EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ON ADULT
EDUCATION

By

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ABSTRACT

Social Networking Sites (SNS) are rapidly taking over people's personal as well as professional lives, globally. It has not only changed the way masses communicate and express but is also transforming the way learning is looked at. Though considered as inherently personal spaces, these sites are now proving to be professional spaces to learn; used by millions of consumers and validated by field experts and mentors. Although there is some amount of research done on the effects social network platforms have on school education, the way it is moulding adult education is yet to be fully investigated. Adult education is essentially unlike school education as it usually has a specific goal, either personal or career oriented. Since SNS are affecting all these aspects of life and the world is starting to accept them as not only socialising tools but as executive tools, it is time for these sites to be a part of adult education too.

Keywords: social networking sites; adult education; adult learning; technology; professional development

DEDICATION:

I dedicate this paper to my husband, Nikunj Oza for constantly motivating me to not lose hope and keep trying till I do a satisfactory work. I thank him for being with me through all the tough times and for his love, support, and inspiring words whenever I doubted myself through the completion of this paper. I dedicate this work to my family and my friends, who gave me the strength and patience to keep moving ahead and complete what I had started.

Finally, I dedicate my work to God, who has blessed me with a healthy life and helped me achieve my goals.

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Introduction:

In this ever-expanding world of digitisation, social networking sites have become a consistent and significant part of people's everyday lives (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Chovanec and Meckelborg, 2011; Careless, 2015). The popularity of various social networking sites (SNS) primarily lies in the fact that it provides individual users with platforms to not only connect and socialize with family and friends, but also to express themselves in multitudinous ways (Booth, 2012). People adopt and engage with various social network sites for different contexts, content, situations, as well as people (Boyd, 2008). Social network platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others, bring forth a method through which communication is encouraged in innovative ways, to a comparatively larger audience with varying experiences, not taking into account the restrictions of time and (space) geography (Brigham, 2012; boyd, 2008). Thus, communicating and learning becomes much more open-ended than it did any time in the past, as it is not dependent on a specific place and time (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016).

SNS is dynamically changing the patterns in which people learn and interact. Teaching and learning contexts today have become more complex as people not only learn in the physical classrooms but also in easily accessible virtual spaces (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009), or, even at times using a hybrid format. Although, a substantial amount of research has been done on digital literacy (Chinlen & Boutin, 2011; Fraillon et al., 2014; Laanpere, 2019) along with effects of social media and SNS on school education (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2011; Prescott et al., 2013; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016), its impact on adult education has yet to be fully explored. Despite increased involvement of people in social networking platforms and their potential learning benefits, few researchers have deemed it important to study (Warrell, 2012; Careless, 2014; Careless, 2015; Lusk, 2021).

The idea of integrating SNS into adult education, either formal or informal, is not just a unique individual thought influenced by the demand of the era; it is also an extension of what

educational theorists such as John Dewey (1897) and Paulo Freire (1970) promoted in their theories. Their viewpoints against the passive reception of knowledge in a classroom for children, shed light on the significance of their everyday life affecting their learning. For Dewey and Freire, education was best understood as an active process, and student learning was a feature of social interactions that took place and gained meaning in school, a key social institution. This stands true for adults too as far as learning goes. Adults as well learn best through social interactions within social institutions. However, today, the learning of children and adults is not just limited to social institutions like schools and universities, it includes online social spaces as well. Utilising these daily community experiences of learners as an educational tool would only prove to be an asset. In addition, thinking ahead of the future, in a highly competitive economy such as this, all the elements affecting job prospects must be taken into account for learning.

Educators today, are now observing how SNS is transforming practices in socio-economic and political fields. With that, a similar positive transformation in education too is inquired upon, with technologies people already use in their regular lives, including SNS (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). To name an example, Canadian government, recognizing the influence SNS has on changing systems of the world, has implemented certain inevitable changes in school curriculum as well as in government policies. To cite one, as per the 31st National Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE), the "province of New Brunswick provides funding for software and hardware skills and social media education to adults living in rural and urban areas to assist them develop their job preparatory skills and increase their employability levels" (Brigham, 2012, p. 21). This paper sets out to explore the multifaceted functions of social networking sites and their influence on adult education, irrespective of whether SNS is formally taken into academic structures or not.

Specifically, it investigates how these platforms not only effect but also dominate the evolution of adult education, around the world.

Background:

For the longest period, social networking sites had just performed the role of socialisation for me. Since these social sites were never used as learning materials in Indian educational context, at least for me as a student till I graduated in 2014, they were viewed no more than places of social connection with people I either personally knew or idealised. Until after I stepped into my first job of a high school English teacher, I did not realise the potential of these SNS as powerful tools of learning as well as sharing knowledge. As a new English teacher, I wanted my students to take the subject as seriously as they took math and science. I did not want them to think of English as a dull subject full of reading and writing, especially when I was teaching it as a second language. Since I knew as a fact that majority of my students used social networking sites daily, I had to make it a part of their learning. I needed them to look for learning materials not only in the curriculum specified textbooks but beyond that. We made sure we followed active Instagram grammar accounts like 'Idiom Land' (@idiom.land) and 'To Fluency' (@tofluency). They would then come to the class picking up a few new words to flaunt, which would make learning more meaningful. Moreover, these accounts helped me refine my knowledge and present it to my audience in a culturally familiar and relevant manner. Although I got to creatively use SNS as a teacher, I had never explored social networking sites as a student, but that ended when I migrated to Canada.

As a student pursuing a Master of Education at University of Windsor, I experienced many instances where I had to use social networking sites for learning. Though I thought of myself as a competent internet user, it was tough to use technology as a part of the learning process as I had never formally done that before. For instance, I had to complete my assignments with the help of advanced technologies and even, in some cases, with the help of social media

applications like TikTok. Being an international student, I was not really exposed to learning techniques even when I had used SNS as a teaching tool. India is a country which is yet to adapt these techniques in their pedagogy, specifically in adult education, as per the context of this paper.

Taking up these assignments suddenly, was surely a challenge, but one that I was excited to commence. As opposed to conventional teaching, such an approach expanded the space through which we learn and express what we have learned. A written document would express plain information whereas a video would include aesthetics as well as would communicate emotions associated to the text; featuring excitement, anxiety, frustration, and other emotions which the audience can easily connect with.

Definition of Key Terms:

Before proceeding further with the topic of my paper however, let me begin by providing important definitions that are used to shape my research, specifically the terms *adult education* and *social networking sites*. There is no dictionary definition for the term adult education. However, the Canadian Encyclopedia (2013) defines the term adult as "someone beyond the legal school-leaving age. Other than that, there is no upper-age limit for learning." Under UNESCO definitions of fundamental terms, a similar idea is expressed as it explains adult education as "adult education concerns those who are "regarded as adults by the society to which they belong" (Adult Learning and Education, 2012). Generally speaking, adult education, here, refers to anyone above the age of nineteen, seeking education for enhanced knowledge, additional skills, or improvement of the current skills for better career opportunities. American educator and theorist Malcom Shepherd Knowles, while giving the term 'Adult Learning Theory' or 'andragogy' (1968), has differentiated between the learning of children and that of adults. In the 9th edition of *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic of*

Adult Education and Human Resource Development (2020), Knowles has mentioned six core principles of adult learning. They are "(1) the learners need to know; (2) self-concept of the learner; (3) prior experience of the learner; (4) readiness to learn; (5) orientation to learning; and (6) motivation to learn" (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 5). This paper too is reflective of these principles in adult education.

Moving forward, another important term used in the title is *social networking sites* or SNS. According to the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), social media "refers to a variety of online platforms/applications such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Snapchat and TikTok, etc., and other sites and services that permit users and organisations to share information/content over the internet and to interact with other users" (Toronto District School Board, 2022). This paper, however, refers specifically to social networking sites (SNS), as interpreted by Ellison and boyd (2007). They define SNS as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd and Ellison 2007 as cited in boyd, 2008, p.94).

By the nature of this definition, SNS can complement adult education in the 21st century. Since multiple literacies like digital literacy and media literacy are successfully incorporated in several school curriculums all around the world, especially in countries like U.S, Canada, U.K and others, adult education can also be supplemented by the positive benefits of SNS. To better understand how the use of SNS in education is distinct from that of all the new literacies, a brief explanation of digital literacy and media literacy follows this paragraph.

Digital Literacy:

Also called as 21st century literacy (Pilgrim & Martinez, 2013), digital literacy is emphasized by researchers as a new literacy (Chinlen & Boutin, 2011; Pilgrim & Martinez, 2013; Laanpere, 2019). Unlike traditional literacy, digital literacy refers to the creation and consumption of content in digital form. And it is noncontroversial at all to say that digital literacy is becoming increasingly important in a person's life as computers are much more central in everyday life. So, a student who is competent and fluent with digital literacy, who has the knowledge and the skills to navigate digital domains successfully, will be much more prepared to succeed in their pursuits. Hardly can any graduate student survive in institutions without basic digital skills.

Government of British Columbia proposes another definition of digital literacy. They define digital literacy as "the interest, attitude and ability of individuals to use the technology and communication tools appropriately to access, manage, integrate, analyse and evaluate information, construct new knowledge and create and communicate with others" (Government of British Columbia, 2013). The collaborative and learning aspect of SNS not only exists in schools, but also in the organisations worldwide. To meet the surging demand in organisations for digitally efficient workforce, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Target 4.4, aims to hype up the number of adults who have relevant technological skills. The three indicators mentioned by SDG of technically sound employees are:

4.4.1 – Proportion of youth/adults with information and communications technology (ICT) skills, by type of skill

4.4.2 – Percentage of youth/adults who have achieved at least a minimum level of proficiency in digital literacy skills.

4.4.3 – Youth/adult educational attainment rates by age group, economic activity status, levels of education and programme orientation. (p. 5)

Above mentioned goals are the consequences of the current trend as well as futuristic image of the employment criteria. Anybody who wishes to be a part of organisations today, needs to be updated as per the requirements of the competitive market, including being proficient with technology. Even the ones termed as the 'Net Generation' should not be assumed to be "well-versed in the available technological tools needed to have a strong personal or organisational presence online" (LeNoue et al., 2011, p. 5).

Even before entering the workforce, these digital literacy skills form the basis of student life as every learner is required to access information from electronic sources/ databases at any point of their education. Educators thus should encourage students to get more and more involved in academic research using electronic resources on the web without committing plagiarism (Adeoye & Adeoye, 2017). Gathering information, either for awareness or for essay writing and assignment completion, needs skills to retrieve relevant data. Students exposed to such activities know how to steer through the overload of unwanted data and reach applicable sources, without plagiarism errors in their academic work. Unquestionably, while a certain region or class of people would have enough resources to access this technology, others might not, creating a technological gap. This gap is termed as "digital divide." This gap has been addressed by the Canadian government with policies like 'The Digital Literacy Exchange Program' (DLEP). The program was launched in 2018 (Government of Canada, 2022a), aiming to give equal access to all Canadians to the necessary digital skills. A recent addition made to this initiative is the second phase of DLEP announced on July 28, 2022, which would have a $17.6 million investment (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2022). Not-for-profit organisations with the help of this investment, would reach out to those

Canadians who do not have access to these mandatory digital skills. Such policies reflect the effects digitisation has on the world, and the threat of not being timely updated about the same.

The importance of digital literacy is also emphasized in school curriculum. For instance, Red Deer Public Schools in Alberta aim to prepare students for the present-day digital world with 4 Cs of digital literacy: "Creativity, Collaboration, Citizenship and Critical Thinking" (Red Deer Public Schools, n.d). Another example of significance of digital literacy in school structure is the work of educational leaders of British Columbia in *Digital Literacy Framework,* 2013. The six characteristics recognised by them are:

1) Research and Information Literacy

2) Critical Thinking, Problem Solving and Decision making

3) Creativity and Innovation

4) Digital Citizenship

5) Communication and Collaboration

6) Technology Operations and concepts. (Government of British Columbia, 2013)

In the age of evolving technology, while the term digital literacy is defined and refined, it is crucial to update learning and teaching methods to involve technology as a core part of it rather than it as a supplemental element. These skills are requisites of being updated in social, personal, and work life (Pilgrim & Martinez, 2013). Next, I provide the reader with a definition and description of media literacy.

Media Literacy:

Media Literacy is another vital element, under the multiple literacies umbrella, required for this digital era. While the three fundamental literacies- reading, writing and numeracy focused on building up basic skills of learners, media literacy focuses on the emerging new ways of communication. It centres its attention on communication and meaning making through a

combination of various "media languages – images, sounds, graphics, and words" (The Ontario Curriculum, 2006, p. 14).

As rightly explained by UNESCO in 2003 and mentioned by Wilson and Duncan in 2009,

> Learning is about more than reading or writing -it is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture. Those who use literacy [reading, writing and numeracy] take it for granted -but those who cannot use it are excluded from much communication in today's world. Indeed, it is the excluded who can best appreciate the notion of literacy as freedom. (p.128)

Following the same, in Nova Scotia, media literacy is integrated in curriculum at both elementary and secondary levels, in English Language Arts and Social Studies curricula. Along with that, the Department of Education has included two media-based tests in grade 6, as well as a grade 12 film and video production course, which incorporates production, theory, and media analysis. The aim of these steps is to create "critical media consumers who can, and will, bring critical analysis to their use of media" (*Media Education in Nova Scotia*, 2021).

Media usage is now being diverted to be more useful than just a source of entertainment. This is particularly necessary in the world where there are more creative ways of expression rather than spoken or written words. The recognition of these factors might be the reason why Ontario was the first educational jurisdiction in the world to recognise the significance of media on everyday life and mandate media literacy in its curriculum, in every core English/Language course. This was done in 1978 with Association for Media Literacy writing Media Literacy curriculum for the province (About the Association for Media Literacy (AML) in Toronto, Ontario, 2022).

In addition to the above stated factors, what is shared and seen on social media platforms, stays with a learner for a longer period than mere exchange of words done in educational institutions, considering the various ways of representation of information (boyd,

2008; Brigham, 2012). Communication done through distinct medium becomes a part of learning inside, as well as outside of formal classrooms, making it a part of their life experience and therefore, more real (Krutka & Carpenter, 2016). Valuing the practicality of this approach, it is essential to make this a part of regular learning environments. Any job roles in contemporary times favour people who are technologically sound, have creative approaches, can think critically as well as work in a cooperative environment (Abdou et al., 2012). Thus, employing media as an educational tool is and will help in touching upon all these qualities and would make the teaching methods more engaging. In the way changing media affected education of that time, I think growing SNS use is rapidly and constructively affecting educational trends of the present generation. The next section will explore more about how each generation got moulded by the Internet in their times.

Intergenerational Effects of Social Networking Sites

The usage and thus influence of technology in general, and social networking sites in particular, varies from generation to generation. Generation X, people born between 1965 and 1976 (Tapscott, 1998), was exposed to technology, but at a later phase of their lives. Thus, Marc Prensky (2001) labelled the Net Generation as 'digital natives' while Generation X was labelled as 'digital immigrants' as they immigrated towards a technology savvy world, highlighting the generational differences (Pilgrim & Martinez, 2013). Being the generation raised before the intervention of technology, 'digital immigrants'' understanding of new technological introductions was not as clear and advanced, and they were not as tech savvy as the next generation (Tapscott, 1998; Pilgrim & Martinez, 2013). This is not surprising since digital immigrants grew up in a world of print media and television, and they certainly weren't exposed to a world powerfully shaped by the Internet. This print media and television background of course would have had a profound effect on adult education, as adults before the Net

Generation did not grow up heavily influenced by the networking sites. Clearly, their adaptation of technology would make them less likely to be fluent with digital literacy.

In contrast however, the Net Generation, those children born between 1977 and 1997, grew up with technology as a part and parcel of their lives, and had access to global data on their fingertips. A major factor separating SNS from Generation X's technologies such as radio or television, is that SNS provides a two-way flow of information between users (Chovanec & Meckelborg, 2011). Users are readers or consumers as well as active co-producers of content on SNS, making it significant for them (Chovanec & Meckelborg, 2011; LeNoue et al., 2011 Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012, Brigham, 2012). As per what Don Tapscott mentioned in one of his YouTube interviews, "this is the first generation to be bathed and bit [in technology]. Computers, the internet, interactive technologies are part of the experience of youth" (The Agenda, 2011, 0:58). While Generation X spent their time making sense of the technology, the Net Generation spent their time exploring and employing various elements of it. Some researchers argue that "only a small proportion of young people are actually using social media in sophisticated ways that educators might value" (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016, p. 7), and thus, I think, it is an increasing responsibility on the part of educators to instruct young adults on the constructive and productive use of social media.

Formal and Informal Education

Formal and informal education is distinguished based on how it occurs for a learner. Formal education is defined as "learning occurring within organised and structured contexts such as formal education and training" (Yakin & Gencel, 2013, p. 109). A formal education is received either from schools, other educational organisations, short certificate courses or workplaces, all with a certain goal (Brigham, 2012). Informal education, on the other hand, is more external, not directed by school or any curriculum and is more self-directed (Dabbagh & Kitsantas 2012, Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). It is thus defined as accidental or experiential learning occurring

outside the formal curricula of school or other educational programs (Yakin & Gencel, 2013). Greenhow and Robelia (2009), perhaps put it best when they define informal learning "spontaneous, experiential, and unplanned" (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009, p. 4).

This kind of learning is a very natural human activity and thus so invisible that learners are not aware of their own learning (Tough, 1999). Allen Tough, a Canadian educator and researcher gave informal learning the metaphor of an iceberg, in his paper *The Iceberg of Informal Adult Learning*, 1999. This metaphor splits an individual's learning into 20/80, in which 20 percent is formal, professional learning while the maximum 80 percent is informal education deriving from the needs and necessities of the learners (Tough, 1999). According to him, students as well as educators are not aware of the informal learning that happens in daily lives as it is a "non- linear process" (Warrell, 2012, p. 363). It is not a straightforward process as learning in a classroom, followed by examples and tests or evaluation. Learning in informal settings takes place instinctively, thus goes unnoticed. As educators or administrators, acknowledging the possible sources of learning is as important as classroom teaching. Tough states, "We as educators often don't think about the enormous range of what any one person is learning but it's quite extraordinary" (Tough, 1999, p. 3), which in turn enhances and complements formal learning (Yakin & Gencel, 2013).

Since informal learning is completely self-directed and based on learner's pace, the learner intentionally engages with people and ideas on SNS to gain knowledge, develop skills and newer understandings (Brigham, 2012). Here, they are responsible for choosing content they are interested in. Significantly, "adult learners must be honoured as decision-makers and given every opportunity to seek out learning experiences according to their individual wants, needs and interests" (Lusk, 2021, p. 12). In an informal learning environment, learners cannot depend on any agent to provide them with relevant resources and information. They, in turn, create learning contexts across several platforms (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009), thus taking

authority over their own learning. Informal learning thus becomes an essential element of new learning environment (Yakin & Gencel, 2013), which SNS is a major part of. The potential of SNS to promote informal learning lies in the virtual spaces it creates, in which learners can interact and collaborate with their peers, teachers, fellow teammates, subject experts and others (Brigham, 2012). The following section will discuss how SNS can be intricately linked to education, formally and/or informally.

SNS and Adult Education

The relationship between adult learning and social networking sites is symbiotic. Gone are the days when textual technical knowledge was enough for an individual to be competent in educational institutions or workforce. Building and maintaining online profiles and networks, ability to navigate one's ways successfully through these social networking platforms are various other additional skills that would help a candidate reach a milestone. To maximise learning for adult learners, instructors must be able to accommodate diverse learning goals of the student population (LeNoue et al., 2011). This can be done by employing SNS tools as instructing tools as well.

Debates on the double-edged nature of social networking platforms have been consistent since their existence (Chovanec & Meckelborg, 2011). Although there has always been doubts regarding the constructive usefulness of SNS, the Net Generation manages to effortlessly blend digital technologies in all aspects of their lives (Brigham, 2012). Among other digital technologies used daily, SNS has become increasingly popular among people (Brigham, 2012) for various purposes of communication, interaction, sharing of content as well as discussions (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Other than making learning hybrid or entirely online, the digital era has led to educators employing multiple resources to teach content, giving the learners options to explore in a way that they may showcase their bookish as well as practical knowledge. Particularly adult learners, who are distinguished from children as learners,

(Knowles, 1968) know what the purpose of their learning is. They identify the knowledge and skills required for themselves, either for work or to solve daily problems (MacKeracher, 2004).

One of the most noteworthy roles of SNS other than networking, is the fact that it provides people with multiple ways of sharing information with the world; one such widely accepted way is through pictures and videos. Studies identify multiple reasons why people choose to interact through images and short clips on SNS. Few of those reasons are obtaining peer recognition, interaction with online community, garnering community support and collaboration, and most importantly for self-expression/self-representation (Nov et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2015). A profile on social network platform, with the pictures, showcases a personality of the creator, making self-expression synonymous to visual images. India, followed by U.S are home to the world's largest Instagram audiences, with 330 million and 143 million users respectively. Facebook is the most used social networking platform used by marketers in 2022, with 90% of respondents stating that they used the space to promote their businesses (Dixon, 2023b). These numbers depict an obvious fact that people are consuming as well as responding to the creations on SNS and they prefer selecting appropriate channel of edited pictures either through strategic use of unique SNS characteristics of posts, tweets, or stories. In a digital world, where exchange of information is done in less words and more pictures and videos, it becomes crucial to integrate this knowledge into education.

The online presence of people engaged on SNS is almost second nature to them, even if it is considered more as a personal space rather than a professional or a learning space (Carpenter et al., 2020). Activities like sharing a post on Instagram or Tweeting about something, using related hashtags, retweeting posts, and promoting similar ideas or posting a contrary opinion, can become a part of active learning, which might then be discussed and validated by professionals of the field. Moreover, adult learners must be prepared to be a part of the workforce and organisations which have already established their online presence. One

of the instances that reflect dominance of SNS in businesses is the report from the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. The report revealed that,

> 77 percent of Fortune 500 companies have Twitter accounts, 70 percent have Facebook accounts, 69 percent have YouTube accounts, and 34 percent are actively blogging. The report also noted that companies are using Foursquare, Instagram, Pinterest, and other social networking sites (Obar, 2014, p. 212).

Among others, SNS influences adult education by providing hands-on, practical experience, opening their learning space to more than the four walls of their classroom (Warrell, 2012). Secondly, it builds a sense of community of learners, constantly gaining knowledge and participating in discussions they wouldn't know they would be interested in (Booth, 2012). The developing sense of community and participation in the same, helps individuals become "complex, full cultural-historical participants in the world" (Lave & Wenger, 1998, p. 32). Building a responsible and safe online space, as well as professional development (Lusk, 2021) would be other two impacts of SNS on adult education. We will further discuss these themes in detail.

Accessing Worldviews and Networks

Convenience and easy access are some of the major reasons why social media platforms are used so excessively (Krutka & Carpenter, 2016; Owen, 2020). Although it is important to acknowledge that there are start-up fees in terms of gaining access to social networks, and this would include the cost of a computer and the cost of Internet access, it is the case that most of the SNS have free access or have minimal fees, making it accessible to anyone who wants to be a part of it (Lusk, 2021). Although this has also been considered as an "unsafe" place (and rightfully so) for various reasons like privacy issues raised by sharing of too much of information given and received by too many people (Chovanec & Meckelborg, 2011). For

example, in 2021 over 500 million Facebook users' personal data was leaked online, a tremendous breach of privacy by any one's standards. It would also be safe to say that concerns over privacy and personal information being leaked online has increased over the years and has become more of an issue. However, as per the 2019 Statista report, 11.8 internet users in Canada used Instagram via any device at least one day per month in 2018 (Dixon, 2022a). Thus, it cannot be negated that such platforms indeed lay out data for every consumer, including adult learners. Since this is a category of learners who are not a part of mandated education, they learn to improve themselves; either to update their skills, to effectively solve problems at work or in their personal lives or just to be better, personally (Tough, 1999).

Considering the "reservoir of experience" (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 23) adult learners already possess and the existing motivation to learn, it becomes imperative for them to be able to access the knowledge that can be applicable to their social and professional roles (MacKeracher, 2004). Due to the constant evolution of SNS tools, there has been growing concerns about the effective use of these tools. While many organisations are trying to integrate SNS into their established routines, there is still an uncertainty concerning the complexities of it, leading to the desire of learning the usage of SNS constructively. For example, the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters voiced their concerns by stating that "there appears to be little information or instruction available on how to use social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook. … We have goals and a strategy for the use of social media, and understand the technical side, but the actual operational side … is largely guesswork" (Obar, 2014, p. 225). Such well-known organisations have their loyalties established already and social networks are platforms to reach out to a larger audience. Guesswork in navigating these dominating sites might mislead the audience. A few authors have noted that non-profit organisations (NPOs) should lean toward using social technologies to promote themselves and strengthen their networks (Greenberg & Maggie, 2009). One of the major reasons being the nature of these

organisations, which are relationship driven. SNS offer unique ways of nourishing their existing relations (Obar, 2014).

Posting content online provides room for exploration which catches the eye of thousands of people at a time, attracting necessary as well as unnecessary attention (Christine & Robelia, 2009). Translating the existing ability of learners to post their message effectively through this medium, into teaching and learning, especially in adult education becomes crucial. This is because the education system becomes responsible for how the learners segregate the overload of information as per their relevance and how they validate that information on professional grounds. If used constructively and thought critically upon, it can be used to generate new perspectives and might lead to solutions and innovations (Lusk, 2021). Spontaneous and diverse conversations might at times lead people to even "rethink, reflect and in some cases, reshape their own knowledge" (TEDx Talks, 2018, 8:29). This switch in opinion certainly is not sudden, it is a result of conversations done online by diverse participants. Reddit's r/ChangeMyView is one such debate forum where similar conversations take place, with the goal of changing the opinions of the viewers (Monti et al., 2022). A noteworthy difference between traditional debates and virtual ones is the authenticity and reliability of the data posted there. On matters of trust, the online user beware. It is thus important for learners to recognise which aspects of SNS should be used for a determined purpose and how they go about it.

Collaborative Learning

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky in his 1978 work Mind in Society, puts weight on the collaborative nature of much of the individual's learning. According to his theory of social constructivism, learning occurs through interactions with others, often in a group. Society and environment play a major role in human development (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory is still

being utilised in many forms. In education too, communication and collaboration are considered one of the six most important twenty-first century competencies as stated by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE 2007) and Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2008) in USA. It is defined as the "ability to communicate in multiple media and to work collaboratively to support individual and collective learning" (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009, p. 125). Since SNS is an active part of the current generation's society and environment, it also plays a central role not only in the development of humans and their relations, but also in the development of their learning. SNS's reach and the ease of communication it offers, provide them with a scope of being potential learning platforms. A peculiar characteristic of SNS is that one individual's friends or networks are visible to all the others. This provides an access for other people to use each other's networks to connect with people they would otherwise not have known. This is one clear advantage social network sites have over traditional learning spaces. Such connections are neither made through classrooms nor through in-person community groups (Warrell, 2012). Apart from accessing networks and information, as well as being passive viewers of the same, many users prefer sharing their opinions on the shared content. Sites like Twitter and Instagram especially benefit adult students as well as educators as they learn together, building up a network of knowledge collaboratively (Lusk, 2021). Since the active online participants choose appropriate platforms through which they like to present or express themselves, instructors must also make use of the available social networking tools and methods to deliver appropriate content (LeNoue et al., 2011).

Researchers have highlighted the vitality of advancing from "more general discussions" of "technological advancements" and "networking" towards a critical engagement with these tools and their connection to learning, communication and culture" (Careless, 2015, p.51). Viewers can absorb information found in culture, as well as be active co-creators of

information (Carpenter et al., 2020). This is an important point because it highlights the way in which adult learners are active in their own learning and can express 'agency' in developing content. Simply put, when adult learners create content on social networking sites, they have some autonomy in terms of making decisions on how they want their work to be communicated. The mass culture of being a part of online communities, is increasingly becoming a part of people's lives, which seems to lead to building strong online communities of learners.

Learning and the Adolescent Mind (2019) shares an understanding of community of learners,

> …as a group of people who share values and beliefs and who actively engage in learning from one another-learners from teachers, teachers from learners, and learners from learners. They thus create a learning-centred environment in which students and educators are actively and intentionally constructing knowledge together. Learning communities are connected, cooperative, and supportive. (Means, 2019)

This type of learning, as Lave and Wenger explain, is highly influenced by socialisation and imitation. For learners these communities, having similar interests, benefit from the knowledge of those who are more knowledgeable or experts in the field (Lave & Wenger, 1998). These communities are increasing and going strong as they have a language of their own to showcase their interests, likes and opinions. Slags like YOLO (You Only Live Once), FYI (For your Information), iykyk (if you know, you know) are all indication of consumers having their own language to refer to something online. Digital natives, in a way, have created ways of expressing "I see you, I understand you, I get that reference, I like the things that you like" (Dyer, 2016), effectively interacting through multiple ways at an given space and time. This practice is seen among 34.47 million users in Canada who are active at least on one of the social networking sites in 2022 (Dixon, 2023a). With them connecting and communicating equally over online and offline settings, it becomes unchallenging for them to integrate their

online lives to their offline lives (Dyer 2016). As rightly suggested in *Taken Out of Context* (2008), "Teens are not engaging with social network sites as a separate or distinct world but as an extension of everyday life" (boyd, 2008, p. 107). Nonetheless, these widely used online spaces, must be used with a sense of responsibility, to make it secure for the millions of users, as discussed.

Building Respectful and Comfortable Virtual Spaces

Several negative effects of social media have been surfaced since the beginning of it. A recent survey conducted by the Centre of Mental Health and Addiction (CMHA) states that 86% of students in Ontario are daily users of social media and approximately 16% use the SNS for five hours or more, per day (CMHA, 2017). Such regular usages have led to compulsive behaviours, addictions and even suicides (CMHA, 2017). Especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, screen timings of adolescents have increased a lot (2021). Issues like trolling through hate or derogatory comments, cyberbullying and privacy breaches are a regular scenario (Chovanec & Meckelborg, 2011). A lingering feeling of being abandoned is one of the repercussions of being on SNS for a longer period. This emotion is given the term FOMO (fear of missing out) by the users. It refers to a feeling of being left out and dissatisfied with one's life as compared to the high living standards maintained on social media.

These references to negative impacts of SNS on youth is an existing gloomy reality. However, it cannot be negated that there are constructive sides to SNS too (Tapscott, 2008; Chovanec & Meckelborg, 2011; Brigham 2012; Rosen, 2020). Teaching learners how to use social networking sites for constructive purposes can help make it a safer place to socialise and learn. Networks and communities built on SNS are strongly responsible for bringing out valuable changes within the society (Brigham, 2012). This collective responsibility is given the term 'digital citizenship'. Digital citizenship is "the ability to practice and advocate online

behaviour that demonstrates legal, ethical, safe, and responsible uses of information and communication technologies" (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009, p. 125). It basically highlights the responsibility as well as the awareness of internet users to use the online spaces consciously to ensure quality participation on social sites. Also, it advocates safely using SNS by being alert of things to be posted online, words and symbols used for expression as well as adjusting privacy settings to ensure one's safety online (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009).

The responsibility of being respectful online is called as digital citizenship or *netiquette*. Instances of these etiquettes are shown through Instagram pages like 'Black at Harvard Law'(@blackatharvardlaw), 'Brown History' (@brownhistory), 'So Informed' (@so. informed), 'Centre for Human Rights in Iran' (@centerforhumanrights). These different accounts voicing their thoughts and experiences on certain social topics, develop a sense of community, which can be validated by masses. Such groups based on common interests not only spread awareness about important issues like racism, climate change and mental health, but also build a stronger foundation for the understanding of young adults of the society they are living in. SNS have been rapidly demonstrated as activist tools and dominant vehicles for protest movements around the world (Chovanec & Meckelborg, 2011; Brigham, 2012). In addition to the protest accounts mentioned earlier, there are also accounts on SNS portraying the culture of a city, province, or a nation entirely. Even colleges and government organisations are now on social platforms to be a part of the pop culture. For instance, official Instagram account of the police of an Indian city, Mumbai, Mumbai Police (@mumbaipolice), tourism Twitter account of Australia (@Australia) and Facebook news page of Vancouver (CityNews Vancouver) are just a few of the many communities on SNS. These groups/online communities instil within the members a sense of belongingness making people feel they are not alone in their daily living (Dabbang & Kitsantas, 2011). An instance of this is a UK based study of first year undergraduate students (Madge et.al, 2009) which found students using Facebook

communities to settle in their university life. The study suggested that Facebook was a part of the "social glue" that helped students feel a sense of association towards the institution and help get comfortable (J. Prescott et al., 2013).

Another significant element of online knowledge sharing is trust (Booth, 2012). Though building confidence in one another while sharing knowledge is important for both online as well as face-to-face communities, "without the facial expressions, verbal cues, and nonverbal cues afforded in face-to-face communities, online communities meet unique challenges in cultivating trust" (Ridings et al., 2002; Young & Tseng, 2008, as cited in Booth, 2012). Gaining confidence is principally necessary for businesses on SNS. Brands that mostly get their sales online, need to create trust and generate interest among potential buyers (Adams, 2016). The usage of SNS by all age groups calls for training and instructions on responsible usage of easily accessible platforms and content. This training can begin at school level and can extend with advanced professional learning, to make internet a secure place.

Professional Development

This section is one of the most essential ones when it comes to the work culture of the 21st century. Digital skills have become a requirement in "post-secondary education, career pathways, work, daily living and life-long learning" (Rosen, 2020, p. 74). Following the rising significance of media literacy and digital literacy, several assessment tools measuring the digital literacy of adults, have surfaced. A few of those assessment tools are Common Assessment of Basic Skills Online (CABS) assessing reading, writing, numeracy as well as computer skills; Northstar Digital Literacy Assessment, the Open Data Institute, the Datability and others also are used for assessing basic digital skills. There is no measure, however, of the hold SNS has on the professions of the world. Headlines like "Social Media Will Change Your Business" (Baker & Green, 2008) and "Social Networking Puts Your Business on Steroids" (Stengel, 2013 as cited in Obar, 2014) calls attention to the rapid and overriding grip of SNS

on businesses. One of the noteworthy roles of SNS today, is its role in professional development (Chovanec & Meckelborg, 2011; Careless, 2015; Laanpere, 2019; Rosen, 2020). It is crucial to make SNS a part of the learning culture as internet continues to become "the dominant infrastructure for the creation and exchange of knowledge" (Tapscott & Williams, 2010). As Tough had rightly predicted in 1999, "we need to take the web very seriously, because it's being used by more and more people as one of their key means to get information, whether the information is good or bad" (Tough, 1999, p. 7). SNS provides those platforms with immense amount of information and the means of validating this overload of information is education. This would require adult learners to have a clear understanding and knowledge of technical skills required to use SNS to its fullest capability. A lack of these skills is considered as a "significant barrier" (Brigham, 2012).

Continuing automation requires advanced skill developments in one's field. Similarly, the use of social media requires more than just technological access; it requires technological know-how, which would lead to creative and economical use of the available tools (Careless, 2015; Walker, 2022). Adult learners increasingly encounter "digital communications such as government websites, online applications, the information explosion on the internet, and of course social media and SNS" (Chovanec & Meckelborg, 2011, p.13). To face these digital challenges daily, exploring the SNS tools would be crucial. Another area of social media that would need exploration for adult learners is knowledge of technical services and terms like Social Media Marketing (SMM), Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), video marketing, Facebook, and Instagram ads, understanding search machines and knowledge of social media algorithms (Adams, 2016). Along with these terms emerging with the rise in SNS, several job positions exist in current times which did not exist a decade ago. An example of how these new employments emerge was given in 2014, by Professor Sir Steve Smith, Vice chancellor of Britain's Exeter university. He stated that students chose to tweet for help, tagging the

university, rather than communicating via email. As a result of this, the university had to employ a round-the-clock team to reply to those queries. Since the posts and replies are public and shareable, they would affect the reputation of the university and thus was important to address (Driessen, 2017). Changing approaches bring out change in employment opportunities too. Positions like that of digital marketers, social media managers, social media marketing expert, bilingual social media specialist, social media chat assistant, communications advisor, social media and so on, revolve around the fact that SNS are at their peak. And, not to mention the fact that many organisations, businesses and even universities advertise job postings on social network sites. In fact, universities get various opportunities to communicate with the masses about what they do and the knowledge they help to facilitate (Farkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2011). Businesses and organisations flourish by getting their products and services promoted on social networking platforms, thus generating job opportunities for the generation immersed in it. These social media handlers have the responsibility of producing relevant and trending content, planning, and posting it, as well as promoting campaigns to help raise the profiles network of products/services. For adult learners to make their mark in these fields, it would be imperative for them to learn these tools not only via informal learning but also in formal curriculum via educational institutions.

SNS as Everyday Life

Social network sites are now a key part of everyday life, and with the ongoing spread of smart phones it seems likely that it will become even more deeply integrated into people's lives. Given this, it is hard to see how educators can avoid teaching about social network sites, in fact it seems to be a growing necessity to do so. This is exactly Rahman's point, when she asks, "If schools are educating us for the future, then why is social media not included when our future is technology?" (TEDx Talks, 2019a, 3:59). And this is a very interesting and imperative question asked by a teenager in a YouTube Ted Talk video. She addressed the issue of schools

not educating children about social media to help them be secure on the virtual realm. It is little use to students to either ignore or ban teaching about social networking sites, but this approach would be impractical. It would be impractical because students of any age are now online for a large chunk of the day engaging in social platforms one way or the other. The realisation that social networking sites are no longer just platforms for socialising leads to this talk. Social platforms prove the accuracy of the statement "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964), clearly suggesting that the medium of expression holds as much value as the message itself and SNS provides multiple options like feed, stories, ads and more, to spread their messages (Carpenter et. al, 2020). These sites are consistently emerging as platforms not just for communication and collaboration but also as places to build and promote brands. People who lack the required technological competence tend to engage less or not at all within these online spaces, leaving a major chunk of culture unexplored (Warrell, 2012).

Most businesses today have taken to social platforms to promote their work as they are the quickest means to reach millions of masses (Adams, 2016). When it comes to marketing tactics, the most crucial part is to know your audience and where they actively spend most of their time (Driessen, 2017). Thus, social networking tools like hashtags, stories, live streaming videos about the products or services the business offers as well as maintaining an attractive feed for their viewers are multiple ways in which things are advertised. Traditional marketing methods of setting up stores, mouth publicity or immensely spending on ads are no longer enough to make any venture a success in most cases (Adams, 2016). It is rather beneficial to command "the authority of millions upon millions of actively engaged individuals ready and willing to follow your advice and your lead" through SNS (Adams, 2016).

Any organisation must make sure it creates and leaves behind a trail of reliable information. If not done right, these online issues leave behind a trail of digital mistakes which might hinder or narrow down the firm's prospects. This trail called as 'digital footprints' is another reason

why educating about and via the social sites becomes essential (TEDx Talks 2019a**;** Government of Canada, 2022b). *Role and users' approach to social*

networking sites (SNSs): a study of universities of North India (2013), highlights that learners at the university had public online profiles with questionable content. Since with time, employers are now sifting through social networking sites for potential employees, it becomes essential to provide formal education to these students on how to use and maintain SNS (Singh & Gill, 2013). The Government of Canada defines digital footprint as "a trail of data you create while using the internet. This trail of data comes from the websites you visit, the emails you send and the information you submit or download online" (2022). For a young adult to land a job opportunity, they need to be aware of the digital footprints they leave behind on their SNS. It is crucial for learners to realise the consequences of their actions on the SNS of their choice, now or in the course of time. Therefore, adult learners must develop the necessary skills, expertise, and experience to realise the capabilities for learning on SNS (Warrell, 2012).

Conclusion

The numbers are huge. Taking only Canada into our lens, 31.8 million Canadians who use an average of six different social networks, spend approximately one hour and 53 minutes there every day. Experts predict that over 96% of Canadians (approximately 38.18 million people) who use internet for some or the other purposes, will be on social media by 2026 (McKinnon, 2023). These numbers prove that the value of SNS tools goes beyond the ability to just create content (Tapscott & Williams, 2010). These platforms connect people together so that learning can happen "organically and spontaneously" (Warrell, 2012). Popular culture terms like 'Tweets' and 'hashtags' have already been included in Oxford English dictionary, which evidently shows that the language of SNS is catching up with education and is here to stay (Careless, 2015). Even though SNS has become an active part of informal learning for learners across all age, educators, and learners, both are not yet able to recognise the potential

benefits of SNS for formal education (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016), principally in adult education context.

Adults wanting to utilise SNS as learning tools, not only require basic technological knowledge but they also need to learn how to successfully learn in such a setting (Warrell, 2012). Learning in classroom settings only restricts the learners to a limited set of resources which might or might not help them in gaining the skills of 21st century. SNS can be "natural extensions to classrooms" (Warrell, 2012) since people are not involved on SNS as a distinct world but as "an extension of everyday life" (boyd, 2008) thus putting SNS at the forefront of their informal learning. Even though there was less enthusiasm among educators to use the SNS tools in their pedagogy, online learning and distance education has made educators all around the world, take up the aid of SNS, either willingly or out of necessity. As rightly stated by a grade 9 science teacher Joseph Cossette in his YouTube video, as educators it indeed becomes a responsibility to think of this technological future and prepare the students to be winners in future, with the help of ever-growing technology (TEDx Talks, 2019b). This can be initiated by building their technological foundation in school, which can be continued in the later phases of their lives too. Adult learners, competing in a global world would have SNS handy to have regular knowledge and trend updates in their own field.

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