

Social Networking Sites – A Critical Analysis of Its Impact on Personal and Social Life

Dr. Biswajit Das

Associate Professor - Marketing Management
& Chairperson Doctoral Programme
School of Management, KIIT University
KIIT Campus-7, KRISHNA Campus
Bhubaneswar-751024, Orissa, India

Jyoti Shankar Sahoo

Masters in Business Administration
School of Management, KIIT University
Room no: 6, B-Block
KIIT Campus-7, KRISHNA Campus
Bhubaneswar-751024, Orissa, India

Abstract

The growing popularity of social networking sites (SNS) among the Internet users demands an introspection of personal and social behavior of human beings. Today 1.5 billion people across the world have their profiles in social networking sites. Everything looks nice when you create a profile on social networking site, but how you feel when someone starts blackmailing using your personal data. Your boss threatens to fire you for posting comments on SNS. You feel compulsive to check your profile during work hours. SNS becomes a reason for anxiety and addiction. It starts affecting personal relationship with spouse and family members. Such sites make private life and public life of an individual a digital document. How SNS affecting our social behavior and relationships? Are we going towards a prosperous future or a darker world of SNS? This research study tries to explore all these negative impacts of SNS on its users.

Key Words: Social networking sites, Personal privacy, Social isolation, Cyber infidelity, Virtual life, cybercriminals, Facebook addiction.

1. Introduction

Online Social networking is a type of virtual communication that allows people to connect with each other. This concept arises from basic need of human beings to stay together in groups forming a community. Michael Wesch, cultural anthropologist at Kansas State University, compared the tribal societies to online social networking. Like the tribal culture, in Facebook people project their identity by demonstrating their relationships to each other. You define yourself in terms of who your friends are (Wright, 2007). Wikipedia defines social network service as online platform that focus on building and reflecting social networks or social relations among people who share interests and activities.

Social networking sites, email, instant messaging, video- and photo- sharing sites and comment posting are all tools that help people to communicate and socialize with each other (Mooney, 2009). The first social networking site SixDegrees.com was launched in 1997. It allowed users to create profiles, list their friends and surf the friends list (Boyd, & Ellison, 2007). Starting from 1997 to 2010 there are some 1.5 billion users of social networking websites (Kreutz, 2009). People join social networking sites because it gives them an opportunity to express their views, a feel of independency and self esteem. It's just a click way to create a virtual profile and connect with millions of users across the world, becomes more interesting because you can stay connected with old friends and family members. The list of ten most popular social networking sites based on their Alexa global traffic rank and traffic rank from Compete and Quantcast is shown in Fig1.

Fig 1: Top 10 social networking sites in the world

Rank	Sites	Estimated Unique Monthly visitors
1	Facebook	550,000,000
2	Twitter	95,800,000
3	MySpace	80,500,000
4	Linkedin	50,000,000
5	Ning	42,000,000
6	Tagged	30,000,000
7	Classmates	29,000,000
8	Hi5	27,000,000
9	myyearbook	12,000,000
10	Meetup	8,000,000

Source: Top 15 most, 2011

According to ComScore, a leader in measuring the digital world, 84 percent of India's total internet visitors are users of SNS. India is the seventh largest market worldwide for social networking after the U.S., China, Germany, Russian Federation, Brazil and the U.K. Facebook captures the top slot among SNS in India with 20.9 million visitors. Interestingly, Indian social networking audience has increased by 43 percent within 2009-10 ("Facebook captures top," 2010).

Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook, initially launched for Harvard students, is today the most used social networking site by worldwide users. With more than 500 million active users, it is the third largest country after China and India. People spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook and 70 percent of users are from outside United States. Interestingly, an average user has 130 friends on Facebook ("Facebook statistics,"). But is this the true picture of social networking sites? Is everything going fine in the world of social networking? What about the futures of its users? Are they happy with the virtual life or it is making their life hell? The above questions have been discussed with a critical analysis of available facts.

2. Personal Privacy: A Concern

There is a narrow gap between private and public life in the age of social networking. Once you put personal data, image or video on web site, you are helpless to control its distribution. Though you can set its privacy level in the profile but you are sharing them with an unknown web administrator. Tomorrow your personal information may lend in the hand of parents, teacher, employer, spouse, criminal or a marketing company.

A study conducted by Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2007 found that 66 percent of teens restrict their online profile by making it private. They found 82 percent teens post their first name, followed by photos of themselves (79%), name of city (61%) and email address (29%). According to Pew study girls generally don't post information that could help in finding their physical location. On the other hand, boys are just opposite and post more information about their real location (Lenhart, & Madden, 2007).

Today many employers look online profile before giving the job offer, because they don't want to see only one side of employee's personality. The president of a consulting company in Chicago decided to check one of the candidate's Facebook page, and found descriptions of marijuana, shooting people and obsessive sex. Finally the candidate was rejected for this (Mooney, 2009). In another case, 13 cabin crew of Virgin Atlantic were fired who posted derogatory comments about safety standards of the airline and its passengers on a Facebook forum. Similarly, British Airways investigated the behavior of several employees who described some passengers as "annoying" and "smelly" in Facebook ("Losing face," 2008).

A research by Gross and Acquisti after analyzing 4000 Facebook profiles of Carnegie Mellon University students, found threats emerging from personal information posted in social networking site. Only 1.2 percent of users changed their default privacy preferences. Hence fully identifiable information like (first name, last name, personal image, hometown, date of birth, ZIP code) easily available to anybody registered at Facebook. This information can be used to estimate a person's social security number and finding sensitive medical information (Gross, & Acquisti, 2005). Using the information available on Facebook profile one can easily determine likely physical location of a person. Social networking sites are becoming a threat to the privacy of an individual.

2.1 Impact of Stranger Friends

When you accept friend request from strangers, you put yourself at severe risk. The men at other side start exchanging words very cordially and within some days you have a faith on them. Then they start the mind game and start gathering more personal information. If they get to know your email address, they could go to email account and click on 'forget password'. And the system will ask a security question like – “your favorite teacher, your first phone number etc”. Unknowingly, you have already shared this information with them. So now they have access to your email account. This task will be much easier if you set your date of birth, school or college name as email password. A study conducted by Internet security firm Webroot, found 2 in 10 people use significant date, such as birth date, or a pet's name as password which is often publicly visible on social networks. And 4 in 10 respondents shared password with at least one person (Boulder, 2010). Similarly, the Research done by BitDefender reveals that 75 percent of individuals use same password for social networking sites and Email ("Study reveals 75," 2010). All this ignorance by users becomes the main reason behind hacking of SNS profile and email account.

2.2 100 million Profiles hacked in Facebook

Ron Bowles, an online security consultant, stunned everyone in 2010 by posting personal details of 100 million Facebook users online. Bowles used a program to scan 500 million Facebook profiles for information those were not hidden by privacy settings. And finally a collection of user IDs, names, URLs and all other data of those profiles were available as downloadable file in public. Facebook said “No private data is available or has been compromised”. Yes it's true that information was publicly available, but it shows the vulnerability of privacy in social networking sites. For many people it's annoying to customize their profile privacy, so they face such kind of data theft risk.

3. Biological Impact of Social Networking

Social networking users face severe health risk because they reduce face-to-face contact and become addicted in a virtual world of relationships. Instant gratification of needs become their goal. According to the U.S. Internet activity (January 2010) Nielsen Online says, users spent an average of 7 hours a month on Facebook. This makes Facebook **Internet's maximum time waster**. In U.S. 53 percent of people check their Facebook profile before getting out of bed in the morning and 35 percent check their accounts several times in a day ("People's addiction to," 2010).

Aric Sigman, fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, says “social networking sites have played a significant role in making people become more isolated. Lack of face-to-face contact could alter the way genes work, upset immune responses, hormonal levels, function of arteries and influence mental performance. This could increase the risk of health problems like cancer, strokes, heart disease and dementia ("Online networking harms," 2009)". In his research 'Well connected? The biological implications of social networking' published on Biologist reveals since 1987, face-to-face social interaction has sharply fallen with the increase in use of electronic media. It has reported the first evidence that social isolation is linked to alterations in human gene transcription. DNA analysis showed 209 genes were differentially expressed for people with high levels of social isolation (Sigman, 2009).

4. Its affects Work Productivity

People spent hours chatting with their friends and browsing profiles on social networking sites. It becomes a compulsive habit to visit own profile several times in a day for checking friends' updates, changing status, and commenting on others photos and videos. Finally it diverts employees' attention from the office work. A study conducted by Nucleus Research with 237 corporate employees shows 77 percent of them use Facebook during work hours. And it results in 1.5% drop in employee productivity for those companies allowing full access to Facebook (Gaudin, 2009).

Another study by Robert Half Technology, an IT staffing firm, says “54% of U.S. companies have banned workers from using social networking sites while on the job” (Gaudin, 2009). This was further affirmed by a survey of 3500 UK companies, it says 233 million hours are lost every month as a result of employees wasting time on social networking sites ("Facebook costs business," 2007). Mike Huss, director of employment law at Peninsula says “All firms should block access to sites such as Facebook. Why should employers allow their workers to waste two hours a day on Facebook when they are being paid to do a job”. Portsmouth City Council blocked access to Facebook after it found its 4,500 staff logged on for 270,000 times a month, and they collectively waste 572 hours (71 working days) in just one month (Kisiel, 2009).

This problem is much intense in developed countries and in extreme case the employees are sacked. After all it's a waste of public money because of social networking sites.

5. Facebook Addiction Disorder

After drugs and alcohol addiction, if the world is facing any new type of addiction disorder, then that is Facebook addiction. This is a kind of Internet addiction, but social networking site influences such that people goes mad behind it. It's like people being immersed in virtual life and forgetting about the physical world around them. Alexandra V. Tobias, a mother from north Florida, killed her own child because the boy was crying that make her anger while she was playing FarmVille on Facebook. The shocking story was reported by the Florida Times-Union in 2010. Salum Kombo, 18 yrs from London, was stabbed by his friend over an argument that started over Facebook. Salum wrote something stupid on his friend's wall and that provoked the boy to kill his best friend on the street (France, 2009).

A survey conducted among 1000 people across United States to find people's addiction to social networking sites, finds 56 percent users check Facebook at least once a day. And 29 percent can stay only few hours without checking their account. Study says people under 25 years are more likely to lose sleep keeping an eye on their friends' post. Interestingly, 17 percent would read a message on Facebook during sex and 63 percent while in the toilet ("People's addiction to," 2010).

Jerry, a man in his late thirties, ruined his family, job and life because of addiction to social networking sites. And he realized the pain when his wife tweeted to him "she wants divorce". Now he is founder of the site Social Media Addicts Association (SMAA). That helps the people to share their stories of addiction to SNS and recover from it. When we searched 'Facebook addiction disorder' in Google, it gives 343,000 results. The more interesting thing is that there a number of communities in Facebook itself that talks about FAD.

Psychologist Michael Fenichel describes FAD "it is a situation in which Facebook usage overtake daily activities like your normal function, eating, working, waking up, sleeping and many more" ("Facebook addiction disorder," 2010). According to Dr Mohamad Hussain Habil, director of university Malaya Center of Addictive Sciences, "it's a brain disorder as a result of neurochemical dysfunction where normal behavior becomes abnormal". Dr Hussain says "parents brought their teenage children thinking that they were under the influence of drugs when the teenagers perform poorly in school and not interacting as usual. The teens were so obsessed with virtual activities that they were willing to forego their meals, sleep, responsibilities and leisure activities. The fact was these children were addicted to the Internet" (Renganayar, 2010).

Dr. Joanna Lipari, a clinical psychologist at University of California says there are five clues that show you are addicted to Facebook ("Are you suffering," 2010).

- ✓ You start losing sleep over Facebook and that hampers your daily activity.
- ✓ Spend more than an hour on Facebook.
- ✓ You become obsessed with your old loves and start visiting their profile. And gradually it starts to affect your current relationship status.
- ✓ You tend to ignore work and use Facebook in office hours.
- ✓ When you think of going a day without Facebook, it causes stress and anxiety to you.

Social networking sites should be limited for making friends and fun in the leisure. But don't substitute it with your real life social contacts. Otherwise, you will be facing social isolation, high level of anxiety and other behavioral disorders.

6. How it's helping Cybercriminals

The beginning of social networking sites started to make contacts with people and build a network of healthy relationship in the society. But now it seems offering cybercriminals a great advantage to target victims. Haydn and his family were out of home for treatment of his son in Leeds. Instead of making phone calls to everyone, he was updating on Facebook message about son's health. Someone read his Facebook message and burgled their home during this time. A report by Daily Mail shows "crimes associated with the networking site have increased by as much as 7000 percent in some area – including cases of murder, rape, pedophilia, bullying, assault and burglary" ("Facebook – crime," 2010). Pedophiles are using social networking sites because that is where they can lure the victim willingly. Teens easily believe in Love with the person they met online but actually they are falling to a trap of sexual predator.

Janis Wolak of the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire says: “majority of cases involve young teenagers, mostly 13-, 14-, 15-year-old girls who are targeted by adults on Internet who are straightforward about being interested in sex” (Steenhuysen, 2008). In a similar case, Ashleigh Hall, a 17 year old girl, accepted friend request from a 33 year old man on Facebook. She had no idea that actually he was a convicted rapist who created a Fake profile as a teenager. And Finally, Ashleigh was murdered by that person ("Facebook – crime," 2010). The major problem is that there is no way to verify the actual identity on cyberspace and the criminals takes the advantage of this.

The secure feeling of being anonymous in SNS encourages a person to commit cyber crimes that a normal person would have never committed in real world. In another case, a 19 year old Wisconsin boy posed as a girl on Facebook and persuaded 30 fellow classmates to send naked pictures of them. And finally, he was blackmailing the victims for sex using those photos and videos ("New berlin teen," 2009). These things happening so securely on a networking site, but the victim do not come out because of social stigma. In most of the time when the case comes to investigating agency, the criminal has already done a severe damage. Countries like India are also facing similar threats from networking sites. According to Central Crime Branch, all reported cases were committed on Facebook, Orkut or MySpace, with Facebook topping the list (Venugopal, & Peter, 2010). Cyber crimes on SNS includes posting objectionable content on user’s profile, creating fake profile to defame a person and getting access to someone’s profile by hacking.

7. The power to Destroy Relationships

Social networking site that once was thought to be helping people across the world to unite and making new relationship can also damage the relationship and make life miserable. Imagine one morning you find, your spouse updated his marital status to single on Facebook. And people posting comments about your sad break up. How cheap has become our relationships in the age of social networking. A survey by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML) reveals Facebook is the main reason behind one out of five divorces in the US. It also says 80 percent of divorce lawyers use social networking site to gather evidence. Flirty messages, photographs and other personal information that you share on Facebook can be used as proof of infidelity. Mark Keenan, managing director of Divorce Online says: “The most common reason is people having inappropriate sexual chats with people they were not supposed to” ("Facebook causes one," 2010).

Facebook is fuelling divorce rate because it easily reunites old lovers and acts as a secret platform for dating. A research conducted on 308 Facebook users found majority of participants (74.6%) are likely to add previous romantic or sexual partner as friends on Facebook (Grohol). It also shows time spent on Facebook increasing jealousy related feelings. Some people’s flirting comment on your profile can make your partner feeling aggressive and jealousy. And this starts the beginning of a break up.

Dr. Marlene Maheu, author of the book **Infidelity on the Internet** and a Psychologist, says “Cyber Infidelity occurs when a partner in a committed relationship uses the computer or the Internet to violate promises concerning sexual exclusiveness (Maheu, 2002)”. Today social networking site making it much easier, your spouse not feeling good to have sex with you but seeking sexual solicitation from Facebook friend. Interestingly, there are sites dedicated to Facebook cheating. FacebookCheating.com provides tips how to catch a cheating spouse in the social networking sites. Some typical clues to know if your spouse is involved in cyber Infidelity ("Online affair –,"):

- ✓ Spends excessive time online.
- ✓ Computer use continues even after its bed time.
- ✓ Computer screen is changed by your partner when you come close.
- ✓ You don’t know any password or anything about his email address.
- ✓ Internet history is always cleared.

8. How to remain safe in SNS

Whether to use social networking site or not is an individual decision to many. But you must be aware of certain things when discussing your private life in public. These are some of the tips that can make you and your family safe on the networking sites.

- 1) **Change the profile privacy now.** Keep your information accessible only to people in your friend list.

- 2) **Don't accept friendship request from strangers.** Many often we judge a particular person online, by his/her profile picture and personal information. This is the first mistake that cyber criminals wanted us to do.
- 3) **Don't post very personal information on the profile.** It includes your email id, date of birth, contact number, home address and information about your family members.
- 4) **Be cautious while posting your photo.** Ensure your photo background doesn't show about your actual whereabouts.
- 5) **Don't post your current location when on a tour.** Posting this information on social networking site is just like inviting criminals.
- 6) **Don't post negative things about your life.** This is just like maligning your own image. Your friends are monitoring your activity and one such mistake can cause havoc in future.
- 7) **Make distance from your ex's profile.** This might seem you little cruel, but once you decide to quit a relationship there is no meaning again visiting your ex-partner's profile. If you want to have a good life in future, then unfriend your ex from friend list.
- 8) **Don't substitute real friends with virtual friends.** Facebook is a great tool to connect new people across world. But they can never be your real friends. You need real friends to enhance your social image and reduce stress and anxiety.
- 9) **Avoid using Social networking sites in work hours.** When you try to use social networking sites during work hour, it not only affects your work performance but also increases chances of getting fired.

9. Conclusion

The growth of social networking sites shows a significant change in the social and personal behavior of Internet users. SNS has become an essential medium of communication and entertainment among the young adults. Though it has started to affect the daily activities of normal human beings, the popularity of SNS is not going to reduce in near future. Everything in this world can be used for a bad purpose as well as for good. It's us who can make the difference and utilize social networking sites wisely for the benefit of developing social bonds across the geographical borders. However, nefarious act of cyber criminals discussed in the article has to be brought to the fore and stringent measures should be taken to curb the menace. Cyber laws have to be fortified with advancement of rules as if violators cannot escape committing a crime, at the cost of societal values.

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