

Children's experiences with social networking sites – Need for critical research

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The sudden rise in popularity of Internet-based social networks such as MySpace and Orkut has given the media research community little time to examine how these sites impact children in order to make appropriate guidelines. Children use social Web sites to connect with others across the world and with their friends who sit in the next bench in the school. They use social Web sites to chat, play games, post and browse pictures and videos, blog, post an online profile. It also helps them self expression and thus share their emotions and experiences. They may use social Web sites designed for children such as Webkinz or Club Penguin, or social Web sites designed for adults such as Windows Live Spaces, YouTube, MySpace, Flickr, Twitter, Facebook, and others.

Social networks are a place where adults and children can mingle as the sites are popular with both age groups. Most social networks state that their services are not for children. However, these sites don't have effective means of preventing under-age users and as a result, many children wander around MySpace and other social networks. Social networking website like MySpace, the most commonly used social networking site, has more than 200 million profiles, with 25 percent belonging to children under 18. Websites for children are growing faster than adult-oriented sites, with Club Penguin, aimed at the seven-to-11-year-old children. Orkut, a social networking

service run by Google is another popular site in India.

Access to hardcore pornography

As social networking sites have grown, so, too, have concerns about Internet safety and privacy. Social networking sites make it extremely easy to upload many different forms of personal information, including age, contact information (like home address and telephone numbers) and photos. Unfortunately, some of the information the kids post on their pages can also make them vulnerable to phishing, bullying and Internet predators. The presence of sexual predators on social networks remains a concern. Another issue that bothers about social networks is that they give children access to hardcore pornography. The Center for Missing and Exploited Children, an NGO in USA reported more than 2,600 incidents of adults using the web to target children online in order to engage in sexual activity.

Privacy is a central issue in the context of social networking services. While users might feel that they have control over their personal information, in many cases the user content uploaded onto a social networking site becomes the property of that site. However, profane content is commonplace in popular social networking sites and many parents are concerned about their children spending time in such an environment.

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Children are also adding to this growing problem by posting personal pictures of them online. Through social networking sites, predators make friends with children, young people and even adults in an effort to gain their trust and confidence, all the while grooming them for an anticipated face-to-face encounter. As on date we are not aware of the gravity of the problems associated with these sites as there is dearth of serious research conducted in Indian context in this regard. There is almost no systematic effort to learn about child and teenage behavior on social sites, good and bad, or about the impact of online socializing. Some academic experts propose that lack of education about the risks involved lead users to conclude that the benefits of socialization outweigh the potential harm (Livingstone,2005). However a little is known about the Children's use of online social networks in terms of their motivations, characteristic of online communities and potential benefits and risks.

Experiences of children in the global context

The rapid adoption of social network sites by children in the United States and in many other countries around the world raises some important questions. Why do children flock to these sites? How do these sites fit into their lives? What are they learning from their participation? Are these online activities like face-to-face friendships or are they different or complementary? How do these sites affect the personality of children?

A study of a total of 500 randomly chosen Web profiles of self-reported 18-year-old males and females from the United States provides some data on children's use of these sites. The study found that 54 percent of the My Space profiles contained high-risk

behavior information, with 41 percent referencing substance abuse, 24 percent referencing sexual behavior and 14 percent referencing violence. In the study, females were less likely to display violent information than males. (Nauert, Rick,2009) . In another study it was found that about half of all teens who use the Internet also use social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook. MySpace hosts more than 200 million profiles and about one-quarter of those belong to teens under 18 (Moreno,2007) .

MySpace was a popular destination for high school students throughout the United States by 2005 but teenagers from other countries were on a variety of other social network sites. A national survey of 1588 children of 10 to 15 years conducted in USA revealed that 34% were harassed baseline (Ybarra, 2006).In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (N=935) among the children of 12-17 years, Lenhart and Mary(2007) found that "55% of US online teens use social networks and 55% have created online profiles. In the study, 91% of all social networking teens say they use the sites to stay in touch with friends they see frequently while 49% use the sites to make new friends, 17% of all social networking teens use the sites to flirt. More than three out of four (77%) teens who have created profiles say that their profile is currently visible online, while 21% say their profile is not currently visible. Of those users who have viewable online profiles, more than half (59%) say that their profiles are visible only to their friends. Another 40% say that their profile is visible to anyone who happens upon it online.

Posting messages to a friend's page or guestbook was the most frequent action (84%), followed by sending private messages (82%), posting to blogs

(76%), posting to groups (61%) and poking (33%). The study of online victimization discourse reveals that young people are ill informed and older people are more responsible. Although students are very well aware of the surveillance threat, they are willing to take this risk because they consider communicative opportunities as very important. Gender, class, income, and location stratify student's knowledge about surveillance.

The usage of social networking sites is different in different parts of the world. For example, usage of these sites in German-speaking countries is different from Europe. The Irish teenagers engaging in shorter sessions on Social Networking Websites (SNWs) is indicative of more mature usage patterns. The nature of online social networking leads to intensive initial usage patterns as users spend lot of time developing their profiles, searching for friends and acquaintances, and exploring their profiles. Overtime users seem to move to less time consuming activities such as sending updates to friends' profiles, organising social events and reviewing pictures and videos of significant social occasions.

It is also noticed that a combination of successful awareness raising activities in Ireland and improvements in the child protection aspects of the technical features of the Bebo website(Bebo is a social media network) led to a reduction in risk behaviour by Irish teenagers. At the same time the research revealed that meeting people face-to-face that they first met online appear to be more prevalent since the advent of these sites. (Report of National Centre for Technology in Education,2008).

The 2008 watch_your_space survey is the second annual survey of how Irish teenagers (13 to 18

years old inclusive) are using social networking websites (SNWs) such as Bebo, My Space and Facebook. It was conducted by the National Centre for Technology in Education with assistance from the members of the Anchor Youth Centre, an NGO. There was no difference between boys and girls in terms of the frequency that they were accessing these sites.

The most popular place

The home is, by far, the most popular place for accessing social networking websites with 87% saying this is where they accessed these sites most often. An increased number of teens (42% up from 36% in 2007) were doing this from their bedrooms. This is disappointing because it means that they are spending considerable amounts of time detached from the general life of the family but also because it reduces the potential for parental engagement and monitoring of their online lives.

Girls were more likely than boys to access SNWs from a public space in the home. My Space and Facebook were also frequently used by a significant group of teenagers and a small number (2%) said they used Nimble, the Irish social networking site. Two thirds of teens allow anyone to read their profiles.

The nature of communication on social networking sites seems to encourage lots of weak ties between users rather than a small number of intimate connections. More than half the teens surveyed had added over 100 friends to their profile. Adding strangers as friends compromises the capacity of the user to restrict access to their personal information. Digital content on profiles can be easily copied and distributed widely. The transition between socializing online and offline appears to be very fluid with most

using the sites to communicate with their offline friends.

A qualitative study was conducted in USA to explore how subjects use social networking sites and instant messenger to engage in interpersonal relationships. Participants also discussed how efforts to create a good impression affected their use of profiles. Nevertheless, participants did enjoy the ability to present themselves via a profile. Most people will try to distort the truth to make they look better to the masses, whom they don't even know. While there was a degree of excitement and novelty associated with using these sites to meet new people, participants did acknowledge the friendships were superficial (Dwyer, 2007).

While the United States and a handful of other countries have taken some precautionary steps to try and stem the growing tide of online child sexual exploitation and predation, countries like Brazil, India, and several Far East nations have become safe places for predators. These countries offer few protections or safeguards that restrict or, in any way, prohibit the distribution of child pornography online. The Brazilian government has reported that almost 90% of all the illicit sexual material coming from their nation is flowing through Orkut. In 2007, 624 cases of Internet crimes were prosecuted in Brazil, and two-thirds of those cases (420) were linked to child pornography on Orkut (John, 2009). Meeting people that you first get to know online can be a risky behavior. It has become prevalent since the advent of SNWs, for these reasons there is a need to carry-out more in-depth quantitative and qualitative research into this aspect of Children's behaviour.

India is a growing hub for online child pornography. Social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, Yahoo Chat, YouTube and Orkut have become popular both among youth and children. The sites like Club penguin and Whyville, are popular sites that immerses children in a video game-like experience. With more than a third of its population below the age of 18, India has the largest child population in the world (Report of Earth Trends, 2005).

Online child pornography

According to Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2007, school children form 14% of the users in the country. An article in Newsweek states that the Internet is directly responsible for an increase in child pornography and other forms of child sexual abuse. For Indian surfers, there is a popular www.masalaboard.com, where sexual content bordering on pornography abounds. It is accessible even to kids (Sridhar, Susan, 2006). All these pose a challenge for researchers.

The issue of safe surfing has come to the fore as children increasingly use the Internet and spend longer hours online. Indian children on an average spend 34 hours online every month against the global average of 39 hours. Children of only two other countries, China (33 hours) and Japan (31 hours) seemed to spend fewer hours online, according to the Norton Online Living Report 2009, (http://nortononlineliving.com/documents/NOLR_Report_09.pdf) which was based on a survey of adults and children in 12 countries. It covered 6,427 adults aged 18 years and older (including 1,297 parents of children aged between 8 and 17) and 2,614 children aged between 8 and 17 who spent one or more hours online each month in the U.S., Canada, U.K., France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, China, Japan,

Australia, Brazil and India. The report indicates that parents end up thinking their children spend less time on the Internet than they actually do. Indian parents thought that the time spent was only 21 hours a month, when it was actually 34 hours.

On a positive note, various organizations are providing internet portals that are specially designed and monitored to give children safe links to legitimate websites. An example of action by a private body is Dimdima Kids, (www.dimdima.com), an online children's magazine from India which also provides safe discussion areas and links to a large amount of material for education and entertainment. It is operated by a unit of the educational foundation, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. Recent initiatives by corporate giants like Intel, TATA, Dr.Reddy's, HSBC, Wipro, Infosys and a few others have come forward in India to fund digital learning. The Intel has a tie up with the Ministry of Education in the Project 'Vidya' where computers will be installed in selected schools throughout India which are termed as Cyber-schools and Cyberbus aiming at training teachers and bringing about constructive changes in the field of education and quality of life.

A national campaign has been in progress to focus attention on safe surfing. The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), along with the National Internet Exchange of India, a non-profit organization which facilitates exchange of domestic Internet traffic between the peering ISP members, has been promoting an Internet safety campaign aimed at both urban and rural school students studying in the sixth to the 12th standards. The first leg of the campaign was done by IAMAI in partnership with Google in Chennai, Kolkata and Delhi. It covered 40,000 students, 400 teachers,

and 30 schools. The campaign eventually aims to reach out to thousands of students in more cities. CERT India (Indian Computer Emergency Response Team) of Department of Information and Communication Technology and Microsoft India launched SecureYourPC.in, a website aimed at disseminating information on online safety and security to diverse audiences (<http://www.cert-in.org.in>).

CERT-In's primary role is to raise security awareness in Indian cyber community and to provide technical assistance and advice them to help them recover from computer security incidents. The website, SecureYourPC.in aims to create awareness and provide people with information on how to be Secure online. Secureyourpc.in, will provide specific information on online safety and security to women, parents, teachers and children.

Viewing in different languages

One of the most important aspects of the website is that it can be viewed in four different languages, English, Hindi, Marathi and Tamil, reaching a large audience base. To realize the vision of a Connected India, NASSCOM has been advocating for enhancing computer & Internet usage within the country through its initiatives. NASSCOM Vision 2020 also strongly emphasizes the force-multiplier impact of Internet & Broadband in scaling up the delivery and increasing the efficiency of public services, thereby improving the quality of life of every Indian. With the internet connected users in India expected to rise exponentially, it is important to ensure that the users should have complete knowledge of what they are doing on social networking sites. Data of National Crime Records Bureau of India, show an increase of cyber crimes by 38.6 in the year 2008 over 2007. These figures include

cyber crimes against adults as well as children and do not include unreported cyber crime offences (<http://www.indianchild.com>). These alarming trends have put Internet safety measures for Protecting Children Online, high on national agenda.

The task to develop and introduce safeguards that sensibly address risk while recognizing the Internet as an indispensable communication platform assumes urgent significance. It is a global issue and every nation should learn and emulate from the rest and it should be recognized as a shared responsibility of all state and non-state actors. The research on social networking sites and children in India has to be taken up by various stakeholders from different dimensions.

Unlike in USA and some of the European countries, there is no systematic attempt to make the children media literates. But the situation demands the need to learn more about the children's online activities to prepare them to face the challenges and also to utilize it constructively. India has the youngest population in the world and the use of social networking sites will increase exponentially with time. Nearly half of all Indians are under 30 years of age i.e 550 million youth, equivalent of Western Europe and USA together. Therefore it is essential that critical research related to online issues be taken up continuously and consistently.

The online issues revolve around children must be researched applying different research techniques to have critical understanding for the safe use of social networking sites among children. A comprehensive approach to address children's Internet usage is essential. That approach requires a clear policy with a strong focus on educationally valuable use of the social networking sites. The policy must be supported by curriculum and professional development.

Review of management policies and practices of Internet use at schools and cybercafé centers should be done periodically. A needs assessment and evaluation of use of social networking sites would provide helpful insight. The analysis of social networking sites and implications to children will be significant to people who are working in the field of communication, education, sociology, legal, psychology and medical. The understanding of online networks of children will also have a bearing on psychological and educational studies of children. The outcome of the research will create a framework for stakeholders to understand the nature of children's online community and to develop proper guidelines. The analysis of social network sites helps to explore the technological interventions also.

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The remarkable thing about television is that it permits several million people to laugh at the same joke and still feel lonely.

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)