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**GETTING TO KNOW YOU**

## Has Facebook fatigue arrived?

Some of the social network's 67 million users are bored. But if growth is slowing among older people, the website is essential for those aged 12 to 34, who find that without Facebook, 'you're not in the loop'

Mar 07, 2008 04:30 AM

**CHRIS SORENSEN**  
 BUSINESS REPORTER

Facebook status update: Is it over already?

That's the buzz in some quarters of the Web after a recent report showed the number of people logging on to the social networking site in the United Kingdom dropped by 400,000 between December and January.

The decline, a first for the Facebook-crazed British, was pounced on by critics who gleefully warned that Facebook fatigue had finally arrived.

Perhaps more ominous, at least by Internet standards, is the recent appearance of a music video on YouTube that bleges "I'm getting bored of Facebook," to the tune of Billy Joel's "We didn't start the fire."

There's even a Facebook fatigue group on Facebook that encourages people to log off permanently. (Ironically, the group has still managed to attract 36 members.)

### Students warned against using Facebook groups for cheating

With the soaring popularity of Facebook among teens, the University of Western Ontario has started 25 Facebook study groups this year in such big first-year courses as biology, English, chemistry and psychology.

In the U.K., for example, Facebook still boasts about 8.5 million users. That translates into about one out of every six people in the country.

Globally, Facebook claims to have a user base of 67 million.

Canada, meanwhile, boasts the third-largest number of Facebook users in the world behind the U.K. and the United States, where Facebook originated. Analysts here estimate one of every four Canadians have Facebook accounts.

Kaan Yigit, an analyst at Solutions Research Group, said his own



Social networking website Facebook claims to have a user base of 67 million around the world.

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### WHAT IT'S ABOUT

In case you happen to be among the 75 per cent of the Canadian population not on Facebook, here's how it works:

It's a website where you make your own profile page, with pictures and personal information.

The "social networking" aspect refers to the ways users can link to one another through connections stemming from work, school or mutual interests.

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data shows that Facebook's growth rate has slowed considerably in Canada over the past few months – a finding he attributes to the suspicion that most Canadians between 12 and 34 are already on Facebook.

"The thing about Facebook fatigue is that it's primarily an older phenomenon," Yigit said.

He said people over the age of 40 are more likely to find Facebook time-consuming and rife with potential work-life conflicts.

"I don't see any fatigue in the younger, 12 to 34 age group, because with those people, it's really not an option not to have Facebook. Otherwise, you're not in the loop."

Mark Zuckerberg, the 23-year-old chief executive officer of Facebook Inc., came up with the idea for the website while attending Harvard University.

Zuckerberg launched the original Facebook from his dorm room in 2004 with an eye to helping students keep track of who was dating whom. As the idea caught on, Facebook membership was gradually expanded to other U.S. colleges and universities and, in 2006, opened to the public at large.

Zuckerberg, incidentally, did not bother finishing his university degree, opting instead to move to Palo Alto, Calif., with some friends to focus on developing Facebook into a business. Facebook currently employs about 500 and generates more than \$100 million (U.S.) in annual sales.

Notwithstanding recent concerns about fatigue, Zuckerberg so far has been successful in keeping the site relevant for users by offering an open platform for software developers and, for the most part, maintaining a focus on protecting users' privacy.

While Facebook's user base still trails that of News Corp.'s MySpace, which has about 110 million users globally, Facebook's rapid growth has nevertheless attracted the interest of major players, including Microsoft Corp., which last year paid \$240 million for a 1.6 per cent stake in the company.

But even if Facebook's growth is already beginning to plateau, Info-Tech's Hickernell says, that doesn't mean people are losing interest in the site.

"The absolute numbers are not as important as the quality of what's happening on the site itself."

What's happening is that tens of millions of users are spending a considerable chunk of their waking hours sharing photos, sending messages and playing online games with one another. According to data supplied by U.S. firm comScore Inc., the average U.S. Facebook user spent nearly three hours on the site in December.

Still, some bloggers were quick to note that December's average usage – 169.4 minutes – was slightly less than the average length of time that visitors spent on Facebook in October, which was about 195.6 minutes.

That prompted some to conclude that Facebook users were indeed "getting bored" with the site.

But a spokesperson for comScore cautioned that, because the total number of new U.S. Facebook users also grew by about 2 million during the same period, one might expect to see a slight drop in the average length of time spent on the site. That's because new users need time to build a network.

With so many eyes on Facebook, Zuckerberg and his investors are betting they can transform the social network into an advertising bonanza in much the same way as Google now rakes in billions through Internet search.

So far though, efforts to "monetize" Facebook proved far more difficult than building the site's sizable user base.

Zuckerberg was forced to apologize last year to subscribers for the way Facebook implemented an advertising program called Beacon, which tracks data about Facebook users when they are shopping on certain external sites and shares that information with their Facebook friends as well as advertisers.

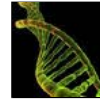
Such public relations missteps have been chalked up to an inexperienced management team, which could be why Facebook said this week it was hiring a top Google executive, 38-year-old Sheryl Sandberg, to be Facebook's chief operating officer.

Facebook's success in making the jump from hot Internet start-up to major corporate player is by no means guaranteed, but many believe that the social networking concept it helped popularize has already emerged as a key function of the Internet alongside email and instant messaging.

"Everything in our research points to this as being long term," said Yigit of Solutions Research Group.

"Now Facebook is just a name, as is MySpace.

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"So will there be another social media platform? Sure.

"But I think the fundamentals of social media – staying connected to friends and family and, in some cases, work life – that's here to stay."



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