The Usage of Social Networking sites Among the College Students in India

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Abstract

Today in India particularly among the Indian college students the usage of Social Networking Sites (SNS) has significantly increased and it certainly has far reaching impacts on the academic and other activities of the students. And these impacts are so widespread that they caught the attention of social scientists worldwide. However, the range of studies conducted to deal with the usage of SNS among college students is negligible in India. Hence, this study is placed in this context, aimed at presenting usage pattern of SNS by the Indian college students. For the said purpose a survey has been conducted among 500 students in various colleges and universities throughout India. The findings of the study acknowledge the rampant usage of SNS among young college students in India. Their usage pattern of SNS, hours spending per week, gender differentiation in its usage, purpose of membership, their level of intimate relationships with online friends and much more interesting aspects have been dealt scientifically in this paper.

Key words: Social networking sites, indian college students, youth, usage pattern, gender differentiation.

Introduction

During the last two decades the world, in general and India, in particular has witnessed for remarkable changes in Information Technology (IT). The advancement in IT led to the emergence of Social Networking Sites (SNS). SNS are currently being used regularly by millions of people. The usage of SNS has been so widespread that they have caught the attention of academics worldwide. SNS are now being investigated by numerous social science researchers. An increasing number of social scientists are developing interest in studying SNS, because of its impact on society. Further, the usage of Social Networking Sites (SNS) among the people of India is evidently increasing, particularly among the Indian college students. It has invariably left a big impact on society in general and college students in particular.

The term Social Networking Sites has been defined by different authors in several different ways. This leaves the reader with a feeling of being 'unsure' of its real meaning. Social Networking Sites can be broadly defined as internet-based social spaces designed to facilitate communication, collaboration, and content sharing across networks of contacts. Social Networking Sites allow users to manage, build and represent their social networks online. Social Networking Sites are usually made up of other individuals; they might also include profiles of events, companies, even political parties. People use Social Networking Sites for countless activities. Among the most common uses are, connecting with existing networks, making and developing friendships/contacts, create an online presence for their users, viewing content/finding information, creating and customizing profiles and so on. Social Networking Sites have rapidly gained popularity. Globally the active memberships on SNS reached 300 million on 2010.

A social network is a collection of individuals linked together by a set of relations. Online social networking sites 'virtually' link individuals, who may or may not 'know' each other. They enable rapid exchange of knowledge, high levels of dialogue and collaborative communication through text, audio and video. Boyd and Ellison[1] define Social Networking Sites as: "web-based services that allow individuals to i. construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, ii. articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and iii. view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site".

In general, college students are more interested in using advanced technology in every field compare to any other age group. It is also true in the case of medium of communication. In the category of users of SNS the majority are youth. In India too this fact is acknowledged by the various studies and hence today the usage of SNS has become large part of the student's lives in India. The EDUCAUSE data showed that the percentage of students who said they never use SNS has fallen from 25% to 11% in 2008.

The interesting discussion published in the UNESCO Report no. 59 of 1970 entitled "Mass Media – the need for research" comments that in dealing with the influence of the media in developing countries thinking and research have often been confined to specific technologies. These are important, but the wider impact of media at the socio-cultural level may be more important in terms of social change and development. General researchers limit their studies to the potential of the new technology. However, the range of studies conducted to deal with the usage of SNS among the college students is negligible

in India. Hence, the study is aimed at conducting exploratory study on the usage pattern of SNS by the Indian college students.

Review of Literature: In the following review of existing studies on the related topic provide us a base to go ahead in the pursuit of understanding usage pattern of SNS by Indian college students. The study entitled "The Influence of Social Networking Sites on the Interpersonal Relationships of Rogationist College Students" explores how today the importance of Social Networking Sites is increasing. Many SNS developers like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and others are competing to give the best features in terms of socialization, interaction, privacy and even entertainment. This study primarily asks a major question: Does SNS usage affects interpersonal relationships? This study was aimed to determine the effects of SNS to the interpersonal relationships. It also focuses on analysing the level of interpersonal relationships. Through these SNS, people develop virtual interpersonal relationships.

In the Huang[2] study, Taiwanese students' online habits were studied longitudinally over a two and a half year period, with little change in their usage of MSN messenger, email or chat room usage, possibly indicating that the technologies had been adopted to saturation levels, and that further development of the software is required to ensure its further growth.

Keol Lim and Ellen B Meier in their study entitled "International student's use of social network services in the new culture: a case study with Korean youths in the United States" clearly pointed out how and why Korean students use SNS and what are the uses they find by using SNS. The study begins with explaining how an increasing number of international students are entering in U S universities. It also talks about the psychological experiences of international students include phenomena such as disorientation, nostalgic depressive reactions, feelings of isolation, alienation and powerlessness. However, international students may have limited ways to cope with stress, which could lead to stress-related illnesses such as anxiety or depression. These limitations make it hard for international students to accommodate themselves to new circumstances. In this study the authors mainly constrained themselves for only two research questions: How do these international students use SNS and how do these international students perceive the impact of SNS on their affective and academic adaptation.

This study was conducted in the United States with Asian international students, all from Korea, who were not raised in a western culture. Respondents in the study used SNS in various ways and the tools played an important role in their adaptation to a new life in the United States. The findings of the study clearly show that the respondents benefitted from their use of social networking sites and that the interactions helped to decrease their anxiety in the new culture by providing them with

a means of connecting to their parents and friends in Korea. At the end it also emphasises on the fact that more research is needed to identify the potential of SNS to contribute to the affective and cognitive adaptation for international students including the connection between Internet use and academic achievement.

Valkenburg, Peter and Schouten[3] tried to investigate the impact of Social Networking Websites on adolescents' self-esteem and well-being. The survey was conducted amongst a group of 10-19 year-olds who had an online profile on a Dutch Social Networking Website. The study found that the frequency with which adolescents used the site had an indirect effect on their social self-esteem and well-being. Positive feedback on the profiles enhanced adolescents' social self-esteem and well-being, whereas negative feedback decreased their self esteem and well-being.

A study into the uptake of Social Networking Sites, in particular Facebook, was conducted by Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis[4]. They surveyed a number of librarians, some of whom were in favour of Facebook being used in libraries to promote services and events, whilst the majority of librarians were not in favour of Facebook having a presence in libraries at all. The results of the Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis study may be an indication that the use of Social Networking Sites increases as age decreases, and that although no age of the librarians interviewed is mentioned in the study, that as new librarians move into libraries, so the uptake and acceptance of Social Networking Sites will increase. This study helps us to find a use pattern SNS in the context of age. Hence, findings of this study clearly say that there is a visible age pattern in the usage of SNS.

The above studies seem to indicate that younger people are more likely to utilise SNS's than older people, although no literature could be found to support this proposition. What is evident from the literature is that young people will tend to use SNS's to interact with their peers, as well as to meet new people.

In a recent study on Social Networking Sites Preeti Mahajan tried to look at the impacts of SNS on Indian society, through linguistic and cultural perspectives. The article entitled "Use of social networking in a linguistically and culturally rich India" describes some of the top Indian SNS and pinpoints some instances where people have used such sites to raise their voice against the bad elements harming people's culture. The study helps us to enhance the current situation about social networking in India. According to the study Indians are using the power of social networking like Facebook to combat a rising vigilantism against activities certain groups feel are not in keeping with the spirit of Indian culture. Study says a social networking site enables us to stay connected despite the hindrances of distance and time. That is why their popularity and utilization has increased manifold and will continue to increase in future. However, every coin has two sides and same

is true of social networking as well. Some people make good and worthy use of it while others misuse it. Hence, its impact on the country's social and cultural values is debatable as some Indians feel it a threat while others feel it is not. Its misuse by a few people needs to be addressed by the site executives, legislators, and people in any regular community and be resolved before they become endemic.

Sonia Livingstone[5] in her article entitled "Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression" places the SNS in the contemporary virtual environment of the web. Livingstone's conclusions on teenagers' practices of social networking can be summed up as follows. i. Teenagers are playing and experimenting with their identities within social networks and for them "self-actualization increasingly includes a careful negotiation between the opportunities (for identity, intimacy, sociability) and risks (regarding privacy, misunderstanding, and abuse) afforded by internet-mediated communication" and thus the strategies of representing the self vary considerably. ii. Younger teenagers relished the opportunities to play and display, continuously recreating a highly-decorated, stylistically-elaborate identity, wherein older teenagers expressed a notion of identity lived through authentic relationships with others (Livingston suggests that this shift may have implications for teenagers' experience of online opportunity and risks). iii. Teenagers perceive online risks critically, which is amongst others apparent in the differences between using identity as display or identity as connection. Also evident and significant is the fact of limited Internet literacy. iv. It should not be assumed that profiles are simply read as information about the individual (in some cases the "position in the peer network was more significant than the personal information provided, rendering the profile a place-marker more than a self portrait") v. Teenagers use social networking sites for only part of their social relations, and in so doing they are choosing communication channels according to what they are communicating and to whom.

The study, conducted by child health researchers Michele Ybarra (Internet Solutions for Kids) and Kimberly Mitchell (University of New Hampshire), set out to look at the places online where youth are most likely to experience sexual solicitation and harassment. The researchers, whose study is published in Paediatrics, found that among 1600 children and adolescents 10-15 years-old surveyed nationally, 4% reported experiencing an unwanted sexual solicitation and 9% reported being harassed while on a social networking site. Solicitations were reported 59% more often in instant messaging however, and 19% more often in chat rooms than social networking sites. More surprising, harassments were reported 96% more often in instant messaging than in social networking sites.

Lenhart and Madden[6] in Adolescent social networking, said that in the past five years social networking has "rocketed from a niche activity into a phenomenon that engages tens of millions of Internet users. The study proposes that online social networking profiles posted by adolescents contain intimate, candid, and observable self-disclosure and peer interaction that can be analyzed creating an overall picture of adolescent behaviour, highlighting specific areas needing additional research, and addressing implications for parental monitoring and intervention. Lehnhart and Madden state that fifty-five percent of teenagers use and create online social networking profiles. They opine that with more than half of teenage Internet users interacting online, the concept of blogging is a salient research topic investigating what adolescents are blogging about, how they are socially interacting, and what potential effects this phenomena may have on other dimensions of their lives. Boyd says that gender appears to influence participation on social network sites. Younger boys are more likely to participate than younger girls (46% vs. 44%) but older girls are far more likely to participate than older boys (70% vs. 57%). Older boys are twice as likely to use the sites to flirt and slightly more likely to use the sites to meet new people than girls of their age. Older girls are far more likely to use these sites to communicate with friends they see in person than younger people or boys of their age. Larsen, based on the empirical data, says that both genders seek the acknowledgement they get from having their looks commented on, but the girls are more preoccupied with what kind of comments they get and whom they come from. In general, it is very important that the comments come from friends and people they know, rather than strangers.

This indicates that photo comments are not just about having ones outer looks valued and acknowledged (identity construction), but also about practising and maintaining friendships Lenhart reveals that the share of adult Internet users who have a profile on an online social network site has more than quadrupled in the past four years – from 8% in 2005 to 35% now, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Projects December 2008 tracking survey. While media coverage and policy attention focus heavily on how children and youth use social network sites, adults still make up the bulk of the users of these websites. Adults make up a larger portion of the US population than teens, which is why the 35% number represents a larger number of users than the 65% of online teens who also use online social networks. Still, younger online adults are much more likely than their older counterparts to use social networks, with 75% of adults (18-24) using these networks, compared to just 7% of adults 65 and older. At its core, use of online social networks is still a phenomenon of the young.

Knight in the article "Is Social Networking Losing Clout With Youth?" says in 2003, teens were most likely to visit icon sites for instant messaging. The most popular sites then were OriginalIcons.com (77%) and BluntTruth.com (76%). Today (in 2006) the most popular sites are PLyrics.com (68%) and SnapVine.com (67%). Both of these sites offer social networking tools. The older generation is also visiting these sites, according to comscore. More than half of the visitors to popular MySpace were 35 and over. For marketers, this is a good thing. A new report from Compete indicates that social

networkers, no matter their age, are creating their own e-commerce system. According to the report, those on social networking sites have more discretionary income, shop online more and pay less attention to traditional media. That is a host of potential customers just waiting to be tapped into.

Subrahmanyam[7] suggests that youth spending on data services represents almost 50 percent of all mobile spending in most mature markets. Not only are youth the early adopters of most new technologies, they are also among the more sophisticated users of it as well. In fact, Livingstone and Bober have coined the term reverse socialization to characterize the shifting nature of socialization that occurs in many families, as teenage children are often more knowledgeable than their parent about these technologies. Research has also suggested that adolescent's interactions with these new technologies are often at the vanguard of trends. Among adolescents, communication is the most important use of the Internet and the popular communication applications include, e-mail, instant messaging (private, one-on-one, text based conversations), chat rooms (communication systems that allow text based conversation among multiple users), and the newest craze social networking sites (connects people together) including blogs, MySpace and Facebook. Although we know that adolescents are spending considerable amounts of time on these applications, many questions remain. Firstly, what are teens doing in communication forums such as chat rooms and blogs? What do they talk about? Secondly, are these online communication activities fundamentally changing adolescent behaviour or are they simply providing new venues for traditional adolescent behaviour? Lastly, what is the relation between teen virtual worlds and real worlds? Are teen participants leaving behind real lives when interacting online or do virtual worlds reflect themes that are traditionally adolescent ones?

Wintour in the article titled Facebook and Bebo rist infantilizing the human mind says that Social networking sites, such as Facebook, are putting attention span in jeopardy. Wintour refers to Baroness Greenfield who believes ministers have not yet looked at the broad cultural and psychological effect of on-screen friendships via Facebook, Bebo and Twitter ; She has told the House of Lords that children's experiences on social networking sites are devoid of cohesive narrative and long-term significance and as a consequence, the mid-21st century mind might almost be infantilized, characterized by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathize and a shaky sense of identity. Arguing that social network sites are putting attention span in jeopardy, she said: "If the young brain is exposed from the outset to a world of fast action and reaction, of instant new screen images flashing up with the press of a key, such rapid interchange might accustom the brain to operate over such timescales". Perhaps when in the real world such responses are not immediately forthcoming, we will see such behaviours and call them attention-deficit disorder. "It might be helpful to investigate whether the near total submersion of our culture in screen technologies over the last decade might in some way be

linked to the threefold increase over this period in prescriptions for methylphenidate, the drug prescribed for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder."

Tynes in an article "Internet Safety Gone Wild?: Sacrificing the Educational and Psychosocial Benefits of Online Social Environments" indicates that online socialization through networks like Facebook is more beneficial to the development of adolescents than they are harmful or dangerous. "Many Internet safety and parenting experts suggest that parents prohibit their teens from social networking sites and other online spaces where predators may lurk [But] banning adolescents from social networking sites - if this were even feasible - as well as monitoring too closely might close off avenues for beneficial cognitive and psychosocial development that are available to young people in the online social world," claims Tynes, Assistant Professor of African American Studies and Educational Psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The above studies help us in building theoretical framework to explore the usage of SNS among the Indian students.

Methodology

This paper attempts to understand the usage of SNS among the Indian college students with the help of empirical data. For the said purpose a survey has been conducted among 500 students in various colleges and universities throughout India. This survey was mainly done in the urban regions and rural areas were left out mainly assuming lack of availability of computer networks to the rural students. For the survey of sample size of 500 respondents between age group of 18 to 26 years who were college and university students were randomly selected. The age group of 18-26 was chosen since they are the heavy users of SNS and also early adopters of advanced technological applications.

The surveys were done by circulating questionnaires personally and also some of the data were collected through interview. This research also involves observation-both direct and participatory method, where direct observation was made with the students, their peers and friends which helped knowing some of the facts related to the research.

Results and Discussion

Usage pattern of Social Networking Sites by the Indian College Students: According to the present study 80 percent of the students spend significant amount of time on using SNS regularly and 20 percent of the students do not spend any time using SNS. The following reasons are their major concern for not using SNS: i. They are not interested in having account in SNS. ii. According to them SNS are not useful particularly for them. iii. They are afraid of misuse of their private information in the SNS.
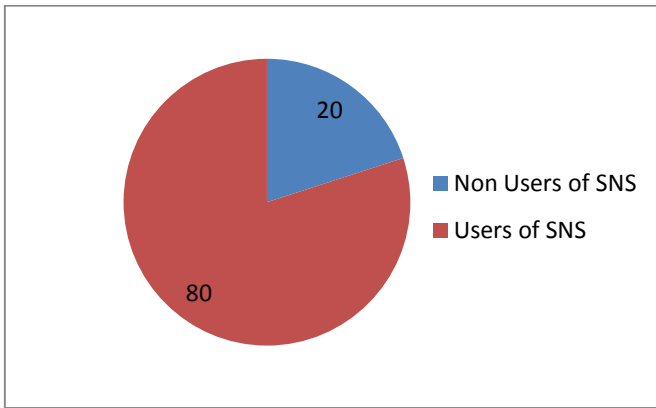
Figure-1
Percentage of Users and Non Users of SNS

Among this sample, hours spent on SNS was less than 1 hour for 4% of the respondents and the majority of the Indian students (62.6 %) spent 1-10 hours per week on using SNS and reportedly 17.5 % spent more than 10 hours per week (figure 2). In particular the percentage of students spending 5-10 hours on using SNS is higher than any other category. Majority of the students were exposed to SNS for shorter duration due to various reasons such as no Internet connectivity at home, residing at hostel with no Internet provisions or low level of interest in SNS.
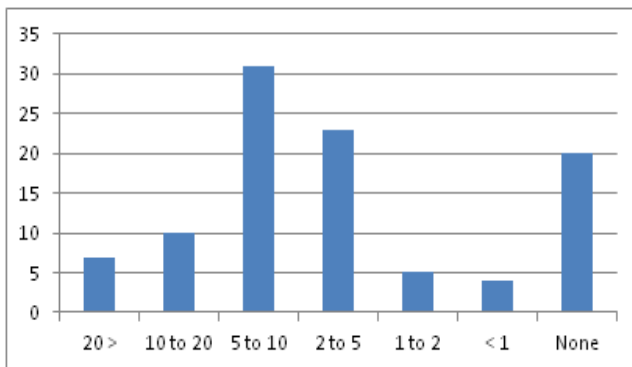

Figure-2
Number of Hours Spent on Using SNS by Indian Students

Gender Differentiation on the Usage of SNS among the Indian Students: In general, according to the data male students use SNS more than female students. Among the total users of SNS 71 percent of the users are male and 29 percent are female. It is more clearly shown in the figure 3.

Further, this study has shown that most of the Indian students had user accounts in more than one SNS (figure 4). The number of students who had user accounts in 1 to 10 SNS is 72%, 4% of students have accounts in 11 to 20 SNS, and other 4 % of students have accounts in 21 to 40 SNS and as I already stated 20% of the students are not interested in using any SNS.

Breaking the data down further, almost 50% of the respondents were members of Orkut and 30% were in facebook while other sites mentioned were MySpace, Big Adda, Linkedin, WAYN, Hi5, Stylefm, Twitter, Ning, Indyarocks, Tagged, Netlog, Friendster, ebuddy and Vampirefreaks. And also there was an overlapping pattern in the membership of SNS while 44% respondents were exclusive members of Orkut, about 27% respondents were members in more than one SNS but also an orkut member. This shows the popularity of orkut among other SNS, in special reference to Indian college students.
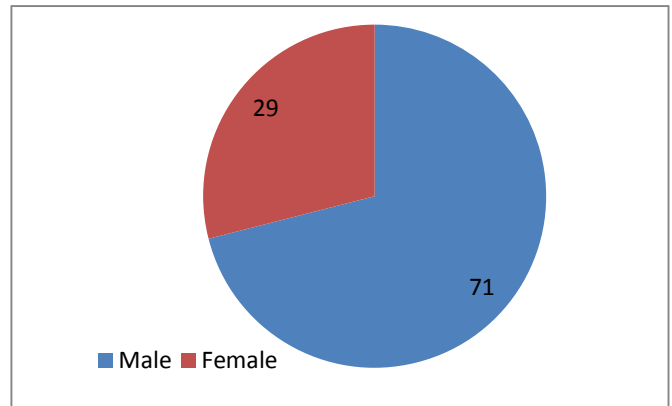

Figure-3
Percentage of Male Users and Female Users of SNS

Table-1
Purpose of Membership in Social Networking Sites

Reason to Register in SNS	Percentage (N=100)
To maintain existing friends/contacts	48.8
To find new friends	19.5
For business networking	7.4
To find activity partners	4.9
Dating	3.7
Others	15.9
Total	**100**

Among these Indian students, 48% stated that they use SNS to maintain existing friends/relationships and only 19% for finding new friends with 3% for dating purposes. It states that a vast majority of respondents are re-establishing existing friends through SNS while only a minimal number account to using for dating purposes. Connecting with new friends in the virtual world brings with it a whole set of problems and sometimes it make them victims of cyber crimes – issues highlighted in Indian media of much public and social concern. And 12% use such sites for business networking and activity partners, which is also an impending danger since there is an uncertainty of the nature of purpose of the individual, reliability, accountability and anonymity leading to grave consequences.

Respondent's Perception on SNS: Above 95% responses were of the positive opinion that social networking sites act as platform for reconnecting with lost friends, maintaining existing

networks/relationships and sharing knowledge, ideas and opinions. At the same time, they also considered that such sites had to be handled with discretion respecting others privacy.

Table-2
Criteria for Making Friends in SNS

Criteria for Making Friends in SNS	Percentage (N=100)
Education or Business stream	26.7
Based on the personal likeness	42.2
Just to get someone for chat	8.9
Other	22.2
Total	100

To better understand on what basis the students choose their friends online (strangers) in social networking sites, 42% trust on their personal likeness as a reason to make friends 26% are based on education and business stream and 22% of responses are to maintain existing contacts among family and friends people already well-acquainted in real life. It states that students at these sites give high priority to their personal preferences and likeness in comparison to other logical or rational reasons. It is a prominent social behaviour dominantly expressed among the age group 18 to 26 yrs.

Table-3
Rating Student's Relationship with Their Online Friends

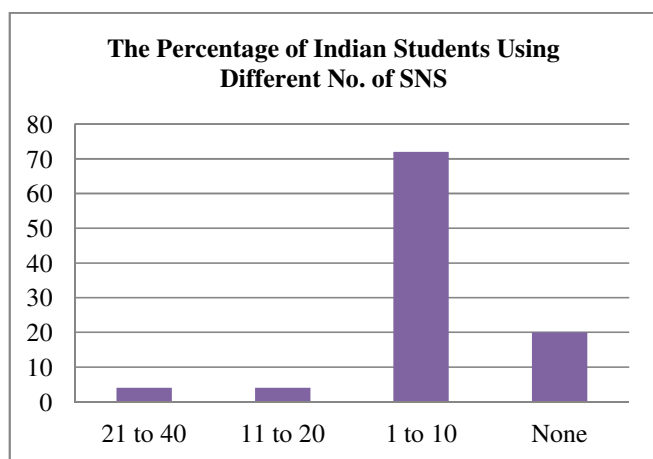| Relationship with Online Friends	Percentage
Very intimate	7.5
Good friends	20
Fairly	17.5
Average	25
None of above	30
Total	**100**

Figure-4
The Percentage of Indian Students Using Different No. of SNS

Only 7% of respondents share an intimate relationship with their online friends while 20% say they are good friends. It indicates the level of priority/trust attached to an online relationship

among the college students. But a considerable sample rated their online relationships as average (25%) and fair (17%). A vast majority 30% rated as none of the above (very intimate, good friends, fairly, average), though they have online friends they do not have any greater affinity to their online relationships.

Table-4
The Frequency of the Student's Communication with Their Counterparts

With Student's Counterparts	Never	Rarely	Always
With Co-Workers	7%	40%	28%
With Family Members	11%	30%	48%
With Friends	2%	26%	70%
With Unknown people	30%	17%	11%

Table-5
The Purpose of Using SNS among the Indian Students

Different Purposes of Using SNS	No	Less	Average	High
Forum	20%	26%	28%	19%
Blog	15%	19%	37%	20%
Media Sharing	10%	23%	27%	39%
Messaging	1%	10%	20%	68%
Chatting	2%	8%	27%	67%
Browsing Profile Pages	19%	24%	27%	30%
File Sharing	10%	23%	33%	37%
Browsing Friends' Profiles	28%	21%	19%	16%

The main purpose of usage of SNS for the respondents was for massaging and chatting with 38% and 36% respectively. Massaging and chatting are two traditional reasons for using SNS from its inception. Personal chats are conversational forum to exchange and share about each other in a dialogue. It is more similar to a real life conversation with an exception being it's not face to face. Though making new friends happens via social networking sites among 55% of youth, 68% of them interact to their online friends through personal chats in other messenger services. Many social networking sites have chat applications; it leads to more intimate interpersonal relationship between online friends due to higher degree of privacy in personal chats. In Indian context, SNS are growing to gain momentum in its popularity and usage but have not yet reached the expectations matching the global scenario.

Conclusion

The primary objective of the research undertaken has been to shed light on the evolution of the dominance of social networking sites among the Indian college students. Previous research in spheres of social networking sites and its impact on college students in different global and demographic context provided an extensive secondary source base for the study. As with many technologies, adoption of the Internet especially for its social uses has seen its highest levels of usage among young college students in India. The majority of current college

students have had access to the Internet and computers for a large percentage of their lives. These digital natives see these technologies as a logical extension of traditional communication methods, and perceive social networking sites as often a much quicker and more convenient way to interact. That they are aware of the danger and risk involved in these sites is a positive indicator that Indian college students are not only techno-savvy and socially active through social networking sites but they also possess social consciousness.

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