Title: Young Adults and Social Networking Sites in Mauritius

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Abstract: This study attempts to explore the ways in which young Mauritians aged 19 to 29 engage in social networks in their daily life. It examines their need to build an online identity and their crave for new forms of socialisation through social networks such as Facebook and Hi5. A quantitative survey was thus carried out to estimate the reach of social networks amongst this population segment and qualitative in-depth interviews were carried out to investigate usage patterns and motivations amongst the selected age group.

Keywords: social networking sites, youth, mediated communication, online identity, ethnicity

Introduction

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have grown exponentially with over 200 social networking sites being currently available on the web. They have acquired growing popularity in the world, especially among young people. This new social technology has significantly altered social interaction and information distribution. And thousands of young people from Mauritius are also joining in on the social networks, signing in to Facebook, Hi5, or YouTube, and increasingly spending a great deal of time on these platforms. According to Alexa’s Statistics, Facebook is the number one site visited by Mauritians as shown in the table below. Indeed, there were 159,480 Mauritians on Facebook as at 13th January 2010 according to the advertisement programme available on the network.
This study attempts to explore the ways in which young Mauritians aged 19 to 29 engage in social networks in their daily life. It examines their need to build an online identity and their crave for new forms of socialisation through social networks such as Facebook and Hi5. A quantitative survey was thus carried out to estimate the reach of social networks amongst this population segment and qualitative in-depth interviews were carried out to investigate usage patterns and motivations amongst the selected age group.

The survey population for this research consisted of 100 young people found both in and outside the educational sector and coming from different ethnic groups and locations. Data was collected during the first semester of 2009. A four-part self-completion questionnaire was designed to provide clear guidance and instructions to respondents on how to record their answers. The first section was devoted to obtaining general information about the respondents such as gender, age, marital status, ethnic

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Table 1: Alexa’s Ranking of SNS visited by Mauritians in top 100 sites

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Alexa’s country ranking accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2010 (Available at: [http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/MU](http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/MU))
group, location and educational background. The second section investigated the popularity of social networks and usage patterns amongst respondents. The third section was designed to explore young people's attitudes towards these platforms and to gauge the importance of popular features to the subscribers. The fourth and last section focused on respondents' depth of engagement with social networks to determine level of willing exposure of their selves and intensity of activities on these platforms.

**Place of Access to Social Networks**

Out of the 100 respondents for this study, it was found that 87% access social networks from home, 10% from the workplace and 3% from internet cafés. In keeping with Alexa's ranking, Facebook enjoys a huge popularity with 89% users followed by Hi5 (63%) and YouTube (59%). Other SNS such as Tagged (20%), MySpace (14%), Kotzot (9%), Flickr (9%) and Photobucket (2%) are accessed by lesser numbers.

*Illustration 1: Place of Access to Social Networks*
Respondents frequently use Facebook and Hi5 which are profile-based SNS. It has been noted that Facebook users are more frequently engaged in "searching" for people with whom they have an offline connection more than they "browse" for complete strangers to meet\(^2\). The popularity of social networks also varies according to age. The findings show that older adults aged 25 to 29 use Facebook mostly while younger adults aged 19 to 24 use both Hi5 and Facebook. According to a previous study carried out in 2008, users aged 14 to 16 have a strong preference for Hi5, but, as they grow older they start to show interest in Facebook.

YouTube, a content-based SNS has also acquired much popularity in Mauritius as it enables users to upload, share and view video clips online. In the qualitative study, six young men out of twenty respondents declared that they use YouTube to download and share video clips from their mobile phone and are up to date with newly uploaded videos whether local or international.

**Usage Frequency of SNS**

The results indicate that younger adults aged 19 to 24 tend to visit their favourite social networks either once a day or several times a day while those aged 25 to 29 years old use the sites less often.

A 2008 Ofcom report identified five distinct groups of people who used social networking sites in the UK namely:

- **Alpha Socialisers**: mostly males under 25 who use those sites in intense short bursts to flirt, meet new people and be entertained.

- **Attention Seekers**: mostly females who crave for attention and comments from others, often posting photos and customising their profiles.

- **Followers**: males and females of all ages who join those sites to keep up with what their peers are doing.

- **Faithfuls**: older males and females generally aged over 20, who typically use SNS to rekindle old friendships, often from school or university.

- **Functionals**: mostly older males who tend to be single-minded in using sites for a particular purpose.
The qualitative interviews with the 20 Mauritian users show that both male and female respondents aged 19 to 24 can be identified as ‘Alpha Socialisers’ and ‘Attention Seekers’ as they log several times a day to check for friend requests and comments, to add new applications to their profile page and to post photos. Those aged between 25 and 29 can be identified as being ‘Followers’ and ‘Faithfuls’. They use social networks mainly to keep in touch with friends and families. The difference in the usage pattern according to age groups is consistent with the iProspect study 2007 on user behaviour in social networks whereby it was found that users aged 18 to 24 are more prolific at visiting social networking sites. This can be explained by the fact that younger adults tend to view the Internet more as a social space than as an information resource.

**Time spent on SNS**

The data shows that 55% of all respondents spend on average one hour per day on social networks, which amounts to around 35 hours monthly. In the UK, according to a research study done in 2008, it was found that users between 18 to 29 spent mostly five hours or less weekly on social networks which comes up to around 25 hours or less monthly. Thus, Mauritians seem to be heavier users of these sites. The UK study stated that those who spend more time on social networks usually like to customize their profile content, design and layout. Mauritian SNS users are also continuously building their digital image by customizing their profile pages very often. The in-depth conversations with ten respondents out of twenty reveal that the latter spend a lot of time enhancing their profile pages and adding new applications. This attitude can be considered frivolous because people are spending time constructing
online identity and enhancing profile pages, comments and connecting with friends rather than using this time for more important activities in relation with their studies or jobs.

10% of all respondents reported spending more than four hours daily on SNS and they were surprisingly all single females aged 19 to 24. The in-depth conversation with females of this age group revealed that they spend a lot of time enhancing their profile page on Hi5, with background pictures, adding new photos, posting and replying to comments from their friends and looking for new friends mostly males with a view to flirt. This usage frequency is comparable with the Consumer Internet Barometer Study conducted in June 2008 in the US, where it was found that women are more likely to use social networks than men. The study also reported that in general women use the Internet more than men for personal communication. Usually, women give particular attention to their physical appearance. Even online they spend time customising their profiles in such a way that these appear physically attractive.

According to Auren Hoffman (2008): “It’s no shock either that men and women act very different online. The web is an extremely social medium, with Web 2.0 being all about social. Men traditionally are early adopters, especially when it comes to tech, but when it comes to social media, women are at the forefront”. He further stated that young women spend time decorating their social network profile pages, preparing slide shows, while married women put up pictures of their immediate family on social networks and use their social network profile as a family home page to share with friends and relatives. Social networks have allowed people to do countless activities online from sharing personal items with a select number of people to broadcasting information to a wide range of ‘friends’. The quantitative
study shows that all 100 respondents use social networks mainly to keep in touch with friends and families and to make new friends.

Illustration 3: Type of activities on social networks

All of the 20 participants in the qualitative survey also confirmed that they use social networks to maintain their current friendships and to make new friends. A young man aged 26 added that he joined Facebook under the influence of one of his co-workers. Another young man aged 20 declared that he uses Hi5 mainly because it allows him to enhance his profile by adding background pictures, using different skins, coloured themes, copying HTML codes, adding social dating applications such as ‘Zoosk’\(^3\) and ‘Are you Interested?’\(^4\) He further remarked that social networks allowed him to find new girlfriends and his friend lists consisted mostly of girls. Many people showcase themselves online, they tweak their profile pages, constantly change their profile pictures and backgrounds and add new

\(^3\)http://www.crunchbase.com/company/zoos
\(^4\)http://dmnnewswire.digitalmedianet.com/articles/viewarticle.jsp?id=453524
applications, thereby showing how effective and competent they are in building their online identity.

39% of respondents aged 25 to 29 declared that they use social networks for spending idle time. Informal conversations with three respondents of this age group revealed that they spend time browsing through pictures, reading comments from other users, reading posts and keeping track of other people’s news. It has become like an addiction for them to log onto social networks during their spare time to peek and see what others are doing. In fact, 26% of all respondents declared that they have a profile only in order to be able to view other people’s pages and activities. This shows that the Internet has given rise to a growing number of people who engage in near-voyeuristic activities, the desire to see what others are doing.

A research study from North Carolina University in the US found that it is common among users to browse through different profiles (Bumgamer, 2007). According to the study, Facebook has provided a venue for voyeurism where people can peruse the profiles of various users, read about other users’ interests, read their friends’ comments on their walls or view their friends. People can scroll through users’ photo albums and see all pictures that the latter have uploaded of themselves and tag pictures from their friends. Profiles are connected to one another and sometimes contain links to other photo albums or to online journals. It was observed that Facebook may cultivate what Calvert (2000) refers to as “mediated voyeurism”. According to Calvert’s definition, mediated voyeurism is “the consumption of revealing images of and information about others’ apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse, through the means of mass media and Internet.”
Identity Construction through Profile Pages

SNS present opportunities for identity exploration (Feinberg, 2008). The construction of a social networking profile is an exercise in identity building. Users identify their beliefs, interests, and hobbies on their profiles. Sometimes, users play with different names, ages, and genders on their social networking profiles. Youths, in particular, have seized the opportunity to engage in identity play. Profiles have become a common mechanism for presenting one’s identity online (Boyd & Heer, 2007). The philosophy that first impressions are lasting impressions holds true in the social networking arena, and nowhere is this more evident than on a profile page. A social networking profile page is often the first big impression visitors get on the user and the user’s contacts. Profile pages that have been visited online consisted of the user’s name, location, gender, date of birth, age and occupation. Other details such as hobbies, favourite music with embedded video clips, movies, books, actors as well as likes and dislikes are displayed.

The findings for this study reveal that 79% of the respondents have one profile page on their favourite social network while 13% claim to use two different profiles on their favourite social network. The latter stated that one is used for professional purposes, whereas the second profile was used for personal purposes.

It was also found that people present themselves online in a variety of ways, for example by using avatars or by tweaking the choice of font to give a particular “tone of voice” to their page (Croft, 2007). Such creativity on profile pages is more prevalent on Hi5. Some even portray themselves in a provocative manner with sexy pictures of nude or semi-nude parts of their body, thereby simulating a sexual playground on their personal pages.

Facebook on the other hand does not allow such photos on its site according to its terms on safety. Several Facebook profiles of the participants have been visited during this study and no provocative or
nude picture has been spotted. Facebook does not provide services to enhance profile pages and this can be the reason why younger people tended to prefer Hi5.

Individuals’ Facebook networks often reflect their real-world social graph more closely than they do in related sites such as Hi5, MySpace and Orkut (Yardi et al., 2008). In contrast to these less-structured sites, the technical and social design of Facebook encourages users to articulate existing relationships by joining networks, groups, and filling out profile fields. This articulation of one’s real-world networks might help establish some level of accountability among Facebook users, suggesting that they will be less likely to engage in deceptive practices.

Social Networking Sites as Public & Private Communication Tools

The findings show that 63% of the participants prefer to send private messages within the social networking system and 62% post messages to their friend’s page or wall. 32% of the respondents post comments to their friend’s blog and 28% use wink, poke, “e-props” and fives not only on Facebook and Hi5 but also on other social networks such as Tagged. The least used communication tool is bulletin or group message (used by 13% of respondents). In the qualitative study, fifteen out of twenty participants stated that they post messages to friends’ pages or wall to invite other friends to share opinions by replying to these messages. They also do so for fun and to tease their friends.
A young woman of 22 years said that she does not feel comfortable to solicit directly new friends so she prefers to post a casual invite on their page or wall. This may be an indication of cowardice or fear of receiving negative response. Online interaction has allowed more people to flirt and do things they would have never done or might never be able to do in real life situation. Social networks and chat rooms serve as a substitute for direct communication among shy and introvert people. These people prefer to use anonymous ways to interact behind their computer screen rather than engage in personal interaction.

**Virtual friends’ vs. Real friends**

The rapid growth of social networking sites and their popularity among young people is due to the Web 2.0 technology which allowed self-expression, communication and user interaction online. This technology is not unique to social networking sites but has also helped in the development of other
interactive applications such as user-generated content (UGC) sites like YouTube where people can upload, share and download contents as well as post comments and share opinions with other users. Another example is Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as Second Life; which is a virtual world enabling its users called ‘Residents’ to interact with each other through avatars.

According to Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007), such web-based services have allow people to:

- Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system
- Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and
- View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system

According to 42% of the participants, friend lists are one of the most important features in social networks. Therefore it is important to understand what kind of relationship is being developed online, is it existing relationship or newly developed online friendship? A young woman aged 25 who uses both Facebook and Hi5 said that she never receives friend requests on Facebook compared to Hi5 where she receives friend requests regularly from unknown people. This contributes to the growth of her friendlist with 350 people she hardly knows and who have never contacted her.

It is observed that most profile pages of Mauritian users on Hi5 contain more than three hundred friends which in real life are impossible to have. W. Reader (2007) of Sheffield Hallam University remarks that: “the advent of online SNS like Myspace and Facebook is changing the average number of

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5 An avatar is a computer user's representation of himself/herself or alter ego, whether in the form of a three-dimensional model used in computer games, a two-dimensional icon (picture) used on Internet forums and other communities
friends people have, with some users befriending literally thousands of others”. And according to R. Dunbar: “we can maintain stable social relationships with only 150 people, but I think today’s social web allows for a much greater number”.

Out of 100 respondents from the quantitative survey, 47% stated that they have met virtual friends whom they have initially befriended in social networks. They were hesitant to say that they meet for dating. From the qualitative study with ten men and women, five males and three females admit that social networks enable them to find a date whom they meet consequently. This period of life is generally considered to be a time of great change on many levels, specially with the biological changes associated with puberty. These changes include dramatic shifts in the shape of the body, increases in hormones, and changes in brain architecture which are themselves directly linked to changes in sexual interest, cognitive capacities, and physical capacities (Jacquelynne, 2009).

The Role of Ethnicity in SNS

Different social networks have acquired popularity in different places around the world (e.g. Cyworld in Japan and Orkut in India). This popularity has also contributed to the density of an ethnic group using a particular social network. The 2007 Northwestern University found that college students’ choice of social networking sites is related to their race, ethnicity and parents’ education. The study reveals that Facebook is the social networking site of choice for white students whereas Hispanic students prefer MySpace.

This survey showed that most SNS users in Mauritius are Indo-Mauritians (46%) followed by people categorised as General Population (22%), Muslims (20%), Sino Mauritians (10%) and Bahai believers
(2%). Informal conversations with the participants have helped to uncover a demarcation between Facebook and Hi5. Facebook users are acquainted with the people they have in their friend lists and which consist of friends from different ethnic groups whereas in Hi5, users are more into choosing new friends according to ethnic groups. This tendency has been observed with younger adults of 19 to 24 years old especially female users because in their mind this new relationship with a male of their ethnic group might simply be a first step to build a love relationship in the future which is in line with the findings of a study done in 2008⁶.

Conclusion

The popularity of social networking sites is continuously growing by winning more adepts around the world and working on better service features. It has quickly begun to work its way into the lives of people, changing the way people use the Internet and engage with each other. The SNS wave encompasses all age groups but the reason put forward by users who join SNS are mainly personal. The young people, in particular, are the quicker ones in adopting this new technology. They are the first to exploit its opportunities but have to be conscious and manage the associated risks.

The study tries to find out the underlying reasons that could attract such a mass of young population towards SNS. Despite modernisation, Mauritius is a country where conservative cultural barriers still prevail. Faced with such a reality, young people find in the SNS a realm for expression of desire, feelings, emotions, ideas and opinions.

Interestingly, out of the 19 to 29 age group studied, a progressive line was skewed towards the younger ones of 19 to 24 years as heavy users who would access their favourite SNS in their spare time. The

⁶Meeajane, I. 2008, Le Role des Réseaux Sociaux dans la construction identitaire et la sociabilité des adolescents à Maurice (dissertation)
strong percentage of young users aged 19 to 24 was also significant on Hi5, although they were users of both Facebook and Hi5. Along with friendships and keeping family ties, they were keener to enhance profiles and playing with Hi5 “add-ons”. As for the 25 to 29 age group, they were seen to be mostly Facebook as users in quest of stability and seriousness.

Another important finding in this study is a high rate of female users both in terms of volume and activity. The most active category on all social networks are young women between 19 to 24, at times as a simple hobby for these young women and other times as a thirst for relationship. This may partially be explained by the nature of our patriarchal-based society where norms and traditions are imposed upon women. This trend has been observed in most Asian families who still hold beliefs that girls should rarely or should simply not be allowed to go out with boy friends and not even go to any pubs or restaurants at night.

In such cases, young women found in SNS, a way-out to share feelings, express freely their voice and opinion, interact with other people and even date with men online. Social networks act as a medium of communication to the outer world providing a chance to build relationships and at the same time to be on the safe side by respecting societal limits imposed on them. SNS enable them to have open discussions on any topic of their concern. They can even go to the extent of exploring and experiencing sexual adventures often without realizing that SNS can as well be the ground for sexual predators.

Another aspect is the focus on ethnicity among young women where they mostly befriend men of the same ethnic group. The reason might be that they tend to believe that these relationships could last longer and turn into a real love story hereafter. Unfortunately, their naiveté make them often-times easy preys to online predators. As for men, they do not exhibit preferences in terms of ethnicity as they are interested in flirting rather than seeking a serious relationship.


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