

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN THE LIVES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies and Social networking sites (SNS) have increasingly become a natural part of students' lives at home. Many academics and researchers are interested in finding out how these newer technologies are changing the way students live, work and play (Gemmill, & Peterson, 2006; Mohamed, & Sumitha, 2011; Roy, 2016; Shaheen, 2008). The current paper aims to understand the usage pattern of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) among the university students studying in Delhi-NCR region. The results reveal several findings viz. a viz. the sites they most frequently use, the device of access, average hours spent, personal information shared, general perceptions and experiences of university students studying in Delhi-NCR region. Furthermore, the paper also throws light upon the various reason/purposes for which these students are using several social networking sites.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites, Technology, Internet, University, Students, Delhi-NCR

Introduction

One of the ways for global communication that has led to a network boom in the cyberage is the development and rising use of the internet technologies (Bedi, 2016; Roy, 2016). This boom of networks is not a simple network made of numerous wires, but it is that of social connections also known as the social network. This social network enables its users to connect to other users (also known as nodes in the network), no matter how many, on an everyday basis (Ellison & Boyd, 2013), thereby further contributing towards the ever so increasing social networks. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp among a few, represent these social networks wherein users across the world communicate, or rather network with each other. Although one major reason behind an enormous success of these social networking platforms is the availability of internet (the very lifeline of these networks) that help in easier, faster and at times cheaper communication than ever before. However, the question that arises is what exactly does these sites offer people that these have become so popular among people all across the world and especially among the youth. The use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) has become an integral and significant part of people's lives (Gemmill & Peterson, 2006) all across the globe. These sites are especially popular among the adolescents and young adults (Mauri, Cipresso, Balgera, Villamira, & Riva, 2011).

The current paper aims to understand this very landscape of social networking among university students. The paper elaborated upon the usage patterns viz. a viz. the sites they most frequently use, the device of access, average hours spent, personal information shared, general perceptions and experiences of university students studying in Delhi-NCR region. Furthermore, the paper also throws light upon the various reason/purposes for which these students are using several social networking sites.

Review of Related Literature

The use of the early SNSs started out as a hobby among the computer-literate people of those times. However, with the increasing introduction of newer and more advanced SNSs, that offered multiple features, began, its popularity among people also grew exponentially, so much so that these sites have now become like a social norm as if it is a way of life for people living across the globe (Boyd, 2007; Coyle & Vaughn, 2008). These sites have become popular, especially among the teenagers and young adults who use these sites for connecting and communicating with their friends, sharing information and also for showcasing their social lives and status, thereby an opportunity for these users to reinvent their lives and their personalities (Boyd, 2007), viz. a viz. how they want to project their lifestyle in front of other community of users. Such social networking activities by the users of various Web 2.0 technologies also helps contribute towards content generation and value creation on these SNSs (Vasalou, Joinson, & Courvoisier, 2010). This use of SNSs as an integral and significant part of one's life has become an international phenomenon in the recent years (Gemmill & Peterson, 2006), so much so that many researchers are now interested in exploring this area in the social science and academic domains.

One question that straight away crops up in our minds is that why are these sites such as Facebook, Twitter etc. so popular among the youth? Mauri, Cipresso, Balgera, Villamira and Riva (2011), through their study aimed to answer just this. They identified particular aspects of users' online experience that contributes to the success of these SNSs. In their study, they studied specific psycho-physiological patterns that leads to a positive experience among the SNS users. Their study revealed that a state of positive valence and high arousal can be evoked among the users through the use of SNSs. Thereby, the probable association between positive affective state of users of SNSs and the successful spread of SNSs. Hence, the implications that the nature of SNSs usage (positive or negative) results into corresponding influences (positive or negative) on the user. A study conducted by Oberst, Wegmann, Stodt, Brand, and Chamarro (2016) aimed at understanding the influence of the use of SNSs on the users' psychological state of mind revealed that an increased use of SNSs is a resultant of different feelings among boys and girls. For girls, it is the feeling of depression that seems to trigger an increased usage of SNSs, while for boys, a feeling of anxiety seems to be triggering higher usage of SNSs.

A study conducted by Mohamed and Sumitha (2011) investigated the use and perceptions about SNSs among the students studying at the Calicut University, Kerala. The results of the study revealed that a large majority of students were using the several SNSs for the purpose of meeting new people and also communicating with old friends. Out of the several sites that these students were using, Orkut was found to be the most popular among others less popular sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Despite of their avid use of several SNSs, the respondents were also found to be concerned about various issues of security and privacy that arise due to use of these sites.

However, meeting and communicating with old and new friends is not the only purpose for which people are found to be using SNSs for. Several other activities such as that of employing, raising awareness, political activism etc. can also be seen to be performed easily with the help of SNSs. An instance of this can be seen from the work of Shaheen (2008), who investigated the use of SNS and political activism on the internet among university students during the time of political crises in Pakistan. The study, surveying 420 students from 3 universities of Pakistan, revealed the changing communication channels in the country.

These changes, as the study reports are influenced by the social networking tools. Hence, the reportedly positive role of internet use for the promotion of greater awareness about individual rights, freedom of expression, and also democracy among the people, especially during the times of emergency in Pakistan.

Often, studies reveal the role of SNSs in changing the mindsets of youth by making them either more aware about contemporary social issues and or enabling them to freely express and voice their opinions on burning social issues. Women are also seen to be more sensitive towards social issues despite of spending much less time on these SNSs (Jain, Gupta, & Anand, 2012).

The SNSs are also being increasingly used for employment purposes, helping not just the prospective employees to look for recruitment opportunities, but also for them to know more about the companies and their products through the customer feedbacks already available online, hence influencing their final decisions (Barnes, 2008). These sites are also helping the employers to recruit the best suited candidate for their company/firm/organization. The employers do this by making use of the applicant's personal information, available on their social networking profiles, thereby trying to make better hiring decisions. A USA-based study examined the feasibility of using solely the available online information (about the candidate) for improving candidate hiring decisions made by the employers. It revealed that just by using the information available on social networking profiles of individuals, the judges were successful in distinguishing high performers from that of the low performers (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009).

Keeping all these in mind, the need for studying the status of SNSs usage among university students of Delhi-NCR region was felt, so as to build a more contextual understanding of the entire phenomenon.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the various categories of SNSs used by university students of Delhi-NCR.
2. To examine the extent and nature of usage of SNSs by the university students.
3. To examine the purpose of the usage of SNSs by the university students.
4. To understand university students' perceptions on the issues of privacy and security relating to the SNSs that they use.

Significance of the Study

The outcomes of this study are expected to benefit students, teachers and the administrations of the universities under study by providing a clearer picture of the extent of SNSs usage among Delhi's youth, more accurately among university students studying in Delhi-NCR. This shall further help them in understanding and proffering ways to maintain students' attention in the classroom using SNSs. The results would also add to the already available academic literature on social networking.

Method

The current study utilizes a descriptive survey research design for the purpose of describing, explaining the existent and non-existent facts concerning the present status of a phenomenon, which in this case is the use of SNSs among the university students. For the purpose of this study, the sample was the students studying at different kinds of universities (Central, State, Private and Deemed-to-be Universities) located in the Delhi-NCR region. The instrument for data collection was a self-constructed open-ended questionnaire divided into three main sections namely, students access to, experiences with and perceptions about the SNSs they use. The questionnaire so developed was also content and face validated by a panel of 40 experts. After the validation process, the final tool was distributed to the sample students, partly through print and partly through google forms. A total of 100 completely filled questionnaires were received back and were further processed for analysis. The data so collected, was then analysed using frequency distributions and was then represented graphically. The results & implications of the current study are delimited to only the sample universities from the Delhi-NCR region.

Results

The study is based on understanding the way Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are used by university students to serve their academic or non-academic purposes. This objective was helpful in knowing the overall ways (academic as well as non-academic) in which university students use various SNSs. The objective is also helpful in understanding the general perceptions of the university students about the SNSs that they use. The higher is the usage, the better is the possibility of finding the potential role of SNSs in an individual's academic life hence academic social networking.

The results revealed that 97% of the respondents are using one or more SNSs regularly. Also, a majority (30%) of them have been using these sites ever since their senior secondary school grades. 25% were using these sites since their senior school classes and 23% since their undergraduate years.

Among the users of SNSs, WhatsApp was found to be the most popular among the respondents (i.e. 95% of the sample university students). While the second most popular SNSs, with 91% of the respondents being active on Facebook. YouTube was the third most popular SNSs that was found to be used regularly by 62% of the sample university students. Instagram, Google+ and Snapchat were the next popular SNSs in the line. Academic sites such as Academia.edu, Blogger.com, Google Scholar, Moodle, Quora, ResearchGate, TEDx, and WordPress were found to be used by less than 50% of the respondents. The probable reasons for this can be found in the role and the extent to which these sites provide entertainment and socialization for the users like watching videos, sharing any multimedia, digital material (audios, videos, pdf, doc files, .jpg etc.).

Also, the most popular device that is being used by the respondents for accessing their social network profile was their own smartphones, followed by Laptops and finally Tablets/iPads and desktop computers being the least popular devices for accessing social networking sites. This finding also indicates the youth's being wanting to stay continuously in touch with their online lives. With the portability of mobile phones and the feature of providing easy access to the SNSs, provided a sound internet connection is there, seems to attract a large number of today's youth. This also becomes possible due to good tower connectivity in

urban areas like Delhi and also due to the coming of JIO services that has made high speed internet available at cheaper prices. This can also be one reason why people are spending so much time online. As the study revealed, a majority of the respondents i.e. 63% of them reported to being online for around 1-6 hours per day. While 22% reported to be using SNSs for less than one hour per day and 12% reported to be using SNSs for around 7-12 hours per day.

Being online for so many hours, the youth tends to share different sorts of personal information online. Out of these a majority of them freely shared their gender, pictures and email address on their social network profiles while only very few of them shared more personal information such as their residential address on their online social network profiles. As the respondents felt that sharing such personal information can actually be harmful especially with respect to other unknown users misusing their personal information.

The study revealed that 53% of the respondents believed (or were unsure i.e. 22% respondents) that the privacy and security of their personal information is protected by the SNSs they use and (47% of the respondents believed or 25% were unsure) that these SNSs companies will not use it for any other purposes. This result can also be corroborated with the findings of a study by Dwyer, Hiltz, and Katia (2007), that reported the development of online relationships even in sites having weak trust and privacy safeguards at the users' end. They (60%) also do not worry about any embarrassment that they might have to face from the information posted about them. Also, it can be inferred that the respondents (58% and 62% respectively) are ready to overlook the privacy policies of the SNSs that they use if these sites help them to stay connected with their friends/family/teachers and if it helps them with their educational tasks. However, the students (65% of the respondents) would not overlook the security policies only if the SNSs is popular.

In addition to disclosing their personal information online, the youth also tends to use these sites for staying in touch with their friends and family (85% of the respondents), finding information (67% of the respondents), sharing videos/pictures/other media (65% of the respondents), and playing games and dating (18% of the respondents). This small number of respondents using SNSs for dating matches with the 16.90% of the respondents using Tinder. However, this does not mean that the users cannot use other sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp etc. for dating. Hence more research is needed in this regard.

Conclusion

The study revealed the SNSs usage pattern among university students studying in the Delhi-NCR region. It reports largely entertainment and social sites such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to be most popular among the users while educational sites such as Authoria.com, ResearchGate, WordPress to be least popular. Also, the portability and easy, cheap internet access leads to smartphones being the device mostly used by the students for accessing their social networking profiles. Thus, also contributing towards an increased online active period among the users of SNSs. Being online, the users use these sites for finding information, chatting with new and old friends, sharing multimedia files, playing games and also for dating. The users, on their social network profiles, share information such as their gender, pictures, email address but not their residential address. Also, these users, a majority of them, trust the sites they use for not using their personal information for any other purposes and also believe that the information they share online is kept private and secure by the social networking companies. The study also revealed that the

users, i.e. the university students are ready to overlook the privacy policy of these sites if they get to communicate with their friends and family, and if they get help for their educational tasks. However, the student users were not ready to overlook the privacy policies of social networking sites only for the reason of them being popular. Finally, the study can be concluded with an understanding of SNSs use among the students studying in universities located in Delhi-NCR.

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