

A Study on Adolescents' Use of Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

Social Networking Sites (SNS) are now a global phenomenon. This research study looked at the adolescent's usage patterns on their SNS and their perceptions and experiences of the same, using a quantitative approach. The use of Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) seemed to be the most preferred and frequently used means of communication on a regular basis. A high involvement of parental control and monitoring was also seen all through the study, especially among the adolescent girls. There seemed to be a direct impact of this on the adolescent activities online. The findings suggest important implications for SNS usage, addiction, parental involvement, gender differences and identity issues that have emerged from it.

Keywords: Social Network, CMC, Control, Gender, SNS

Introduction

Technological advancements and a swarming variety of 'new media' forms have been one of the hallmarks of the 21st century. 'New media' is a broad term in media studies, that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century, and refers to on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, creative participation and community formation around the media content (Socha and Eber-Schmid, 2012).

As this new media is constantly evolving to connect to as many different platforms and people as possible, one of its most defining characteristics is interactivity. Of all these forms of new media, in recent years, online 'Social Networking' is something which has caught on and spread massively in its pervasiveness and mass consumption.

Most SNS support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks and ties, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, experiences, views, opinions and activities (boyd and Ellison 2007). Some sites cater to diverse audiences and are open to all regardless of age, gender and profession, while some sites cater specifically to people with certain professions or views or activities. 'Sites also vary in the extent to which they support and incorporate new information, apps and



communication tools such as mobile connectivity, blogging, and photo and video-sharing' (boyd and Ellison 2007).

The year 2011 was a big year for the Social Media industry worldwide with its popularity, pervasiveness and unprecedented active user base and surveys such as the comScore (2012) helped throw some light on the same. This survey showed how the shifts in engagement among the top content properties online are now showing a user trend that is moving away from traditional portal content in favour of social networking and entertainment content available online (comScore, 2012). Besides the sharp rise in the number of registered users on SNS, the time spent on these networks has also increased tremendously. Social Networking now accounts for approximately 1 out of every 6 minutes spent online (comScore; February 2012).

Facebook's Presence in India

Of all the SNS currently present, Facebook though has turned out to be the most phenomenal with the largest users not only in India but most of the world over, and has moved to creating a place for itself as the number one social networking site. As of October 4th 2012, Facebook now boasts of a staggering 1 billion monthly active users (Facebook 2012) world over.

Infact one of the important reasons apart from the number of users, the amount of time spent on SNS too has increased significantly can be attributed to the very rise of smartphones and internet services. The rise of smartphones and tablets has drastically altered consumers' digital media consumption changing the way people access content, where they consume it and the frequency of consumption (comScore, 2012). World over, approximately 100 million users' access SNS through their mobile phone (Nielsen 2011).

Surveys show a similar trend wherein Internet and 3G rank high among Indian consumers on features most sought after in their next phone; and among smartphone users, three out of four, use social networking and spend more than two hours per day browsing and downloading applications and entertainment (Nielsen 2011). Infact eMarketer (2012), a research firm in the field of market research estimates that more than 76 million people in India will use social networking sites at least monthly in 2013, up 51.7% from last year's total. This essentially means that by 2014, 83% of internet users in the country will regularly access social networking sites. This would mean that India then would have a significantly higher penetration of internet users using social sites than what is expected in the US the same year, which eMarketer projects the share to be around 68%.



But since the past two decades another noticeable trend has been identified. Apart from Facebook having its grip on the youth, this time around it looks like the Facebook appeal has spread straight amongst the elderly too. In a recent study done by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in the year 2010, it was reported that the number of social media users age 65 and older grew 100 percent throughout 2010, such that one in four people in that age group are now part of a social networking site (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010).

Right from Barack Obama to Sarah Palin, US politicians are masters of Social Media actively pursuing it as a means of communication to connect to the people. Barack Obama rode into office for his first term as President of USA on a wave of promises about openness and transparency, vowing to look for technological solutions to every problem the country faces and change the way business is done in Washington (Corbin 2009). And abiding by those, Obama and his team were the first to start using social media like SNS to connect to the masses. Obama and his team have spent a good deal of time and energy expanding the government's presence online with instant updates and weekly addresses screened online (Corbin 2009).

Approximately 91% of youth who use SNS report that they utilize such sites to communicate with already known friends (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2007) and studies show how the fact that one's peers are on these sites makes it a necessity to be part of these sites to enhance one's social lives (Boyd, 2008; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008). SNS seem to now be an additional place where people can maintain their offline relationships (Ginsuanlian 2012).

SNS are also a platform that tends to reward the user with social support and well-being. In a study by Diener in 2000 on subjective well-being, it was found that Facebook tends to serve as a support system especially for those people in collectivist cultures, who have frequent interactions and a close circle of Facebook friends. In another study by Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) on adolescents, they found that users find instant messaging "as supportive as phone or face-to-face interactions," (p.125).

Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) explored the dynamics of the same and discussed the use of such CMC and its impact on offline relationships, stating "the characteristics of electronic communication intrinsically change social relations," (p.32) and through their study they found that young adults use electronic forums more frequently than face-to-face interactions when communicating with their peers.

Impact of Social Networking Sites



Online social networks can serve as a powerful medium for sharing new perspectives, ideas, exchanges and world events. SNS provide a plethora of features that gets a user engrossed and gripped. Another feature of SNS is its potential to widen a person's social networks to provide the person with access to valuable resources, information, and social support (Wellman et al., 1996). Recent studies also find a positive relationship between Facebook use and social capital (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Social capital refers to connote the benefits such as advice, information, or social support that one can achieve through their network of relationships (Portes 1998). Social Capital is immensely useful to the person's self-esteem and social support and can be made either through strengthening and bonding with the existing social bonds or by building and bridging new bonds.

Rosen (2011) in his talk at the 119th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association stated how research being done in this domain is coming out with other various positive influences linked to social networking too. For instance he stated that young adults who spend more time on Facebook are better at showing "virtual empathy" to their online friends by reaching out to and expressing concern online for peers who may be dealing with personal issues or worries.

Discussion

The current research is a study on adolescents' use of Social Networking Sites (SNS). With the now pervasive spread of SNS and more than a billion active users engaging in it (Facebook, 2012), it is interesting to see how adolescents have adopted and adapted to an online social world. The social experiences of adolescents on such online networks are domains that are vital to the understanding of a virtual culture. These social experiences include aspects such as the use of virtual space, and the negotiations and perceptions of such online relationships. Given this context, the present research explored how adolescents negotiate relationships in their online social networks and their perceptions and experiences of using such SNS.

Through this study it was observed that easy access to internet on the phone played a crucial role in the adolescent's participation on their SNS. It was seen that more boys (55%) seemed to have the permission to have net access on their phones than the girls (45%). The reasons for not being allowed net access revolved around the themes of 'because it would distract their studies' and the other being, 'because their parents felt they would get addicted to it'.

Conclusion

Social networking has achieved immense popularity in recent years. Social networking has come a long way in India; from having just a few users with accounts on these sites to becoming an accepted means of communication. It is now the easiest, fastest and most entertaining route of communication and connectivity. The current study aims to study this very domain of SNS and its impact and influence on adolescents. The study has taken a quantitative approach for data collection and analysis. Several important findings were observed through this study. Apart from age difference in the access to mobile phones and the frequency of log-ins, the study also brought out distinct gender differences when it came to the access and control of their SNS. When it came to the girls, more than half the girls mentioned how their parents controlled how often they logged into their SNS.

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