

# Flirt, Chat, Play: ethnographic study of iminlikewithyou

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## ABSTRACT

These are the results of an ethnographic study and a questionnaire done to iminlikewithyou – a social networking website and massive multiplayer online gaming platform. The purpose was to understand how the socialization process occurred in this community. Through participant-observation and a questionnaire, this community was analyzed during a period of two months. Iminlikewithyou seems to have characteristics of Oldenberg’s *third places* and our results point to the fact that this is likely the main reason for its success.

## Author Keywords

Social Web, Multiplayer Online Games, play, third place, leveler

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social relationships are changing significantly, especially in the western civilization. Many factors contribute to this and, one of them is, without a doubt, the web [2] [3] [18]. Boase et al. [3] report that our social networks are growing and that there is now a new factor that influences society: multiplexity. What is meant by this is that people tend to communicate more and in more varied ways. Many of them make use of the Internet, like Instant Messaging (IM), forums, chat rooms, e-mail and massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs).

Iminlikewithyou is, in part, a MMOG. It first appeared with the slogan “find, flirt, bid” [10], as it aimed at helping people flirt with others and have fun in the process. The site provided tools for users to get to know each other, like the profile bidding games, the profiles themselves and photo uploading [10]. However, the website has taken a turn and is now more directed at multiplayer gaming.

MMOGs connect hundreds or even thousands of players from all around the world and, therefore, have a huge potential as social connectors, in the sense that they enable users to interact with people remotely and to build new relationships [14].

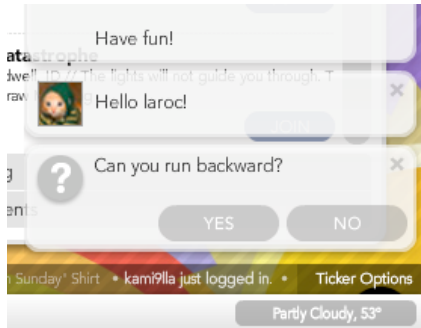
## 2. ABOUT IMINLIKewithYOU

Iminlikewithyou emerged from the YCombinator program – a seed-stage startup funding firm, started in 2005 by Paul Graham, Robert Morris, Trevor Blackwell, and Jessica Livingston [9] – but remained in stealth mode for the first six months. The website was created by Charles Forman and Dan Albritton and was launched in late 2006 as a private beta version [21]. On May 2007, entrepreneur and co-founder of Digg, Kevin Rose made an investment to the site [1] [20] and in June 2008, Spark Capital, Baseline Ventures, Betaworks and Mark Andreessen also invested in this platform [7][21]. PC Magazine classified iminlikewithyou as one of the Top 100 Undiscovered Web Sites on August 27, 2007 [16]. And, on September 2007, the website launched its Flash version, which is entirely built in Flash, and includes many new features like games.

Iminlikewithyou has changed very much in the past few months. New features have been added and others have been removed.

### 2.1. Experience Points

In the beginning of the observation period, iminlikewithyou members could interact not only via the games – using the game chat – but also through profile games and videos. Profile games consisted of questions users would post and that other members could bid on. To bid, users need experience points, which can be acquired by playing games and by answering random questions that pop up. The answers to these questions are stored in a database and help shape the user’s profile. Later, this information would be used for targeted advertising [10]. However, during this ethnographic study, no ads popped up in iminlikewithyou. The points also contribute to the level the person’s at. By accumulating points, users level up and, hence, have a way of demonstrating their seniority in the website.

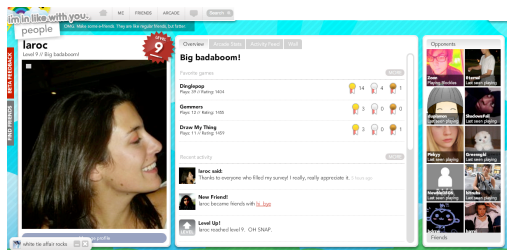


Picture 1. Question Prompt

## 2.2. Profile

In their profile, members can have some information about themselves, as well as photos. The profile also shows the user's rank, in terms of experience points. This feature was added somewhat recently, in November 2008, when a huge restructuring of the website happened.

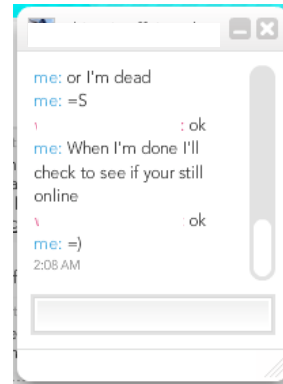
The profile also has an activity feed, which shows that member's recent activity, in terms of leveling up, medals won in games and friends that were added. Another feature of the website is the Wall. On the Wall, users can post anything they feel like posting, but this is a feature that doesn't seem to be used much. A characteristic of the profiles of iminlikewithyou is their visibility: anyone can see the profile of any user, even if the person who's viewing doesn't have an iminlikewithyou profile.



Picture 2. Iminlikewithyou profile

## 2.3. Messages

Iminlikewithyou's users can send private messages to each other, using the private message option. They can also use the public chatter, which sends a message to all of their friends, or the chat, that allows instant messaging between members.



Picture 3. Private chat

## 2.4. Games

Iminlikewithyou has several games that anyone can play, whether that person is a registered user or not. The games can be played alone or with other players. And the user can choose if it's a private game or not.

A feature of the games is that they allow users to send an invitation link to their friends using Twitter. They can also invite their iminlikewithyou friends directly.

Games can be very different from one another, ranging from *Blockles* (similar to Tetris) to *Draw my thing* (an online version of Pictionary), or even *Dinglepop* (the online version of the arcade game PuzzleBubble). Games can be competitive in their nature, like *Blockles* (player vs. player) or collaborative, like *Draw my thing*.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Iminlikewithyou was studied through immersive ethnographic fieldwork, which included participant observation, reading about iminlikewithyou on its blog and on news' websites and, finally, the deployment of a questionnaire for iminlikewithyou's users.

### 3.1. Ethnography

In the beginning of October 2008, I created a profile on Iminlikewithyou. I logged in several times a week, to keep playing with other users and get a feel of the community's culture. The information given on the profile was truthful, except for the screen name, for which a nickname was used. Besides logging on to the website, I also observed it while logged out or as a "LameGuest", like people that don't register are known as. During this observation period, several changes were made to the website, new games were added and features were removed.

### 3.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was online between December, 17<sup>th</sup> 2008 and January, 2<sup>nd</sup>

2009. It was conducted after the observation period. The link for the questionnaire was posted to mailing lists at Carnegie Mellon University and at the University of Madeira. Besides this, private messages were sent to users that were logged in and playing on iminlikewithyou. Overall, 207 people answered the questionnaire. Of these, only 70 completed it. However, after analyzing the answers, only 65 were considered in the final analysis.

As for its structure, the questionnaire was divided in 6 parts: demographics, general usage, friends, profile, behavior and features. The goal of this questionnaire was to get an overview of iminlikewithyou's users, the features they use most and the reasons for joining this community. From the observation period, it seemed that most users were very young and that the majority were females. From the interactions that were observed, people seemed to use the gaming platform mainly to meet new people and have fun, like they would in Oldenberg's *third places* [15]. As for adding people as friends, there didn't seem to be very strict rules about it. So, the questionnaire was constructed so as to understand if these hypotheses were true.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Demographics

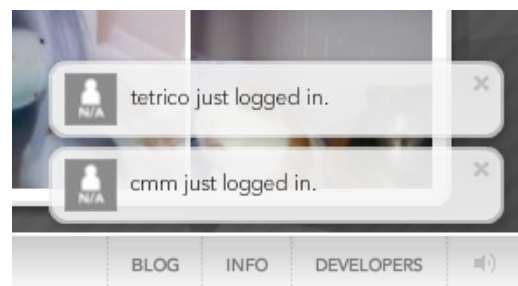
Iminlikewithyou has a very particular design, extremely colorful and appealing. While observing the community, it seemed that most members were teenagers and the majority were females. This was later confirmed by the results of the questionnaire, which indicated that 72% of respondents were female. The members' age ranged from 12 to 35, the median was 17 and the average age was 18.08. However, the standard deviation was 4.99. This indicates that most users are very young. As for their occupations, as one would expect, most go to School or University (78%).

As for the place where people come from, 61% are from English speaking countries (USA, UK and Canada) and the rest are scattered through Europe, North Africa and Asia. Iminlikewithyou is completely in Flash. Therefore, it needs a high-speed Internet connection for playing games. Moreover, its servers are in the US. So, it comes as no surprise that many members come from there (43%). Another factor that may contribute to this, is that the website is completely in English, which may constitute an impediment for more users to join, especially if they want to play *Draw my thing*, which requires a good knowledge of English. On the other hand, one user from Brazil commented that one of the reasons why she had joined this community was to improve her English.

### 4.2. Usage

Regarding the time users have been members of iminlikewithyou, most of them (72%) had joined rather recently – less than 6 months ago. This may be due to multiple reasons, like the fact that it's a very recent community and it's still not very well known – at least outside the US.

Also, most users report to log into iminlikewithyou at least once a day (66%). However, this result may be biased by the sampling method, given that the users that filled the survey were those that were online and playing at the time. However, in the questionnaire, those that said to log on less frequently, were employed and, therefore, older. So, this may contribute to the results. Of the features that iminlikewithyou has, users report to use more the games (92%), the private chat and the private messages. The reasons people report more often as to why they go to iminlikewithyou are to have fun (89%) and to meet new people (71%). While playing, the user can chat with the members she's playing with. Later, she can review whom she played with and, if she wants, she can add them to her friends' list. Of course, the other users have to confirm she's a friend, before she gets notifications about their activity.



Picture 4. Pop up with information about who logged in

### 4.3. Friends

Regarding friends on iminlikewithyou, from the ethnographic observation, it seemed there were no very strict rules as to whom you might add as a friend. Every now and then, users would request to add them as friends, even though I had had no previous contact with them. What was usual was for people you played with a couple of times to add you, or vice-versa. Iminlikewithyou makes this easy for its users, because it keeps track of people you have played with and you can know if they're playing at the moment. As for the results of the questionnaire regarding friends, 75% of the respondents said to have added to their friends' list at least one person they had met on iminlikewithyou only. 37% respondents said they knew some of their friends from the real world and 14% had met them through other websites. Bessi re et al. [2] describe a longitudinal study they developed to learn about the effects of Internet usage and people's psychological well being. Their data seems to indicate that people who have good social relationships and use

the Internet to communicate with their friends and family, feel less depressed over time. Their results also suggest that those who have good social relationships and use the Internet to meet new people online, feel more depressed over time. This may be due to the fact that people invest more time online and end up putting less time into their “real world” relationships.

In fact, one of the main reasons why people join *iminlikewithyou* is to meet other people (71%) and to have fun (89%). Several authors [22] [17] claim that online communities and the usage of the Internet are “*particularly good for weak-tie relationships*”, in the sense that they’re tools that facilitate keeping in touch with those you usually don’t have much contact with. Wellman [22] claims that more and more people are creating relationships online and, in fact, the results of the questionnaire and of the observation seem to confirm this. Wellman [22] and Boase et al. [3] also point out the fact that the Internet also helps support strong ties, like family or close friends. This is also supported by the findings of this questionnaire, in the sense that 57% of the respondents said to use *iminlikewithyou* to communicate with friends they had met before joining this community, or like a respondent said: “*I play iminlikewithyou every day and i make friendships stronger by playing games with my friends.*”

#### 4.4. Profile & Privacy

In section 2, *iminlikewithyou* was described in detail. One of its features is the profile, where users can have information about themselves, upload photos and talk with their friends (through the Wall). The profile is visible to anyone that has Internet access and a web browser with a Flash plug-in. As a result, users seem to have some reservations as to what information they make available. Only 43% of the respondents said to have their real names on their profiles, but most said to have their age. In fact, during the observation period most users displayed nicknames on their profiles, instead of their real names. Adding to this, they have very little personal information. For example, on the questionnaire, only 15% had their occupation and 18% said to have no information at all about themselves. Regarding pictures, *iminlikewithyou*’s users seem to have fewer concerns, given 72% said to have at least one picture of themselves on their profiles. However, during the observation period, it was commonplace to find users with random pictures – like cartoons, anime or even animals – as their main profile picture. As for the awareness of the visibility of their profile, most users (87%) seem to know that their profile is visible to anyone that gets to *iminlikewithyou*.

One can only speculate on the privacy issues this may raise. Given many *iminlikewithyou*’s users are under aged, it would make sense that profile access be restricted to registered users. Otherwise, privacy violations may

occur, like a female user was saying in the questionnaire: “*Yeah, there was this guy that kept following me. (but he was a guest) So i couldnt report him. He kept telling me about he would "plant" a virus on my pc.*”

In fact, like Boyd [4] [14] argues, there are four properties of the online environment that may have social implications. They are *persistence*, *searchability*, *replicability* and *invisible audiences*. Like this author states, the Internet is becoming more and more part of people’s everyday lives. However, not everyone is aware of the *persistence* of the Internet, in the sense that what a person says today, may still be online ten years from now and may be easily found (*searchability*). Adding to this, there’s *replicability*, i.e., anyone can copy and paste content from one place to another and then, context is lost. On top of this, there are also the *invisible audiences*, people that view what someone has done/said online, without the author being aware of it.

An implication of this, like Rosenblum [19] says, is that there seems to be a less defined barrier between someone’s personal life and their work, for example. Like Boyd [4] [14] says, employers nowadays seek information online about potential employees, and may end up not hiring them, if they find something they don’t like about that person online. After all, like Rosenblum [19] states, given that lots of users of social networking websites – like *iminlikewithyou* – are teenagers, in their eagerness to “fit in”, they not only accept total strangers as friends, but they also tend to “act cool” by, for example, showing pictures of themselves having more or less marginal behaviors.

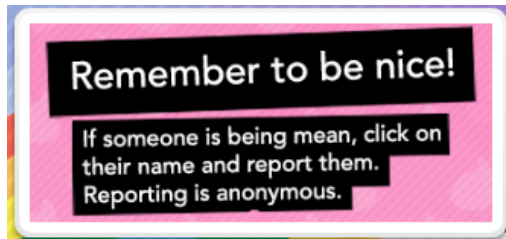
Rosenblum [19] also says that, in the end, it’s the user that has to exercise judgment on what to post. But, given many of *iminlikewithyou*’s users are so young, are they aware of the *persistence* of their actions online? And of the consequences these may have in the future?

#### 4.5. Behavior

*Iminlikewithyou*’s culture is light-weight and, therefore, there are no specific rules as to how users may and may not interact with each other. In fact, sometimes there would be users that would behave rudely – like swearing – but most people didn’t know they could report others. So, people would leave the game and come back later. However, when *iminlikewithyou* was restructured in November 2008, reporting became more advertised. With this feature, users can report other users who were considered to have inappropriate behaviors. As a result, the reported users would not be able to log on to *iminlikewithyou* for a certain period or would even be banned from the site. In fact, 31% of respondents stated to have had a problem with someone else on *iminlikewithyou*. Problems ranged from swearing, to users who didn’t play games by the rules or even stalking.

Like one 21 year-old respondent said: *“People get ignorant in the chats sometimes and in “draw my thing” they draw rude things so i just cuss them out and leave the chat and game.”*

Like Kiesler et al. [12] say norms can help members feel safe, help newcomers learn adequate behavior and serve as guidance. However, there are no clear rules on iminlikewithyou. Recently, when the reporting feature was added, a warning – that switches with other announcements – was added to iminlikewithyou’s homepage.



Picture 5. Encouraging good behavior

#### 4.6. Games

What seems to be unique about iminlikewithyou is its playful culture: *“We are just trying to make a really fun thing to help you waste time”* [11]. Or like a user said: *“The way some things on the site itself are just funny, it’s informal and I like it that way. I don’t see it very often in other sites. Just relaxed.”*

In fact, games are the feature users report to like the most – 61% of the respondents said this was their favorite feature. Games are referenced by Oldenberg [15] as one of the characteristics of *third places*. And Williams et al. [23] refer to *World of Warcraft* as having some properties of *third places*. These are places where people get together outside their homes – in *neutral ground* – to socialize. In *third places* the interaction is light and witty, and serious conversations are avoided. Another characteristic of these places is that they act as *levelers*, i.e., people’s social statuses are of no importance there, because everyone’s the same. All these characteristics are present on iminlikewithyou, which make it a really good *third place* for those who want to “hang out” online with their friends: *“it’s like a getaway place (...) where i can relax and chat and play with friends”* (quote from a user that responded to the questionnaire). Moreover, games help users create a *common ground* [17] [14], that like other authors argue, is essential for successful relationships, like a user said in the questionnaire: *“My friends get mad when they cant beat me in blockles, etc. It just comes up in conversation often. Ill be online and i wont respond quickly and they’ll just be like, Oh, blockles.. Hahha it’s great.”*

## 5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to get an overview of iminlikewithyou’s culture. How its members interact and how the socialization process happens in this community. From the ethnographic study and the questionnaire that was conducted to iminlikewithyou’s members, it became clear who its members are – mostly teenagers and young adults – and why they keep coming to this website: it has characteristics of Oldenberg’s [15] *third places*: it is a *leveler*, because it has games that make the interaction between members easier and helps establish a *common ground* (Preece et al. [17]) that enables conversations in other contexts.

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## APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

Survey about iminlikewithyou:

I am a graduate student of the Masters of Human-Computer Interaction at Carnegie Mellon University and at the University of Madeira.

I am conducting a study about iminlikewithyou, as a part of a study for the Social Web course.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about iminlikewithyou's members and how they use this online social website.

No personal information will be collected, so I have no way of identifying you.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (e-mail). Thanks in advance for filling out this survey.

Are you a registered user of iminlikewithyou?

- - Yes
- - No (If no, will exit survey).

### Demographics:

1 - What is your gender ?:

- - male;
- - female.

2 - How old are you?

3 - In which country do you live?

4 - What is your occupation?

- - I go to school;
- - I go to University/College
- - Full time employment;
- - I'm unemployed.
- - Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### General usage:

5 - When did you join iminlikewithyou?

- - less than 1 month ago;
- - between 1 and 6 months ago;
- - between 7 months and 1 year ago;
- - more than 1 year ago;
- - I never joined iminlikewithyou;

6 - How often do you visit iminlikewithyou?

- - many times a day
- - every day;
- - 3 to 4 times a week;
- - once a week;
- - 2 to 3 times a month;
- - rarely.

7 - Which functions of iminlikewithyou do you typically use (select all that apply)?

- - play games. Which? \_\_\_\_\_
- - ping friends;
- - use the public chatter;
- - send private messages to friends.

- - other: Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

8 - If you selected "Play Games" above, then please indicate whom you play with:

- - with anyone;
- - with my friends only;
- - I prefer to play with my friends, but play with others too.
- - alone.

9 - Does iminlikewithyou help you in any of the following ways? (select all that apply):

- - have fun;
- - "hang out" with friends;
- - get away from real life;
- - meet new people;
- - flirt;
- - none of the above;
- Other (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

10 - Besides iminlikewithyou, which other social networks do you belong to? (select all that apply)

- - Bebo;
- - Facebook;
- - Hi5;
- - MySpace;
- - Orkut;
- - Other (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)
- - None.

#### **Friends:**

11 - How many friends do you have in iminlikewithyou?

12 - Where did you first meet your iminlikewithyou friends? (select all that apply):

- - in the real world;
- - on iminlikewithyou;
- - on other websites;
- - these are people I don't know and have never talked to.
- - I'm not a registered user, so I don't have an iminlikewithyou profile.

13 - Do you communicate with iminlikewithyou friends outside iminlikewithyou?

- - Yes

- - No

- I'm not a registered user, so I don't have an iminlikewithyou profile.

14 - If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, please select all that apply:

- - IM (instant messaging);
- - Email;
- - phone;
- - SMS;
- - None of the above.
- - Other: (Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

#### **Profile:**

15 - The information in your iminlikewithyou profile:

- - is truthful;
- - is false;

16 - How many profiles do you have?

- - one;
- - several; \_\_\_\_\_

17 - Please indicate which information is present in your (main) profile, (select all that apply):

- - real name
- - personal contacts;
- - fun facts about yourself;
- - your age;
- - your occupation;
- - no information about me;
- - I don't have an iminlikewithyou profile.

18 - Please indicate which photographs, if any, are present in your (main) profile (select all that apply):

- - a picture of yourself;
- - a picture of someone else;
- - a random picture;
- - no picture.

- I'm not a registered user, so I don't have an iminlikewithyou profile.

19 - Your profile is visible to:

- - anyone;
- - iminlikewithyou's users only;
- - your friends in iminlikewithyou only;
- - I don't have a profile.

**Behavior**

20 – Have you ever had a problem with someone else in iminlikewithyou?

- - Yes
- - No

21 – If you answered “Yes” in the previous question, can you please describe what happened and how you dealt with it?

22 - How much time do you spend in iminlikewithyou?

- too little
- ideal

- too much

23 – Why did you join iminlikewithyou?

**Features**

24 – Which feature do you like most in iminlikewithyou?

25 – What would you like to be able to do, but can’t in iminlikewithyou?

26 – Please leave any comments you’d like about iminlikewithyou and how it influences your everyday life.

27 – Please feel free to make any comments about this survey.