

Social Networking

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ABSTRACT

Social networks constitute the greatest global information platform on the Internet today. They have become an indispensable part of our daily lives as people spend more time socializing on the Internet. They have witnessed their collective fortunes rise as they become ubiquitous in our lives. The penetration of these technologies into the popular culture has been pervasive. However, creating online social networks raises privacy concerns of possible misuse. This paper provides a brief introduction to social networking and its diverse applications.

KEYWORDS: social networking, social networking sites, social media, social software

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet has rapidly evolved from being merely an information sharing platform to being a social networking platform used by individuals to share content, opinions, and information. Social networking is a global phenomenon that has revolutionized how people interact with each other. It affects nearly every aspect of our life: education, communication, employment, politics, healthcare, social relationships, and personal productivity.

A social networking service (SNS) is an Internet-based platform used in building and developing social relations among people. It provides means by which users can interact online with people of similar interests, whether it be for romantic or social purpose. It allows users to share emails, instant messaging, online comments, wikis, digital photos and videos, and post blog entries. It also offers people with disabilities a chance to make their thoughts and opinions known in a virtual environment.

Social networks serve dual roles as both the suppliers and the consumers of content. They provide the user with a choice of who can view their profile. A profile is generated from answers to questions, such as age, location, interests, etc. Some sites allow users to upload pictures, add multimedia content or modify the look and feel of the profile, post blogs, comment on postings, compile and share list of contacts. To protect user privacy, social networks typically have controls that allow users to choose who can view their profile, contact them, add them to their list of contacts, and so on.

POPULAR SOCIAL WEBSITES

Major modern SNSs include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Google+, and MySpace. These and others are illustrated in Figure 1 [1].

- **Facebook:** Facebook was first introduced in 2004 as a Harvard social networking site, expanding to other universities and eventually to everyone. It became the largest social networking site in 2009. It remains the largest photo sharing site. Marketing strategists have found Facebook to be useful because it covers a range of personal and organizational interests.
- **Twitter:** Twitter was founded in 2006 by Odeo, Inc and was originally only for Odeo Inc employees and family members. It became a public network in 2006. Twitter provides a real-time, Web-based service which enables users to post brief messages for other users and to comment on other user posts. Tweets are extracted from Twitter. A tweet is a small message of no more than 140 characters that users create in order to communicate thoughts. Microblogging is a newer blog option made popular by Twitter.
- **YouTube:** This is a video sharing platform where many people can discover, watch, and share user-generated videos. It is a website of participatory culture.
- It has become the most successful Internet website providing a short video sharing service since its establishment in early 2005. Since YouTube is a Google property, to sign up for a YouTube account requires a Google account.

- **LinkedIn:** This is a professional network that provides a platform for professionals to participate in networking with each other. By setting up an account on LinkedIn one can link with professional individuals of similar interests. LinkedIn remains the most popular social networking site for organizations to recruit new employees.
- **MySpace:** This social networking site bases its existence on advertisers who are paying for page views. It has a lot that users could do. There are MySpace sites in United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia.
- These are just a few of the social networking options available on the Internet today. Others include Instagram, China-based Renren, Friendster, Vox, Bebo, LiveJournal, and flickr. The impact of these modern social networks on social, health, political, and economic arenas has far surpassed the expectations of many. Many experts see the future of social networking applications in smaller, tailored, or specialized private systems [2].

APPLICATIONS

Social networking applications have become important services that provide Internet-based platforms for their users to interact socially. Common applications involve computer-mediated social interaction, education, business, finance, healthcare, politics, religion, and crowdsourcing.

- **Social Interaction:** Social networking sites facilitate computer-mediated social interaction and make it possible to connect people who share interests and activities across political, economic, and geographic borders. They provide a modern form of entertainment. People use them to meet new friends, find old friends, locate people with similar interests, and staying in touch with old acquaintances. They also provide an online environment for people to communicate and exchange personal information for dating purposes. Some job seekers use social networks in their job search increasing their chances of receiving job offers and finding gainful employment [3].
- **Education:** Social networks are impacting the way students and educators engage in learning. They are now used for learning, educator professional development, and content sharing. Scientific communities use social media to exchange knowledge. Researchers and librarians use social networks frequently to maintain professional relationships and share ideas. Social media can become research and learning networks. Social networking media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are widely used at many universities with each university having at least a page on a site [4]. Privacy, real friendship, time-consumption, and miscommunication are challenges facing education through the social networking. On the other hand, flexibility, repeatability, convenience, and accessibility are the key benefits [5].
- **Business:** Social networking between businesses is another great application. It can be an effective promotional tool for businesses, entrepreneurs, actors, musicians, or artists. Companies use social networking sites in five major ways: to create brand awareness, as an online reputation management tool, for recruiting, to learn about new technologies and competitors, and to intercept potential prospects [6]. Social networking sites help businesses to advertise their products, recognize consumer's needs, and gather opinions on diverse

viewpoints. New opportunities for global finance are created through the use of virtual currency in social networks. Social networks allow consumers to share their personal experience which help early adopters make informed purchase decision and reduce the risk of buying a new product.

- **Healthcare:** Social media enables different types of social connectivity among different stakeholders such as doctors, patients, and caregivers. Social networking is an effective tool for teaching and learning for doctors and nurses as SNS is used to provide new information from research and assist in providing quality care to their patients. Virtually all aspects of healthcare can be inherently affected by these technologies. Examples of health-related social networking sites include *healthchapter*, *Inspire*, *DailyStrength*, *ToolsToLife*, *Health Care 2.0*, *LiveStrong*, *Everydayhealth*, *revolutionhealth*, *MyCancerPlace*, *Planet Cancer*, *No Surrender*, *Prostate Cancer Infolink*, *Psych Central*, *sobercircle*, *diabetic connect*, and *DailyPlate* [7].
- **Politics:** Social networking seems to be impacting political life and political movements across the globe. It has influenced voting and induced social changes, unrest, uprisings and revolutions all over the world. Social networking will make government to be more accountable and enable citizens to exercise freedom of speech [8]. It also helps to engage people in the democratic process and to get the younger generations involved in politics. For example, Barack Obama successfully incorporated social media in his campaign in 2008, engaging people, empowering volunteers, and vastly increasing donors. Obama became the first US president to fully understand the power of social media.

CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

As social media attempt to fulfill cognitive, affective, personal, and social needs, it is in turn affecting everyday life, including relationships, family, marriage, school, church, and entertainment. Like any other technology, the problematic use of social networking media and its adverse consequences have become prevalent. Although a minimum age is required for joining SNSs, many children/students misrepresent their real ages and join. These students learn about safety and privacy issues in a haphazard way and suffer from training deficiency [9].

Studies have shown that the use of social networks among students, particularly in Africa, constitutes distractions because students tend to spend a good deal of time on the networks. In the past, some regarded social networking as a distraction and offered no educational benefit for students in junior or high school. So blocking these social networks was considered a form of protection for students against wasting time, addiction, sexual predators, cyberbullying, and privacy theft. Others feel that the schools that block social networking services are preventing students from learning the skills the youths need in navigating the digital world with confidence and therefore regard blocking social networking sites as counterproductive.

Some have contended that social networking is an impoverished version of conventional face-to-face social interactions, and it produces negative outcomes such as loneliness and depression for users who use the technology heavily. Social networking services have been used for bullying purposes and child pornography. Since there are no

limitations as to what individuals can potentially post online, people can post offensive remarks or pictures.

Privacy on social networking sites is an important issue. For example, third parties often use information (such as personal information and profile) posted on social networks for a variety of purposes. Privacy may involve whether or not companies should have the right to look at employees' social network profiles. Privacy concerns differ between users according to their gender and personality. Some studies have indicated that women often have more privacy concerns than men.

Another dark side of SSN is that they are becoming increasingly popular tools for methods of ending relationships and friendships. We must ensure that SSN does not continue to be bastardized by bad influences that prey on the vulnerable.

Culture plays a major role on how people interact on SNS because it defines norms and rules on what is accepted and what is not accepted. Culture can limit the people to whom a person can interact if they want to withhold their identity. For example, a global culture has emerged in India as a result of the SNS; the technological changes have not only changed the quality of life but also the social architect of society [10].

CONCLUSION

Social networking has changed the way people communicate, share information, and interact socially. It allows individuals to connect and socialize with others, regardless of location. As the popularity of social networking increases, new applications for the technology are often being observed. A new trend is the social internet networking of machines. The ultimate goal in this evolution is creating the Internet of Things (IoT) and social networks among machines [11].

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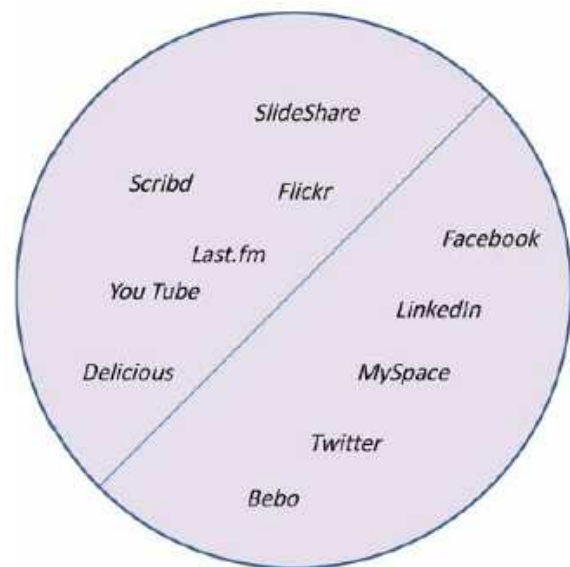


Figure 1 A map of some popular social networking sites [1].