

Social Networking Sites

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Social Network is social structure made up of individuals (or organizations) called “nodes”, which are tied (connected) by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as friendship, kinship, common interest, financial exchange, likes/dislikes, or relationships of beliefs, knowledge or prestige.

From the very beginning, human beings always associated themselves to some form of social structure as they evolved across generations. Management principles talk about motivations that drive a human being to form affiliations that provide a sense of belonging while climbing the ladder of social strata. All human beings crave social life, but not all can have time and resources to enjoy social circle where they can communicate, collaborate and freely express themselves with likeminded peers for satisfying their different needs like security, assets, skills, relationships, science and technology, events, politics, history, literature, art, etc. There is no end to the list of fundamental principles that can drive people to create platforms for communication and interaction, mutually beneficial for the whole community.

A “Social Network” is an online community where people across the globe (irrespective of demographic and geographical differences) can develop network with different organizations or individuals for a specific purpose. It creates a chain of linked/connected entities (individuals/organizations, communities, forums, groups etc.) like a tree with multiple branches and nodes. These branches are the various groups, communities, forums etc. that an individual intends to join. Hence, a social network represents relationships between nodes (people) and flows between the branches (groups, communities, forums, organizations etc.).

WWW before web 2.0 was a platform for publishing information for end users to view without any provision for their participation whatsoever in adding their views, feedbacks or contributions. With the onset of Web 2.0, the whole ball game of information broadcast on the NET changed by creation of virtual communities driven by end users. Now the users have become the masters of the content that is published across the world for free use and encourage further contribution.

Evolution of Social Networking Sites

Efforts to support social networks via computer-mediated communication were made in many early online services, including Usenet, ARPANET, LISTSERV, and bulletin board services (BBS). Many prototypical features of social network sites were also present in online services such as America Online, Prodigy, and CompuServe.

Early social networking on the World Wide Web began in the form of generalized online communities such as Theglobe.com (1994), Geocities (1994) and Tripod.com (1995). Many of these early communities focused on bringing people together to interact with each other through chat rooms, and encouraged users to share personal information and ideas via personal webpages by providing easy-to-use publishing tools and free or inexpensive webspace. Some communities - such as Classmates.com - took a different approach by simply having people link to each other via email addresses. In the late 1990s, user profiles became a central feature of social networking sites, allowing users to compile lists of

“friends” and search for other users with similar interests.

New social networking methods were developed by the end of the 1990s, and many sites began to develop more advanced features for users to find and manage friends. This newer generation of social networking sites began to flourish with the emergence of Friendster in 2002, and soon became part of the Internet mainstream. Friendster was followed by MySpace and LinkedIn a year later, and finally Bebo. Attesting to the rapid increase in social networking sites’ popularity, by 2005, MySpace was reportedly getting more page views than Google. Facebook, launched in 2004, has since become the largest social networking site in the world.

Today, it is estimated that there are now over 200 active sites using a wide variety of social networking models.

Social Networking Sites –Fundamentals

Social Networking sites have conventional features. Every user registered with a social networking site creates his profile containing some basic information with very little time and effort. He can add new contacts, upload pictures and/or audio/videos, set status messages, post comments, join various groups of people that share common interests, join forums for discussion etc. There is a provision to make changes in ones’ profile as and when required. To protect user privacy, the users can configure their profile in such a way that they can allow only certain people to view their profile, post comment to their threads, add them to their contact list etc., commonly known as privacy settings. Now-a-days, mobile social networking has become the latest trend. Most mobile phone users can access social networking sites through their mobile phones itself e.g. Facebook Mobile.

Social Networking Sites – Advantages

- 1. Get Instant Feedback:** Companies, organizations and individuals can get unbiased feedback from the mass for their concepts and innovative ideas immediately that can improve the quality. This enables a lot of products to be featured, enriched based on valuable inputs from the prospective end users without any monetary losses. Innovative ideas can be given life in the form of a product or service that can be used by the communities for enriching their lives.
- 2. Virtual Worlds:** A whole lot of people like to portray their different image on the net that they actually cannot in their real life. Virtual worlds (secondlife, twinity, smallworlds etc.) can enable the people to realize their fantasies in constructive and controlled environments.
- 3. Personal Reasons:** The very basic fact that one joins a social network is that he wants to stay connected with his friends irrespective of wherever he travels around the world. It is the most cost effective way to stay in touch with your people in spite of geographical or cultural barriers.
 - a. Entertainment:** These sites provide an entertainment aspect which has helped them to increase their database of users and gain popularity across the globe. E.g. online games (viz. Farmville, mafia wars etc on Facebook), quizzes, events, videos etc. available on these sites makes the users addicted to these sites thereby reducing the churning of users and increasing the retention period of users for these sites.
 - b. Job Search:** People can collaborate among their network to find more challenging and fulfilling jobs based on their skills and experience.

- c. **Polls:** Consensus can be attained by having online polls for diverse topics where opinions and views can help make decisions.
- d. **Knowledge Pool:** Expertise can be sought by people for topics completely unknown or where their knowledge is lacking from voluntary experts willing to share their experiences.

4. Business

- a. **Marketing:** With internet marketing being a buzz today, social networking sites have become a major hub for selling products and services and also for branding your product. This may be done through advertisements and/or banners etc. Companies may have teasers on a specific space before the launch of any new product on such social networking sites. The companies may invite comments for any product launched which after moderation (if required) is posted on the website.
 - b. **Connecting with customers:** Companies can directly get in touch with their customers through social networking sites. It increases reputation of the company, gets them positive reviews and shows that they really care for their customer. Certain brands from various segments viz. technology, garments, fashion accessories, footwear, eyegear etc. can create their own forums or even a designated webspace and have users registered under their name. These websites would provide relevant content regarding various products for each brand, offers (if any), information about new releases etc. to these users (customers). This structure helps the companies to maintain periodic information about a huge customer base.
5. **Professional Networking:** a social networking site like LinkedIn.com provides a platform for interconnection of professionals around the world. This could be used for many business purposes and may act as a job portal also. Specialists on human resources can search for the desired profile in the pool of users on such websites. The professional people uses this as a medium to raise their visibility, get noticed, tell about their company, service, and get more clients.
6. **Education:** The National School Boards Association reports that almost 60 percent of students who use social networking talk about education topics online and, surprisingly, more than 50 percent talk specifically about academics. Various educational institutes may have their presence on social networking sites focusing on their academia, academic and other extra-curricular activities, achievements and rewards, campus images etc. This would help the aspirants in knowing more about the particular institute.

Social Networking Sites – Disadvantages

- 1. **Security:** Security is one of the major concerns for social networking sites. Since the users display their personal information viz. name, location, age, gender, photographs etc. there is a probability that this information may be misused or may be used to commit online crimes or illegal activities. Hence all such sites must be protected from hackers and must have right kind of access levels defined. Only right type of people can access the content.
- 2. **Online harassment and stalking:** Since personal information about users is easily available on social networking sites, there is a risk of malicious humors being posted, pictures or photos may be downloaded and morphed etc.
- 3. **Fake identity:** Also, many people pretend to be someone else and prepare their online profiles

with false information, so as to dupe unsuspecting users. So, if you do not know the person face to face then it will be very hard for you to find the real identity.

- 4. Addiction:** Actual social activities where people can interact one-on-one physically are taking a back seat as the virtual social networking takes over. People are getting addictive to the virtual world and the physical people interaction in the real world is passé.

Conclusion

Technology innovations have always been perceived as either a boon or a curse to the mankind. The problem starts when, what, where and for what purpose the technology innovations are applied. There are always pros and cons to every idea, theory, invention and discovery. Every new concept has adverse and beneficial effects over the way we live and enrich our lives. Social Network can be also weighed in the same balance where it has many perceived beneficial aspects as compared to some adverse effects to the overall well being.

References

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