



SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND INDIAN TEENAGERS

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Abstract: The social networking sites have a primary purpose of promoting communication and interactions amongst users. Such sites like *Facebook*, *Orkut*, and *Twitter* have become popular and a vital part of social life in India, especially among teenagers. However, available literature indicates lack of in-depth study to evaluate how and why Indian teenagers engage with social networking sites. This study hopes to fill this gap as it uses Focus Group Discussion to explore the experiences of Indian teenagers with social networking sites. Information from the groups was analyzed in terms of their use of social networking sites, online versus offline friendships, and extending friendships beyond cyberspace. Our findings indicate that both boys and girls use other forms of communication channels to strengthen existing friendships more with the same gender than with the opposite. However, the boys enjoy more freedom when compared with the girls and they admitted talking to online friends and meeting them outside cyberspace without any hesitation. The girls, on their part, were hesitant to extend online friendships beyond virtual space because of security issues and resistance from family members.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites (SNSs), Teenagers, Online relationship, Offline relationship, India

INTRODUCTION

The use of Online Social Networking Sites (SNSs) has become an important activity in the lives of teenage children in India. The young generation constitutes a growing segment in terms of internet usage pattern, with more than three-quarters of internet

population driven by young men (27%), school (21%) and college (27%) going kids (I-Cube, 2011).

Much of the research to date on Internet use has been conducted from a commercial perspective and lacks critical insight into how teenagers incorporate SNSs in their social lives. Yet, the popularity of

SNSs raises questions for researchers as to why teenagers use these sites. For instance, how do these teenagers construct their online profiles? Do these sites aid self-expression? Do the teenagers trust online relationships as much as they trust relationships in the real world? This study addresses some of these issues arising out of the role played by SNSs in the lives of Indian teenagers. The study also discusses recent developments in the Internet industry in India and evaluates the rise and the popularity of social networking sites among Indian teenagers. It also presents findings from focus groups of teenagers on their use of SNSs in the Indian context.

INDIA: A GROWING INTERNET INDUSTRY

India continues to be one of the fastest-growing major telecom markets in the world. Sweeping reforms introduced by successive Indian governments over the last decade have dramatically changed the nature of telecommunications in the country. India now stands third in the world in terms of the number of people surfing the net, with a user base of 205 million, after China and the US (I-Cube Report, 2013). Of the Internet users in the country, 110 million access the net through mobiles.

Mobile Internet users in India are young, with 94 per cent of them aged between 13 and 34 years.

Cyber cafes also serve as an important access point for Internet as 23 percent of Indian youths access the Internet through it (I-Cube Report, 2011). According to a study on social media use by the Nielsen Company (2011), 30 million Indians who are online are members of social networking sites and about two-thirds of them spend time on these social networking sites on a daily basis. More importantly, Indians spend more time on social media than they do using personal email. This growth is attributed to the variety of online applications like online communication, information search, user-generated content, as well as online entertainment applications like gaming. Notably, teens in India (77 percent) are most likely to find the value of online reading to be comparable to the value of reading a book (Norton Online Living Report, 2009).

India represents one of the fastest-growing markets for Social Networking Sites. SNSs have become a complete package; providing communication, connection, networking, entertainment, information, and much more. Globally, India now ranks as the seventh largest market for social networking. According to the Nielsen Company (2010), 70 percent of all social networking users in India access a social networking site every day. It was found that 89 percent of the 15-20 year olds access a social

networking site everyday, of which 60 percent spend at least half an hour on social networking.

Many mobile development companies in India provide customized solutions to optimize social networking websites for mobile devices. *Facebook* secured the top position as the most visited social networking site with 20.9 million visitors in July 2010, marking a 179 percent increase from the preceding year (ComScore, 2011). *Facebook* has made special efforts to reach regional audiences by adding Indian languages.

Teenagers use *Facebook*, *MySpace*, *Orkut*, *Hi5*, *You Tube*, along with Indian social sites like *Biggada.com* and *Bhratstudent.com* to interact with each other. These sites also serve as a way to stay in almost constant contact with others (Lamb and Johnson, 2006). Social networks provide platforms where adults and children meet, since the sites are popular with both age groups. Though many sites restrict children below 13 to create an account, it is impossible to prevent them from entering into it. In a study on American teens, it was observed that 46 percent of 12-year-olds and 62 percent of 13-year-olds use social network sites (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010). These findings should be seen in the light of age restrictions on social networking sites that restrict children under 12

from registering or posting profiles, but do not actively prevent them. In essence, a kid who is just 11 years of age could conveniently claim 19 when he is online. Ofcom (2009), reports that 37 percent of five- to seven-year-olds had visited *Facebook*, but it did not have data on how many profile pages have been created by this group. Moreover, parents with limited technical skills are unable to guide their children on SNSs or even prevent them.

Norton Online Living Report (2009) observes that almost three in four (72 percent) parents in India who go online agree that their children are more careful online than they are. Parents are least likely to have monitored their children's Internet use in Japan (10 percent), China (22 percent), and India (24 per cent). Byron, who has investigated the potentially harmful effects of video games and websites, warned parents that letting children play unchecked on the Internet is just as dangerous as allowing them to roam in the streets unsupervised (Byron Review, 2008). She noted that good parenting "in the 21st century" ensures they were meeting their responsibilities "online as well as offline".

As social networking sites have grown, so, too, have concerns about Internet safety and privacy. Social networking sites make it extremely easy to upload different forms of

personal information, such as age, location, contact information, and photos. Although most social networking sites do offer privacy options, most participants do not make much of an effort to customize who can view their profile (Dwyer, 2007). Social networking sites have increased the prevalence of cyber friends meeting face-to-face (Report of National Centre for Technology in Education, 2008).

Some of the messages or photos teenagers post on their profiles make them vulnerable to cyber bullying and Internet predators. Criminologists have argued that crime is most likely to occur when there are opportunities for crimes to happen, like the presence of suitably motivated offenders and the absence of capable guardians or other deterrents to crime (Kim-Kwang & Raymond Choo, 2009). The US Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported more than 2,600 incidents of adults using the Web to target children online in order to engage them in sexual activity (Gareth & Lenny Roth, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teenagers join the social networking sites for communication and networking. Social network sites create a space for teenagers to not only form new relationships (Boyd, 2007) but also reinforce existing ones (Subrahmanyam and Patricia).

Adolescents, moreover, integrate these tools into their “offline” worlds. The users construct profiles to create positive image about them by placing their personal information and photos for online social interactions (Boyd, 2007). Profiles are used to converse with people. Users share photos and this is recognized as a form of conversation (Efimova & de Moor, 2005). A study on the analysis of newcomers’ motives for contributing content on *Facebook* found that an initially engaged newcomer who receives comments on early photos is more likely to increase the rate of photo contribution subsequently (Burke, Moira and Cameron Marlow, 2009). Byod (2006) in her ethnographic study on *Friendster* observed that profiles convey different types of conversational starters, regardless of their intended expression.

The sharing of photos and personal details on profiles is a source of concern because this information may be misused. Dwyer (2007) compared perceptions of trust and privacy concern, along with willingness to share information, develop new relationships on two popular social networking sites, *Facebook* and *MySpace*, and found that *Facebook* users disclosed significantly more identifying information such as real name and email address when compared to *MySpace*. This study observed that for users of *MySpace* trust is not a

necessary condition for building new relationships as it is in the case of offline relationships.

Some of the teens become so obsessed with and absorbed in the virtual world that they lose the drive to achieve in the real world (Kerlikowske, 2007). In a national survey of 1,501 youths, 256 respondents reported close online relationships and 41 percent of them reported face-to-face meetings with their online friends (Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor, 2007). Studies have indicated that their online activities are connected with their offline activities. A study of children's online diaries in Sweden found that these self-presentations were "connected with other activities they do in their everyday life, and are in a dialogue with their social life, both at home and at school" (Moinian, 2006).

Gross, Ralph and Alessandro Acquisti (2005) in a study on more than 4,000 CMU users of *Facebook* noticed that only a small number of its users change the default privacy preferences. The study suggests that in the online environment gender is a risk factor, 'with seemingly more girls than boys appearing to be harmed through cyberspace interactions' (Muir, 2005).

The social networking sites are novel to Indian teenagers and motives for using social networking sites are not well researched. In view of the differences in social

context that influence online behavior of teenagers, this study attempts to understand how social networking sites have become an integral part of teenage life in India. This is a significant first step in developing strategies for dealing with both the dangers and opportunities presented by SNSs.

METHODOLOGY

Thirteen focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with teenagers between the age group of 15 to 17 years. The participants were all undergraduates and belonged to both genders. The broad purpose for conducting FGDs was to draw an online profile of young SNS users, find out the motivations for using SNS, determine differences between online and offline friendships and examine whether online friendships extend beyond cyberspace. The analysis and interactions helped to generate discussions on various issues surrounding SNSs. A trained male project assistant conducted FGDs with boys and the researcher and the female project assistant did FGDs with the girls.

The FGDs were conducted in thirteen different colleges spread across five locations, one in the capital city of India (New Delhi) and the rest from the State of Andhra Pradesh, the fifth largest state in the country. Separate FGDs were conducted with boys and girls except in New Delhi where the FGD was conducted on a mixed

group. As the sample was drawn purposively from different geographical backgrounds, the participants belonged to different social, educational, and economic backgrounds. We took the help of class teachers in identifying the participants; the inclusion criteria were that participants should be SNSs users, belong to different socio-economic backgrounds, as stated above, and be between 15 and 17 years of age.

Participants totalled 109 undergraduate students (53 girls and 56 boys). We assured the participants of confidentiality to enable maximum cooperation and optimum participation. The resulting data were broken into three themes: reasons for using SNSs, online versus offline friendships, and extending online friendships beyond cyberspace.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Why Do Teenagers Use Social Networking Sites?

Social Networking Sites enable teenagers to communicate with friends quickly, easily, and effortlessly. Majority of the teenagers in the focus groups reported using SNSs primarily to communicate and connect with school friends. Other activities they reported doing on SNSs include making new friendships, gaming, sharing music and video, uploading photos, and posting messages. Majority of the teenagers interviewed started doing social

networking at the age of 13 years and some of them even earlier at the age of 11. One of the focus group discussant says:

My father opened an account with his mail id when I was 11. I saw my elder brother playing online games. That is how I started - Boy, 15

However, there were some differences between the male and female teenagers. We observed that more teenage boys than girls in the focus groups started using SNSs at an early age of 11 years. Majority of the boys had 150 to 300 friends, whereas girls reported fewer than 100 friends. Many of the boys explained that they tend to befriend 'friends of friends'. In other words, their lists do not necessarily represent direct contacts, either online or in the physical world. Majority of the participants reported having accounts on more than two social networking sites. Among these, *Facebook* was the most popular followed by *Twitter*. Many also have profiles on *orkut*, *linkedin*, *bigadda.com*, *bharathi.com* (an Indian SNSs). Two of the focus group participants gave an insight why *Facebook* is so popular among the Indian teenagers thus:

Facebook is convenient and safe. I like it - Boy, 16
I started using Facebook because many of my

*classmates have profiles
and I can talk to them,
almost on everyday basis –
Girl, 16*

For most participants, social networking sites are important tools to stay connected with schoolmates and other friends. The groups also reported that the negligible cost of joining the site was another important factor that made SNSs use attractive. Further, they agreed that SNSs gave them an opportunity to re-establish relationships, especially when people move away from each other for various reasons.

Some insights on the various reasons why Indian teenagers use Social Networking Sites are presented thus:

*SNSs provide us a
platform where we can
share our feelings
without any hesitation,
which otherwise we
would not have discussed
face to face – Girl, 16*

*Social Networking is
truly a platform for
multitasking, playing
games, continuing your
friendships with
classmates who spread to
different colleges, and
making new friends,
which I think otherwise
is not possible - Boy, 17
I think it is the cheapest
way to talk to friends –
Boy, 16*

*I had my schooling in
Delhi. My father got
transferred to
Hyderabad (name of a
city). My friends are still
in Delhi, I can talk to
them, send messages,
and share photos - Girl,
16*

Some of the participants use social networking sites to communicate with friends and cousins who are students and professionals in countries across the world. Because it is expensive to make long distance calls and, in some cases, parents do not allow, they find SNSs a cheaper and more convenient way of staying in touch with them. One of the female focus group participants confirmed this thus:

*My cousin is studying
MS in USA. It is easy to
talk to her on SNSs and
we exchange lot of things
including career plans -
Girl, 16*

Though the participants interviewed initially created an account to keep contact with their schoolmates, gradually they extended their activity to making new friends through the 'friends friends' option in the profile settings. Some of the focus groups participants explain this thus:

*I have many friends from
other countries on my
friends list. I came to
know their festivals,*

food, and campus life. They send me photos of important occasions. I think it is an amazing way of exploring new things in life – Boy, 16
I accept invitations from friend's friends. I think online social networking is meant for people to develop new friendships. I like to make new friends. It's fun to share interests, hobbies, academic things, and a lot more - Boy, 15
It is most satisfying. I can completely let out my feelings. It truly helps - Girl, 16

The participants interviewed reported frequent uploading of pictures, sometimes a photo a day. The manner of uploading photos seems to be gender based. Boys tend to upload pictures for the public at large, whereas a majority of the girls upload their pictures only for private use. Girls, rather than boys, are cautious in uploading pictures. Interestingly, girls preferred group pictures for public viewing. Some of the participants give more insight on this:

I always keep my picture private. I feel shy to see my picture in the public domain. I am a bit scared about the possibility of misuse - Girl, 15

I keep changing my photos on Facebook - Boy, 16
I upload group photos, my picnic and college day photos for public usage. What's wrong with that? -- Boy, 17

We also found out that social networking is a hobby for many participants of the FGDs, but was an obsession in the case of a few of them. The obsession with SNSs was more significant among the boys. Some of them reported checking messages or posting messages at least four or five times a day. They explain further:

I feel restless if I won't go online. I don't miss them if I speak - Boy, 17
I think I am emotionally attached to SNSs – Girl, 16
I can't imagine life without social networking sites - Boy, 16
I don't have account in any of the SNSs. I chat with my friends through net only - Girl from semi urban area, 16.

From the FGDs, we found out that teenagers contribute content on social issues. A girl in a discussion group held at an urban college was motivated by messages she received on a social networking site to join an online community that

was working on environmental issues. She explained this thus:

I came to know about the online community working on environmental issues through a social networking site. I was quite impressed and decided to join the group. Occasionally, I post comments on environmental issues- Girl, 16.

The availability of porn material and their use by the teenagers is not uncommon. In fact, this is one of the negative exposures that SNSs bring to the discourse. A 17-year-old boy explains how he was embarrassed over the issue thus:

I saw a few sexy pictures on a SNS, which I think I did not close properly, and my mother found them on the internet. She was shocked and shouted at me. It was an embarrassing moment for me – Boy, 17
I download porn videos from SNSs. It's very distracting. It becomes sometimes uncontrollable to avoid watching them. It distracts me from my studies - Boy, 17

Some children in the FGDs were undergraduates from semi-residential colleges. In a semi-residential college, the students

would be at school between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., which includes tutorial time with a lunch break and a brief interlude for relaxation in the afternoon and evening. These teens hardly have time for other hobbies or outdoor games. The only choice they have is SNSs, besides watching television or reading books. Many of the teens relax after spending time leisurely or playing games on SNSs. Some of the focus group discussants explain this thus:

I hardly have time for outdoor games. After spending 12 hours in the school, I really relax on Facebook by cracking jokes, reacting to messages, sharing some dirty jokes... It's real fun - Boy from semi residential school, 16

I spend an hour on SNSs and chat. My father doesn't say anything - Boy, 16

During college time we are busy with classes so we find more time to chat online. We share classroom experiences - Boy, 15

Although some participants spend long hours with SNSs, a majority of them said that they were on SNSs for long hours only during vacations or when there were no exams. This indicates that many of

the young users exercise discretion while engaging with SNSs.

Online Friendships

Boyd (2007) explains that, "Social network sites are yet another form of public space". Children and teenagers use social network sites to deepen intimacy, express themselves, engage in creative work, provide emotional support to others, learn more about people they have met in other contexts, and keep in touch with weak ties, such as far-away friends (Livingstone, 2008). Teenagers are generally inquisitive at this age, seeking to form new friendships and strengthen existing relationships. Social networking sites provide them an alternative means from the real world to do so. This section therefore, examines how teenagers employ SNSs as an instrument to make friendships against the background of existing social norms in Indian society

The discussion in the study indicates mixed reactions from the teenagers. Majority of the participants engage in social networking sites to keep contact with old friends and make new friendships through friends' friends. Though majority of the participants opined that trust is an important factor to form or continue online friendships. The participants were aware of the fact that some of the users provide fake information. Some of the participants even admitted that they

also send fake information if they think the users post wrong information. However, majority of the participants stated that they share many things but when it comes to decision making, they depend on family members. Both boys and girls said they tried to be honest if the friendship is established.

The gender difference that were noticed in the study shows that boys were more in number in making friends through friends' friends whereas the girls restricted their profile only to friends. Another difference that was observed was that more boys than girls reported of revealing their real name or placing personal pictures while creating profiles. Some of the girls in the study have admitted that they are more comfortable in engaging with strangers online without revealing their true identity. Some of the research participants explain further:

I get to know about new people, share messages, which is not possible outside with minimum mobility. I can share anything without any inhibition. I have a friend but I may not meet him in my lifetime because it's not my real name - Girl,
16

I joined online communities like organic chemistry community,

favorite colours, and I love my father. I met some nice people there. They are strangers a year back but we are now intimate friends - Boy, 17

I share lot of things; all my new friends on SNSs were added to my profile through school friends. I meet them quiet often – Boy, 16

I always share intimate issues with my family not with my online friends. I just talk about movies, jokes – Girl, 15

It is difficult to be yourself without trust in friendship. I can't enjoy the conversations if its fake – Boy, 17

I can identify whether the information is true or not. I also send them wrong information and discontinue after some time – Boy, 16

They (online friends) are not real and they are not substitutes to real friends – Girl, 15

We won't blindly trust someone through chatting – Boy, 17

Even though I have 72 friends on my profile, I interact on regular basis with 20 or 30. They are my close friends and cousins – Girl, 17

We ask our friends about them whether they are good friends or bad friends then we will take a decision to add them or not. I think I have a choice on SNSs – Girl, 15

Many participants in the study told the researchers that they can estimate a person through his /her profile or by interacting with them. Surprisingly, the time they take to decide about the genuineness of a person is 10 to 15 days sometimes a week. One of the participants explains this

Like in real life, I try to understand a friend online also. I am confident that I will be able estimate whether the boy or a girl is genuine or not – Girl, 16

When participants were asked particularly about friendships with the opposite gender, most of the participants were hesitant to discuss them freely. This is so because the participants are in their teens and their opinions are not well crystallized. They appear to be careful enough to speak about their friendships within the ambit of social norms. Some of the participants stated that cyberspace helped them to form new friendships and some of them were still uncomfortable about discussing the subject. Some of the

participants give further insight below:

I don't think there is anything wrong with making friendship with girls. Many people deny openly, but I know some of my friends have girls in their friend's list. What is wrong in having friendship with a girl? In fact I have more friends among girls —
Boy, 16

I chat with boys but I don't keep my photo on the profile. I kept an attractive actress on the profile. I am worried, if somebody looks at my conversation —
Girl, 16 years

I think these sites break the social boundaries for making friends. It's a way of making new friendships —
Girl, 17

My parents have lots of faith in me. I will never do anything that would create a problem for them —
Girl, 15

I talk to my classmates who are boys. But, I don't accept invitation from everyone —
Girl, 16

I created a profile with a different name. I added few people when they send me the invitation. We exchange

movies, funny stories —
Girl, 17

I have male friends, but I am scared if anyone identifies that it's me. I am always careful —
Girl, 17

I have friends who are girls, but all of them are my friends' friends. I don't think they are strangers —
Boy, 17

The opinions expressed in the FGDs indicate that most of the conversations on social media are confined to lighter topic like movies, games, and music. The girls also appear to be more cautious in revealing their true identity. The teenagers seem to trust and tried to be honest if friendship is formed. The girls were careful about their conversation with opposite gender with a presumption that the parents might disapprove such friendships. Many Indian families do not encourage teens to mingle very closely with opposite gender although many Indian family norms are going through some changes and friendships between boys and girls are not uncommon.

Extending Relationships beyond Online Platforms

The strength of new relationships could be measured indirectly by whether subjects extended contact using other communication channels (Schweizer, Leimeister, & Krcmar, 2006). The focus group

participants were asked about the possibility of using other communication methods to extend online relationships to offline ones. Most of the participants acknowledged that they call each other, chat, and use Instant Messaging, which is prominent among the members of the same gender rather than with those of the opposite gender. A few of the participants did web chatting. For some of the participants, SNSs are extensions of their friendship as most of their online friends are classmates, schoolmates, or cousins. The participants give more insights below:

Kartheek was my school friend. We later joined in different colleges. I call him, send him sms...this is so common. We all share our activities and photos – Boy, 16

We call each other, discussing from classroom subjects to the food in a new restaurant. I miss it if I don't do it – Girl, 16

I chat and do sms on phone with friends – Boy, 17

Some of my online friends are friends' friends. We have become close only after meeting several times outside. We call each other – Girl, 17

I always post comments on facebook if the distances are very far. But I do sms or call with some of the friends within the State – Boy, 15

I have friends on facebook, which are my friends' friends. They invite me for movies and get together. I call them. The social media are meant for new friendships – Boy, 17

This particular research participants are teens and they tend to perceive relationships between men and women from their parents' perspective and from the cues they derive from the society. Many of the participants were hesitant to disclose their relationship with the opposite gender thinking the others would disapprove. Most of the participants said that they do not meet people in the real world whom they met online. A few of the participants mentioned they meet online friends outside. It is evident from the opinions expressed during the focus group discussions that more of the boys meet their online friends outside the virtual space. However, most of them also claim these friends are not necessarily complete strangers. The girls, on the other hand, explained that their inability to be freer with the opposite gender is related to their family values that question such association. Some of

the female participants share their personal views on this further:

My sister heard when I was talking to an online male friend on a mobile; she almost slapped me and said she would inform my parents if I repeat that. I was terrified and removed his name from my friends list – Girl, 17

Actually, I am not ready to give my phone number to the opposite sex. Besides my house there was one girl she encouraged me to call this boy and we chatted several times from her mobile. I spoke to him for 2 to 3 minutes and we were frightened of the consequences if we are caught before our parents – Girl, 16

I prefer not to meet outside. Who knows whether they are true or not – Girl, 16

It is difficult to say whether these friendships remain the same, discontinue, or turn into deeper relationships. It would be very interesting if a longitudinal study is undertaken to document how technology impacts the relations between men and women over time. An overwhelming number of participants stated that career is important and they ensure that their online time would not affect their

studies. At the same time, all of them agreed that they enjoy this new freedom on social networking sites.

Related findings also suggest that teenagers use SNSs for other kinds of interaction and for forming new relationships. Although they tend initially to be smart by providing a positive image, eventually they try to be honest with their online friends and tell who they are. The teenagers use different kinds of other communication channels to establish stronger ties. The results show strong evidence that existing social norms influence the way boys and girls interact with each other and turn the online friendships into offline. A small number of boys and girls in the study mentioned that they met their online friends in the real world.

CONCLUSION

Though the overall internet use is low when compared with India's total population, the social networking sites are quite popular among teenagers. Using the outcome of the Focus Group Discussion as a basis, we conclude that Indian teenagers are using SNSs to seek and develop new kinds of relationships online.

The results show active engagement of teenagers with social networking sites for various reasons. These include communication, networking, strengthening existing friendships, and forming new relationships. The

teenagers considered SNSs as convenient, inexpensive, and interactive media to communicate with friends and relatives not only within the country but also across the world.

The appealing factor of SNSs was the features that allow users to multitask. Majority of teenagers in the study also considered SNSs as avenues to share their thoughts without any hesitation and inhibitions as well as an avenue to support some social causes that they subscribe and encourage. The results also show that majority of the teenagers are emotionally involved with SNSs and use them several times a day. The information given by some of the teenagers who participated in the study shows some level of addiction in SNSs usage.

Furthermore, there is clear evidence from the outcome of the discussions that some Indian teenagers visit some porn sites and most times, this distracts them from their academic activities. Parents' inability to discuss openly, sex education and related topics with their teen children often causes more harm than good. However, sound moral upbringing of most of the teens has continued to act as a check on their excesses whenever they are online or offline and their parents are not with them in either case.

Generally, the boys and the girls that participated in the study were

not quite comfortable discussing their friendships with the opposite gender. Considering their ages, with some strict family values that shy away from such "worldly" topics, this was understandable. These results also indicate differences between boys and girls in their engagement with SNSs. Though both boys and girls in the study value online friendships, some of the girls admitted of creating fake profiles or provide false screen names and conceal personal identifiable information for safety reasons. Some of the girls also raised doubts about the personal information or identity provided by others on their profiles. Ironically, they do similar thing for security reasons too.

We also note that both boys and girls use other forms of communication channels to strengthen existing friendships more with the same gender than with the opposite. However, the boys enjoyed more freedom when compared with the girls and admitted of talking to online friends and meeting them outside without any hesitation. However, the girls were hesitant to extend online friendships as they have experienced resistance from family members for extending online friendships beyond the online platforms. This is because generally parents do not appreciate or encourage friendships with opposite gender in India.

In conclusion, we note that the popularity of Social Networking Sites among Indian teenagers raises several key issues for the Indian society to explore. The society needs to begin to address, for instance, cyber bullying and parental engagement with the virtual community. Their under aged children are part of this community and so they should be part of it to be able to help their kids when necessary. This exploratory study has also been able to capture the opinions of the teenagers as to why and how they use SNSs for making friendships and growing virtual relationships. Earlier known studies within India do not map various dimensions of

social networking sites like the influence of online friendships on real world concerns, privacy, security, cyber crimes, and parents' and educators' roles in helping children and teenagers to handle their online problems. There is a need therefore, for critical research on these issues to obtain authentic information in the Indian context. The results of this particular study encourage further research through an online survey to get deeper insights into how teenagers of different age groups, educational backgrounds, and geographical locations, use their social environment to engage the virtual world.

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