

A Critical Sociological Study of Impact of Social Networking Sites on Adolescents in Jaipur City

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Abstract

The role of technology in the process of social transformation is important to analyze the emergence of a new form of society i.e. Network Society. This development and the desire of humans to interact globally and virtually have given rise to Social Networking Sites. It is possible that the use of social networking sites might diminish human relationships and contact, perhaps increasing social isolation while keeping in mind that wide connectivity through this technology will add to people's stores of social capital. This paper seeks to find out the changes in Indian society as a result of the emergence of Social Networking Sites.

Keywords: Social networking sites, network society, cyber crime

Introduction

Social Development is a process which results in the transformation of social structure and institutions in order to fulfill the needs of changing society. Society has transformed from nomadic to agrarian societies, to the industrial and then to capitalist society. The Capitalist society is characterized by Technological Revolution which has resulted in the emergence of Network Society. It is a society built around microelectronics-based information technologies. Even though the social structure is global, most of the human experience is local, both in territorial and cultural terms. The coexistence of the network society, as a global structure, with industrial, rural, communal or survival societies, characterizes the reality of all countries. The new global structure has given rise to Social Media which enables people from around the globe to communicate openly and efficiently at the press of a button with no constraints of space and time. This enables social units (individuals or organizations) to interact anywhere, anytime, while relying on a support base offered by Information Technology. The rapid rise of Social Networking Sites is the most prominent feature of the Network Society.

The Network Society: Conceptual & Theoretical Framework

The concept of "Network Society" first appeared in sociology in late 20th century in the work of Manuel Castells (1996). In his view, Network Society consists of a new social structure and process which is based on microelectronics and is ensured by information and communication technology. While Industrial Society was characterized by modes of transport and communication, the Network Society is characterized by modes of digital communication. Castells argues that network society is growing at a much faster rate than the earlier societies typical of the industrial age. Castells mentions that it is not technology that changes society, but rather the emerging changes in social needs that interact and lead to the development of technology. According to Castells the Characteristics of Network society are:-

- (i) Nodes can interact anytime and anywhere because of the technical support;
- (ii) Infrastructure that manages material resources through an information power grid;
- (iii) Communication is not dependent upon time or space because nodes are mobile and move around the Network. This is known as "space of flows."
- (iv) Power is embedded in networks that spread out horizontally;
- (v) Information is the key factor of the Network Society; and
- (vi) There is proximity between Individualism and Communalism - individuals exist in the Network which increases the sociability of individuals.

Jan Van Dijk (2012), a prominent sociologist and Media Communicationist states, "At the level of society and on a global scale we can see that media networks, social networks and economic networks reach into the farthest corners and edges of the world. Our world has become truly globally connected with the swift spread of satellite TV ,mobile telephony and the internet, developing countries such as China and India rapidly transform from pre-industrial society into mass industrial societies and partly even post industrial network societies". He calls 21st century as the age of networks which are the nervous system of our society as they influence our entire social and personal lives.

With the advent of network society, we have entered the age of post modernity which is usually associated with the emergence of global capitalist network or multinational capitalism. This has resulted in explosion of culture, expanding it throughout the social realm. Jameson(1984) describes this new form as a 'cultural dominant' wherein very different kinds of cultural impulses make their way. He offers an image of postmodern society composed of four basic elements:-

- 1) Superficiality and lack of depth
- 2) Waning of emotion or affect
- 3) Loss of historicity
- 4) Dominance of reproductive technologies specially electronic media like the internet which 'articulates nothing but rather implodes'

Thus Network society can be considered a feature of postmodern society which has given birth to a different cultural product i.e. Social Networking Sites.

If Jameson is considered as a moderate post modern social theorist, Jean Baudrillard is one of the most radical post modern theorist. In his analysis of contemporary society, which he sees as dominated by the 'media', cybernetic model, computers, information processing, entertainment and so forth (Kellner, 1989) he has laid emphasis on simulations or reproduction of objects or events. He even writes that it is the simulations that have become predominant in the contemporary society rendering it hyper real (Baudrillard, 1983).The result is that what is real comes to be subordinated and ultimately dissolved together. This culture involves the masses becoming increasingly passive absorbing all meaning, information, communication, messages and so on, without manipulating them.Indifference,apathy and inertia are terms that come to describe the masses in a postmodern society. People are patronising virtual and abstract relationships at the cost of primary face to face relationships. Modern social networks have resulted in deconstruction of human relationships. According to Kubicek (1988)"the new media were reducing, diminishing and even destroying the quality of face to face communications and were making relationships at work more formal".

Nevertheless, only a decade ago people had to trek down from one locale to another for various goods and services. Now with a single click of mouse these are available at one website from which we can order online

Shopping, banking, games, movies, entertainment are available online. This is all because of rapid development of technology. Besides the Internet, another revolution in communication that has occurred is the explosion of wireless communication with mobile phones. This revolution is the basis of the network society. It provides 'networked connection' between the local and global. As a result, a new type of horizontal communication network has developed with 'The Blog' (Internet Diary), 'The Vlog' (Video diary), and 'The Podcast' (own radio broadcast) as its essential components. These contents are easily accessible to anyone at anytime. A key change is the ability of individual nodes to easily spread their created works throughout the Network through Social Networking Sites that have brought a revolution in the patterns of interaction and relationships in the post modern society.

Social Networking Sites: Origin and Development

The idea of "Social Networking" has existed for several decades as a way for people to communicate in society and build relationships. With the increase of technology used for communicating with others and the popularity of the Internet, "Social Networking" has become an activity that is done primarily on the Internet, with sites like Myspace, Facebook, Bebo, Friendsters and Xanga (Coyle C., & Vaughn, H. 2008). Social Networking sites are web-based services allowing individuals to construct a semi-public or public profile in a bounded system so as to share connections, views and thoughts. Social Networking sites may be defined as: "Web based services that allow individuals to:-

- Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system
- Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection
- View and Traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." (Boyd & Ellison, 2007)

The first recognizable Social Networking Site was launched in 1997 i.e. Singlegress.com which not only allowed users to create profiles, list their friends but also surf the friends. From 1997 to 2001, many tools began supporting combinations of profiles and publicly articulated friends. The next wave of Social Networking Sites began when Ryze.com was launched in 2001 in the field of business networks. Friendster was launched in 2002 as a social complement to Ryze. It was designed to compete with Match.com, a profitable online dating site (Cohen, 2003). Friendster could not work for

long because it encountered technical and social difficulties which frustrated its users. Since then several new Social Networking Sites have been launched. Facebook was launched in 2005 with users including high school students, professionals inside corporate networks and eventually everyone. Unlike other social networking sites, Facebook users are unable to make their full profile public to all users.

The rapidly growing social demand for the networking of everything has also forced engineers to develop technology at a very fast rate. As a result, the number of Internet users has grown from 40 million in 1995 to about 2.7 billion in 2013. In 2013 rates of penetration have reached 39% of the world population. Currently, there is no reliable data regarding how many people use Social Networking Sites, even though researches indicate that Social Networking Sites are growing in popularity worldwide.

The post independence generation holds India's present and future in its hands. An entire social system is changing and Indian society which was a closed one, wherein young people had no opportunity to meet others or to take decisions, has now changed to an open society. In this system social interaction outside the family is both desirable and necessary. Indians are becoming more social and interactive through virtual mediums. Even though the number of people who have access to the Internet and computers in Indian society is not large, the fact that it is spreading very fast cannot be undermined. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) pegged the number of Internet subscribers in India at 164.81 million as of March 31, 2013, with seven out of eight accessing the Internet from their mobile phones.

A report released by ComScore in October 2013 says that, India is now a second largest online population in Asia Pacific region with 11.4% of the 644 million Internet users in Asia Pacific in 2013, as compared to 9.3% share of the 604 million Internet users in 2012.

Some of the demographic facts stated in the report are:

- India's online population is significantly younger, with 75% under the age of 35. Breaking it down further, 36% are between the age group of 15-24 years, 39% are between 25-34 years, 16% are between 35-44 years, 6% are between 45-55 years and 3% are between 55-64 years.

- When compared to other nations, Indian internet users prefer to spend more time on Social Networking Sites. Time spent on services (Emails, Instant Messaging etc.) by Indian internet users is 23%, on Social Networking Sites is 25% & on entertainment is 11%.
- Among users of various Social Networking Sites, Facebook continues to be number one social network with a 28 % increase in traffic & a reach of 86%. Surprisingly, 59.6 million Indian users access Facebook, which is followed by LinkedIn & Twitter.

Due to the increasing pace of globalization in India, Social media has gathered strength in India. The power of the individual to create and transmit content over Social Networking Sites empowers the ordinary individual. In India too a new 'Cyber Culture' has entered, with technology & Social Networking Sites spreading their wings.

Social Networking Sites and Adolescents of Jaipur City: Findings & Discussion

Just as widespread access to computers and the Internet is rapidly diffusing knowledge and Information along with new skills among adults, it is also enabling adolescents and teens to learn about the online environment. The internet seems to have become necessary for children to grow up with the analytical, written and graphical communication skills that make them educated and learned in the twenty-first century. This research is based on an empirical study in Jaipur city which focuses on the impact of these sites on adolescents of Jaipur city. The study has been conducted on a sample of five hundred adolescents of five schools spread in the city of Jaipur. The key respondents selected are adolescents between the age group of 15-17 years, who are active users on Social Networking Sites. The information has been collected through a pre tested questionnaire and unstructured interview, for the purpose of analysis. In the present study, Purposive Sampling has been used. As homes and schools acquire latest computers, more and more adolescents spend more time on the Internet in diverse ways; the net generation is becoming a 'reality'. The analysis of the data reveals that about 70% of the adolescent users have computers as well as internet connection at their homes. It reflects the importance given by parents to information obtained through internet. The study reveals that 90% of students are active members on one or other Social Networking Sites. Today's adolescents are techno-savvy, technically sound and believe in online friendships and virtual relationships. Amongst various purposes of using Social

Networking Sites, most dominant is status enhancement, followed by entertainment and friendship. It signifies the fact that socialization of adolescents is witnessing a change in the 21st century.

The study reveals that 40% of adolescent users use Social Networking Sites everyday for 3-4 hours which indicates that our society is slowly patronizing virtual relationships. The time which could have been devoted to some other constructive task is now being taken away by these Social Networking Sites. 50% of the adolescents have agreed that Social Networking Sites are affecting their academic performance adversely. Interestingly about 70% have only one account and only 5% agreed that they have more than 20 accounts on various Social Networking Sites. Social Networking Sites have tremendous effects on social interaction of adolescents. They prefer virtual relations over face to face relations. 55% of the adolescents do not like to attend the social and family functions and prefer to be on these sites. This marks a change in the attitude of adolescents who are becoming more self centered and individualistic. Majority of adolescents (70%) agreed that they learn abusive language from Social Networking Sites. A few (20%) agreed to be involved in hacking in order to impress their friends with their technical expertise. It is important to mention here that since it is difficult to trace the culprit on Internet, committing online crimes becomes easy with ease of space, time and money. It was also found that adolescents use Social Networking Sites to send hate messages to their friends, teachers or anyone. In this study 32% have agreed to do so and have confessed that they do not feel guilty about it. This proves that Social Networking Sites promote deviant behaviour amongst adolescents. More than three-fourths (i.e. 83%) are involved in online flaming. With no one to guide these adolescents, they get involved very easily in online flaming. Majority (75%) of users have accepted that use of Social Networking Sites reduce their learning capabilities and the same number also says that their language and creative writing skills have deteriorated because they copy much of content from web pages. Majority of respondents i.e. 83% know that the excessive use of Social Networking Sites leads to negative physical health because they tend to skip meals and strain themselves for long hours. Cyber crime through Social Networking Sites has seen rise in the last few years. In this study 60% of the adolescent users agreed to face cyber bullying in various forms such as threatening messages, posting of embarrassing pictures and spread of online rumors. These users (70%) also agreed that cyber bullying leads to terror, depression and even suicide. The study reveals that 20% of the adolescents suffered

Cyber Defamation. Majority (60%) of the adolescents agreed to suffer from Identity Theft. They have seen many of their own profiles on various Social Networking Sites which they have not created. An ironical fact is that 60% of the adolescents are unaware of the fact that whatever they post online becomes permanent. This implies that although they are techno savvy, they are not aware of the risks associated with the usage of technology.

Conclusion

The Indian Society is going through a phase of technological change. The use of internet and subsequent growth of social networking sites has become an essential medium of communication among the adolescents. Not only this, the new virtual world has become the object of fantasy for adolescents. However, the use of social networking sites by adolescents can be compared to a 'Juggernaut' (Giddens, 1990) which renders a pleasurable ride but is difficult to control. Indiscriminate use of Social Networking sites is posing a threat to the Indian society and culture as they support deviant lifestyle and behaviour due to unregulated information. A delinquent sub culture of adolescents is developing gradually who are involved in cyber crimes like cyber bullying, hacking, online harassment, defamation and cyber flaming. Moreover, the ease of use and anonymity further facilitates and perpetuates existing crime. The network society has associated risks, making it a Risk society, as conceptualized by Ulrich Beck (1992). The techno-savvy generation of today not only indulges in cyber crimes but is also subject to cyber victimization as they are ill-informed about the potential risks and are not even equipped to deal with them. Since the problem persists at a global level, strategies need to be evolved at a global level to deal with the negative effects of Social Networking Sites. Research in this field is still in its infancy and much needs to be done in the area of Social Networking Sites.

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