

Perception and Use of Social Networking Sites by the Students of Calicut University

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perception and use of social networking sites by the students of Calicut University, Kerala. Structured questionnaires were used to collect data from a representative sample of 150 students. The study found that a majority of the students were aware of social networking sites and use these sites for friendly communication. Orkut was the most popular and used social networking site than Facebook and MySpace. A number of students visited social networking sites twice a week and always send scraps and meet new friends. Though the students indicated that lack of security and privacy are the main concerns of social networking sites, a majority of them used their real names and photos in their profiles.

Keywords: Internet, World Wide Web, social Web, social networking sites, communication, Web 2.0

1. INTRODUCTION

Advances in the World Wide Web (WWW) have greatly changed the way people access information and communicate with each other. The evolution of the Web has led to the development of a collection of technologies known as Web 2.0. The term Web 2.0 was coined by O'Reilly Media in 2004 and refers to web applications, which provide for online collaboration, participation, social networking, interaction and user-generated content sharing¹⁻³. Social networking sites are profile-based websites that allow users to maintain social relationships by viewing, visiting, and sharing their lists of social connections with other members. These sites can be used to build community-based personal websites, online discussions forums, chat rooms and other social spaces accessible to users for exchange of personal content and communication^{4,5}. Examples of social networking sites include Orkut, Facebook, and MySpace.

Social networking sites offer a wide variety of resources and services such as messaging, blogging, sharing photos, audios and videos, group discussion, and distribution of applications. Youngsters, especially students, are the avid users of these sites. Social

networking sites enable students to get in touch with their friends, faculty members, and institutions and allow them to connect with more friends. Students can use these sites to create and share their identities and profiles that may include personal information, pictures, blog entries, videos and music clips. They can join groups and communicate with other students and faculty members by commenting on topics or by introducing topics that they hoped would encourage discussion. They can share information, exchange files and seek comments, advice, give opinions, and suggestions, and ideas instantly and interactively. Students can also use these sites as a platform to connect with long lost classmates, batchmates and family members. These sites provide an online platform for students of diverse backgrounds and nationalities. Security and privacy are the topmost concerns of social networking sites. This is mainly because social networking sites allow members to display their personal information such as their name, address, phone number, e-mail, and photo.

The present study is an attempt to understand the perception and use of social networking sites by the students of Calicut University. Calicut University is a

higher educational institution established on 23 July 1968 with the objective of developing human resources in the northern districts of Kerala by extending higher education and promoting research in all areas of development with particular emphasis on technology, art, and culture of Kerala.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

There have been a number of research studies on the use of social networking sites. Park⁶ studied the use of social networking sites by undergraduates, graduates, and faculty members at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea. The analysis indicated that the three groups of users demonstrated distinct patterns of use of social networking sites. Although the undergraduates used the profile service more than the community service, graduates used the community service more than the profile service. Most of the faculty members were not active users. Mikami⁷, *et al.* examined online communication on social networking sites in a longitudinal sample of 92 youths. The study found that youths at age group of 13-14 years based on gender, ethnicity and parental income were using social networking sites more than at age group of 20-23 years. Subrahmanyam⁸, *et al.* conducted a study to assess the use of online and offline social networking sites among the college students of a large urban university in Los Angeles. The study revealed that the students often used social networking sites to connect and reconnect with their friends and family members.

Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert⁹ studied college students' social networking experiences on Facebook. Results of the study revealed that students use Facebook approximately 30 minute throughout the day as part of their daily routine. Students communicated on Facebook using a one-to-many style, in which they were the creators disseminating content to their friends. Shaheen¹⁰ investigated the use of social networks and political activism by the students of three universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi during the political crises and the emergency imposed by the Government of Pakistan on 3 November 2007.

The investigation found that the use of social networking sites by the students promoted democracy, freedom of expression, and greater awareness about their rights during the political crises in Pakistan. Ellison¹¹, *et al.* identified relationships between undergraduates use of Facebook and three types of social capital. The study revealed that Facebook enhances social capital formation more through weak ties than through strong ties and may psychologically help students increase their life satisfaction and self-esteem. Hargittai¹² found that students gender, race, ethnicity, and parental educational background have

significant relationships with the adoption of a social networking site. Golder, Wilkinson and Huberman¹³ studied the use of Facebook by US college students. The study indicated that the students had incorporated the use of Facebook into their study routines, exchanging messages with friends, predominantly from the same college.

Keenan and Shiri¹⁴ conducted an exploratory study on how social networking sites encourage sociability. Four social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter) were examined from a users' perspective. They found that the social networking sites use a number of different approaches to encourage sociability amongst their users. While facebook promotes privacy representing 'real world' networks in a Web environment, while MySpace promotes publicity and representing both real world and virtual networks in a Web environment. LinkedIn and Twitter focus on more specific aspects of community and technology, respectively. Pfeil, Arjan and Zaphiris¹⁵ investigated age differences and similarities in the use of the social networking site, MySpace.

They found that teenagers have larger networks and friends compared to older users of MySpace. Majority of teenage users' friends were in their own age range, whilst older people's network of friends tends to had a more diverse age distribution. Thelwall¹⁶ investigated the characteristics of social network comments and found that the comments were normally for general friendship maintenance and were typically short. They contained a combination of standard spelling, apparently accidental mistakes, slangs, fragmented sentences and interjections. In general, the use of social networking sites have been studied and discussed at different levels. However, there seems to be little research that assesses the perception and use of social networking sites by students in developing countries like India. Most of the studies have been conducted in developed countries. This study provides an insight into the perception and use of social networking sites by students in the Calicut University in India.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

To meet the main aim and specific objectives of the study, a quantitative research methodology along with a comprehensive literature review were employed. The universe of the study was 867 students of the different departments of the Calicut University. Structured questionnaires were employed to collect data from a representative sample of 150 students. A total of 134 filled in questionnaires were received back, which comes to an overall response rate of 89.3 per cent. The data were analysed and inferences were made based on standard statistical methods.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Awareness About Social Networking Sites

Web-based social networking or online social networking is a new way of communication on the Internet. It is a form of interactive communication between persons or groups of persons or organisations. The students were asked to indicate the awareness about social networking sites and the responses have been summarised in Table 1. The analysis shows that a majority (75.4 per cent) of the students were aware of Orkut and YouTube (62.7 per cent). About half (52.2 per cent) of the students were aware of Blogs. A good number of the students were aware of Facebook (38.8 per cent), and Hi-5 (35.8 per cent). A few (29.1 per cent) students were aware of MySpace, very few students of Classmate.com (16.4 per cent), Friendster (11.2 per cent) and Bebo (6.7 per cent). Only a small per cent of the students were aware of the sites like Flickr (4.5 per cent), LinkedIn (3.7 per cent) and Twitter (2.2 per cent).

Table 1. Awareness among students about social networking sites

Social networking sites	No. of responses (N=134)
Orkut	101 (75.4%)
MySpace	39 (29.1%)
Facebook	52 (38.8%)
Friendster	15 (11.2%)
Hi-5	48 (35.8%)
Flickr	6 (4.5%)
Blog	70 (52.2%)
YouTube	84 (62.7%)
Classmate.com	22 (16.4%)
Bebo	9 (6.7%)
LinkedIn	5 (3.7%)
Twitter	3 (2.2%)

A majority of the students were aware of one or two social networking sites. Orkut is more popular among the students than Facebook and MySpace. Orkut is owned and operated by the Google and its audience tends to be Asian. These may be the reasons for the increased popularity of Orkut among the students. Orkut is more popular in both India and Brazil¹⁷. However, Facebook is more popular among the students of developed countries like United States and United Kingdom. Recent data shows that Facebook is the second most popular website in the world and its popularity is increasing in India at an accelerated speed.

4.2 Sources of Information About Social Networking Sites

There are various sources for getting information about social networking sites. Important

sources of information are the Internet, teachers, friends-groups, newspapers, and magazines. The students were asked to indicate the sources from where they get information about social networking sites. Table 2 shows that a majority (58.9 per cent) of the students got information about social networking sites from their friends and a good number (46.3 per cent) of the students from the Internet. A few (24.6 per cent) students get information from newspapers and magazines and only a small percentage (4.5 per cent) from their teachers. It is found that the students learn about social networking sites through their friends. They join in these sites because their friends invite and compel them to become the members of these sites.

Table 2. Sources of information about social networking sites

Sources	No. of responses (N=134)
Internet	62 (46.3%)
Teachers	6 (4.5%)
Friends	79 (58.9%)
Newspapers and magazines	33 (24.6%)

4.3 Commonly-used Social Networking Sites

There are different types of social networking sites, which are commonly used by the student community. Important social networking sites used by the students are given in Table 3. It was found that a majority (64.2 per cent) of the students used Orkut. A good number of the students used YouTube (35.1 per cent) and Blog (23.1 per cent). A few students use Hi-5 (14.9 per cent), MySpace (11.2 per cent), Facebook (8.9 per cent), Friendster (6.7 per cent), Classmate.com (6 per cent), Flickr (2.2 per cent), Bebo (3 per cent) and LinkedIn (1.8 per cent).

The students were not very much aware of the educational applications of social networking sites like YouTube and Blog. Orkut is the most used social

Table 3. Commonly-used social networking sites

Social networking sites	No. of responses (N=134)
Orkut	86 (64.2%)
MySpace	15 (11.2%)
Facebook	12 (8.9%)
Friendster	9 (6.8%)
Hi-5	20 (14.9%)
Flickr	3 (2.2%)
Blog	31 (23.1 %)
YouTube	47 (35.1%)
Classmate.com	8 (6 %)
Bebo	4 (3 %)
LinkedIn	1 (1.7 %)

networking site than Facebook and MySpace. The students were more familiar with Orkut as they got more chances to use Orkut from the Google search engine. However, recent data shows that Facebook is the most used social networking site in the world. All other social networking sites got a very small percentage of use.

4.4 Purpose of Using Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites have a wide variety of uses and students use these sites for various purposes like friendly communication, publishing, messaging, group discussion, etc. The students were asked to indicate the purpose of using social networking sites (Table 4). It shows that a majority (75.4 per cent) of the students used social networking sites for friendly communication. A good number (36.6 per cent) of the students used these sites for academic communication and for discussing new ideas and social issues (29.1 per cent). A few students (11.2 per cent) used social networking sites to promote their work and to publish their writings (8.9 per cent).

Table 4. Purpose of using social networking sites

Purposes	No. of responses (N=134)
Friendly communication	101 (75.4%)
Academic communication	49 (36.6%)
To discuss new ideas	39 (29.1%)
To publish writings	12 (8.9%)
To discuss social issues and events	39 (29.1%)
Promote themselves or their work	15 (11.2%)

It is clear that a majority of the students used social networking sites for friendly communication. They treated social networking sites as a way to connect and reconnect with friends and relatives. However, a good number of the students use social networking sites like Blogs for academic purpose.

4.5 Time Spent on Social Networking Sites

Time spent (Table 5) on social networking sites by students vary from each other. The impact of these sites can be assessed by the number of hours spent on these sites. Table 5 shows that about half (50.7 per cent) of the students spent less than 2 hours a week on social networking sites. A good number (29.8 per cent) of the students spent 2-4 hours in social networking sites. A few students (8.2 per cent) spent 4-6 hours and more than 6 hours (6.7 per cent) a week in social networking sites.

Lack of the state-of-the-art computer infrastructure and lack of full-fledged Internet connection may be the reasons of less time spent on social networking sites by

the students at Calicut University. Spending too much time on social networking sites for posting entries and comments may affect the academic productivity of students negatively.

Table 5. Time spent on social networking sites

Time spent in a week	No. of responses (N=134)
Less than 2 hour	68 (50.7%)
2-4 hour	40 (29.8%)
4-6 hour	11 (8.2%)
More than 6 hour	9 (6.7%)

4.6 Frequency of Visit to Social Networking Sites

There were variations in the frequency at which the students visited social networking sites. Some of them visited these sites every day and some others once a week. The students were asked how often they visit social networking sites. Table 6 shows that a good number (41 per cent) of the students visited social networking sites twice a week. A few students (23.1 per cent) visited every day, 22.4 per cent once a week and 12.7 per cent less often.

Table 6. Frequency of visit to social networking sites

Frequency	No. of responses (N=134)
Every day	31 (23.1%)
Twice a week	55 (41%)
Once a week	30 (22.4%)
Less often	17 (12.7%)

4.7 Frequency of Using Various Services/ Facilities of Social Networking Sites

The students were asked to indicate the frequency of use of different services or facilities of social networking sites (Table 7).

The analysis revealed that 47 per cent of the students sent scraps and met new friends (37.3 per cent) using social networking sites. A good number (36.6 per cent) of the students sent scraps sometimes, met new friends (32.8 per cent), posted photographs (33.6 per cent) and comments (39.5 per cent).

A few students responded that they never used social networking sites to post photographs (11.9 per cent), find old friends (23.1 per cent), publish writings (23.9 per cent), and post comments (14.1 per cent). A very few students indicated that they never sent scraps (6 per cent) and met new friends (4.5 per cent) using social networking sites. It was found that the students

Table 7. Frequency of using various services/facilities of social networking sites

Frequency of	Responses	No. of responses (N=134)
Sending scraps	Always	63 (47 %)
	Sometimes	49 (36.6%)
	Never	8 (5 %)
Meeting new friends	Always	50 (37.3%)
	Sometimes	44 (32.8%)
	Never	6 (4.5%)
Posting photographs	Always	12 (8.9%)
	Sometimes	45 (33.6%)
	Never	16 (11.94%)
Finding old friends	Always	6 (4.47%)
	Sometimes	16 (11.9%)
	Never	31 (23.1%)
Publishing writings	Always	5 (3.7%)
	Sometimes	15 (11.1%)
	Never	32 (23.9%)
Posting comments	Always	15 (11.2%)
	Sometimes	53 (39.5%)
	Never	19 (14.2%)

were not active users of various services of social networking sites. The frequency of use of various services and facilities are very low. Meeting new friends and sending scraps were the frequently used services or facilities. Lack of awareness may be the reason of the low frequency of using various services and facilities.

4.8 Names and Photoes Used in Social Networking Sites

The members of social networking sites can use fake biographical information, symbolic images, and false names in their profiles. The students were asked to indicate the names and photos used in their profiles (Table 8).

Table 8. Names and photoes used in the social networking sites

Names and photoes used	No. of responses (N=134)
Real	82 (61.2%)
False	52 (38.8%)

Table 8 shows that majority (61.2 per cent) of the students used their real names and photos in their profiles. The students may not be very much aware of the security and privacy concerns of social networking sites. Students usually reveal a lot of information about themselves without knowing the privacy options or who can view their profiles. This information is accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Students need to be very careful about the personal information they reveal

through their profiles and walls. Social networking sites are public domains and any information posted in these sites can remain long after it has been removed.

4.9 Reasons for Giving False Names and Fake Photoes in Social Networking Sites

The students were asked to indicate the reasons, if any, to use false names and fake photos in their profiles (Table 9). The analysis reveals that very few (21.6 per cent) students used false names and fake photos due to fear of security, privacy and misuse of personnel information.

Table 9. Reasons for giving false names and fake photoes

Reasons	No. of responses (N= 134)
Fear of security and privacy	29 (21.6%)
Fear of misusing personnel information	29 (21.6%)
Unwillingness to disclose the identity	7 (5.2%)
For the sake of fun	5 (3.7%)

Very few students used false names and fake photos due to unwillingness to disclose their identity (5.2 per cent) and for the sake of fun (3.7 per cent). Students can protect their identity by using false names and symbolic images. Social networking sites like Facebook provide improved privacy than MySpace and Orkut.

4.10 Opinion About Social Networking Sites

Students use social networking sites for various purposes. They were asked to indicate their opinion about social networking sites (Table 10).

Table 10. Opinions about social networking sites

Opinions	No. of responses (N=134)
Helpful for easy communication	68 (50.7%)
Easy for communicating with many	64 (47.8%)
Easy for contacting old and new friends	77 (57.5%)
Useful for academic communication	14 (10.4%)

Majority (57.5 per cent) of the students opined that social networking sites are easy way for contacting old and new friends. About half (50.7 per cent) of the students have the opinion that these sites are helpful for easy communication and for communicating with many (47.8 per cent). A few (10.4 per cent) students have the opinion that it is useful for academic communication.

4.11 Problems Faced while Using Social Networking Sites

Students were asked to indicate problems/constraints faced, if any, while using social networking sites (Table 11). A good number (48.5 per cent) of the students indicated security and privacy, fear of misusing their personal information (39.5 per cent), and lack of time (37.3 per cent) as the concerns while using social networking sites. Twenty-nine (21.6 per cent) students indicated that non-availability of the full-fledged Internet facility in the departments prevent them from using social networking sites effectively.

Table 11. Problems faced while using social networking sites

Problems	No. of responses (N=134)
Non-availability of full-fledged Internet facility	29 (21.6%)
Fear of misusing personal information	53 (39.5%)
Lack of time	50 (37.3%)
Lack of security and privacy	65 (48.5%)

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study show that a majority of the students were aware of social networking sites and use these sites for friendly communication. However, a good number of students use these sites for academic purpose also. It should be noted that social networking sites can be used as an interactive platform for academic communication and can be a source of information, knowledge and help. Orkut is the most used social networking site by the students of Calicut University.

Although there are many resources and services available through these sites, there are also many concerns. Security and privacy are the topmost concerns while using these sites. However, a majority of the students still used their real names, photos, and biographical information in their profiles.

Social networking website companies need to improve the security and privacy of their sites. They should establish policies and strategies for the proper and safe use of personal information posted on their sites. Students may share copyrighted materials such as videos, music, photos and other documents. Social networking sites should protect the misuse of copyrighted materials.

Students should not disclose personal information to strangers. They should work in accordance with strict and safe computing practices. They can protect their privacy by putting up fake biographical information and images, making the profile private and for friends only. They can also use social networking sites that provide

better privacy and facilities to present highly customisable personal information. Training and awareness programmes should be given to educate students about the applications, benefits, and risks associated with social networking sites.

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