

Social media's impact on teenagers and women

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ABSTRACT

Social media (SM) enables individuals to connect and its power can be judged by the recent Arab Spring or 'Kony 2012' video on Youtube. By studying surveys on SM that have taken place during the last four years and by content analysis of some comments posted on blogs, we determine how this media is impacting teenagers and women. We found that the advent and growth of these disruptive technologies are creating thinking shifts, which have also brought with them some side effects, such as hate blogs and virtual interactions. Although the impact of SM on teenagers is enormous, we argue here that digital life is less likely to take over a teenager's life. Surveys suggest that women would remain 'naturally' ahead of men in the race of usage of this technology.

Keywords: Social Media; Web 2.0; Women Expression; Pre-adolescents; Adolescents

INTRODUCTION

Online Social Media or Social Media (SM) is an assembly of online applications (such as blogs, microblogs, social networking sites, video sharing, photo sharing, online news, among others) that leverages Web 2.0 internet technology to facilitate an effective dialogue between users (Kumar and Jan 2011). Viral nature of this user-generated media is enabling people to participate and collaborate in real-time. Web 2.0 is the next generation Internet technology that enables collaboration on the World Wide Web (WWW). It brings new applications and technology that make web experience more interactive through user-interaction, dynamic content, meta data and scalability (Best 2006). Openness, freedom and collective intelligence are also features of Web 2.0. Social media sites such as Facebook, Youtube and Flickr make use of this technology in order to give interactivity to their sites. Recent people's movement such the 2011 Arab Spring and 'Kony 2012' movement on Youtube are largely attributed to SM (Harb 2011; Goodman and Preston 2012; Saletan 2011)

Although these new technologies are making the Web even more popular, they are also making people spend long hours on seemingly unimportant and irrelevant conversations, dialogues, reviews and opinions. According to Andrew Keen, writer of *Cult of the Amateur*, Web 2.0 has "created a cult of digital narcissism and amateurism, which undermines the notion of expertise" (Web 2.0 has created a cult of digital narcissism and amateurism? 2010). The thinking shifts that this technology is bringing are enormous.

The objective of this paper is to examine the impact of Social Media on teenagers and women. The underlying idea is not to link women and teenagers and view Social Media's impact on them together. Rather we take women and teenagers as two individual segments of society and deal with them separately. We acknowledge that the scope is vast and such a broad study undoubtedly cannot be subjected to 'test-tube' tests of traditional empirical research studies. Few important surveys conducted over past four years to assess the behavior of online users, have been reviewed. We support our argument by analyzing contents of some comments on social media.

TEENAGERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In this review, we equate Teenagers with adolescents as this is the period when both biological and cognitive faculty of individuals go through transformation. Teenagers have the curiosity and the drive to do things. Teen years are considered 'formative' years as they could make or break the future career of an individual. Like most, teenagers are fascinated by social media, primarily because of the way it lets them engage with their friends. A 2007 survey by Pew Internet and American Life Project (Teens and Social Media 2007) found correlation between those having their profiles on Social Networking sites and those who blog. Some 55% of teenagers have social networking site accounts (sites like Facebook, MySpace, or Bebo). A good percentage of those who have the user accounts in Social Networking site, blog.. According to the recent 2009 survey by The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart et al. 2009), 65% of teenagers with ages between 12 -17 were engaged in creature of online content, up from 57% in 2004. Girls are outpacing boys in their online presence – 86% of online girls have profile online when compared to 69% of boys. Teenagers are involved in posting photos and uploading videos. Even young children of all ages enjoy videos on Youtube and photos on Flickr. The impact of these videos and photos is bigger than text and strikes the chord across all age groups.

Children are "wired" to learn technology things fast. Nowadays, a four year old kid can play DVD by booting up the laptop, inserting the disk and then going to the right software to play. He enjoys seeing children cartoons on Youtube and uses Paintbrush to draw colourful pictures. The point to be noted here is that children pick up things very fast as their brain is ready to receive and accept new ideas. On the contrary, learning similar things for a 60 year old would take a much longer time, in general. Children and teens are the most motivated age group where curiosity to learn runs supreme.

In one of the article write-ups (Social Networking 101 - Teen's View 2009) by a 19-year old, who introduces herself as International speaker and Coach and writer of an international best-selling book, writes that she considers the number of friends one has on the social network site as the indication of one's popularity. Sites like Facebook and Bebo are visited and re-visited sometimes several times in a day to socialize and 'show-off your recent pictures'. The same article gives an interesting anecdote:

"My Facebook swears my ex-boyfriend (who I went out with for a week when I was 14) is infact my 'friend', and whenever I want to, I can always engage in a virtual game of Poker through a request he sent me about 6 months ago...so I can always take him up on that, without a) actually speaking to him, and b) without actually seeing him for the past 5 years" (Social Networking 101 - Teen's View 2009)

This is another example of the fact that although social media is letting us connect more than ever before with our friends and acquaintances, it is making us more and more virtual – the physical touch is getting lesser and lesser (Kumar and Jan 2012). Proliferation of emails (emails are also social software but the platform is still private) and social media (platform is more or less public) is gradually taking us to the 'non-physical' plane.

For teens, the online presence of their friends on sites like Facebook or Bebo, make them sign-up. Bebo seems to be one of their favorite Social Networking Sites (SNS) for the teens. Some social networking sites become niche sites probably because of the kind of people who get on to them. Take the case of LinkedIn – it became favourites for professionals. Nothing suggests in the system of LinkedIn that it cannot be used by teens. Similarly in the case of Bebo, nothing suggests why there are mostly teens using this platform. It may be due to the kind of people initially get into using them and they tell their friends, and friends of friends and the network of people with similar profession keeps getting bigger and bigger. There could be few other reasons – the look and feel of the website and what it lets you do, faster. The example in this case would be MySpace, which became famous for music lovers.

It is best to know how Social Media impacts teens, from teenagers directly. In one of the reports published by Morgan Stanley (Robson 2009), which has an article written by Mathew Robson, a 15 year old, who writes about how teenagers consume media. Although his article is centered on western teenagers, they nonetheless give the broad picture - teenagers are consuming a lot more media than ever before. Being cash strapped, they are always looking out for cheaper solutions. TV programs do not interest teenagers as they have a lot of advertisements. They like internet as they can get music and TV programs as they desire. They use pirated software and music because that is the way they can save another penny. SNS are a fad amongst teenagers as they help them interact on a 'larger scale'. Teens do not tweet (use Twitter, the micro blogging site) as that eats away their phone credit.

Teenagers are finding sites like Facebook as a platform to express their feelings, thoughts and ideas, and are doing everything to keep their homepages updated with the latest photos, videos and comments. Digital photos and videos are central to the 'conversation' activity as majority of their conversations are linked to these photos and videos. Most of the teens who upload videos or photos get a response in the form of comments, be it positive or negative. At times these lead to chain of comments and discussions. There seems to be one important distinction between adults and teens – whereby teens seem to restrict the people who could access the video and photos; while adults are less likely to do so. There are 'heavy communicators' who use multiple channels of communication like landline, hand phone, Social Networking sites, SMS, IM and Email. Since most of the teens go to school and most of the contacts they have on sites, like Facebook, are their classmates or neighbours; they are more likely to meet them frequently than adults. Hence, their interactions too are more vivid and one that relates to their current happening in 'physical' life (to differentiate this with their 'digital' life). Teenagers are using the Facebook's (and other Social Networking Sites) mailing services to send email messages to their friends. As such, emails are outdated for some teens, especially those who are active on Social Networking sites.

Teenagers in the USA and Europe have more access to digital media. There is a digital divide in developing and not-yet-developed countries. However, all the major cities in the world are now moving in tandem when it comes to digital modernity. Teenagers are a strange lot – they are no more children, and not yet adults. Moreover, the body is going through physical transformation. This is an enigmatic situation for the teenager, which can make him behave and act in unpredictable ways. For parents too it is the most difficult time managing their teenage children. With internet, children get exposed to both its positive and negative aspects. A few years back, Time Magazine brought out a cover story of how dangerous internet could be for children, if used in wrong ways. However, contradicting their earlier story, in Jan 2009, Time Magazine came out with another article on how Internet may not be as dangerous to children as previously thought (Cruz 2009).

According to the research done by Crimes against Children Research Center (<http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/>), there is a mistaken belief that sexual overtures on the Internet come largely from older adults. Cyber bullying is one of the major threats minors face and there are areas where there is very little research done to find out the truth or trend. A few of them are as follows:

- Minor – minor solicitation (sexual)
- Creation of problematic content by minors (sexual, violent, etc.)
- The interplay between social-economic class and risk factors
- The inter-section of different mobile and internet technologies

After a year-long research, Crimes Against Children Research Center, are of the view that children face no greater dangers online as they face in real life. A blog post on the New York Times (*How Dangerous Is the Internet for Children?* 2008) mentions that the sexual predator aspect online is over exaggerated. Just like plane crashes, they happen very rarely and understandably make news everywhere. According to this blog, about 90% teens blog and it is an important part of their social fabric, something the generation Y would never have imagined. As per the survey most of the teenagers are quite aware of never giving away their personal details and even if they do, the chances that they would be assaulted, is rare. When we say that the kids are exposed to risks online, it is not an overstatement to say that the kids are exposed to much more risk offline.

All of these indicate that Internet is no more a taboo for the teenagers. It is true that the Internet has some 'dark lanes' but these could be avoided as we steer clear of passing through dark risky lanes in our real lives. Internet is becoming an important part of adolescents' and teens lives. By exploring the good side of internet and making children and teenagers be aware of the 'dark lanes' internet could be an exciting and educative medium of expression.

WOMEN EXPRESSION

Human beings are divided into categories – the male and the female. Procreation takes place through Women. Women, thus, play a crucial role in sustaining the existence of mankind. In the book – 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus', John Gray makes a point that men and women think differently (Gray 2004). Mars is representative of 'God of War' and Venus, that of 'God of love'. Men are more for individual glory, whereas women are more for 'collective glory'. In other words, Man is more of 'I' and Woman is more of 'us'.

A study by BlogHer and Compass Partners (Women Blogger Statistics 2008) who studied the blogging behaviour of women between 18 – 75 in the USA, found that over 70% of women do so for the purpose of connecting with others (see Figure 1).

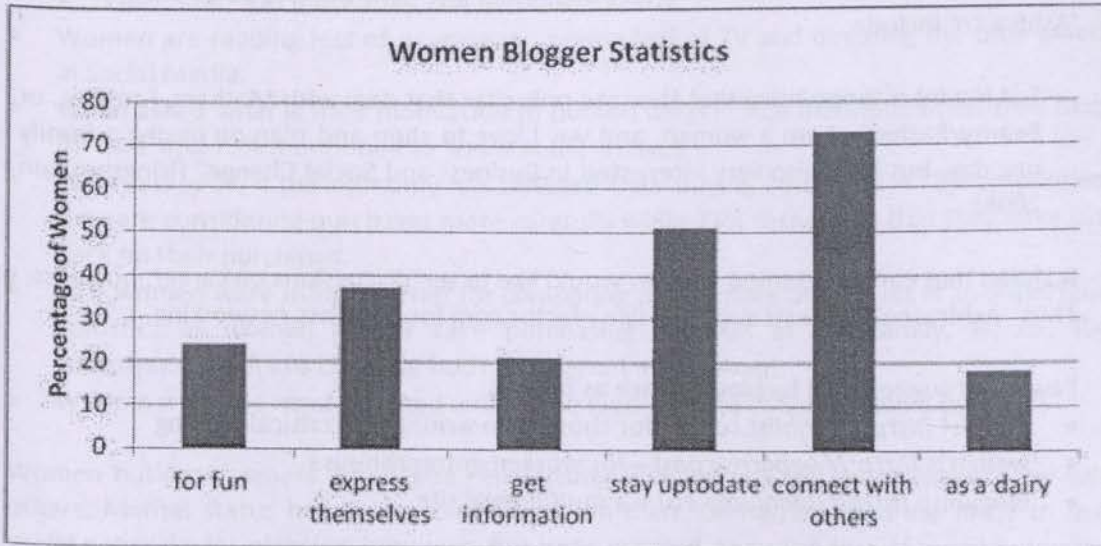


Figure 1: Statistics of Women participating in Blogs between 18-75 in the US.
(Source: BlogHer and Compass Partners)

Women have social genes. Over the years, women have been the custodians of customs and traditions and have amply demonstrated that they are social. So why should women be away from platform that is part of them? In a recent study conducted by Rapleaf (Hoffman 2008) on 13.2 million users of the Social web, there were some striking revelations – women are fast outpacing men in the Social Web world. This online gender gap widens as men tend to use less of Social media once past 30 years of age. As per the same research, women age group between 35 to 50 is the fastest growing segment registering in MySpace. Men's affinity for computers is well-known. However, men, unlike women, are less likely to consider taking decisions from the relationship context (Murphy 1998). It does not mean that men do not like to socialize, but since this is not their domain, women win the Social Web race. Rapleaf's study provides us with some very interesting aftermath – what happens if women were to rule the social web? It considers the following:

- The look and feel of the Social Networking sites will be more what women like. For example the colours would be traditionally women-ish – purple or pink.
- There will be more advertisements on the Social Web targeting women. It is also a known fact that it is the women who make majority purchasing decisions in family.

We have talked about how women tend to be on social networking sites. List of few women centric sites were written on a blog on mashable.com (Ningthoujam 2008). This blog has attracted over 199 comments as of 5, April, 2012. Some of the good sites that this blog mentions are as follows:

- *ivillage* (<http://www.ivillage.com>) – health, pregnancy, beauty and style
- *glam* (<http://glam.com>) – the background colour is pink and attracted millions visitors monthly
- *onsugar* (<http://onsugar.com>) – mainly for young women who discuss about the latest gossips, share tips on shopping, fashion, beauty secrets and etc.

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- *cafemom* (<http://cafemom.com>) – place for Moms to connect to other Moms
- *minti* (<http://minti.com>) – discusses parenting issues

There were some interesting comments to the same blog, which tell what women are looking out for other than health, pregnancy, gossip and shopping. Comments from 'Ashfrasco' include:

“..it is a bit disappointing that they are only sites that deal with Mothers, Families, or Beauty/Fashion. I am a woman, and yes I love to shop and plan on having a family one day, but I am also very interested in Business and Social Change” (Ningthoujam 2008)

It shows that career oriented women would like to see discussions on career, business, etc. Thus, 'Ashfrasco' suggests such site like *efactor.com* for business networking.

Few other suggestions by bloggers are as follows:

- *scriblist* (<http://scriblist.com>) – for those who writing and critical reading
- *webgrrls* (<http://webgrrls.com>) – for women entrepreneurs
- *blogjump* (<http://blogjump.eu>) – a multilingual site.

We infer that although women are using general websites like Facebook, Orkut or MySpace, they also revel in niche sites. Similar to different types of magazines for different category of people – like magazine for men, women, children and 60+ years, social networking sites too are getting category specific. One could find women logging into multiple sites, depending on their mood and time of the day.

Women are the bedrock of society. Since ages they have held the responsibility of maintaining society and culture. However, the advent of Web 2.0 functionalities has given female sex bloggers to experiment their sexuality. Female sex blogs have reached “critical take-off point” (Plummer 1995). The proportion of sex content on Internet is so enormous and people accessing this material so clandestine, to quantify its societal impact is not easy. Countries like USA, where pornography is an industry, is seeing increase in extra-marital affairs, people having multiple sex partners, increase in rate of divorces, and people preferring to remain single, etc. When social norms break down, we have to look in for causes. One of the reasons is over-exposure to media – and in this case, social media being one of them. With the opening of Web 2.0, women are coming out to display and describe their sexuality. This culture of casual relationship, through extensive use of social media, is making people to see social relationships in a different way.

In a study conducted by Blogher, ivillage and Compass Partners, in March 2009 (Wright and Page 2009), some interesting facts were revealed about the US women online. The primary objective of this combined research was to provide a definitive market view of current dynamics and trends among US women online between 18 -77 years. Some of the facts revealed in the study include the following:

- There are 79 million women online in the US. Out of this, over 53 million participate in Social Media activities like: Social networks (e.g. Facebook), Blogging, Blog reading, Blog updating, Message board, Status updating (Twitter). These women participate in one or more of the above social media daily, 2-3 times a day or weekly.
- Social Networking is a hit with 75% active Social Media (SM) online women using it. Twitter is used by 16%. 55% SM Online women blog- post, read or update.

- Women who blog are significantly more active across all forms of Social Media.
- Demographic profile too is interesting i.e.
 - Over 50% are married or living together
 - 70% have completed college or higher degree
 - Over 50% earn more than 70K US dollars yearly.
- Women are reading less of newspaper, seeing less of TV and devoting the time saved in Social Media.
- When asked what is their motivation to publish blogs – 76% mentioned that they blog for 'fun' and 73% mentioned to 'express themselves'
- When asked how the economy has affected their buying behaviour – 78% responded they are considering purchases more carefully while 73% responded that they have cut back on their purchases.
- 62% women were using internet for comparing prices more often. This is an important statistics as women mostly take purchasing decision in the family. Hence, for companies, the focus could be both on Internet and women.
- Women were the most engaged and on the leading edge of Social Media users.

Women business owners emphasize relationship building and are more likely to consult others. Marital status has to do something with men. Unmarried men are likely to use social networks for pleasure purposes. But once married, they use less of social networks and more of transactional networks such as LinkedIn. On the other hand, women use Social Networks regardless of their marital status.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how social media is being applied in teenagers' and women everyday life with the recognition of its importance in today's setting. The study found that although Social Media is causing thinking and behavioural shifts, it is unlikely to take over a teenager's life. Teens use social networking site more effectively and their usage could set an example for the adults – their usage is for fun, for interaction, for discussions, for setting up parties or meeting, sending e-cards, joining relevant groups and so forth, but never forgetting that these are only 'links' or 'appendage' to the physical life. Women, with their social genes have found a perfect expression tool in Social Media. They are likely to stay ahead of men in the utilization of this technology. However, both teenagers and women although socially included in this new media run the risk of negative side-effects of this media, such as cyber porn and hate blogs.

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