Social Media Usage Trends among Urban Female Undergraduates: A Case Study in Vijayawada City

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Abstract
College students are the highest users of Social Media and it is imperative to understand the patterns, and purposes of usage, as well as possible changes wrought on their psyche and behaviour. This study aims to identify the present trends in social media usage among undergraduate female students in Vijayawada city, to discern - the devices used, memberships subscribed, purposes used, identity creation, networking time, negative effects and educational usage. A survey was conducted and data analyzed using SPSS-Statistic 19.0 software and results correlated with reviewed literature. The study revealed that notwithstanding the attitude of parents and teachers, the social media networking habits of the students will prevail and eventually the advantages will nullify the disadvantages; and though cell phones are banned on many college premises, they will certainly be used in the classrooms of the near future. The findings add substance to the ongoing research in this field.
Key Words: Social media, access, identity, privacy, relationships, education

Present Status of Social Media Usage

The advent of the 21st century brought in tremendous developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) which unleashed the interactive world wide web or the Web 2.0, which in turn spawned Social Media Networking Sites (SMNS) that captured the imagination of the people; as is evident from the rapid adaptation of this media, within a short span of a decade and half. This proliferation of SMNS as well as their ubiquitous usage across social, cultural, economic and political spheres of life; has sent researchers scurrying to analyze both its short term and long term impacts on individual and social behavior. The appeal of the SMNS lies in their enabling potential to communicate, collaborate and share content across a worldwide network of contacts; by allowing users to build and manage their own social groups and networks. The potential possibilities of their use are endless, but primarily socializing has gone from face to face, to online, for a whole new generation and is expected to stay there and expand in numerous ways.

A social network is a collection of individuals linked together by a set of relations. These individuals may be physically known or unknown to each other and the network enables instant exchange of communication via text, audio, video or graphics. The present day Degree College students, who are born digitiratti, are all communicating in frenzy, day-in and day-out. Hence it has become imperative for social researchers and educationists to understand the patterns of SMNS usage and the purposes for which they are being used.

Gender is a significant demographic variable affecting social media use, as there are some differences between use by men and women. Women are more likely than men to have a personal profile on Facebook, but men are more likely than women to sustain a profile on LinkedIn (Lenhart et al., 2010). Furthermore, women were four to five times more likely than men to use social networking sites (Tufekci, 2008). Moreover, Sheldon (2008) found that overall women were more likely to use social media for maintaining relationships with family and friends, passing time, and entertainment; but men were more likely to use social media to meet new people. College women were also more likely than men to use the internet for relational communication, such as contacts with friends, family, and romantic partners (Baym, Zhang, Kunkel, Ledbetter, & Mei-Chen, 2007). Educational experience of men and women seemed to play a factor in social media use as well. Men and women were more likely to use social network sites frequently if they had college experience (Lenhart et al., 2010).

More than 60% of the SMNS users are youth in the age group of 18 to 24 years and are the drivers of growth of this media. Most of the students do go online to interact on SMNS several times in a day. Taking the above into consideration it is pertinent to understand the usage trends among female undergraduates, especially in relation to accessibility, identity creation, relationship issues, educational usage, vulnerability to cyber crimes, etc.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was codified as research objectives which are to know in detail the various aspects of female undergraduates' usage of Social Media Network Sites (SMNS) such as - 1) The levels of accessibility, place of usage, types of sites used, purposes used for, identity creation and management, etc. 2) The amount of time, number of times and the time of the day; spent on networking, etc. 3) Number of contacts, nature of relationships, befriending strangers, etc. 4) Whether and how SMNS are being used for educational purposes and what the future portends. 5) Attitude of their families' towards their use of SMNS and effects on real time relationships 6) Awareness about cyber crimes, confidence on SMNS' privacy policies and knowledge of legal issues involved.

Review of Literature

Relevant available literature on the subject, including similar case studies done elsewhere, was reviewed by the author. The reviewed literature highlighted how globally pervasive social media usage is among present day youth and inspired the researchers to undertake this research; to understand its impact at the local level, i.e. the capital region in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India. However, due to paucity of space the same could not be reproduced here; and hence while analyzing the survey results, supporting literature is presented where appropriate.

Methodology

To fulfill the objectives of this research, a quantitative method of research was considered suitable. Towards this a survey was conducted on a cluster sample of 100 undergraduate female volunteers, sourced from Sri Durga Malleswara Siddhartha Mahila Kalasala (Autonomous), Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India. Demographically, they are in the age group of 18-22 years, studying for bachelor degrees in Arts, Science and Commerce streams, hailing from urban and sub-urban areas and various social and economic strata of the society at large. The commonality required was that, the respondents should all be female undergraduate students, who are potentially avid users of SMNS and hence purposive sampling method was used.

A questionnaire was prepared as the survey instrument, consisting of 3 sections – Section A- 15 closed ended questions, Section B- 10 multiple choice questions and Section C – 10 questions eliciting responses on a 5 point Likert Scale; i.e. a total of 35 questions. The questionnaire was finalized after testing validity and reliability; and administered live by the researcher on the college

premises, after obtaining necessary permission. The respondents were explained the purpose of the survey, exhorted to answer truthfully to the best of their knowledge and were also informed that they will remain anonymous as only the analyzed data will be published.

Data Analysis

The data thus collected was analyzed using IBM SPSS-Statistic 19.0, a MS Windows based software and the analysis presented in the form of cross tabulation tables.

Section-A – Analysis. From Table 1, (Appendix A) the following aspects were apparent - 90% of the respondents are members of a social networking site, confirming that most of the students are communicating via social networking sites. Facts support the assertion that Social Media usage has increased in the US by almost 1000 percent in eight years for people between 18 and 29, according to Lenhart et.al, (2010).

67.7% of the students have a personal profile on multiple social media websites, indicating that students are using various networking sites for different purposes. 'As the number of young adults who use online social networks has grown, so has the percentage of social networking site users who maintain a profile on multiple sites.' (Lenhart et.al., 2010)

54.7% of the students find face to face communication is neglected with rising popularity of SMN sites.

49.5% of the students use SMN sites for passing time or for entertainment, indicating their acknowledgement that they are mostly wasting time on non-significant chatter and watching assorted entertainment.

40.6% of the students visit social networking sites many times in a day. This shows that they keep updating their sites and responding to other's updates constantly.

34.4% of them agreed that they use SMN sites more than boys, corroborating with the research by Pew Research Center, USA, that – 'girls were more likely to use the sites than boys.'(Lenhartet.al.,2010)

60.8% of the students agreed that social media improves the quality of relationship between users. Gratification is more among girl students, as they keep in continuous network contact sharing all that they do in a day's work. 'Facebook use was positively correlated with closeness with friends with whom they interact on Facebook and the support received from friends.' (Baker & Oswald, 2010: p9)

20.6% of the students faced online harassment. However the majority i.e. 79.4% did not encounter any online bullying.

69.3% of the students' parents are aware of their social networking activities. It is true that most of the girl students are communicating more with their family and friends and hence majority of the parents are aware of their daughters' social networking activities.

42.4% of the students agreed that they did notice changes in attitude of their families towards them due to their social media networking activities. As time spent alone on social networking increases, it interrupts quality time spent with the family.

81.4% of the students opined that social networking is important for educational purpose. It indicates that most of the girl students are already using social networking sites for some educational purposes; which may be - exchanging notes, recording guest speakers, etc. and are aware of the potential uses of social networking sites for educational purposes.

15.9 % of the students accepted the strangers, who try to befriend them on SMN sites. This can be considered risky on sites like FaceBook.

4.0% of the students spend time watching others' profiles and their updates. This may be so, as they are made available by the sites and are easily accessible. However shy individuals may spend

time on watching others' profiles, before they actually start communicating and sharing. Immediate communication benefits of FaceBook users were seen for individuals reporting various levels of shyness, opine Baker & Oswald (2010).

58.6% of the students know about cyber crimes. It is quite heartening to note that majority of the girl students are aware about the type of crimes that occur on social networking sites.

9.4% of the students know about the punishment of cyber crimes. It is evident that though a majority of the girl students know about cyber crimes, very few of them are aware of the legal protection available to the victims and judicial punishments that can be awarded to the accused.

Section-B – Analysis. The following aspects can be deduced from Table 2 (Appendix B)**.** Of the 100 students surveyed, 60% have a smart phone and 19% have laptops. The rest of the students, i.e. 15% of them have Desktop PCs and 6% of them have tabs. It is noteworthy that all of them have access to internet through some device or the other, as all the 100 students have responded.

The usage of internet is predominantly from home with 52 respondents, while another 45 students do it from their mobile phones when they are away from home. Only 2% of them use the campus wifi system, which may be due to the ban of cell phones usage on the campus and only 1 student uses the internet centre as parents may not be permitting usage of the home Desktop PC for networking.

44% of the students use FaceBook more, followed by 34% on Google Plus and 19% on YouTube. However, only 3% of the students spent time on Twitter.

Most of the students i.e. 53% of them network during 7-8 pm and 27% at 8-9 pm. 15% of the students did it between 9-10 pm and 4% of them after 10pm. As most of the students are networking in the evening between 7-8 pm, which is directly clashing with quality time spent with the family.

26% of the respondents have been using the SMNS for more than 4 years, 13% for more than 3 years, 28% since 2 years and 29% since 1 year. 4 students did not respond as they may have been new or much less than 1 year experience on the sites.

20% of the students have more than 100 friends in their circle, 12% have 80-100, 17% have 60-80, 44% have 40-60. 7 students did not respond, which may mean they have a very high number of friends or much lower than 40 friends.

Most of the students or nearly 78% of them updated their status or post any other comments once or twice in a day. However there are around 18% of the students who post updates once in 1-2 hours.

A vast majority of the surveyed female students or 82% of them use online social networks to keep in touch with their family and friends. 9% of the students say they look out to make new friends, whereas 7% of them are more interested in sharing videos and pictures and only 2% of the students prefer to play online games.

Most of the female undergraduates surveyed i.e. 68% of them are aware of cyber crimes, with hacking being most known, followed by maligning others using morphed photos, stalking and tagging.

Section – C Analysis. Table 3 (Appendix C) reveals the respondents' levels of agreement and / or disagreement.

A whopping 92% of the students agree or strongly agree that social networking sites are important. Only 7% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the rest of the students and one student did not answer.

More than 81% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that social networking technologies should be used in colleges for learning purposes. Only 18% of them disagreed or strongly disagreed.

73% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the social networking sites follow the privacy rules they have been set for their site and that they are generally safe. However 26% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the majority. This statistic roughly corresponds to the percentage of students (20.6%) who have encountered online bullying.

87% of the students agree or strongly agree that girls in the age group of 18 to 25 years are more at risk of various cyber crime attacks. However the remaining 13% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed, which can mean that cyber crimes victims can be of any age group or sex.

81% of the students believe that cyber crimes against girl students in the age group of 18 to 25 years can lead to cultural disasters. This is very surprising and may be the result of observing the mass agitations that followed the Nirbhaya case, Valentine's Day attacks and other such attacks by vigilante' groups. The remaining 19% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed.

79% of the students agree or strongly agree that social networking sites provide users the opportunity to create their self profile in a manner that they want. 21% of them disagreed or strongly disagreed with the rest and may mean that creating multiple profiles or hyped up profiles is not good.

64% of the students agree or strongly agree that social networking sites have become an integral part of the classroom. The rest 36% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is a surprising statistic as even the usage of cell phones on the college campus is banned. It may mean that the students are using social media sites for their coursework in some form or the other.

85% of the students agree or strongly agree that social media should be included into the curriculum and 14% of them disagreed or strongly disagreed. The disagreement may be due to their perception that social media are frivolous.

82% of the students agree or strongly agree that social media enhance learning by making the process more engaging and enjoyable, irrespective of the subject or content that has to be learnt. However 17% disagree or strongly disagree with the rest.

89% of the students have read an article in the newspapers or a heard a discussion on TV regarding the very high usage of cell phones and internet by college students and that many of them are becoming addicted to the same and are neglecting their studies. However 10% of the students have not seen or heard so. However, most are aware of the drawbacks.

Summary of Findings

Empirical results from the survey of 100 college girl students of Vijayawada city reveal that 90% of them have access to a device through which they can source the internet and social networking sites and that a smart phone is the most desired and used device. They use the social media networking sites mainly to keep in touch with their family and friends and occasionally for befriending strangers. Music, entertainment and activities that are casually called 'time-pass' consume nearly 50% of the respondents' time spent on the social networking sites and they admit to the same.

FaceBook is the most preferred social network, followed by Google+. Few use YouTube and they may be students interested in music, performing arts and students who are already performing or practicing some art. Very few use Twitter and even they, may be spending more time on browsing others' tweets, than actually tweeting or responding to tweets. Many are registered users on multiple sites and hence it may be assumed that they use the sites as per their utility and the gratifications they derive. This aspect corroborates the 'Uses and Gratification theory' of Katz and Blumler, 1974, that people use different media for different purposes and there will be uses that are gratified by their actions.

Some of the respondents have been members of these sites for more than 4 years, a statistic that shows that they are navigating the social networking sites deftly, without falling into the usual pitfalls. Most of them are also aware of the various cyber crimes that they are vulnerable to and the general precautions they should take while navigating the social networking sites. Most also believed that the privacy rules set by the service providers are implemented strictly and that the grievance redressal mechanism works.

Creation and maintenance of a user profile or self identity creation appears to be a big favourite among many of the students. As most are members on many sites, it leaves to imagination whether the information in their profiles varies and to what extent self identity is created and manipulated through these profiles. It may be safely presumed that for many users, creating and changing online content is an integral means of managing identity and social relationships. However, it can also be presumed that the respondents who have been on the sites for many years are prudent in creating a realistic profile and sticking to it.

Most of the students spend around 1-2 hours on the social networking sites, especially from home during 7-8 pm in the evening and this reduces the quality of time spent with their families. Networking is a solitary activity and the more the time spent in solitary activities, the less time will there be for face to face communication. Some of the students are constantly on the sites for updating and responding to others' updates during all their waking hours. This leads to complaints from the parents and discord in relationships and in extreme cases there is a complete change in the attitude of the family towards such respondents.

Most of the students have seen an article in the newspapers or a panel on TV discussing the very high usage of cell phones and internet by college students and that many of them are becoming addicted to the same and also that they are neglecting their studies. But in actuality they seem to believe that it is the future of human communication.

Most respondents are aware about cyber crimes they may be vulnerable to and know about hackers who may access others' sites and people who circulate morphed photographs to malign others. Cyber stalking and tagging is also known. But it is moot a question whether the students are taking precautions. It is not known what precautions the students are taking to protect themselves and whether they are aware of the precautions to be taken.

Majority of the respondents believe that social media networks can be used to make the learning process more engaging and enjoyable, irrespective of the subject or content that has to be learnt. The very idea has excited most of them who believe that social media should be included into the curriculum and research in Higher Educational institutions. Many respondents may already be using them for searching information, sharing notes, recording guest lectures, etc

Discussions

It is surely an impossible task to keep the students away from social media networking sites and hence a strong case remains that social networking sites should be used for educational purposes in the colleges. The Dos and Don'ts of net surfing can be taught to the students in class so that they can enjoy the benefits of bonding through social media in a regulated manner for both educational and recreational purposes. Though cell phones are banned on the college premises, the students are sure that they will surely be used in the classrooms of the future; an aspect that Higher Education authorities should take note of.

Whatever be the attitude of the parents and teachers of these college students, towards their social networking habits; the students themselves strongly believe that it is all for the better and that the actual advantages of using these sites will ultimately nullify the disadvantages. There are also misconceptions that compassion towards others, a key requirement for civilizational progress, is reducing in the present generation due their engrossed online activities. In actuality, the reverse may be true, as online social activity is all about bonding and sharing with family and friends and that can only increase compassion and not decrease it.

Limitations

The survey extent is a limiting factor in this study as only 100 female undergraduates from one college were surveyed. However, this cluster sample fully represents the targeted respondents for the purpose of this study. Some of the deduced findings are presumed, as 35 questions cannot fully elicit desired nuances in the responses.

Suggestions and Recommendations

As the students themselves are recommending, it pertinent for the educators of Higher Education in India to investigate the reasons and contemplate inclusion of studies on social media networking into the curriculum of colleges and also encourage research into how effectively social media and their technological platforms can be used in educational settings. It should also examine the long term impacts on the social life, education, privacy and emotional health on the youth.

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