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Mobile Fair-Social networks go mobile

REUTERS 

Reuters - Thursday, February 7

It might even revolutionise ordering a take-away, Kolman said. "In the next two to three years, you will be able to see where your pizza is." (Additional reporting by Reed Stevenson; editing by Elaine Hardcastle) - AMSTERDAM, Feb 6 - Online social networking -- popularised by Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook -- is moving to the mobile phone and could generate revenue of more than \$29 billion a year by 2012, a market research firm says.

In a report released in the run-up to next week's Mobile World Congress, market research firm Informa Telecoms & Media said 55 to 60 million mobile phone subscribers worldwide already use services from simple chat rooms to multimedia environments.

That number could rise sevenfold by 2012 even under a conservative scenario, Informa said.

With revenue from voice calls under pressure in mature markets, mobile operators are seeking to boost data usage, and social networks offer one such opportunity.

The issue is firmly on the agenda of the Mobile World Congress, the world's biggest wireless trade show, which will take place in Barcelona.

Christine Perey, author of the Informa report, said social networking on mobile phones offered a level of privacy that office computers lack, making it attractive for use anywhere.

Nokia, the world's largest cellphone maker, has already begun a push into social networking with its "Mosh" service and launched its "N-Gage" gaming service and "Share on Ovi" media sharing site this week.

While big names dominate social networking on the Web -- News Corp's MySpace has more than 110 million users globally -- mobile services tend to be smaller and more focused, Perey said.

Perey pointed to the example of myGamma, which was originally launched in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand.

"Instead of targeting the upscale, affluent people with data plans, this originally was for blue-collar workers. They focused on people... who were away from home and missed their families," Perey said.

MOBILE VIRTUAL WORLD

"S! Town", part of Japanese mobile phone operator Softbank, is a virtual world squarely aimed at teenage girls, who can choose from a variety of big-eyed characters with names such as "love-love" and "strawberry", and create a virtual space, share pictures and chat.

The service itself is free, but the carrier generates revenue from data charges -- sending a message costs about 1 yen, and changing the interior of a virtual room 200 yen.

Among the web brands, MySpace and Facebook offer mobile versions where users can check their latest friend requests or post "what I'm doing" updates.

Other services are also specifically aimed at people on the move, seeking to combine social networking with data on a user's location that is obtained by using a global positioning chip or from cell tower information.

Amsterdam-based startup Bliin allows its users to share their whereabouts in real time, updated every 15 seconds, as dots moving around on a map. A user can add such a map to their MySpace page or profile on another networking site.

Bliin founder Stef Kolman said this technology could find an application in advertising and branding as well.

"There's a transition going from the hard-core, very secure vehicle and people tracking and tracing towards a more fun-loving way of doing basically the same thing," he said.

It might even revolutionise ordering a take-away, Kolman said. "In the next two to three years, you will be able to see where your pizza is." (Additional reporting by Reed Stevenson; editing by Elaine Hardcastle)

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