhair>), which has nearly 40,000 members who discuss aspects of the haircut; the MAC Cosmetics community, with 10,000 members (http://community.livejournal.com/mac_cosmetics/); and the plus-size, fat-acceptance-focused Fatshionista (<http://community.livejournal.com/fatshionista>).

LiveJournal has several active parenting communities, such as Parenting 101 (<http://community.livejournal.com/parenting101/>), Geekparents (<http://community.livejournal.com/geekparents/>), and Breastfeeding Support (<http://community.livejournal.com/breastfeeding/>).

Entertainment

The largest Twilight community on LiveJournal (http://community.livejournal.com/lion_lamb/), "and so the lion fell in love with the lamb," has morphed from a writing group to a movie fan club.

Comics are well represented on LiveJournal, including comics artist Nick Bertozzi (<http://bertozzi.livejournal.com/>), who recently announced that he will be teaming up with *The Colbert Report* writer Glenn Eichler on *Stuffed*, an original graphic novel. Also of note is the journal of Scott McCloud, an influential comics artist, theorist, and author of *Understanding Comics* (<http://smccloud.livejournal.com>).

LiveJournal's Syndication feature (<http://www.livejournal.com/syn/>) allows the importation of RSS feeds into the Friends Page; while this is widely used by some communities (such as readers of the geek-focused comic strip XKCD, who have built a community around the feed: example at http://syndicated.livejournal.com/xkcd_rss/), it is difficult to search.

Finally, LiveJournal encourages participation and creativity from its users, who can make their own icons and themes, customizing the site further.

For users who choose to use the site simply to blog, LiveJournal does not require complicated maintenance, upgrades, or HTML knowledge, and allows them to communicate with an engaged user base that is rarely present on free hosting sites.

Versatility of LiveJournal User Quotes

"LJ has been around a lot longer than the rest of them (relatively speaking). That combined with its base in journaling/blogging means that its community is baked in and less likely to be affected by ongoing trends. You can go to the other sites without leaving LJ. As opposed to what happened to Friendster when MySpace came along. The reason for this is because the basic foundation of LJ has yet to be duplicated. Take away features and buzzwords, and market positioning, LJ is still very unique in its core functionality, and as a result remains more organic. The best feature of a good application is what you do with it, not what it does." (Jarvis, 36)

2.5 LiveJournal Has Privacy Filters that Mimic Real-World Groups

LiveJournal gives users the ability to filter each entry in several ways:

- Public: Anyone can read the entry
- Friends Only: Only those on their Friends List can read the entry
- Private: Only the writer can read the entry
- Custom: Members of a specific filter can read the entry

A study of LiveJournal and privacy conducted in 2006 (see http://community.livejournal.com/lj_research/26273.html) found that of the 250+ respondents, 95% used Friends Only entries and 85% used filters (85%). Respondents used filters most frequently to avoid interpersonal conflict, both with people they know online and people they know in real life. Similarly, relationship discussions were often filtered so that either the user's partner or their partner's friends could not read the discussion.⁴

Due both to the depth of engagement with the site and the privacy filters, many users view LiveJournal as the "most private" of their online broadcasting options. Even if a user has other social media outlets, LiveJournal is often the most personal or intimate—and often a user has a small, trusted filter on their LiveJournal to talk about very personal issues. There is evidence that the strength of these privacy filters drives adoption of LiveJournal by young users outside of the U.S., who are excited about the prospect of online communication but wary of the publicity. Filters allow personal entries to be restricted to an immediate sphere of friends.

Other social media applications have attempted to match LiveJournal's flexible privacy options, but few have succeeded, giving rise to the common social phenomenon of censoring one's Facebook actions so that a boss or parent will not read them. Privacy features contribute to the view of LiveJournal as personal, intimate, and trusted.

As discussed earlier, the definition of "friend" on LiveJournal is intrinsically related to the levels of privacy available to community members. The social norms that are emerging around "friending" as it relates to social networks can be generalized as follows:

- Someone you know of (Twitter)
- Someone you know in RL and want to keep in touch with (Facebook, LinkedIn)
- Someone you know in RL and know some of their interests (MySpace)

Along this continuum, LiveJournal has privacy features in place that allow community members to keep in touch with the friends that they have met—either via LiveJournal or in RL—and with whom they want to have private or moderated conversations.

⁴The full list of reasons: Interpersonal conflict: 72%; Relationships: 72%; "TMI": 54%; Sex: 51%; Planning special event: 48%; Family issues: 41%; Locality/people at event: 38%; Medical issues: 32%; Specialized topic: 30%; Drugs / alcohol: 27%; Mental health issues: 27%; Complaints: 24%; Pictures: 16%. The most frequent write-in was Work.



Privacy Filters User Quotes

"I think the privacy filters are essential, also. I have multiple online outlets and think of LJ as the most private (and therefore where I share the most personal stuff), Facebook the next, and Tumblr not at all. All my posts are friends-only - this is for interacting with existing friends on a personal level, not meeting people." (Rena, 27)

"When you only talk to 20 people [on a LiveJournal filter], you can be your screwed up 14 year old self." (Chloe, 25)

3. Conclusion

LiveJournal's feature set encourages real, engaged, committed, long-term interaction with the site and friends met through the site, creating passionate users who care deeply about LiveJournal. While passionate users can be a pain—constantly offering opinions, disagreeing with each other, and demanding in their company and product expectations—they are absolutely crucial to the long-term success of LiveJournal.

Kathy Sierra, originator of the "Passionate User" concept, wrote about the "suck threshold," the point at which a person is unskilled with a particular tool (and therefore frustrated), and a passion threshold, where a user begins to understand how to use a tool, allowing her to begin loving it. This is illustrated by her User Hierarchy of Needs.⁵

This report demonstrates why LiveJournal has high degrees of "Flow/Enchantment" with the software from the site's most engaged, passionate users. These users are already at the passion threshold.

Whether ad hoc or deliberate, the technology choices made long ago at LiveJournal have created a tool set that encourages and rewards deep engagements. The more community members post, comment, or simply read other entries, the more committed they become. The simplicity of commenting and the unique status of Friending on LiveJournal allows for substantive engagement among community members and provides the building blocks of substantive relationships. Rather than an online adjunct to existing RL relationships, LiveJournal serves more as a source of interaction than a supplement or augment to interaction.

LiveJournal is a fascinating area of study, part social network and part blogging platform. Arguably, the dual nature of LiveJournal has led to confusion as to just how to characterize the company, the product, and the community that follows both so closely. The reality is that this hybrid has fostered the passion that drives the community today.

The hybrid also differentiates LiveJournal from other social media sites, which arguably encourage less long-term, meaningful relationships amongst users—relationships that mirror real-world interactions between individuals. As stated earlier, the difference between a "journal" versus an "update" or "status" is significant. Journal entries mimic face-to-face interactions—whether interesting, funny, or provocative—and work toward building trust between users.

Which leads to passion. Passion is clearly the operative ingredient on LiveJournal. It drives LiveJournal users to read, write, and comment prolifically around their areas of interest. The unique Friends features within LiveJournal—and the privacy that comes with them—are what draw users together and keep them coming back. The depth of the relationships made and maintained on LiveJournal is what then brings these individuals together face to face.

5

User Hierarchy of Needs (and desires)

Flow/Enhancement

Does it keep me fully engaged, where the world drops away?

Intuitiveness

Does it feel natural, and doesn't make me think?"

Usability

Is it user-friendly?

Efficiency

Does it let me do what I need without long workarounds?

Learnability

Can I learn it quickly?
Is the manual good?

Correctness

Does it do it correctly, without a bunch of bugs?

Functionality

Does it do what I need?

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About the Author



Alice Marwick is a Ph.D. candidate in the Media, Culture, and Communication department at New York University. Her dissertation examines online status-seeking practices and the impact of social media technologies on social stratification. She is a frequent presenter on Internet celebrity and social media and recently gave the keynote at ROFLCON. Her work has appeared in *First Monday*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *WIRED*, and *BusinessWeek*, and on BBC Radio and Current.tv. Alice holds an M.A. in Communication from the University of Washington and a B.A. in Women's Studies and Political Science from Wellesley College. She grew up in suburban New York, spent eight years in Seattle, and now splits her time between Manhattan and San Francisco, where she enjoys thrifting, sushi, and karaoke.

Alice is a professional researcher by training and an active LiveJournal user. She enjoyed the process of producing this report, but considers it research with a small "r" as opposed to the strict academic Research and analysis that takes up most of her time. She was compensated for her work on this report; compensated with a small "c."