

Social Networking Sites - Impact on Social Relationships in Darjeeling Hills

Smriti Rai is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism at St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling.

Abstract

Social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Hi5, Bebo, Twitter, and Google+ have attracted millions of users since the moment of their introduction. Many users have integrated these sites into their daily practices. The hills of Darjeeling have not been left out of this social networking phenomenon too since the introduction of Orkut in India in 2007. However none of these sites are equally popular across cultures, not only across nations but regions too. These websites help in building relationships and helps us to communicate with our surroundings. This article focuses on the computer-mediated communication and its need to evaluate the cultural and behavioral issues of the people in the hills due to exposure of these sites. Not much research has been done on social networking sites in the hills. Therefore, an overview of these sites which have caught the attention of many in the hills is necessary in order to analyze and reflect on the current status on the impact of communication and the cultural aspect of the region. The goal of this article is to see the impact of social networking sites among the people of the hills and to define areas and directions for future research. Observation and online data is undertaken into research performed in area of impact of social networking sites.

Keywords: Social networking, Facebook, Chat, Twitter, Darjeeling

Introduction

Social networking sites, as new trend in information and communication technologies world, have come a long way since the initial efforts of computer-mediated communication. The role of information and communication technologies has been growing in the economic and social life recently. Today, it is the way the 21st century communicates.

What is interesting to note here is that Darjeeling and its subdivisions which have been a neglected region for basic amenities has surprisingly been very techno savvy region. The introduction of internet in 1997 (Compuset 2010), cell phones in 1998,¹ Yahoo Chats, MSN and hence social networking sites have been an interesting leap towards the information development of the place. Today internet serves as one of the major and integral source of information for urban region of Darjeeling- Darjeeling town, Kalimpong, Kurseong. The number of internet cafes in these areas has increased invariably with well connected lines such as broadband, wireless and mobile phones (Wikipedia.com, 2010). The first broadband service was started by BSNL in 2003, in this region which gave rise to various broadband services and finally technology like net connect with USB facility has been introduced in this region from 2008.²

1 Reliance Office, Darjeeling, 2010.

2 Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) Office, 2010.

The region has been targeted by major mobile networks like: Reliance, BSNL, Airtel, Aircel, Idea, Vodafone, MTS and Uninor. But can these technological factors relate to the change in the communication process of the people of the hills? Can these factors attribute to the change of culture among the people in the region? Scientists proved that culture not only affects various areas of human activity but depends on economical growth as well.³

Studies on whether websites should be localized or standardized⁴ point to one general conclusion - that web content needs to be adapted to the different cultures of its targeted consumers.⁵ Currently not much research is being done with respect to cultural differences in social networking sites as to date, the bulk of social networking site research has focused on impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structure, online/offline connections, and privacy issues (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Definition of social networking sites

According to J. A. Ryan⁶ the concept of 'the virtual community' had been introduced in Howard Rheingold's (1993) landmark novel by the same name. He then later suggested the more apt term "online social network" (2000). Social Networking sites are based on Web 2.0 tool which facilitates the users to have a two way communication and post their feedback, rather than just serving as one way process of communication. Researchers use quite a number of terms, which are related to social networking sites:

Internet Social Networking: a concept of Social Networking on the Internet which allows the Internet users to extend or maintain their social network.⁷

Social Web sites: defined as those Web sites that make it possible for people to form online communities, and share user-created contents (Kim et al, 2010). These websites allow users to have a two way communication in contrast to the traditional websites which acts as a one way communication. For example, the groups in sites such as, Hotmail, Gmail, online news sites, and dating sites do not, at least today, meet the definition of social Web sites, since they do not allow the users to form communities.

3 U. Ubius & R. Alas, *Organizational Culture Types as Predictors of Corporate Social Responsibility*, 2009.

4 A. Faiola, & S. A. Matei, "Cultural Cognitive Style and Web Design: Beyond a Behavioral Inquiry into Computer-Mediated Communication", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2005)1, 375-394. See also N. Singh, H. Zhao, & X. Hu, "Analyzing the cultural content of web sites: A cross-national comparison of China, India, Japan, and US", *International Marketing Review*, 22 (2005)2, 129-146.

5 N. Singh, V. Kumar & D. Baack, *Adaptation of cultural content: evidence from B2C e-commerce firms*, 2005.

6 J. A. Ryan, *The Virtual Campfire: Ethnography of Online Social Networking*, Wesleyan University, 2008.

7 D. Richter, K. Riemer, J. vom Brocke, & S. Große Böckmann, *Internet Social Networking - Distinguishing the Phenomenon from its Manifestations in Web Sites*, 2009.

Social networking services: are online communities that focus on bringing together people with similar interests or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others (Marcus & Krishnamurthi, 2009).

Most popular definition is proposed by D. M. Boyd and N. B. Ellison (2008): Social Network Sites are "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) 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" (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

D. Beer⁸ criticized this definition on the grounds that it is too wide and includes all sites that feature social network of any kind. He also disagreed that social networking sites are only for making new relations.

Susan Greenfield, DPhil, Professor of Pharmacology at the University of Oxford, stated the following in her Feb. 12, 2009 speech to the UK House of Lords:

Social networking sites might tap into the basic brain systems for delivering pleasurable experience. However, these experiences are devoid of cohesive narrative and long-term significance. As a consequence, the mid-21st century mind might almost be infantilized, characterized by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathise and a shaky sense of identity.

Social websites are posed as an alternative medium to reach out to the people whom you call friends. This article does not propose to work on the above mentioned definition but rather see a different perspective on the usage of the social networking sites in building relationships across the regions and also crossing political, economic, and geographic borders. It will, therefore, talk about the pros and cons of using social networking sites as a medium to build social relationships among the people of the hills whose population is 2,997,40 (Census, 2008).

History of social networking sites⁹









The first social networking websites was established in the year 1997 called Sixdegrees.com. This company was the first of its kind; it allowed user to list their profiles, provide a list of friends and then contact them. There are also other elements that makes at Social networking websites. For instance, dating sites required users to give their profiles but they could not share other people's websites (Cassidy, 2006) 1999 saw the beginning of Live Journal in order to facilitate one way exchanges of journals between friends. Cyworld in Korea added some social networking features in the year 2001, followed by Lunar Storm in Sweden during the same year. They included things

8 D. Beer, *Social network(ing) sites revisiting the story so far: A response to Danah Boyd & Nicole Ellison*, 2008.

9 URL: <http://www.articlesbase.com/internet-articles/history-of-socialnetworking-websites-1908457.html#ixzz10SWBftHm> (accessed on 4/May/2013).

like diary pages and friends lists. Additionally, Ryze.com also established itself in the market with the purpose of linking business men within San Francisco. The Company was under the management of Friendster, LinkedIn, Tribe.net and Ryze. However, Tribe.net specialized in the business world but Friendster initially did well; this did not last for long.

The most significant companies in the history of social networking websites are as follows

Facebook		MySpace	
Orkut		Cyworld	
Twitter		Hi5	
Bebo		Friendster	

Some facts about Social Networking sites from 2006 - 2010 (Nielsen Net ratings)

- Social networks now represent the fastest growing Internet segment which is 3 times the rate of overall Internet growth (2009).
- Social networking sites are growing at the rate of 47% annually, reaching 45% of total web users (2006).
- Social networking and blogging are now the 4th most popular online activities, according to Nielsen's recently released Global Faces and Networked Places report (2009).
- 67% of the global online population now visits a social network site, and this sector accounts for 10% of all Internet time (Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, India and Italy are the fastest growing segments).
- Social networks and blogs are now the 4th most popular online category - ahead of personal Email.

- Member sites now account for 1 in every 11 minutes online.
- Orkut.com in Brazil (operated by Google) has the largest domestic online reach (70%) of any social network anywhere in the world, whereas Facebook has the highest average time per visitor among the 75 most popular brands online worldwide. However, the amount of time spent on Facebook.com increased by more than 566% in only one year (Nielsen, 2010).

Social Networking sites in academia

Twitter

According to the web site Social Media Defined,¹⁰ Twitter is a microblogging application that is more or less a combination of instant messaging and blogging.

*Twitter in Academia*¹¹

Back-channel chat - This enables the participants at conferences to provide feedback regarding conference proceedings to both other conference participants and to people who cannot attend the conference (Hargadon, 2009); or preceding a conference via keywords (Parry, 2008). Twitter can be used during a webinar to post specific keywords denoted by a hash (#facebook) and then participants search on those keyword to see what other people in the webinar (at other locations) were saying about the topic. (Mullings, 2009).

More recently, researchers from Penn State University have explored bringing "backchannel" up front in classrooms using what they call "ClassCommons," to increase students' participation in large size classes.

Twitter is also widely used today by audiences to create backchannels at technology conferences. When audience members add an event hash tag to their tweets (for example, #w2e was the hashtag used for the Web 2.0 Expo New York in 2009), anyone can run a Twitter search to review all the backchannel tweets related to that event.¹²

Class chatter - that allows students to continue discussion topics outside the classroom.

Follow professionals who are actively engaged in particular topics or events. For example, students can follow any number of correspondents at BBC, CNN, and other news outlets

Writing assignments where students build on each other's tweets to generate a story or poem.

10 URL: <http://www.socialmediadefined.com> (accessed on 6/May/2013).

11 URL: <http://www.scribd.com/Can-we-use-Twitter-for-educational-activities>(accessed on 6/May/2013).

12 URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Backchannel> (accessed on 6/May/2013).

Collaboration with students from other countries regarding specific topics of political or historical significance

Use *Twitter* to "track" a word. This will subscribe you to any post that contains said word. So, for example, a student may be interested in how a particular word is used. They can track the word and see the varied phrases in which people use it. Or, they can track an event, a proper name, or a movie title. (Send the message "track _____" to Twitter).

Storytelling - George Mayo, an eighth grade English teacher, recently used Twitter as a tool to collaboratively write a story with his students. Mayo invited his students and students around the world via his Many Voices Twitter account to add to an ongoing story with individual "tweets." After six weeks and the help of more than 100 students and six different countries, the story was finished.

Twitterfall (*www.twitterfall.com*)

This is a UK-based website designed to allow users of the social networking site Twitter to view upcoming trends and patterns posted by users in the form of tweets. The project was founded by David Somers and Tom Brearley. In February 2009, it was revealed that the site was projected onto a wall at The Daily Telegraph to allow journalists there to view breaking news posted by users to Twitter. It takes advantage of Twitter's search trends (listed on the Twitter search page), which reveal the topics that are currently most popular and most discussed at that time. Twitter has become more and more important in news coverage, such as the US Airways plane crash-landing in the Hudson and the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008.¹³ In May 2009, ITV announced that they were taking advantage of Twitterfall on their site during the FA Cup Final.¹⁴ During the Iran election protests of 2009, it was used to follow the events as they unfolded.¹⁵

Twitvision (*www.twitvision.com*)

Twitvision and Twitvision 3D allow you to GeoTag users and their posts to know where certain topics are being discussed

Freshlogic Atlas

You could type in a keyword and watch the results in real time

13 Charles Arthur, "How Twitter and Flickr recorded the Mumbai terror attacks". *The Guardian*. URL: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/nov/27/mumbai-terror-attacks-twitter-flickr> (accessed on 6/May/2013).

14 Ben Ayers, "ITV taps into social media for FA Cup Final". ITV. URL: <http://www.itv.com/PressCentre/Pressreleases/ProgrammePressreleases/ITVtapsintosocialmediaforFACupFinal/default.html> (accessed on 6/May/2013).

15 URL: <http://psigrist.wordpress.com/2009/06/14/iran-elections-and-anargument-for-making-twitter-sustainable/> (accessed on 6/May/2013).

Historical tweets

Learn what it may have been like for historical figures to tweet

Tweetdeck

It is an application for Twitter. Like other Twitter applications it interfaces with the Twitter API to allow users to send and receive tweets. It is the most popular Twitter application with a 19% market share as of June 2009, following only the official Twitter.com website with 45.70% share for posting new status update. It also helps to create "groups" of students within the application making exchanging of ideas easier between the groups.

YouTube or twiddeo

Link to video files from Twitter to YouTube and twiddeo to share. This is becoming very popular among amateur and small time film makers to post their videos in order to get international accolades.

Facebook

Facebook is a social networking website that was originally designed for college students, but is now open to anyone 13 years of age or older. Facebook users can create and customize their own profiles with photos, videos, and information about themselves. Friends can browse the profiles of other friends and write messages on their pages.

Facebook Groups

With Facebook Groups, you can join and create class-centric groups and make up to 200 groups. Groups can be based around shared interests, activities, or anything you like.

Networked blog (www.networkedblogs.com)

NetworkedBlogs is a community of bloggers and blog lovers. Academic Networking could be done using this.

Academia (www.academia.edu)

This site helps academics follow the latest research in their field.

You can follow what academics in your field are working on

- the latest papers they are publishing
- talks they are giving
- blog posts and status updates they are writing

You can create a webpage on Academia.edu, and share your own research.

- list your research interests, and upload papers and talks
- get stats on paper views and downloads
- find what keywords people use to search for you on Google

Other Facebook like applications

You could create groups for discussions, researches and sharing of ideas.

URL: <http://www.inigral.com/products/schools.htm>

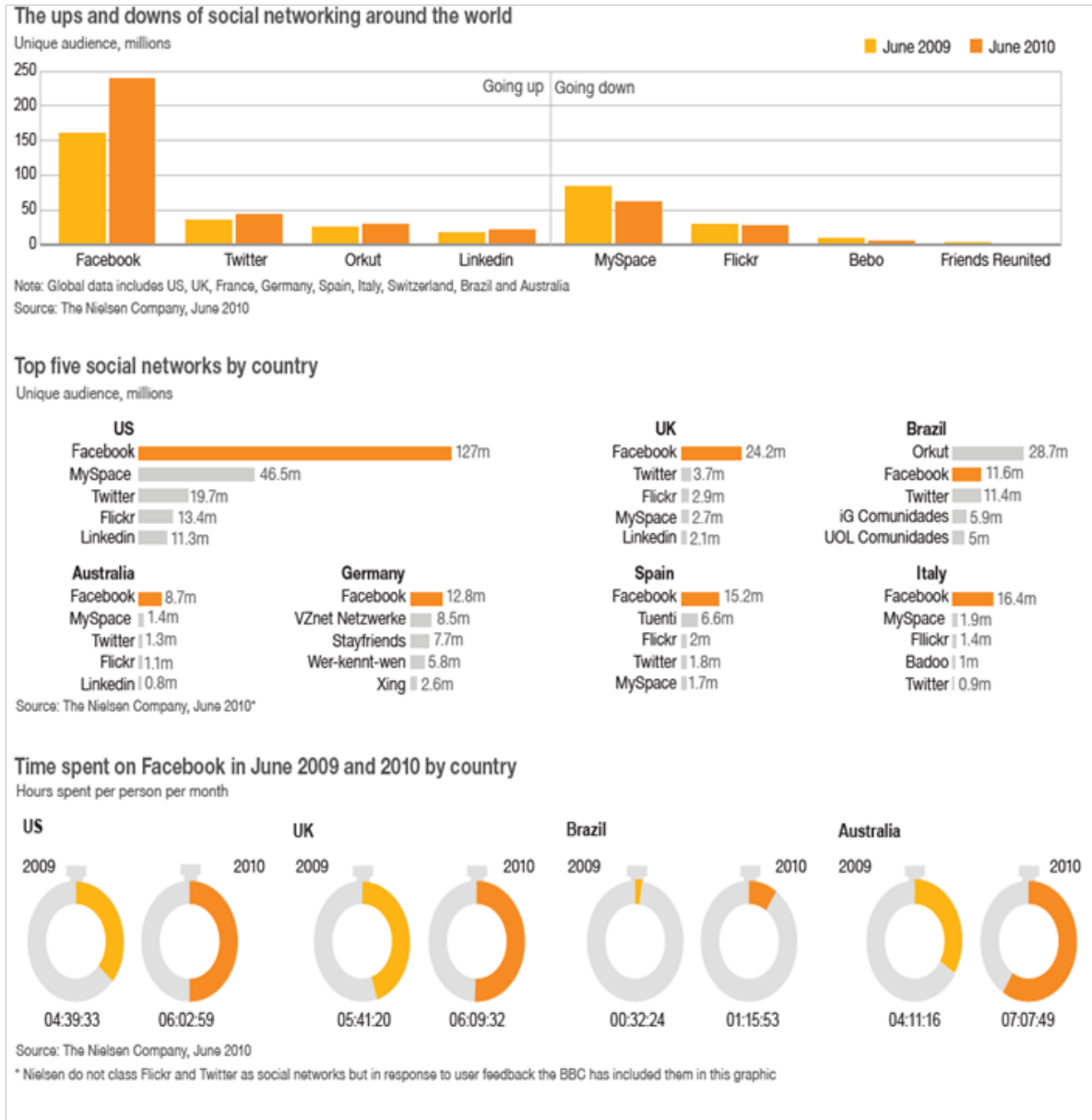
URL: <http://www.inigral.com/products/standardissimo.php>

Word Press

WordPress is web based software you could use to create a beautiful website or blog. It is both free and priceless at the same time.

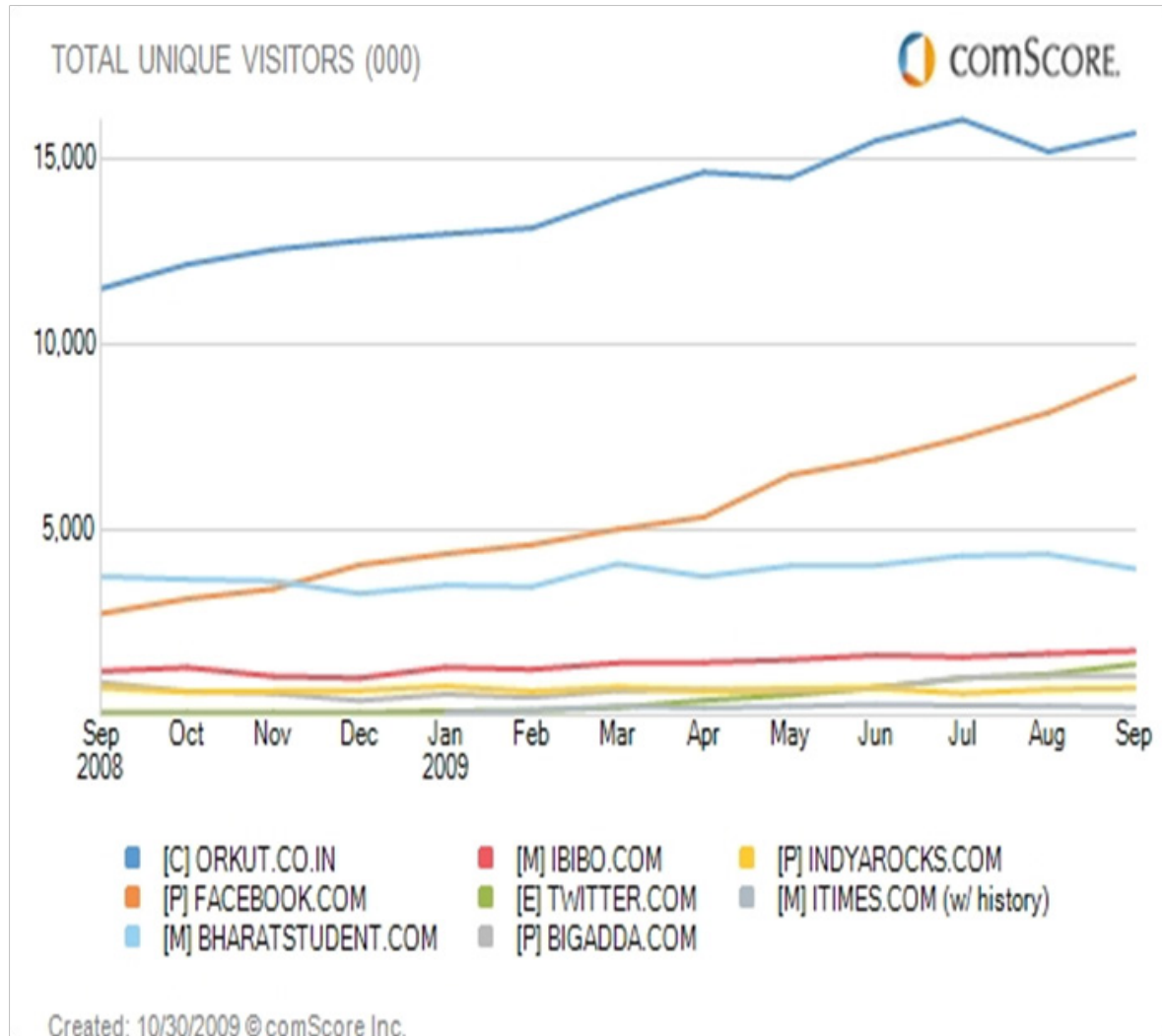
- A blog (an abridgment of the term 'web log') is a website, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse chronological order. 'Blog' can also be used as a verb, meaning to *maintain* or *add content to a blog*.
- The instructor posts various announcements, information, assignments, and abbreviated lessons for student reference
- More aptly called an interactive medium of study, students get an opportunity to express their opinions about a particular topic or subject posted for discussion over the net.
- Articles on various topics provide extensive knowledge on the subject. Students, in turn, post their comments on these articles.
- Used as a writing portfolio, blogs are found to be very helpful in expressing thoughts by students about their subject of study.
- Students find it very useful to post comments, throw questions to their instructor about the course and the subjects in particular and talk to fellow students about course progress and related benefits.
- Activities and presentations pertaining to a particular subject can be discussed over the net by way of blog posts.
- Students get to know each other, by not just chatting, but instead by responding to the posts offered by various students.
- As a means of evaluation, assignments are cross verified and the qualities of presentations are evaluated by fellow students positively by way of blog posts and related responses.

Popularity and time spent on social networking sites in 2010 in different countries¹⁶



16 Nielsen net Ratings 2009-2010, <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/global> (accessed on 6/May/2013).

Popularity of social networking sites in India, 2009

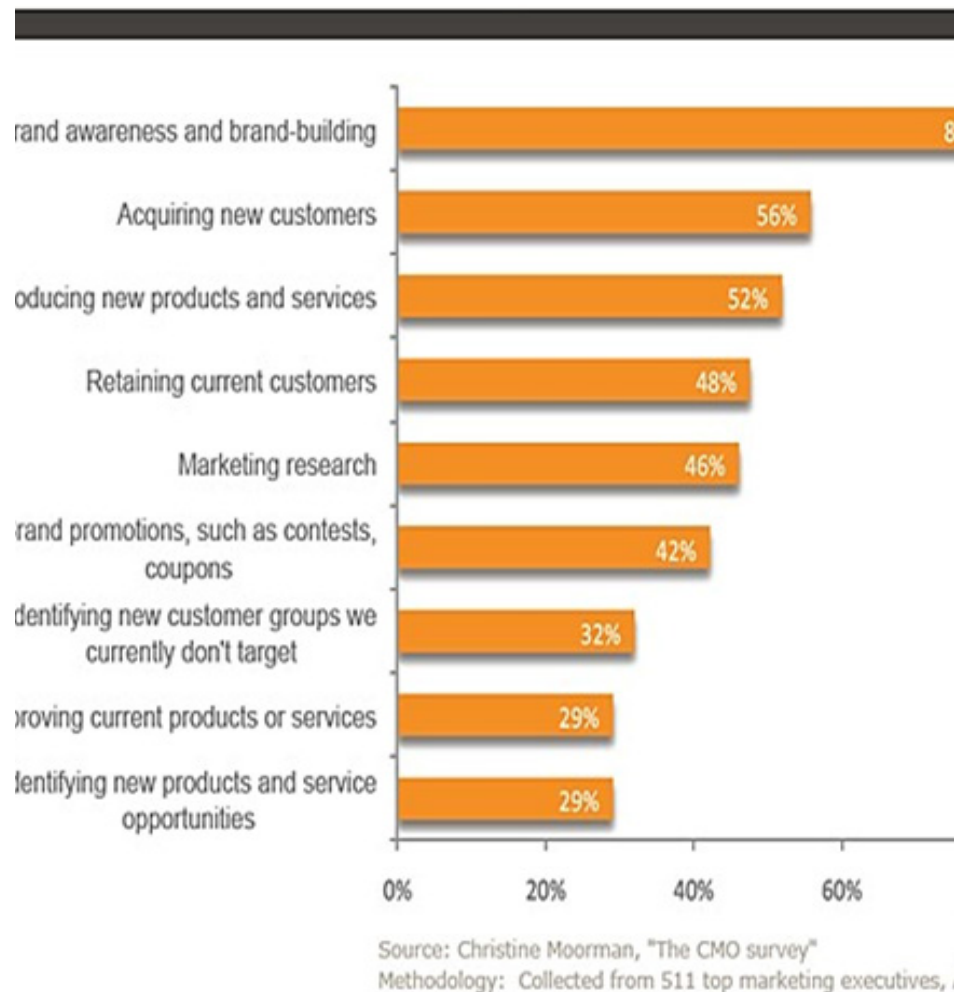


Advertisers' paradise

Social networking sites are becoming an advertisers' paradise and making you exposed to more and more advertisement as the time spent on these sites is much higher than any other forms of media. It also becomes easy for the advertisers to target the right kind of audience as they already have access to your personal information like your likes, dislikes, emails etc through the profiles in these sites.

Below is given the market for advertisers in social networking sites.

Percentage of Firms Using Social Media for Marketing Activities



Impact of Social Networking Sites in the Hills

Availability of internet: Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong have come a long way since the introduction of internet in 1997. An hour of internet used to cost Rs. 80, whereas today's advancement of technologies facilitates the use of internet to Rs. 20.¹⁷ Some websites which targets the local people like www.darjeelingtimes.com¹⁸, have become a path setter for the techno savvy internet users. With a humble start of the internet cafés around the region, the hills now can boast of well connected internet connections ranging from broadband, mobile internet and wireless communications.

17 Compuset Internet Café, Darjeeling, 2010.

18 The first online news portal from Darjeeling for the people of Darjeeling around the globe (since 2004).

This has paved the way for Darjeeling to break its isolation and connect with the world community through social networking sites.

These sites are basically used by the people as a strong medium of expression and most importantly as a democratic medium where the media has always been authoritative. Whether it be taking up of a cause, highlighting an event, a major time pass for the youth or staying connected with their friends - they play a major role in building relationships among the community. Using social networking sites also symbolizes the status of the people and makes you a part of the crowd, as a youth in Darjeeling says:

"Real-time communication platforms like Twitter and Facebook have spread the word about what's happening within these nations, long before the mainstream media prints the story. These tools have also created a level awareness we've never seen before."

For the people of Darjeeling, the assassination of the leader of Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League, Late Madan Tamang witnessed a major platform in the expression of their state of mind on 21st may, 2010. Joining for the cause also helps them to identify themselves as unique groups. Groups like Gorkhaland Awareness Campaign, Gorkha Mutu, Darjeeling wants peace and not Violence on facebook only helps in the expression of their identity to the world (facebook.com/group, 2010). It also serves as an alternative publicity platform for the local artists who post their videos, pictures, article on these sites in the absence of the commercial electronic media (facebook.com/videos, 2010).

Advantages of social networking sites¹⁹ in building social relationships in hills:

- Social networking sites like Facebook, Hi5, MySpace, Orkut have been great for catching up with long lost friends from school or local community. One of the reasons for this is migration of the people to make a good career outside the peripheral of the region. Staying connected through social networking sites have become an integral part of the lives of the people and they are religiously dedicated towards it.
- Social networking sites have paved the way for easier communication to your friends, family, or colleagues. For example, instead of meeting in a certain place, you and your friends could discuss a school activity by having a conference in a certain site that you are all members of, thus saving you time and effort.
- Virtual communities are also formed, which are composed of people connected together by common interests, purpose, and goal. People of different races also get to mingle with each other in just a few clicks. This is becoming even more

19 URL: <http://www.squidoo.com/pros-and-cons-of-social-networking-sites>. Also, see URL: http://www.timesleader.com/business/Pros_cons_and_the_potential_dangers_of_social_networking_sites_Tech_talk_Nick_delorenzo_09-22-2010.html (accessed on 6/May/2013).

important due to the demand of the separate state, Gorkhaland. The views and opinions expressed through social networking sites are helping to spread awareness otherwise in a controlled media where freedom of press still seems like a distant dream.

- The idea of socializing with millions of people of different backgrounds excites the internet users. This is one thing that one can hardly do outside the virtual world.* Looking from a business point of view, when one doesn't want to spend a lot of money on a website, nor maintain one, Social Networking sites like Facebook make it easy to tell people what's going on in your business, offering calendars, discussion boards, etc. - it's almost better than a basic website, and the advertiser is virtually guaranteed higher engagement from your audience. Especially when the hills are the neglected regions, they can be updated through advertisements and be in touch with the latest trends.

Disadvantages of social networking sites²⁰

- While social networking sites have become places for establishing connections and meeting friends, they have also become likely places for identity theft and fraud. Since the user has to provide certain information such as e-mail address, name, and location, others use this information and pretend to be you, especially when they are into illegal activities. The hill region is even more vulnerable: as ironically, the number of internet users may increase day by day, the ignorance on the part of these users regarding the information about cyber crime is not no prevalent among the internet users.
- An increasing number of users are teenagers who are susceptible to all kinds of dangers. The users in the hills are susceptible to these threats as they are mere users of these sites and not exposed to hackers. Carelessness can easily lead them to various kinds of threats such as cyberbullying. It has also become easier for someone to stalk, hack your account and harass you online. This became evident in an incident in Atlanta Georgia which was reported in an online news myfoxatlanta.com 21st september, 2010.

Updated: Tuesday, 21 Sep 2010, 6:47 AM EDT

Published : Tuesday, 21 Sep 2010, 5:08 AM EDT

By TACOMA PERRY/myfoxatlanta

ATLANTA, Ga. - Social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter may be fun for your child, but when intentions turn malicious, it's no laughing matter.

- That's what a Paulding County teen found out when he was arrested and charged with three felony counts of making terroristic threats after he posted on his Facebook page he was going use firearms on three of his classmates.

- The danger of social networks is exposure. Having large chunks of your life visible to co-workers and strangers can be a recipe for disaster. There are measures one can take to isolate some information from some friends, but in the end, the best way of avoiding problems is to simply watch what you post.
- Social networking sites are destabilizing trust when seen in a larger perspective. Applications such as Facebook, Readies Location Tool, Google Latitude and Foursquare are examples of such tracking technology, which can be used on a mobile phone. They allow people to monitor the location of their partners, friends, relatives and others in real time on an interactive map. In some cases, people thought tracking technology could be useful for providing evidence to a partner on their whereabouts. Some cases also thought the device could be used to covertly collect evidence against a potentially guilty partner. Accuracy aside, people were concerned about the potential for the technology to erode trust among friends and family. Users are working towards trusting a technology rather than trusting someone you're in a relationship with (ANI, Jul 29, 2010). However, the region is yet to receive these facilities where 3G technology has recently proliferated the market.
- One of the most ironic negatives regarding social networking sites is alienation (or perhaps isolation.) It seems a quick message to former friends in the form of text messages, emails and comments has replaced actually talking to them or going to see them. In some ways, the sites have allowed us to engage in "easy friendship," where relationships are computer-mediated communication and made more convenient. This is one of the major leaps towards being left alone when more and more families in the hills are opting for nuclear families. Working parents cannot give the desired attention to the children; hence, the children seek company of their friends via technology. Social networking sites are playing a major role among the young generation where they use it as an only medium of communication. Ironically, it has been brought to my notice that people living under the same roof/ building/ locality, find communicating via social networking sites much easier than face to face.
- Social networking sites may claim about creating communities which deals with common interests and hobbies, but the users are unaware of the fact that these sites are inculcating the feelings of groupism and making the people isolated from being compassionate towards other kinds too. This can be seen particularly in the hills where groups have been formed under social networking sites which talks about the superiority of one race than the other. This brings about an unhealthy relationship among people where they will want to belong to a certain group which may be an ego booster and if found outside the group may find themselves alienated.

Conclusion

Therefore these social networking sites have changed the way we communicate with the people around us. Face to face communication has been replaced by quick messages, emails and comments over these sites. Interpersonal relationships are defined through

social networking sites as people find it infinitely easier to send a quick, one-line message to a friend, just to see how he/she is doing, than to pick up the phone, call or to go and see them face-to-face. They tend to find difficulty in having face to face relationship as they are bounded by disparate schedules and think about upsetting their friends if they called them at a wrong time. They would also think about not getting the desired response from their friends whom they want to be in touch.

However, in regards to the age of the users of the social networking sites and their impact on social relationships, it all depends on the internet literacy of the user. Therefore I agree with Michael Marshall who pointed out in an article titled "Why Facebook Is Good for You" published in the New Scientist (Mar 6, 2009):

Using the internet and social networking sites actually appears to reduce loneliness and improve well-being, as was reported as long ago as 2002 in the *Journal of Social Issues*. As for social networking sites being a poor alternative to real-world socializing, surveys reported at a conference in 2006 indicate that Facebook users mostly use it to maintain relationships with people they meet offline. But it is only limited to those people who are computer literate.