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Latin websites build connections

Spanish-language social networking sites are flourishing.

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J. PAT CARTER/AP

Thanks to a deal with the Warner Latin America label, Demian Bellumio of Hoodiny offers complete artist catalogs online and develops websites for top artists such as Pitbull and Ricky Martin.

MIAMI --

Indie rocker Eric Monterrosa checks his ElHood.com website at least three times a day, answering fans, surfing for other new Latin artists and keeping in touch with friends from his native Colombia.

Elhood is sort of a bilingual MySpace page mixed with the latest in Latin music, and for Monterrosa it has become a personal and professional lifeline. It is also the latest in a wave of Hispanic social networking sites building connections across the United States, Latin America and Spain, all hoping that they can capture a slice of the millions of dollars in advertising being purchased.

"A lot of Latin artists are plugged in. So if you want to find them, it's easy. If you go to sites like MySpace, you have to go through all sorts of genres, types of music and languages," Monterrosa said. "It's cool that we can break the boundaries and reach out to other countries and have so many people sharing music and talking across international borders."

About 56 percent of Hispanics in the United States use the Internet, compared to 71 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 60 percent of non-Hispanic blacks, according to study released last month by the D.C.-based Pew Internet and American Life Project. But the number of Hispanics online jumps to 67 percent for 18- to 27-year-olds, who also happen to be the group most likely to visit social networking sites and a plum advertising demographic.

USER FRIENDLY

Elhood's easy-to-use tools make it a breeze for first-time surfers, artists and fans who often mix Spanish and English in their profiles. It is among nearly a dozen Hispanic-oriented social networks to have sprung up, including the entertainment-oriented Quepasa.com, the matchmaking migente.com and a Spanish version of the global networking site Hi5.com.

Then there's Vostu.com. It's a Facebook alternative for prep-schoolers from across the Spanish-speaking world. A group of mostly Hispanic Harvard business students launched the site in February.

Vostu co-founder and Honduran native Dan Kafie, 24, believes his site can compete with the larger sites because it's tailored to the needs of a relatively small but affluent group. The site limits the number of members on each school network and requires additional checks for those seeking to join, a nod to the security concerns in countries where kidnappings are common.

Noting the popularity of text messaging among students, Vostu offers its own version so people can text and check out their friends' sites at the same time. "There's similar types of sites, but they don't capture the cultural subtleties. We thought there's an opportunity," Kafie said.

But are technology, culture and language enough to draw people away from mammoths such as MySpace and Facebook?

These days, Hispanic youth in the United States are already creating their own communities in mainstream sites. Students in California recently used a section of MySpace to organize walkouts to push for the creation of a federal holiday honoring farmworker advocate Cesar Chavez.

Charlene Li, vice president and principal analyst for the marketing focused Forrester Research, believes the Hispanic social networking sites can compete.

"Can they take on a MySpace? Probably not," she said. "Can they succeed as a business? Yes, because whenever you have people grouped together, they become a target for marketing purposes."

Li believes Hispanic users have been slower to go online in part because of economics and in part because existing programs have not targeted them.

ELHOOD'S VISION

And Elhood co-founder, Argentine-born wunderkind Demien Bellumio, is among those out to change that. The 29-year-old, bicultural, tech-savvy hipster represents exactly the demographic his site targets.

Bellumio talks in rapid-fire, English or Spanish, you choose, about his company, Hoodiny, which owns the site.

Thanks to a deal with the Warner Latin America label, Hoodiny also offers complete artist catalogs online and develops websites for top artists such as Mexico rockers Mana, Miami-based rapper Pitbull and Ricky Martin.

To Bellumio, it makes sense that the social networking sites would be among the first Internet sites to successfully market to Hispanics.

"Music is a huge part of our culture. And people are looking for a way to come together," Bellumio said.

GROWING DEMAND

Rocker Monterrosa, who performs under the name Monte.Rosa, believes the need for the online Latin community is only growing.

"More young people come to this country and don't have a family. They are here to strive or to study and they need contacts. They don't have money to go to shows or clubs, but they can reach out to people who also like the same things," he said. As for those in Latin America, they can connect with music and youth scenes that are difficult to find outside the big cities.

Whether these sites succeed in the long term, they will need to meet the expectations of a new breed of Hispanic Internet users, said Richard Chabran, head of the nonprofit "California Community, Technology Policy Group" who has studied Hispanic use of the Internet.

"The youth, they want it to be fast. They want it to be hip, and they want to see themselves in it -- but not just themselves," he said. "People who are serious about the Hispanic market realize that if you put up a site in Spanish and it's not done well, they're going to get you."