



CHARACTERIZING ONLINE BEHAVIOR OF STUDENTS' COMMUNITY

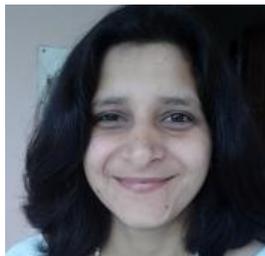
CHASUL

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ABSTRACT



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This paper presents a study conducted to understand the characteristics of the online behavior of the students' community. Web 2.0 has transgressed all boundaries of professional, personal, and educational life of people. One can easily see the impact of this tool on the relationships and mutual behavior of individuals. Since students' life is the phase of life where they can develop behavioral traits in many ways, it is important to understand the students' indulgence and trace their behavior in online media (SNPs). Questionnaire survey method was used to collect data from a randomly selected population of 150 students. Qualitative and quantitative, both types of responses were collected. The data reflects that a large number of populations use social networking platforms to communicate.

Key words- Web 2.0, online behavior, questionnaire survey, quantitative, qualitative, social networking platforms.

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of science and technology online media is becoming popular day by day and it is playing a significant role in all spheres of life. Online media is one of the most popular destinations on the web. Web 2.0 technologies provide user customized interaction to the degree never seen before. These are popularly known as Social Networking Platforms (SNPs). These SNPs are very interactive and transcends multiple levels of social and civil hierarchy in terms of user interaction. The user is freed from the hassles of technical knowhow; nevertheless he has access to real time dynamic interface. Major SNPs are free services and therefore the likes of Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, My spaces, and LinkedIn, etc have grown at amazingly fast rates. As SNP membership grows, it itself evolves to provide more and more dynamic interface.

Email, the first and the most frequently used communication tool on the internet was developed by ARPANET in 1971. Early systems were point to point i.e. one person could send a note to just another person. In 1975, List servers allowed one to many postings. 1970s and 1980s saw limited growth in disparate online communities restricted by technology and bandwidth issues. The first emoticon, a smiley, made by using"-)", was invented in 1979, by Kevin Mackenzie. In 1984 moderated newsgroups were introduced. In 1988 Internet Relay Chat (IRC) was developed by Jarkko Okarinen.

During the last 5 years, many frontiers have been breached with fine enchantments including search engines which enable users to search on topics, user name, date; private conversation spaces; links to email, user profiles and web pages; and graphical two

dimensional pictures and avatars (REF). It has given rise to services like Texting, Internet telephone, streaming video, photographs, sound, voice, web cam, blogs, and wiki. Moreover the Web 2.0 Technology has changed the face of World Wide Web, by changing it to a read-write media from a read only media.

A lot of studies have been carried out on online communities. "An online community is a group of people who interact in a virtual environment. They have a purpose, are supported by technology, and are guided by norms and policies". (Preece, 2000).

In many cases the focus is on students' online community and in others the old people become the subject of focus.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to characterize the online behavior of students' community in terms of time, place, medium, engagement, identity, reliability etc.

Literature survey

Benevenuto et al (2009) conducted a study to find out the frequency, duration and purpose of users online visit, and observed that most users like site specific features such as profiles and friends for orkut, and LinkedIn for professional network. Abbassi et al (2011) studied 35 million tweets related to Arab Spring Event to determine the relative effectiveness of a social media lens in analyzing and predicting real-world collective behavior and exploring the domains and situations under which social media can be a predictor for real-world's behavior. The findings say that during social movements, social media has been used for either to organize future events or to report past events. An attempt has been made by Ung and Dalle (2010) in their paper to analyze the heterogeneity of individual and collective online behavior and to know how users contribute, how they allocate their efforts and how they coordinate, is partly reflected by their "online signal". It was shown that, taken together, some of the characteristics of users and of coordination regimes suggests a more complex view of the aggregation of efforts in Wikipedia. By processing online activity as "online signals", relevant characteristics of the individual and collective behavior of online users can be identified. Pfiel et al (2011) investigated and scrutinized an online support

community for older people in order to identify different social roles within the community. They observed that the number of frequent posts in an online support community could be an indicator of the community's effectiveness in terms of providing support. Alexander et al (2009) presented findings from a large-scale quantitative assessment of online exchanges of copyrighted material on a college campus based on network data collected using deep packet inspection (DPI) and their results contributed in better understanding the impact of P2P on sales of content. A research done by Qiang et al (2009) shows that link between Blog members are very less, the density of network is very low and their communities are not centralized. They studied the map of Blog WebPages from the aspect of social network analysis (SNA). Hilary (2011) carried out an ethnographic study and explored how educated young people involved in civil society online and with links to Sydney, NSW, expressed their understanding of community through their lived experience. A vocabulary focusing on action used by them indicates a strong basis for encouraging participation in social change and transformative practices. Mashroof (2011) found in his study that the development of SNWs coupled with the inherently interactive nature of humans has resulted in an outburst of personally sensitive information to flow on the Internet. The very nature of SNWs and its commercialization thereof has led to serious privacy concerns. Chahal et al(2012) in their study observed that children use similar methods to detect identity online as they do offline, reinforcing the interconnections between mediated and unmediated communication and an ontology of childhood in a digital world that is neither online nor offline, but both.

Methodology

A survey was conducted in an institute campus with undergraduate students as target population. A questionnaire consisting of 8 questions was given to 150 undergraduate students, randomly selected from the pool of four years, first through fourth year. The questionnaire consisted of 'yes-no' questions, 'preference based questions' and 'open ended questions'. 100 completely filled responses were

received and the data was compiled using conventional excel sheet data feeding. The graphs were prepared to reflect trends and change points. Statistical description approach was used to explain the numbers compiled from questionnaire responses. Qualitative remarks collected via open ended question were used to substantiate the analysis. The study is a pilot study for a major research project in the area of online communication media and technologies.

Findings

The first question addressed the issue of whether the student community use or did not use the online platforms for socializing. Figure 1 shows the results. It is clear from the responses that 95% students use online platforms for socializing. Only 5% do not use online platforms for socializing. The affirmative

response of such a large number of people reflects that in today’s era of science and technology, use of online media has become an important part of one’s life. Another important issue was of time (duration of involvement in socializing). It can be seen clearly in Figure 2 that 85% of the students use online media for less than 2 hours in a day. Only 15% of the students use it for more than 2 hours. The environment in the institute is highly conducive for extracurricular activities. Apart from education, students in the institute devote their time to sports, cultural activities etc. There are many associations, clubs, groups with which the students are affiliated. Consequently, they have other avenues of leisure and a large population spends only 2 or less hours on online media.

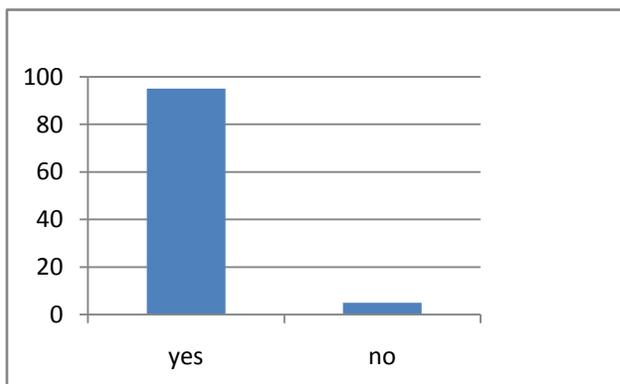


Figure 1 Online Population Volume

The next issue was of place of access. This was a preference based question. Four places i.e. hostel; I.P.C. lab, library, and sky lab respectively were listed for the users to give preference for. Figure 3 shows the result. The place which is preferred the most by all the students is-hostel. Most of the students find it more convenient and easier to access internet in their hostels.91% of the students prefer hostel to use online media, because they can sit comfortably in their hostels, without any kind of formality and interference. 88% of the student community have chosen IPC lab as their second preference because in IPC lab they find the right kind of environment in high

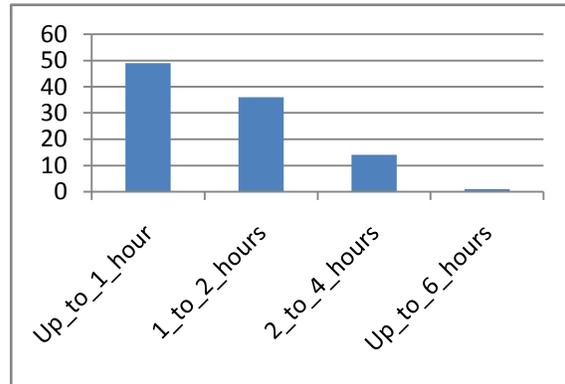
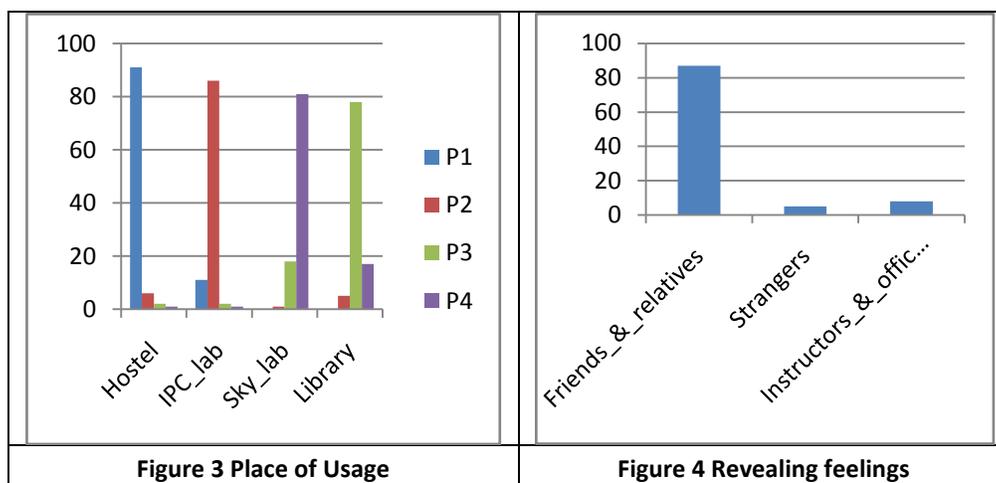


Figure 2 Duration of Engagement

they can take the help of their peers also. Moreover, IPC lab is the central facility with complete installations and all support from technical assistants. This feature makes it conducive for academic and research work. 78% of the population has chosen library as their third preference and 81% of them has chosen sky lab as their fourth preference. After hostel and IPC lab students prefer to use online media in the library and sky lab because the environment at both these places is very quite and peaceful. The wireless internet access also makes it more accessible at different locations within library and sky lab.



The fourth question dealt with the issue of expressing feelings to varied acquaintances. It was about whom they trust to express their feelings. Three choices were given to the students, namely friends & relatives, instructors & officials and strangers. Only 5% of them reveal their feelings to strangers, 87% of the student community prefers to express their feelings to friends and relatives. And 8% of them reveal it to instructors and officials. Figure 4 shows that generally students do not prefer to express their feelings to strangers, officials and instructors but 87% of the students express themselves to their friends. The reason of not expressing feelings to strangers is crystal clear. In real life situations also people generally do not prefer to rely on strangers; and the reason of not expressing themselves to instructors and officials is the formal relationship between the two groups. The relationship with the instructors is formal, but with the evolution of time students became familiar with the instructors and due to this period of time the percentage of students who share their feelings with the instructors grows over.

It is important to include the impact of media specific features and what effect they have on expression in such a study. The fifth question dealt with the aforesaid issue and how students use these to express their emotions and feelings more effectively. Four choices were given to them i.e. emoticons, imagery, typography, and formal language. Unlike real life situations a person cannot show his/her anger or

happiness or sadness by his/her facial expressions or gestures. Figure 5 shows that emoticons are preferred the most. 49% of the students' community has chosen emoticons as their first preference. 31% of the students' community has given second preference to typography. 43% of the students' community has chosen imagery as their third preference. 45% of the population has taken formal language as their fourth preference. Emoticons are preferred as first choice by the students' community reflects the popularity of emoticons in online conversations. The availability of readymade emoticons in the online media is the simplest reason behind it. Students need not to search them anywhere else. There are faces of happiness, sadness; surprised look etc. everything is available. Also, the emoticon adds a sense of fun and depth to the interaction. Second preference, typography, which is used by 31% of the students' community, shows the impact of texting. Capital letters are mostly used to highlight or for putting stress on something, in the same manner sign of exclamations, compressions, and extremes are used to show anger, surprise, and shock etc. The reason of choosing imagery as third preference is to express more emphatically and to add an extra dimension of visual experience. Imagery is a good source of expressing something of much importance. 43% of the students' community prefers formal language after emoticons, typography, and imagery.

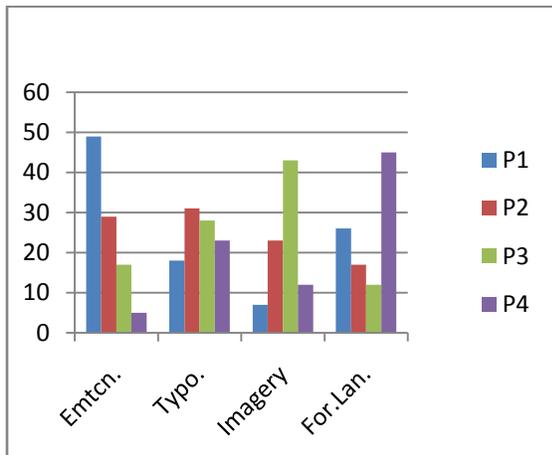


Figure 5 Use of Media Specific Features for expression

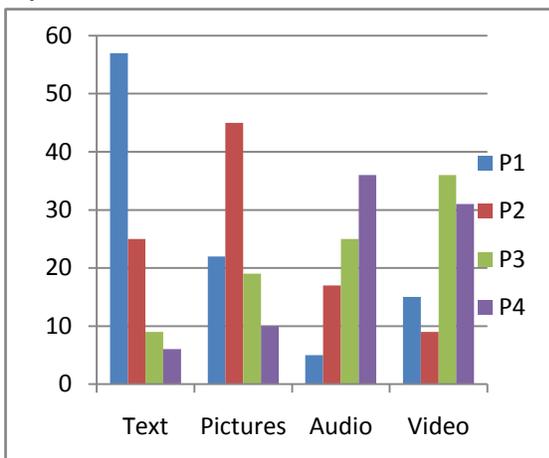


Figure 6 Mime Type used by student community to generate user content

The sixth important issue was of the medium used by the student users to share information with each other. Four options i.e.-text, pictures, audio, and video were listed. Figure 6 clearly shows that more than half of the selected community i.e.57% prefers text to share any kind of information. Text is the easily available source therefore more than half of the population prefers it the most. Moreover, there is hundreds of font typefaces-size, color combination; text arts are available which can be easily formatted. 45% of the community has taken pictures as their second choice to share any type of information. It shows that after text, the community likes to share information in the form of pictures which is a richer medium to convey information. At the same time it

also gives a sense of proximity to the viewer. After text as first preference, and pictures as second, videos have been chosen as third preference. 36% of the students' community has chosen videos as their third preference. It is a richer medium in which audio as well video, both features are available. Audio is taken as fourth choice by 36% of the students' community. Videos provide a sense of multimedia sensory reception which makes the viewer experience richer. Audio is a one dimension media and momentary media (although the technology makes redundancy much easier), and hence users tend to use it minimally.

In the seventh question 09 statements were given to the students' community to be marked on 5 point linkert scale. The questions collectively aimed to figure out the broad and general behavior of the student population in online environment.

42% students totally agreed to the statement that they project their real identity on social platforms. For many among the students' population, going online is an experience of new kind.

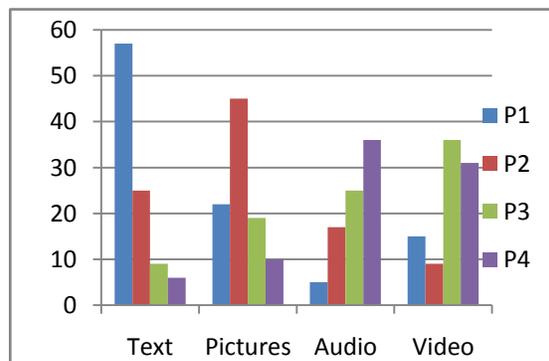


Figure 6 Mime Type used by student community to generate user content

It is also the time where this young population would make new friends, connect to new people, develop rapport and relationship. Therefore, they take every care to pungent their real self to the world; but at the same time 43% totally agreed with the statement that they know of their friends who use fake identity. This implies that a large number of users create a fake impression of themselves to various reasons which may include living an online self which is an extreme instance.

A high percentage of users do not share their personal information on the net. This has been substantiated by the response to the next statement in which 60% respondents totally agree with the statement that they are aware of the fact that shared information could be used against them. It shows that most of the people do not rely to share their information with everyone. One of the main reasons for this observation is the user's trend to avoid cyber bullying. 52% totally agreed with the statement that they prioritize the information which they want to share online. The obvious reason for this is that by doing so they will save time, resources, and will be able to post only the most relevant information. Another reason is to avoid sharing anything which is confidential and which may lead to troubles.

52% totally disagreed with the statement that they interact with their instructors on a regular basis through online media. This high percentage shows that students use online media not just only for entertainment but also for studies purpose. This data can be connected with the

8% of the previous that as the time passes students became more comfortable with the instructors they start the give and take with the instructors and officials.

50% of the respondents totally agreed to the statement that they keep in touch with their friends and family members. It shows that people find online media helpful for communication with friends and relatives. It is a very good medium to keep in touch with the persons who are miles away from us. Communication is one of the frontiers when technology has defeated time and space barriers.

31% totally disagreed to the statement that they find it easier to meet and interact with strangers online then in real life. Almost all SNPs provide features to search, add, delete, locate, hide, and block people. It makes it immensely easier to reach people and build relationships; unlike the real world scenario where face to face interaction makes it that much difficult to express feelings.

In the last statement it was asked whether it is acceptable to them if strangers follow their online profile. 24% responded as neutral. It proves that

people generally do not prefer to share their ideas with strangers.

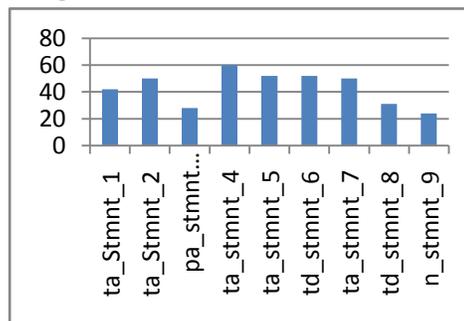


Figure 7 Likert scale statement responses.

There were varied opinions among the members of student community with regards to the social networking media's reflection of the user behavior in the real world. Some users feel that the social networking media reflects the user behavior in the real world. The social media profile is a reflection of the personality of a person. The pictures, videos, ideas, and thoughts etc. posted by a person reveals the personality traits of a person to some extent. But everything which a person write or share online is not his/her genuine being because people generally post or write anything after devoting a lot of time to make their post perfect. Most of the selected community feels that people in online avatars are totally different from what they are in their real life because people always try to put their ideal image online.

In the second statement it was asked that whether the social media isolates or unites user communities. This statement also got both types of responses but most of the people were in favor of unity as an essential characteristic of social media. Some of the respondents have the opinion that social media isolates user communities. They think that people who get addicted to social media spend hours after hours on internet and get isolated from their friends and family, they do not go outside and meet people. But large number of people said that social media unite users' communities. Social online groups make it easy to approach different people and get updates about the lives of distant relatives and friends. It is an effective platform for reuniting friends and relatives. It definitely breaks the barriers of languages and there are open discussions which lead to formation of anti-

community groups. It unites people with same interests; same nature and same hobbies, which otherwise have no chance of meeting. In today's hectic life people do not have time to meet all friends, but with social media people can keep in touch with them. It is an effective way of globalizing. We can connect to people across the world. It helps us to unite not only with people with same interests and common backgrounds, but also from different culture and tradition, educational backgrounds, and areas.

CONCLUSION

Several issues were taken in the study and the findings are very interesting. Only a small number of the members of the population have come into notice which does not use social networking platforms. Almost each and every person in today's era is using these online platforms to connect with their friends, relatives, peers, colleagues, etc. The population which was taken for this study uses these online platforms to communicate with their friends, officials, instructors, and sometimes with strangers also. Most of the population does not prefer to reveal its real identity and feelings but at the same time many persons are aware of the fact that some of their friends represent them with their fake identities. Many of the users think that these social platforms unite the user communities with each other. These online platforms reflect the real behavior of the persons who are using it but some of them think that although people present their ideal image in online networks it does not show the real image of a person. The student population who has been taken for the study spent less than 2 hours per day in using these online platforms instead of their busy schedule.

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