Face it, Facebook is hot

Roll over, Friendster. Social networking site Facebook is now the in way to connect.

HEATRE director Alvin Tan has swapped one addiction for another. The artistic director of The Necessary Stage (TNS) recently kicked his smoking habit. Nowadays, instead of taking a cigarette break, he checks his Facebook page instead.

"I like to try these things," says Tan, 44, a former user of social networking sites Friendster, Multiply and MySpace. These accounts, already scarred by onslaughts of spam, now lie abandoned as he embraces his latest obsession, Facebook.

He signed up a month ago and checks his Facebook page every day, often putting up information about TNS projects.

"I'm kind of addicted," he says, half-earnestly and half-jokingly. He's even in a Facebook group for fellow addicts called I Am A Facebook Whore.

Why the Facebook fervour? The clean design and user-friendly applications are very inviting, he says. He also uses Facebook for research by checking out e-groups like Singaporeans Are Just Way Cooler.

"It's a fast way of knowing what people are talking about. You can spar with different ideas, it's quite a stimulating environment. In many ways, it's a weird cyber-community whose bonds are stronger than superfine even though you may not necessarily see these people you interact with."

Indeed, the easy-to-use range of third-party applications and variety of groups on Facebook not only mimics the minutiae of real life but in many ways also creates a virtual universe that allows for fun and convenient ways of interaction.

Besides keeping in touch with friends through conventional messages, there is a whole range of more informal behaviour at your disposal, like saying hello by giving someone a naughty (virtual) poke or sending a stressed friend a cold beer (icon).

Naomi Mingjin, 31, a casting director, joined Facebook at the urging of her husband. "In one day, I was hooked," she says. Favourite functions include "funny things" like sending high-fives and flying kisses to friends.

Sheryl Lee, 18, a law student at Singapore Management University, checks in at her Facebook account every day, and likes applications like Fortune Cookie (get a new fortune whenever you want), sending her friends Mardi Gras beads and starting a virtual food fight.

In her view, Facebook is the best social networking site of the moment because it's more sophisticated than Friendster and less of a poseur than MySpace.

"Friendster seems over-used. I'm bored of it. And I feel a sort of revulsion towards MySpace, it has too many notorious profiles of instant celebrities like Paris Hilton."

A tool to stay in touch

FACEBOOK'S image of understated cool has been carefully nurtured. Launched in 2004 by Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg, it originated as a networking tool for Harvard students.

ONLINE FUN: Student Sheryl Lee, a Facebook user, gets up to all kinds of hi-jinks with her FaceBook account, including starting virtual food fights with her friends.

Last year, access was expanded to all members of the public.

In a Newsweek article, technology journalist Steven Levy noted that "unlike services like the giant MySpace... Facebook is not a place where emerg ing stand-up comics, hip indie bands and soft-porn starlets try to break out by tagging thousands of people as virtual friends... The Facebook experience is built around people you know."

Singaporean Kelly Lai, 20, is currently a student at Britain's Cambridge University. "Everyone knows you get a Facebook account when they start university. It's a way to keep in touch with people who may be in different countries. It's also a good way of staying in contact with new people you meet and don't want to exchange phone numbers with yet. I've got to know people better through Facebook."

Ms Aparna Aiyar, 20, a Singaporean student at the University of Chicago, made use of Facebook to get to know people at her current school before she set of for the United States. "I use it a lot now to see what my friends are doing during their summer vacation."

The article's website states that...
Which site is the coolest?

HERE’S how the top three social networking sites stack up against one another.

Friendster
Founded in 2002 by American computer programmer Jonathan Abrams, then 32. It accumulated three million users within months of its launch, but teething problems and corporate reshuffles have since weakened its early lead.

It is still widely used today, with a reported 47 million accounts. The key difference is that it’s no longer the only game in town and far from the coolest.

MySpace
Founded in 2003 by American Internet company eUniverse (changed to Intermix in 2004), MySpace quickly overtook Friendster as the most popular social networking site.

Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation bought the site in 2005 for US$580 million.

Today, it reportedly boasts more than 100 million accounts. Bands like the Arctic Monkeys have reaped the rewards of the publicity they got through MySpace pages.

Facebook
Founded in 2004 by Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg, now 23.

With more than 31 million active users, Facebook differentiates itself with features like an eBay-like marketplace and a wide variety of third-party applications.

It is also the site that is most popular with American college students. In a 2006 study, Facebook was named the second most popular thing among undergraduates after the iPod, sharing equal importance with beer and sex.

The company’s website states that there are more than 31 million active users and a July Time magazine article reports that “with more than 150,000 new users signing up daily, it is growing three times as fast as rival MySpace”.

The majority of users are in the US, with Canada and Britain ranking second and third respectively. In the US, a large proportion of its users are college students in their late teens and early 20s. There are 23,365 Facebook users registered in Singapore.

For nightlife entrepreneur Michel Lu, 36, Facebook is a way to connect with friends, indulge in his interests and publicise his clubs Hacienda and SuperFamous and an upcoming restaurant.

“Friendster is a mess nowadays and MySpace looks very cluttered,” says Mr Lu, who has been a Facebook user for five months and checks his account every day.

He is the proud member of the Cupcake Appreciation group, as well as several local music groups.

“It’s pretty amazing, I just added a girl I met in London 10 years ago and haven’t seen since. It’s wonderful to be able to stay connected to old friends.”

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