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Abstract

Virtual communities constitute an important attribute through which social dialogues are mediated. The emergence of online communities is the outcome of the prevalence of web based technologies. In the world of inter and intra connectedness individuals have the prerogative to get connected to the community of their choice. The present study examines the magnitude and motivations of online social networking through field survey method.

Key words: virtual socializing, online communities, social networking, virtual platforms, virtual communities.

JEL Classification: D71, P36

Introduction

The urge to socialize is an important attribute of human society from time immemorial, not surprisingly the thread of survival of humanity. The Great Soviet Encyclopedia defines socialization as “the process by which an individual acquires specific knowledge and values and accepts standards that enable him to function as a full and equal member of society.” Socialization imposes certain socially imposed reciprocity; where by an unnoticeable, but intentional shaping of personality or influence is accomplished. Due to its cause-effect relationship, the process of socialization is not just the direct interaction of individuals but is also the total aggregate of social relationships. The subjects of socialization are the initiators and creators of new social order. Qualitative socialization is not a mechanical imposition of a ready social form on an individual, but mutually reinforcing based on give and take philosophy. The success of socialization, therefore, depends on the extent to which an individual is involved in the creative social action that transforms the society in a desirable manner.

Media plays a crucial role in the qualitative aspects of socialization. Modern man is fortunate enough to have unbridled access to social networking platforms, enlivening and illuminating his personality. Internet is the kingpin to facilitate socialization in modern time and will continue in future also. The internet embedded platforms have configured socialization into virtual entities, rather than traditional real entities. Socialization in the online platforms has been christened 'social networking.' The virtual communities are viewed as consumer groups of varying sizes that meet and interact online for the sake of achieving personal as well as shared goals of their members (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004). These platforms are also Social media marketing through which the members can communicate with people of similar interests. It favours socially enhanced reputation, personal development and relationship with benefits. The influence of social media in modern business and disseminate information is seamlessly vast. This has been substantiated by role of social networking sites in flaring up the youth uprising in Egypt recently. The concept of 'viral marketing' has created a buzz around the marketing initiatives of companies. It benefits organisations and individuals by providing an additional channel for customer support, a means to gain customer and competitive insight, and a method of managing their reputation online. Key factors that ensure its success are its relevance to the customer, the value it provides them with and the strength of the foundation on which it is built. A strong foundation serves as a stand or platform in which the organisation can centralise its information and direct customers. Through social networking, businessmen can communicate vital information to their customers with the potential sense of transience and impermanence, the flexibility of virtual space. In social networking sites plays an important role in shaping the routines in the process of making users with the virtual spaces while also involves uncertainties.

Social networking is a platform for advertising a prime alternative for cost-free promotion. It has become the new wave for companies to reach out to their consumers. The most popular platforms include Face book, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, MySpace, Orkut, Hi5 etc. It's not only become the means for acquiring new clients, but it helps businesses perceive the requirements of their current consumers. Understanding the wants of clients help companies to supply the merchandise and services that meet those demands. Social networking sites are perhaps the fastest growing arena in the World Wide Web. It has only been in the past two to three years

that the phenomenon of online social networking suddenly exploded. Lenhart & Madden (2006) estimated “today social networking sites attract more than 90% teenagers and adults all over the world and have a market of more than 80 million members”. The core concept of these sites is a collection of user profiles where registered members can place the information that they want to share with others. Ponti & Ryberg (2004) observe that due to the user-generated content at its core, a social networking site depends on users to a greater extent than online business, which has full control over its products to sell.

Social networking is the practice of expanding the number of one's business and/or social contacts by making connections through individuals. While social networking had gone on almost as long as societies themselves have existed, the unparalleled potential of the Internet to promote such connections is only now being fully recognised and exploited, through web-based groups established for that purpose. Social networking sites were typically initiated by a small group of founders who send out invitations to join the site to the members of their personal networks. In turn new members send invitations to their personal networks. It had also been observed that the effects of such social networking sites have taken up a considerable amount of the time of students and employees both at work and play. The present study makes an attempt to explore the reasons for virtual socializing along with its magnitude.

Review of Literature

Daniel (2001) examines how social capital is created on virtual learning environments. The study summarises that information technology is used to connect and relate with each other to achieve their goals. This can be for building, socializing, and learning or solving problems. The author is of the opinion that central to the functioning of these communities is mutual support built on mutual understanding, the need to reciprocate in order to sustain membership and friendships and avoidance of social sanctions. Ahuja & Galvin (2003) observe that geographically dispersed, but virtually connected social groups will continue to be an important mode of socialization in future as well. Their study corroborates that information exchanged is the foundation of socialization process. Study by Dholakia, *et al.* (2004) underscores that social identity captures the main aspects of the individual's identification with the group that entitle him an element of social capital through a sense of belongingness. Ponti & Thomas (2004) emphasise the presence of virtual space as a medium for

sociability. Today majority of individuals interact with various kinds of people and also with their environment.

Greenfield & Yan (2006) focus on Children, Adolescents, and the Internet. The study calls for the attention of the advocates of development in how children and adolescents live in a new, massive and complex virtual universe, even as they carry on their lives in the real world. Their research conclude by highlighting the fact that for children and adolescent, internet has become more exciting and challenging than earlier and has turned to a complex virtual social and physical world where they participate. Lenhart & Madden (2006) explore the different ways that teenagers use social networking sites and their reasons for doing so. The study offers a means to explore and evaluate the use of social networking sites by the teens, both boys and girls, and also the risks posed to them through these when personal information is made available in such public networks. Trusor, Bodapati & Bucklin (2006) studied on how the behaviour of one virtual or social networking site user becomes influential to all his other online users. They linked the user activity of an individual to the behavior of the other users in the internet.

Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini (2007) conducted a research on how privacy concern and trust influence social interactions within social networking sites by comparing popular sites like Facebook and Myspace. Muirhead (2007) points out the theoretical background information and offerings for promoting creativity in the online university classes. The social-personality and social-cognitive approaches focused on three major sources of creativity: personality variables, motivational variables and socio-cultural environment. The author perceives that instructors are essential to ensuring that students have the opportunities to demonstrate creativity in their online discussions and assignments. Shah & Kanunjna (2008) emphasise that the virtual worlds are no longer social networks for socializing using 3D animated avatars or chatting .The virtual world has become a business medium as it provides the organizations an innovative way of promoting their business.

Zakhariason, Whilson &Wahlin (2010) explores the Virtual worlds being transformed into business by massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs). MMOGs offer participants to choose characters for themselves and adopt their own gaming abilities in their virtual world. The research indicates that the MMGOs require a persistent and full time virtual world, massive participation by users. Mize (2010) emphasizes that

social networking connects people on a personal level as the social networks builds credibility and trust. The attempt of Chuhay (2010) is to explore the marketing implication of virtual socialization. The study aims to assess the impact of homophily on the optimal strategies of a monopolist whose marketing campaign of a new product relies on a word of mouth communication. Homophily is a tendency of people to interact more with those who are similar to them. The notion of the homophily enriches network structure by specifying a probability of friendship relationships among groups of consumers. Patel (2010) asks whether social networking sites are facts or fictional and whether these sites can help one to improve in the online business.

Research Methodology

Survey method was followed to elicit primary input for the study. The main instrument for collecting data was structured questionnaire comprised of multiple choice questions, Dichotomous Questions and Scale preferences. The content of the questionnaire comprised of questions for gathering information on demographic profile of the respondents, time spent on internet and social networking sites, frequency of use, friends network, perception, personal information shared etc. same questionnaire was used for both employees and students and some questions were most applicable to individual groups. In such cases the respondent concerned can skip the question and go forward. The judgmental sampling was used to identify the respondents. A total number of 120 respondents were selected for the study; who are members of social networking sites. The questionnaire was distributed among employees and students.

Findings

Demographic profile of the respondents

The demographic features such as age, gender, nationality, professional status and the number of friends of a social networking user were analysed (refer table 1). It would be interesting to how nationality is related to the time spent on the internet, willingness to be networked online and similar other responses related to the study. Likewise, gender and age were identified as crucial factors which are related to the qualitative use of internet in general and social networking sites in particular. Since

the study focused on employees and students, knowing the professional status of the respondent was mainly thought to be essential.

Majority of the respondents were Indians with almost 83.33% and other nationalities constitute of 16.67% comprising of Bahrain, Pakistan and Philippines. The main reason for the higher proportion of the Indian nationals in the sample frame was the easy access of the researchers and the respondent's willingness to participate in the survey. The data obtained for the study shows that the highest proportion of respondents, who are using social networking sites, were from the age group of 20 – 25 years (30%) and the lowest proportion was from the age group of 40 – 45 years (5.8%). The average age estimated was 27.45 years with standard deviation as 9.4. It means that 68% of the respondents falls in between 18 – 36 years. The gender composition of the respondents' shows that 52.5% were females and their male counterparts constitutes 47.5%. From the above data, students constitute almost 41.67% of the respondents and 58.33% of employees. It is understood from the data that around 45% of respondents are proud to have more than 200 friends list in their address book having a standard deviation of 19.73 and average number of friends estimated was 3.48. It shows that 68% of the respondents have friends between 100 and 150.

Magnitude of Social Networking

Social networking websites function like an online community of internet users. The internet is filled with millions of individuals who are looking to meet other people, to gather and share first-hand information and experiences about everything and anything. As the study focuses on the magnitude of social networking sites as an objective, the analysis was done accordingly. There are hundreds of networking communities for sharing common interests in hobbies, religion, politics, experiences etc. For this study the researchers selected nine renowned social networking sites. The respondents were asked to rank these specific sites based on their usage on a scale from one to nine (refer table 1). The lowest ranked social networking site by the respondents was Multiply and the highest ranked social networking site was Facebook. The lowest ranked Social networking site is Multiply and the highest ranked Social Networking site was Face book. Initially when the Social networking sites had been introduced Hi5 was the commonly used networking site in the past few years but now it has been pushed down to 6th place. The reason for outpacing of Hi5

by new generation SNS like Facebook and others may be the customized services provided by the new entrants. Facebook has topped among the respondents as a community. It may be due to its user friendly outlook, interesting layouts and the feel of networking sites drags millions of users into using the site. Orkut has taken the second place according to the user's response followed by YouTube which offers the users the facility to upload, share and view videos. However the study has proved that Facebook is highly preferred by students and Orkut is highly preferred by the employees. Friendster and Multiply are least ranked by the respondents in all cases.

It is interesting to see that Facebook, Orkut and Youtube maintained their consistency for the respondents in general and the students' community in particular but in the case of employees Facebook has taken a place behind Orkut. Looking introspectively the reason for this change in trend may be because Facebook provides more vibes that can attract and maintain more youngsters.

Social networking uses much of our online time up as any other online activity. The duration spent for social networking has been analysed with various age groups. The results show that the respondents in the age group of 20-25 spent almost 2 - 4 hours on these sites. The least number of responses were for the online time plunging to Less than 2 hours, and the age group from 40-45 and 45+ had the smallest.

Social networking sites had come into the existence a few years ago but its usage has become prominent in recent years. The overall traffic in the social sites have boosted up of late. To understand the magnitude of using SNS, it has been observed that under duration of the number of respondents using social networking sites, the larger volume have been exercising such sites for 1- 3 years with 50 % of coverage. The least were those respondents that have been using less than one year with 8% of exposure to the internet. Since social networking sites had come into the mainstream of usage of the internet from the past few years, not many were aware of such sites. Therefore they have commenced using this platform for the building of social relations among people very lately.

All these networking sites provides a picture of level of satisfaction with access to social networking tools since it plays a major role in increasing community development, information dissemination and engagement with various contacts. As it has become a key medium for communication, it was decided to study the level of access of such sites at various places be it office or school. The sections under level of

access are limited access, unlimited access and no access which also have been presented in percentages form. It is estimated that 36% has no access to social networking sites and 32% has limited access and the rest 32% has unlimited access. This shows that schools and offices do not have much restrictions to social networking sites.

In this age of networking and IT enabled technologies, online buying and selling are buzz words around. Hence this study attempted to understand the magnitude of using SNS as a potential market place. Regarding the purchase of products from any social networking sites, it was asked to the respondents if they ever purchased any such products from their social networking sites. The total number of respondents' amount up to 120 including students as well as employees. Among them 80% of respondents haven't utilised the facility of purchasing products online and the rest 20% have capitalized this hassle free facility.

Under Business, social networking sites sometimes defines the target audience, locates your potential customers, builds social relationships with them and helps to promote the companies brand and their website. Some may use such sites and some may not use them and this specific question was asked if such sites could prove beneficial to people in the business sectors. The study showed that 37% of the respondents use these sites for business purpose and the rest 63% don't use them.

Social networking is the fastest means of making newer friends day by day. In the table below we correlate the two factors of age and number of friends with the answers of the respondents. This is done to understand the number of friends that are made according to the various age groups. The categories under number of friends have been divided in to below fifty, fifty to hundred, hundred to one fifty, one fifty to two hundred and more above two hundred. The total number of responses amount to 120 responses.

The above table represents among thirty six respondents of the age group 20-25, 29 respondents have more than 200 friends. This shows that the employed youth has more number of friends compared to all the other age groups. The students of age group 15-20 are the second highest category with more number of friends.

Logging in is not required for viewing pages, and not even for editing them. However, it provides additional features, and in general projects recommend it. It was required

to know that how much users would like to log in to their favourite services at any time so therefore the respondents were asked the time duration such as always, quite often, sometimes and never. Therefore it could be estimated to what scale has social networking sites influenced the users. On the internet, daily users log on to their favorite services while at home or office and access the internet. In the pie chart above, over 45% replied that they log on to social networking sites several times a day. Precisely 29% replied that they are logged on regularly. Among the respondents, 8% occasionally indulge into their favorite service.

Reasons for Social Networking

Some of the reasons for social networking are very common around all users such as building up the community, join interest groups, building trust, and helps to find social media affection. Most social networking sites have a forum where thoughts and experiences can be shared. Create photo albums and share photos and find old friends.

From the busy schedules of office times or school works, many users try to find relaxation through the usage of such social sites. Relaxation can come under different forms according to various age groups. Here the level of relaxations has been correlated with that of age groups so that which age group finds maximum and minimum relaxation can be estimated. Here the levels of relaxation have been classified into four types such as excellent, good, fair and poor. The significance of this study can show us if social networks are beneficial to the users regarding few minutes of relaxation from other activities. The study identifies that the employed youth finds social networking sites as a platform of relaxation after their daily schedules. Social networking sites are deemed to be a source of relaxation from the daily routine. In fact we use social networking sites for relaxation more often than we do not give it much thought. Employees recorded that the motivation to join a particular online community is to find their own identity and self-discovery. Umpteen number of online communities offer ample opportunity to find like minded people to share and debate ideas.

Internet users are spending less time, and paying less attention to traditional mails service. Mail usage is gradually falling due to the usage of Internet. Users engaged in social networking sites find it very easy to just post on their profiles specific messages or information rather than sending emails. The finding of the study shows that almost more than half i.e. 66% respondents sometimes use the traditional mails to

communicate with friends. And only 34% respondents use such mails to communicate with their friends on the internet. Gmail, Yahoo and Hotmail were the major means of communications through which people communicate. But since social networking sites do provide better and easier means of communication, this shift had taken place.

The study also explored the benefits of social networking sites in studies. The students were asked about the degree of influence of the social networking sites on their academic purposes. The findings show that 17% per cent of respondents reaction were that they very highly agree to the above statement. And 22% of respondents highly agrees that it provides better assistance in terms of studies. About 33% response were that usage of such sites influences to a great extent. Another proportion of the responses which includes 28% were not in agreement with the benefits retrieved from using networking sites.

The social sites have made interaction with internet users more fun and easier. They can bring to the awareness of many in their contact lists some information which may not be available on the Internet. Social networking provides an appropriate platform for such kinds of thoughts. Estimation of how many social network users would post their feedbacks or experiences regarding any products or services and amidst these respondents 68% responses were negative and 52% answered positively i.e they do post their comments on their respective sites.

Impact of social networking sites

Social networking currently has the greatest impact in the today's web world. Modern day youngsters and college students are mostly engaging their time in social networking websites to stay alive with their friends. As a part of the objective of the research, the impact of using social networking site was analysed. Along with some benefits, some risks are for certain. Social networking sites are open and easily accessible all round the clock. Sometimes users tend to deviate from whatever they are doing to using such sites. The posting of interesting information, statuses, videos and images are really compelling forms of distraction in these sites. This problem can affect both employees as well as students. Due to this, interruptions have become a frequent tendency in the daily routing of these social networking users.

A website can appear to have gone down mainly due to a programming error on the website or a DNS problem, or an expired domain. Regarding social networking sites, network connection problems may arise which may cause the unavailability of such

sites. Some sites may also go down due to reasons under maintenance. This may cause frustrations among the social networking users. The study shows that mainly females (45%) get frustrated than the males when a social networking site goes down. The proportion of female respondents, who are frustrated due to the problems of SNS is 45%. This is comparatively higher than that of the proportion of male respondents (41%) who got irritated due to the same problem. These findings unfold over obsession of female users towards social networking platforms than males.

The study also explored how alert are the respondents in revealing their profile on the virtual platforms. On large social networking services, there have been growing concerns about users giving out too much personal information and the threat of misuse of information. Users of these services are expected to be keen on protecting their confidential personal information, since posting exhaustive personal information as well as other views and feedbacks or experiences may lead to victimization, data theft and/or misuse. In this regard the present study attempted to understand the level of attentiveness of SNS users in disclosing their personal details on the internet.

The profile of an individual social networking user is the mirror of their identities in this virtual world. Chosen information could be displayed on their respective profile for other users to view and access. While some are classified and protected against outsider, some are widely accessible to unknown users in the cyber world. Some users do not provide information on the networking sites due to the risk of public accessibility to view. However there are certain privacy settings also. The respondents were observed on the basis of the personal information included in a social networking site. Only a few are willing to share their political views in their profile since very few are engaged in politics from the backdrop of this island. Instant messenger screens are included on the home pages of many social networking sites. Some users do not use this facility. However the study has proved that almost half of the respondents use the instant messenger screens on their social networking home pages.

Hundreds and thousands of people are met on through social networking sites. It has become a platform of virtual socialization which means people interact and socialize with each other from far off or next door through the means of Internet. Many people join these networking sites to meet new people, share their interests, experiences, feedbacks etc. however some people do keep in contact with their old friends and

relatives staying away from them through these. Due to the highly advanced technology, social networking sites have also kept the co-workers of a company in contact. This shows that the need of social networking sites for business purposes also has a greater significance. Majority of the respondents speak to their close friends/family/co-workers but refuse to get in touch with strangers or unknown people through social networking sites. This may be due to the risks the social networking sites are exposed to.

Conclusion

As technology gets more and more advanced, it should not be overlooked the fact that the information shared on the SNS can easily be manipulated or misused. It is essential to safeguard the personal information while using social networking websites. However, these extra precautions may seem against the true philosophy of SNS, where everyone wants to befriend others. But it is all the more important to protect interest of the users from any potential harm. In this regard the respective SNS can take the lead by making arrangement for protecting the users interest against any blatant misuse. For example, many Facebook users create groups specifically for the purpose of retrieving lost phone numbers. In a similar display of poor judgment, many MySpace users post their chain survey answers in the form of bulletins viewable to all of their friends. Many of those surveys contain questions of very personal nature and many users willingly offer the answers.

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Factors	Percent	
NATIONALITY	Indian	83.33
	Non-Indian	16.67
GENDER	Male	47.50
	Female	52.50
PROFESSIONAL STATUS	Self Employed	4.17
	Professional	39.99
	Administrative Staff	14.17
	Student	41.67
AGE (years)	15-20	24.17
	20-25	30.00
	25-30	13.30
	30-35	8.40
	35-40	10.83
	40-45	5.80
	45+	7.50
NUMBER OF FRIENDS	Below 50	12.50
	50-100	26.67
	100-150	6.67
	150-200	8.30
	200+	45.00

Table .2**Likert scale for ranking the most commonly used Social Networking Site**

Social networking Sites	General Mean	Students	Employees
FACEBOOK	1.72 : I	1.44: I	1.95 : II
ORKUT	2.3 : II	3.14 :II	1.87:I
YOUTUBE	3.16 : III	3.26 : III	3.07 : III
TWITTER	4.44 : IV	4.79 : V	4.10 : IV
MY SPACE	4.72 : V	4.76 : IV	4.67 : V
HI5	5.04 : VI	5.08 : VI	5.00 : VII
LINKDIN	5.72 : VII	6.31 : VII	4.78 : VI
FRIENDSTER	6.43: VIII	6.61 : VIII	6.09 : VIII
MULTIPLY	7.7: IX	8.50 : IX	6.45 : IX