

FACEBOOK USERS ARE AS DIVERSE AS THE INTERNET ITSELF

Thought leadership from Environics Research



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AS A TECHNOLOGY BECOMES MAINSTREAM, ITS USERS BECOME MORE DIVERSE— AND ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THEM BECOME RISKIER

In 1910, owning an automobile spoke volumes about a person. Buying a car meant, first, that you had some money to throw around. It also meant you were a trail-blazer: adventurous, open to risk, perhaps individualistic. Today, cars are too ubiquitous to mean much on their own. Car owners are rich and poor, gear-lovers and Luddites, tree huggers and gas guzzlers. To learn anything about people based on their cars, we need more detailed information: brand, model, how people relate to their machines.

Five years ago, knowing that someone used social media might have told you something about them: that they were open to new ways of relating with others, not especially concerned about privacy, and exceptionally comfortable online. Increasingly, however, social media is like the car: simply knowing that someone is on Facebook, for instance, tells us very little about them. Indeed, recent analysis of Facebook users by Environics Research Group demonstrates that many of the most common assumptions about this group are wrong.

HEAVY VS LIGHT FACEBOOK USERS

According to Environics data, nearly everyone in Canada knows about Facebook (96%), about two-thirds of Canadians have registered (68%), and half (50%) visit the site daily. Among those who are active users, most visit mainly check their friends' updates and activities (63%), while a smaller proportion visit primarily to contribute their own content (37%).

Does intensity of Facebook use tell us something about people's orientation to social life more generally? Yes. Social values analysis reveals marked psychographic differences between those who use Facebook intensively and those who check in only occasionally.

Not surprisingly, the values of heavy Facebook users are more sociable than average: these Canadians tend to be more extroverted, more attracted to groups, and more curious about people different from themselves.

Somewhat more surprising is that heavy Facebook users have a penchant for old-fashioned status-seeking. In the past, discussions about online social life sometimes pictured a rosy world in which people would be more authentically themselves, and would connect with others across geographic and social boundaries that might once have separated them.

Our social values analysis of heavy Facebook users suggests that these Canadians are among the least likely to be seeking an egalitarian utopia online. Far above average on values like the need for status recognition and concern for their personal appearance, heavy Facebook users care deeply about how others perceive them and are determined to present their best self to the world.

In short, heavy Facebook users are not only more social than lighter users, they are also more concerned with where they fit into their social group. Do they have as many friends as others do? Do their photos and videos suggest a fun, exciting life? Do they look good? Are they admired?

Another surprising trait of intensive Facebook users is that, contrary to the early stereotype of Facebook users as exceptionally tech-savvy, Canadians who use this platform most frequently score above average on technological anxiety and below average on enthusiasm for new technology. Like most online tools for a general audience, Facebook is extremely easy to use—and Canadians' engagement with this site says more about their social orientation than about their technological orientation.

Discomfort with technology may keep some people away from Facebook, but these findings suggest that some Canadians who avoid the site may be more interested in coding, tinkering, and benign hacking than they are in fostering socio-emotional connections through the web. This hypothesis is borne out by the finding that light Facebook users tend to describe themselves as driven more by logic than emotion.

OLDER VERSUS YOUNGER USERS

Although Facebook began as a campus-based phenomenon and in its early days was thought to have mainly young users, today Canadians of all ages use the site. Environics data suggest that usership drops off moderately among those aged 55 and older, but for those between the ages of 15¹ and 54, Facebook is shared territory.

While people of different ages may be equally likely to use Facebook, values differences between younger and older users suggest that these two groups might be seeking different kinds of experiences from the same social media platform.

Canadians under 35 who use Facebook at least daily are powerfully engaged with the world around them: they score well above their age-peers on values associated with personal achievement, learning from others, environmentalism, and global citizenship. In the context of these values, frequent Facebook use may be understood as one more outlet for connection and engagement—not an alternative to “real” social life, but a complement to a bustling professional (or academic) and personal life.

Heavy Facebook users who are over the age of 35 do not bristle with curiosity and engagement in the same way younger users do. Intensive users who are older stand out more strongly on the desire to express themselves, and the desire for intense (even if shallow or short-lived) connections with others. Daily users over the age of 35 score high on values like personal creativity and flexibility of personality, saying they like to explore and express different aspects of their identities. They also outscore younger Facebook users on values associated with feeling attracted to crowds, thrills, and intense emotional experiences. These Canadians say they love the rush of being in a stadium, and delight in unexpected moments of connection with strangers.

In short, heavy Facebook users under the age of 35 are likely to be connecting with friends, family, colleagues, and strangers in a wide range of ways—and for them Facebook is probably one part of an integrated and energetic social life. For heavy users

over the age of 35, Facebook is more likely an escape from daily life into a world of greater intimacy, fun, and sociability. It may be that for older Facebook users, Facebook is an activity whereas for younger users Facebook is just life.

TAKE-AWAYS

1. Facebook users are far too numerous to be homogeneous; two-thirds of Canadians are registered on the site.
2. The values of frequent Facebook users are more social, more emotional, and more status-oriented than those of casual users.
3. Heavy Facebook users are actually less enthusiastic about new technology than casual users. For young people in particular, Facebook is like the telephone: so familiar and easy to use that it is invisible as a “technology.”
4. Frequent users over the age of 35 are likely to see Facebook as an activity—a form of socializing, like meeting friends at a café. For younger users, Facebook is more likely to be a tool that fits seamlessly into the rest of their lives—not so much a discrete activity as a backdrop to all their other activities.

1 Fifteen is the age cut-off for our social values surveys.

For more information

Barry G. Watson, Ph.D.

President and CEO

Environics Research Group

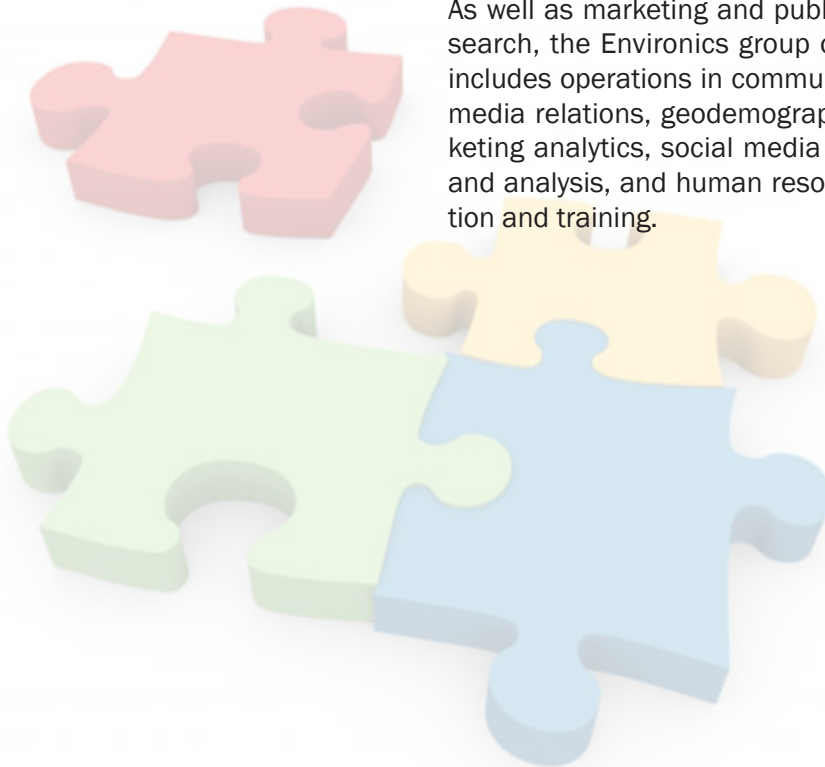
+1 • 416 • 969 • 2810

barry.watson@environics.ca

About Environics Research Group

Environics Research Group Ltd. is one of Canada's leading marketing and public opinion research firms, with a reputation for integrity, accuracy, and insight. Established in 1970, the firm has evolved into a multi-disciplined international research and consulting group offering a broad range of research services to business and government, with its headquarters in Toronto with affiliated operations around the world.

As well as marketing and public opinion research, the Environics group of companies includes operations in communications and media relations, geodemographic and marketing analytics, social media communities and analysis, and human resources motivation and training.



TORONTO

33 BLOOR ST E, SUITE 900

TORONTO, ONTARIO

M4W 3H1

TEL +1•416•920•9010

FAX +1•416•920•3299

WWW.ENVIRONICSRESEARCH.CA