



SPACE AGE

Each week, more than half a million people sign up to join MySpace, a cyber community where the sharing of common interests has reached new, refined heights. PETE KEMPSHALL profiles the phenomenon.

IT'S the fourth most popular English language website in the world, trailing only Yahoo, the Microsoft Network and Google. In the US, it's the most popular, claiming nearly 5 per cent of all internet traffic. As one American teenager put it: "If you're not on MySpace, you don't exist."

Never heard of it? Well, the chances are that even if you aren't up to speed with the MySpace phenomenon right now, you very soon will be. With more than 100 million people already signed up as members and a further half a million people registering for profiles each week, MySpace's penetration is fast approaching the point where there'll be no escaping it.

Billed as an online community that lets you meet your friends' friends, MySpace (owned by News Corp, publisher of *The Sunday Times*) has become a one-stop shop for the avid internet user, nailing 80 per cent of the social network market – its nearest competitor could only manage a paltry 7 per cent.

While a vast number of American users are drawn from the US school and college system – using MySpace as a means of maintaining a social hierarchy both on and off campus – the site has expanded to fulfil any number of other functions that one would usually need to visit several websites to accomplish. Like Yahoo or Google, MySpace hosts groups, allowing the like-minded to get together to discuss everything from the relatively normal (such as favourite TV shows) to the more eclectic.

A group in praise of US convenience store chain Wawa, for example, now boasts more than 5000 members.

MySpace's membership search engine may also be used as a means of finding people with whom you have long lost touch (previously the province of sites like Friends Reunited), or as simply as a way to get a date.

It's simple to stake a claim on MySpace. Membership is free, so it's just a question of signing up. From there, everything becomes about your profile, a distillation of your personality that represents you in the cyber realm.

Profiles can be as simple or as complex as each individual desires – from a straightforward name, date of birth and photograph, to extensive lists of likes and dislikes, or music and video clips that you feel represent you best to the rest of the world.

The trick is to make your profile noticeable. An eye-catching profile can be the difference between obscurity and minor celebrity. A recent issue of *Playboy* magazine in the US ran a Girls of MySpace pictorial, plucking several of the site's most attractive women and thrusting them into the spotlight.

For many, the creation and enhancement of their profile page is an end in itself, dedicating endless hours to tinkering, fiddling and watching their networks increase as a result.

MySpace's addictive properties have even led to a particularly memorable description of the site being coined in the very same issue of *Playboy* – Cybercrack.

However, for the majority of people, MySpace is all about getting out there and meeting people – just without the actual "getting out" part. On its most basic level, MySpace can be used as a check-in point for your immediate friends, but each profile also comes with blogging facilities and on-site messaging, allowing you to post your thoughts or contact other MySpace members without logging out to access separate email.

Teenagers in the US have come to think of it as a digital mall, where they can meet up and hang out without clogging up real-life communal shopping areas. Already it's reached a point in American high schools where you absolutely have to have a MySpace profile or be socially crippled.

"If you don't, then you're an outcast," explains Dr Tama Leaver, from the University of Western Australia. Dr Leaver has been studying the growth of MySpace

and can see the site reaching a similar level of saturation among teenagers here in Australia, especially now that it has developed an Australia-specific branch of the site to promote local interests.

As in the US, most MySpace users are teenagers and those in their 20s, something Dr Leaver says is at least partly due to the adaptability of the basic template on which MySpace profiles are constructed.

"A lot of the changes are cosmetic, filling in boxes and changing backgrounds and so on. But I think it's the same phenomenon that sees teenagers happily spending \$4.95 on a ringtone, or two dollars for an image on a screen," he says.

"In Myspace they can download something and create it themselves for nothing. It's an expression of self and it's something that everybody can do. MySpace could be the portal to their personally created media."

But perhaps the most amazing use of MySpace is as a music forum, which puts it way out in front of its cyber competition, says Dr Leaver.

"Its biggest drawcard is the clever embedding of music on the site. Music companies and artists have their material on there – you can't download a song per se, but you can hear the whole thing streaming. Having that across the whole MySpace network is something almost unique, certainly for commercial music," he says.

The music industry has been quick to get with the program. The recently launched Australia-specific



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branch of MySpace ran a promotion, Secret Shows Australia, where users added a specific profile to theirs, and in return were granted details of a live show to be performed at a secret venue by a major music act.

The first of these promotions saw the group Jet play at the Prince of Wales Hotel in St Kilda, Melbourne. The "adds" for the promotion topped 10,000.

Meanwhile, a whole host of international acts have created their own profiles on the network to allow fans to keep in touch with tour information, new releases and even plain old-fashioned gossip. Limp Bizkit frontman Fred Durst recently announced his engagement on his MySpace site.

Music is also where MySpace has chalked up some of its most noteworthy successes for up-and-coming acts. Word of mouth on MySpace from fans of UK band Arctic Monkeys generated a tsunami of publicity that helped launch the four-piece into a recording contract – and this with the band itself having no knowledge that MySpace even existed.

By contrast, singer/songwriter Lily Allen – recently in Australia to promote her new single, *Smile* – was fully aware of the reach of MySpace and she made her songs available on her profile some time before her album was available to buy.

"Lily Allen's rise to fame is entirely because of MySpace," says Dr Leaver. "If you wanted to be a fan of Lily Allen you would go to the Lily Allen MySpace and become her friend, and she would reciprocate (although it would be somebody on her team). People were so enamoured with hearing the music just from her MySpace profile that I think she went straight into the UK top 10.

"Interestingly, Australia was the country that showed the most interest in her music beyond the UK. That says a lot about what Australian teenagers are looking for."

The success of Lily Allen and the Arctic Monkeys has already signalled a change in the way new music acts introduce themselves to the world. For Warner Music A&R manager Brent Buchanan, MySpace has become an important part of his job to seek out new talent.

"I spend a percentage of my day on MySpace every day," he says. "I get so many emails about bands that often it's the quickest way to have a look at what they're doing, what their songs are, where they're gigging and the people they have backing them."

It's not unusual for bands to approach Buchanan with a MySpace profile rather than following the tried and tested method of submitting a demo tape. Often he finds this new approach is far more convenient.

"Demos are getting sent to us, it still happens, but often they'll just sit there until we get time to listen to them," he says. "On MySpace you're instantly presented with the bottom line of where the band's from, but also what they look like, where they've got gigs, how big their fan base is. It's a way of finding out quite a lot of information about a band, so that's one step further than a demo tape."

So with everyone from up-and-coming bands to schoolchildren logging on to MySpace, is there anything that can break its stranglehold on the social software community?

It does have its problems. MySpace's immense membership is its strength, but also its weakness, with site crashes and technical upsets from heavy traffic a relatively common experiences for users.

The problem peaked during the recent power outages caused by extreme temperatures in the US – the

whole of MySpace went offline for a day.

"I think because it's not essential data it probably doesn't have such a rigorous back-up system as, say, Google," says Dr Leaver. "You could kill three-quarters of Google and it's still there."

It appears that Google is also the way around this particular stumbling block, with the search-engine giant recently signing an advertising deal with MySpace.

"I'm not sure if the exact numbers were released, but I'm sure it'll be worth billions over a couple of years," says Dr Leaver. "On that basis, I suspect investment in more infrastructure will be key. You lose a day where you're making, I'm guessing, \$10 million-20 million a day – that's a loss."

But even with its technical difficulties and issues over the impossibility of an effective system of policing a site against predators where the membership tops 100 million (see breakout), Dr Leaver doesn't feel that the MySpace bubble is in danger of bursting.

"There is a generational turnover on social software, and things that are most popular today are unlikely to sustain too long," he says. "But it depends what people want and it depends on the strategic marketing around it."

"The fact that MySpace is part of News Corp means that its got strategic advantages that will be hard to match – if there is a demand from a youth market for a particular youth service, the odds are pretty good that News Corp already owns it somewhere else and they can just graft it in."

So if there's any change on the horizon, it won't be soon.

"It's like the Yahoo-to-Google change. It took two years for Google to become the dominant engine, but it did happen eventually," Dr Leaver says.

"But MySpace is unprecedented in its size. For the next big thing to be even bigger you've got to have 10 million people through the door to even start looking like a competitor."



Left: The MySpace website.
Picture: Michael Potter

MySpace's biggest drawcard is the clever embedding of music on the site



Fashionable music

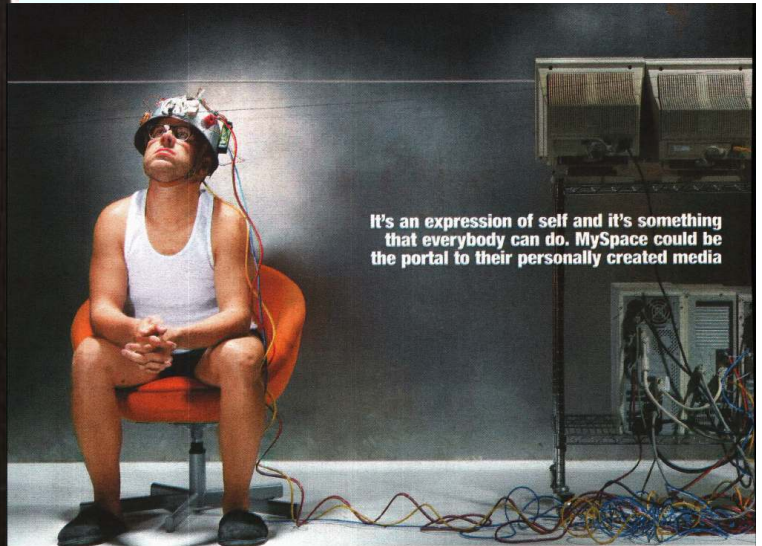
Perth band End of Fashion, pictured above, has been established on MySpace since mid-2005 and are already reaping the benefits. Carly Graham of One Louder Management administers the band's MySpace profile from Sydney.

"It was something that was recommended to us by another band as a tool to communicate with fans," she says. "At the moment, it's important for bands to have a presence on MySpace and be actively involved and understand how young people are finding new music. It's a place where fans feel they can connect with their favourite bands, which is invaluable, especially when the artists are getting involved with blogs and responding to messages."

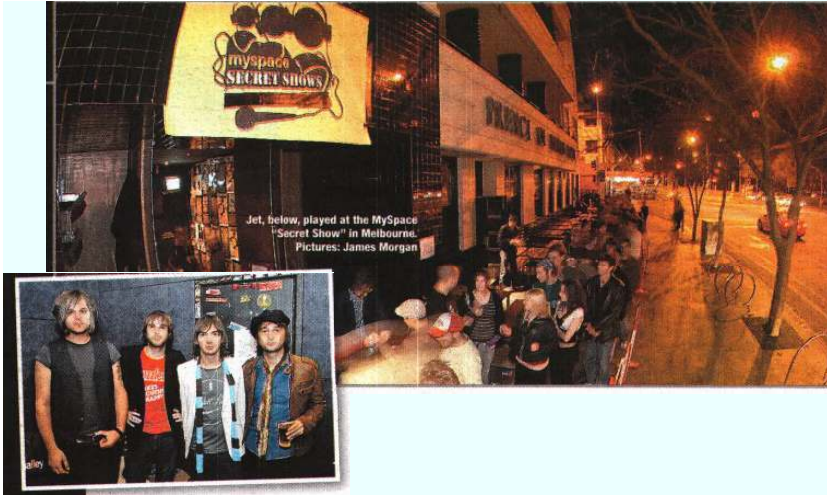
End of Fashion are notching up between 70 and 100 friend requests and profile views daily.

"It moves in waves," Carly says. "We've just announced that End of Fashion are touring nationally with The Living End."

And the biggest positive the band has found in having a MySpace profile? "The band has been a featured artist on both the US and the Australian MySpace homepages," Carly says. "That has opened us up to a new local and international audience."



Above: Arctic Monkeys and Lily Allen have benefited from their MySpace profiles.



Jet, below, played at the MySpace "Secret Show" in Melbourne. Pictures: James Morgan

Taking the streets online

Schoolteacher by day, hip-hop producer by night, Perth's Diger Rokwell is one of the increasing number of Australians who are using MySpace as a media portal, customising his site to showcase the music and street art he loves to create.

"MySpace is an evolving thing," he says. "The more I start personalising it, the more I'm putting in things that stimulate people to come to my site.

"MySpace is very exciting because it's my little bit of the internet and people notice it. No matter how big or small it is, it's there. Before MySpace came along, you'd have to have your own website to have your stuff played and displayed on the internet. This provides an opportunity for someone who has very limited computer knowledge to set up a page.

"Your site is basically what you put into it. On mine I've got four tracks that I've done, usually changing every two months. I've got the tracks on random, so any of them could be playing as you get to the site." As well as his music, Rokwell uses MySpace to post blogs on Perth's street art, on making music through sampling, and on his group of creative contacts.

Originally Rokwell's "Collective" came together through word of mouth, but the introduction of MySpace to the mix has opened up new avenues.

"We do a night called The Community Represents. A lot of people kept showing up, and it always seemed to be the same people. Before MySpace, it happened through association, but now it's online, you have a smorgasbord of people."

That smorgasbord extends to the US and the UK. Rokwell's site attracts comments from both countries. One of the keys to garnering such attention is the careful "adding" of friends to your site, and of getting yourself invited to be friends with others.

"You go to different people's sites, and if you like their site you add them to your friends list," he says. "And they have to accept you in order to be able to display you as one of their friends. That's why the image of you on MySpace is so important. There's an intra-web of all these different people. They'll see that small image, click it, your music plays, your blog, your photos. It tells them a bit about yourself. You probably get five or six hits a day, but that accumulates.

"I've got about 500 people on my site."



Above: Brent Buchanan from Warner Music. Top right: Diger Rokwell's image on MySpace.



Strategies for predators

Success has been a double-edged sword for MySpace. Its sweeping effect on American teenagers, coupled with the fear that pedophiles may be using the site as a hunting ground, has prompted the US Government to push through the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA).

Overwhelmingly passed through the House of Representatives on July 26 (410 for, 15 against), the Act forbids all government-funded public institutions such as schools and libraries from providing minors with access to MySpace and all similar social networking sites on their computers. The idea is that if children can't get on to the sites outside of their own homes, they can't be approached in an environment where parents are unable to monitor them.

While that may sound fine in principle, UWA's Dr Tama Leaver, pictured left, believes that DOPA is tackling the problem the wrong way.

"DOPA says, 'Fire is dangerous, so we're going to lock you in a cupboard so you can't see fire until you're 18. Then we're going to kick you out of the house where things are burning all over the place, then just hope that you've learnt not to stick your hand in a fire'. That is ridiculous," he says.

The best strategy, it seems, is education rather than litigation.

"I think there has to be more emphasis on parents and adults being aware of how things work," Dr Leaver says. "Kids are quite creative, and if you put a wall somewhere they'll work out how to jump over it or build something that gets around it. If your kids have a MySpace profile, at least have a conversation so they have the common sense not to post their full name, their address – the sort of information a predator could use if they wanted to. "It's a responsibility of parenthood, the same way you would talk about stranger danger in a park. MySpace is

a social space, and because the park and the space in the computer aren't as disconnected as we might think for this generation, the conversations need to flow between the two.

"We need kids to be aware that there are real people at the end of these computers. That means the ramifications of what you tell people in MySpace are as real as if you were talking to a person face-to-face." So is a local version of DOPA likely in Australia?

"I think the conversation will be had," he says. "It's going to be incredibly important for parents and educators to know what's being debated. I'm hoping that if the conversation gets very far in Australia, it will come down to how we need educational guidelines that will be put into curricula across primary and secondary schools, making sure students are aware rather than trying to ban things they will get to anyway."

