

The Social Network Hiatus

Hajar Sanders, PhD
DeVry University
hsanders@hou.devry.edu

Social Networking has become trendy and well accepted as a communication medium. Such media are highly popular among the younger generation and others of a somewhat different age. These more youthful users, sharing information and interacting with others, might be referred to as the social network generation. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the rapid developments in social network technologies and online communications on the older generation.

The Social Network is the use of the World Wide Web to promote the exchange of information and provide users with a convenient method of interacting with others; providing individuals the ability to communicate and share common interests. The availability and popularity of Social Network attracts and captures the attention of users in the early stages of their life. Their usage of this technology becomes embedded in their daily activity; forcing, as a practical matter, parents to become familiar with the technology in order to maintain relationships and communicate. These trends, in general, are challenges to the older generations regarding the usage of newer technology, concepts, and capabilities.

Introduction

The motivation for this study was my personal observation of communication among students. The ages of student populations vary and many of them are of a

younger generation; coming right out of high school. Other somewhat older groups are traditional students, some, currently employed, are returning to school to continue their education. It became apparent that younger students use the social media to share information and common interests while many of the older groups have a lesser interest in such activity. However, those groups who exhibit less interest in such usage might be depriving themselves of a useful tool. For according to Bumgardner and Knestis (2011), in educational learning environments, the potential benefit of social networks is that they provide a practical means of reaching out to others, sharing common interests, collaborating on common projects, encouraging one another, and offering emotional support.

Online social networking has provided a convenient means of communicating and is highly popular among the younger generation. The social networking is well accepted as a communication medium and is used to promote the exchange of information and provides users with a convenient method of interacting with others. The availability and popularity of online social networks draws the attention of users in the early stages of young lives. The usage of this technology becomes embedded in their daily activity. For example this usage might be as simple as daily personal conversation, twitting among friends, collaborating with team members on some project. All of these activities, plus others, will, as a practical matter, force, for example, parents to become familiar with the technology if for no other purpose than to maintain communication with their children. Consequently, in general, this new method of communication poses challenges to the somewhat older generations regarding the usage of newer technology, concepts, and

capabilities. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the rapid developments; in social network technologies and online communications on the older generation. In brief, is the older generation becoming wide spread users of this newer method of communication?

The social network attracts various users from different segments of society for various personal or business related preferences. The participation in social networks by many employers is recommended but not required. For example, organizations, businesses, government agencies, and many from the private sectors would like for their employees to participate in public or private social networks; sharing knowledge or items of common interest. In certain respects, the entire educational society as well as various political organizations concentrates on using this media for a broad spectrum of applications; most commonly in sharing data, information, or knowledge of common interest. The term 'social network' has been described as using "social networking software or utility" such as Facebook and Google Plus that allows users "to connect with other members of the service who they currently know or once knew, or those who share similar backgrounds and interests" (Gelman, p. 1330). As an illustration, Gelman noted:

For example, if I wish to tell a personal story about problems with my pregnancy, my social network might include people who know and care about me, as well as other women who have had similar problems and are looking for compatriots to discuss ways of dealing with such problems. It is impossible to identify who, in advance of sharing the story, fits in this latter category (p. 1330).

Accordingly, the social network, such as Facebook, allows the users to share information such as personal information, family photos, and workplace comments with an unlimited number of friends. Such usage can be conducted with relative privacy simply by

replacing personal interaction with digital media. However, there is, or should be, the knowledge that confidential information will no longer be secret if it is posted on an online social network. In other word, the members of network are connected to each other directly or indirectly and sharing or exchanging information.

All users who post data of any sort of the World Wide Web should be aware that their postings are at risk of public exposure. According to Gelman (2009), in Facebook, the users can participate in variety of available applications but all users should know that all postings, regardless of the set up of individual accounts, can, or does, become, because data is so easily shared, inadvertently or ignorantly, become wide open. Additionally, developers create a multitude of Facebook applications in which users can involve themselves in widespread activities such as sharing videos, reviewing artistic works, books, and playing online games. Gelman also notes, importantly, “to use any application, the user has to turn over her personal information to the application developer. Similarly, Facebook itself also retains all the data that users provide to the site” (p. 1326). Therefore, the user information, now in the possession of the developer, can undergo perpetual sharing. Noted by Houghton and Joinson (2010), “with such large scale use and development of social network sites in the culture of the Internet, managing these boundaries, social spheres, aspects of information, and the relationships they entail may become increasingly difficult” (p. 90). Therefore, users of such network need to be aware of such knowledge when they are joining any social network. The word friend is explained as “In a social network sites, the term “friend” is often used to denote any number of potential relationship ties” (Houghton & Joinson, p. 78)

Research Method

The data collected for this study was a series of open interviews and survey questionnaires. Open interviews were conducted with a small size sample and participants were asked to discuss why or why not they were interested in using social networks. The participants for the open interviews were selected based on the convenience of the research time frame, participant availability, and willingness for interviews. Also, survey questionnaire were sent to somewhat older generations. The data were collected for age groups 51 years of age up to and including 81. The ages were grouped into four categories, each spanning 10 years. For this initial effort, this researcher believes that these age groups were sufficient for the collection of the opinion polls and would provide meaningful data for this study. The participants in the survey questionnaires were selected from a list of personal acquaintances and coworkers. In order to hopefully insure the highest number of respondents, this research used simple mail outs. In addition, participants were asked to give the questionnaires to others of their acquaintance. Self stamped envelopes were provided with the survey questionnaires. The response rate was 79%.

Data Analysis Discussion and Finding

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the rapid developments in online social network technologies on the older generation. Results of the data analysis of this research effort highlighted several issues. The response rate of the questionnaire was 79%. The age of respondents varied from 51 to 80+, 48% between the ages of 51 to 60, 29% between ages of 61 to 70, and 23% above 70. 54% of respondents were male, 46%

female, and 54% of the participants in the survey were full time employees. The result also reveals that 54% of the participants are not using any type of social network as a communications tool. In addition, 36% of respondents are not using any type of messaging or communication systems such as Twitter, Blog, or simple Texting.

In open interviews, in response to questions of why participants did not use, or were not, using social network or other messaging media, the responses varied. Participants expressed that issues related to privacy as a main factor. Notably, from the perspective of sharing information, the survey confirms a popular belief that social network in general interferes with privacy. For example, one of the participants was asked to take part in a small social network; a group of ten members. After three weeks, this particular participant reported that after opening a social network account, one of the inherent flaws became obvious. As a result of this flaw, information flows from one member to others directly and indirectly to friends and friends of friends. It is helpful to understand that Houghton and Joinson (2010) noted that, “the term ‘friend’ is often used to denote any number of potential relationship ties” in the social network (p. 78). For that reason, sharing personal information with peers will possibly result, eventually, in being passed to marketing organizations. The drawback and weakness of this “sharing” activity is that such can increase instances of scam and fraud.

In addition to privacy concerns, several participants in the open interview pointed out that too much personal information is shared in social networks. Examples of personal information that gets posted in Twitter are: “out for lunch”; “at grocery store”;

“at conference” (Farkas, p. 36). Farkas continued with a statement that questioned why anyone would want to share such personal, trivial information with others in the network.

Another source of disenchantment with social network, often expressed by users in general, there is entirely too much meddling with required software and hardware by the majority of electronic interfaces; meddling that generates frustration. The findings provide implication that the older generation believe that the rapid developments in the social network technologies are overwhelming and hard to stay abreast of. Furthermore, some participants believe that use of a social network encourages frivolity, that it is “too impersonal” (there is the loss of face-to-face contact), and therefore many did not find an engagement with it to be a desirable activity.

Social network services are, in general, available anytime and anywhere. In it's favor, it is a sophisticated, convenient, and, by and large a practical means of communication. But it obviously creates anxiety among older Internet generation. As revealed by participants of the older age groups, learning a new application is itself a challenge. However, in that the older generations do have a desire to stay in touch with acquaintances, they are willing to make concessions and learn basic aspects of social networking. For example, parents would like to be able to maintain relationships and communicate with their teenagers; college and university professors would like to enhance the learning environment using the latest trends in technology; grandparents would like to be able to keep in touch with younger family members such as grandchildren and other acquaintances.

Future trends in classroom enhancements will likely require, or encourage, students to participate in social networks. Noted by Bumgardner and Knestis (2011),

“Among students surveyed in a National School Boards Association study, 96 percent of those with online access reported using social networking, and half said they use it to discuss schoolwork” (p. 85). Therefore, it seems the social network can be an effective tool to enhance learning; this in addition to the formal virtual online classroom environments or traditional face to face facility. In addition, if professors are willing to use such tools to enhance learning, there should, as a practical matter, be guidelines that established for procedures and desired outcomes. Bumgardner and Knestis, referred to “Dysart Unified School District, Arizona” as source for the “Sample Guidelines for the Use of Educational Networking Sites by Professional Staff”:

1. Let your administrator, fellow teachers and parents know about your educational network.
2. When available, use school-supported networking tools.
3. Do not say or do anything that you would not say or do as a teacher in a classroom. (Remember that all online communications are stored and can be monitored.)
4. Have a clear statement of purpose and outcomes for the use of the networking tool.
5. Establish a code of conduct for all network participants.
6. Do not post images that include students without parental release forms on file.
7. Pay close attention to the site’s security settings and allow only approved participants access to the site (p. 85)

In summary, although it seems that the social network created gaps between generations, it is an accepted trend by all generations. Even though the older generations are challenged by this new trend, they are, overall, supportive of it. Comments made by some of the participants were that “I simply enjoy participating in social networking because I wanted to stay in touch with my grandchildren”. Other participants made similar comments: “this is a more desirable and accepted trend by youngsters. The young prefer this technique rather than face-to-face conversations or those over the phone”.

Also, another respondent commented that “the younger generation responds to Texting faster than other communication media such as phone calls and emails”. Staying in touch was a critical factor for most participants in survey.

Limitations

Like most research, this study has constraints that may have an effect on the results and possibly skew the research conclusions. In general terms, for example, the questionnaires were sent to convenient participants. Also, open interviews were conducted with a small size sample that was convenient, within the research timeframe, sample subject availability, and willingness for interview.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the rapid developments in social network technologies and online communications on the older generation. There are many social network; examples include those such as Facebook, MySpace, Google Plus, LinkedIn. Included also are techniques such as simple messaging and communication systems such as Twitter and Blog. Research on the Social Network Hiatus has revealed that social network activities create challenges for older generations. Although social networking is highly popular and well accepted as a way of communicating among the younger generation, the older generations view it as a challenge and possible invasive of privacy. In addition, research has shown that Texting is, at the present, the most desirable media for staying in touch. In summary, the study also revealed a potential advantage for the older generation: using this media is a convenient means, once learned, to stay in touch with family and friends.

References

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