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Social Media Giants

Since social media's origin over a decade ago, several sites have enjoyed time in the spotlight. Indeed, individuals of all ages and lifestyles often manage several social media accounts at the same time, ranging from the big names to more specific platforms, such as the book-sharing site *Goodreads*. The two giants of the moment are likely *Facebook*, used by tweens and grandparents alike, and *Twitter*. Most individuals have one or more of these accounts and may even use them in integrated ways. For example, *Twitter* has a feature that allows users to post their tweets to *Facebook*, thus updating two sites at once. Often, these sites share the same major features. *Facebook* and *Twitter* are similar on a basic level but differ in appearance and in the way users employ them. 

Facebook has the typical offerings associated with social media sites. Account holders  have a home page containing their "news feed," a list of posts by other users with whom the account holder is "friends." Additionally, posts by fan pages for businesses, products, and celebrities the account holder "likes" will appear on the news feed. Users can arrange their news feed by "top stories" or "most recent." The home page also contains the *Facebook* chat feature, where users can instant message one another, and links to the private message page and the account holder's personal profile. The individual's profile contains a personal picture – as well as a banner picture – biographical information, and a compilation of all the individual's posts, called the "timeline."

Twitter is not much different on these points. The homepage also features a list of tweets  by other users whom the account holder “follows.” The account holder can choose to view a list of tweets generated by *Twitter*’s assessment of his or her interests under the “Discover” tab. A *Twitter* user also has a profile with his or her photograph situated over a larger photo at the top. Underneath, the user provides a short biography, his or her location, and a link to a personal website, if applicable. Direct messaging is also available on a separate page.

Despite these major similarities, *Twitter* and *Facebook* differ in the details. On *Twitter*,  everything from the layout to individual tweets is condensed. Posts are famously limited to 140 letters, numbers, spaces, and other characters, and on the home page, tweets are “collapsed,” often hiding photos, links, and other users’ responses. A user must click “expand” to view the whole story. This feature keeps the contents of the homepage uniform. On *Facebook*, the entire post (unless the post is unusually long) and many of the comments are always visible.

Additionally, the process for tagging other users in a post differs between *Facebook* and  *Twitter*. On *Facebook*, a user can only tag individuals with whom they “friends,” meaning the two share information with each other, as well as fan pages. *Twitter* makes no distinction between the personal accounts utilized by individuals and the accounts of organizations and celebrities. Most accounts on *Twitter* are public, and a user can “follow” an account without that account “following” them back. The relationship is not necessarily mutual, as it is with *Facebook* friends. Any account holder can address another user with that user’s twitter handle (the @ sign followed by a distinct name or word combination). This tweet will not automatically appear on the addressed user’s profile, as it would on a “friend’s” *Facebook* page. The addressed user would have to “retweet” in order for the tweet to appear on his or her page. “Retweeting” is similar to “sharing” on *Facebook*.

These subtle nuances in *Twitter* and *Facebook* impact the way the account holders use the sites. *Facebook* emphasizes a circle of friends, family, and acquaintances through the mutual relationship of “friends.” Thus, the information users share on *Facebook* tends to be personal. Users are able to post large numbers of photos in albums and additional biographical information is compiled under the “about” tab. A compilation of the pages a user likes is visible to his or her friends. *Twitter* is less about friends and relatives and more about an enlarged conversation. There is no place for users to upload 200 photos of their latest family vacation. Since most tweets are public, *Twitter* users have an expanded audience, and there are more opportunities to engage with other users who are interested in the same news stories, businesses, and blogs. *Twitter* also updates faster because the posts are shorter, creating an ideal environment for news and conversation in real time.

Facebook and *Twitter* are similar in their major features. They both provide account holders with an online platform for connecting with others through posts, profiles, and content sharing. However, they differ in the details of appearance and focus, thus creating two unique environments: one that emphasizes friends and personal information and another that highlights cultural conversations.