

Social Networking, Social Harassment and Social Policy

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Abstract

This paper reports on the misuse of social networking sites (SNS). It was based on a study of 226 students in UK, Sweden, Turkey and France and a panel survey of 1068 Australian adults. Although only a minority of people experienced social harassment and abuse, the distressing nature of the bad experiences suggested that social marketing was needed on several fronts -self-regulation, regulation, education and personal responsibility - in order to minimise these behaviours.

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Introduction

Social Network Sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace capitalise on Web 2.0 technologies to provide interaction between individuals and groups (boyd & Ellison 2008). They have a number of typical features. First, each individual has his or her own site or home page which links to all the material available to them. This consists of a personal profile, where people can post a photo to represent themselves and provide details such as their birthday. They can also post picture albums of themselves, families and friends; list their current activities and use one of the messaging options available. Some SNS, like Twitter have a more restricted, limited messaging option. It is also possible to invite others to join in a group campaigning for a certain cause as in the “million people against the new interface in Facebook” or more seriously, to join a riot (Jines 2008). Finally, they can be followers or fans of an individual, a celebrity or increasingly, a brand (Mashable 2009). SNS are now attracting major use. According to Hitwise (2009), Facebook had 6.12% and MySpace 0.91% of all site visits by a sample of 3 million Australian residents during one week in September 2009. By comparison, Google had 8.57% of visits.

The literature suggests a variety of motives for joining a SNS. Primarily those with high gregariousness needs (Lucas, Le & Dyrenforth 2008) can be expected to be longer term and more frequent users of these sites. Beyond this, the individual’s circumstances – change of jobs, travel and interests – are likely to affect participation. For example, when people move into a job, start a course of study or backpack they are likely to meet people who they like. SNS allow them to keep in touch. Where this has involved group activities, such as a study tour, prolonged contact is even more likely and adds to society's social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007). Finally, although SNS use for activities such as posting photos may be related to a strong sense of public self consciousness (Shim, Lee & Park 2008) some who describe themselves as socially isolated may be motivated to join and participate, driven by the need to belong (Harsha 2008) even if it is by following individuals, brands and groups. It might be expected that the two genders have somewhat different approaches to social networking, with females placing more emphasis on maintaining social relationships and males placing more emphasis on instrumental (outcome oriented) uses such as making dates (Thelwall 2008).

For users, the sites are overtly permission based, that is, the user has the right to decide who can be in their network, though there is obvious social pressure on people if an acquaintance asks them to become a friend or colleague and they do not want to accept. They can divorce friends by removing them from their list. They can opt to join groups or to become followers of individuals, celebrities or brands. This would suggest the user has a high degree of control and because of this experience few problems using SNS. However, like all new technologies SNS offer opportunities to those with anti-social motives to exploit these relatively open systems. In what follows, the paper reviews recent literature on some of the reported abuses of SNS and discusses some results from two surveys, one in Australia and one in Europe which covered these issues. It then turns to consider how social marketing might be used to alleviate some of the problems observed in the surveys.

Negative Aspects of SNS

There are a range of potentially negative aspects of SNS. The first class involve unfortunate social interactions with known members of the SNS. Peers may bully (Feinberg & Robey 2008) or belittle one another (Harvey 2008) or provide malicious advice. One possible consequence of younger groups' use of SNS derives from the rapid forming and dissolution of relationships. The dumpee has the opportunity to slander, abuse or reveal information, such as photos, about the dumper. A form of stalking behaviour is also possible, with the dumpee continuing to follow the person's activities. Although the user, the dumper in this case, has the opportunity to remove a person as a friend, the damage to self-esteem (Guo 2008; Lane, Jones & Stevens 2002) and reputation may already have been done by the time this occurs. If the dumpee has mutual friends on the SNS they may still be able to maintain some forms of surveillance by exploring the sites of the friends of the ex-friend. Even where relationships have not broken up, friends may post materials or photos which are regarded as compromising (Lenzi 2008) without seeking the permission of the persons featured. Similarly people who are disliked might seek to make friends, bringing unwanted attention.

Other negative consequences involve the crossing of personal-public boundaries (Ibrahim 2008; Tufeki 2008). For example, young persons may not appreciate having parents on the same social network. They may feel uncomfortable to think that parents are privy to the exchanges they have with peers. Later in life, a crossover between professional and private networks may lead to unwanted or embarrassing disclosures from the private, personal domain to the professional. While people might belong to separate professional networks like LinkedIn, the ability of SNS to inter-connect, plus individuals' limited management of discrete domains make this difficult. For example, one way to stay in touch with former workmates is to include them on a SNS. They may go on to have further professional relationships, rather than stay merely as friends of acquaintances.

Another class of known intruders into the social space embodied in SNS are the commercial operators with a vested interest in promoting relationships between their brand and the SNS user. While the individual again has the choice of opting-in or out, too many of these linkages may become intrusive if they are constantly posting messages. This is not the same as spam because of the opt-in and opt-out provisions. Finally there is normal advertising, though its use of space is restricted on a site like Facebook and unlikely to be particularly intrusive.

Negative consequences may be experienced also from people who are unknown to the member of the network site, but who search and find people by name. Although many SNS users are aware of the potential risk, often they do not take action to protect their personal details (Ibrahim 2008). People who steal identities, personal information or passwords or misrepresent themselves, also pose a threat. This may simply be a matter of theft of critical identity data (Hrabluk 2008) but some of it may involve predation (Guo 2008) or even recruitment into terrorist networks. Even where the incidence of extreme behaviours like sexual solicitation may be low (Ybarra & Mitchell 2007), the damage done to particular individuals, countries and commercial interests could be devastating. Finally there is the use of groups to organise social or political action such as the riots in Greece in 2008 (Jones 2008) or in Iran in 2009 (Guardian 2009). While the authorities may regard this as being a social negative, those interested in supporting a cause may see it as a positive. It is also possible that people who project themselves as vulnerable may be more subjected to bullying and harassment. Those who report being more exposed to these activities are likely to suffer a loss of self esteem (Lane et alia 2002). It is anticipated that people who belong to more

networks and hence extend their contacts beyond their more immediate circle of family and friends are more likely to be exposed to negative aspects of SNS.

These considerations led to the basic research questions for exploratory research:

- Q1 To what extent do users of Social Network sites personally experience problems?
- Q2 What is the nature of these problems?

Method

The first was a pilot self-completion survey of 226 university students conducted among undergraduate and postgraduate marketing classes in four countries, France (48 people), Turkey (59), United Kingdom (43) and Sweden (76) in late 2008. Self-completion questionnaires, using mainly open-ended questions, were used. They were completed in English as this was one of the languages of instruction in each place. The second survey was a Australia-wide internet panel survey conducted in February 2009 of 1068 people aged 18 and over using the Ipsos Custom Panel¹ using a sample claimed to be broadly representative of the Australian adult population. Five pre-coded questions were asked, including one which asked respondents to note anti-social behaviours which they have personally experienced.

Results

In the European study, all students reported using SNS. Of the sample, 20% reported problems with the sites. The rates of problems experienced did not differ significantly either between genders or between the four countries in which the survey was conducted. Table 1 below shows the problems experienced by this group. The major issues were caused by unwelcome behaviour on the part of known friends or acquaintances. However there were also a group of people subjected to the activities of outsiders hacking accounts or assuming false identities. It was also apparent that some of the problems noted were hearsay - reports of what others said they experienced. This applied to work issues where others were reported as missing out on jobs because of information posted on SNS. Despite all this, all students were current users of SNS, with 83% reporting daily use. This suggested that the problems experienced were not enough to make them quit using the sites.

In the Australian sample, 85% reported being users of SNS, consistent with this being an Internet panel survey. As Table 2 shows, usage was significantly higher among the younger groups ($\chi^2 = 106.98, 5 \text{ df}$) as shown in Table 2. Table 3 shows the reported problems. Only 6% reported any problems and again there were no differences between males and females. In the survey, open-ended descriptions of the problems experienced were not sought. Given the different composition of the European and Australian survey samples, it is unclear whether the lower incidence of problems in Australia was due to inter-country or cohort differences.

¹ The authors gratefully acknowledge Ipsos for collecting and making available this data.
<http://www.iview.com.au/custompanel.htm>

Table 1 Experiences of Marketing Students in Four European Countries

Issue	Examples	
Unwanted pictures or information released	Pictures published without my consent: did not want them exposed!! Private settings important to restrict contact to friends only	24%
Identity fraud, hacking virus	Password stolen because of poor security on servers Fake account created using downloaded images	24%
Negative comments about me	Nasty bullying emails Negative comments posted	11%
Stalked	Harassed by stalkers	9%
Unwanted contact	Contacted by unwanted people	9%
Harassed by ex friends	Deleted a 'friend' who was a mild stalker	9%
Job related	A friend wasn't hired by a company because he admitted taking drugs on Facebook A friend wasn't hired by a company because of something said on Facebook	9%
Other	Bought a holiday and couldn't get hold of the company	5%
		n= 45

Table 2 Rates of SNS Usage by Age Group in Australia

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
Usage	97%	97%	89%	85%	69%	69%	85%
n =	91	275	176	217	135	174	1068

Table 3 Problems Experienced by Australian Panellists

Problem	
Harassment	2%
Stalking	1%
Cracked accounts	1%
Fraud	2%
Identity theft	1%
Being removed from a friend's list	4%
Total	6%
n =	1068

These results indicate that severe problems like harassment and stalking are not common, at least in these adult samples. Where they do occur, they are clearly serious for those who are victimised. Especially vulnerable groups like children remain a particular concern. Society would never tolerate a laissez faire approach to SNS because of the dangers involved for children and vulnerable adults who use these sites. Social marketing might help alleviate these risks. Andreasen (2002, p.7) conceives social marketing "... not as a theory or a unique set of techniques but as a process for developing social change programs ... the ultimate objective

should be behavior change.” Strategies to effect this behavioural change are now discussed in the light of these emerging problems.

Social Marketing Strategies to Effect Change

Self-regulation by SNS providers is one market approach. Sites like Facebook prevent children under 13 (if discovered) joining and children 13 and over are advised to seek parental permission (Facebook 2009a). But it is very difficult for SNS to police the identity claims of those who join. In addition, SNS are set up to encourage people to expand their network. The mere act of searching for someone may trigger messages to individuals who feel their safe social space has been compromised (e.g. Barrett 2009). While IP addresses of those logging in are collected (Facebook 2009a), this is a minor deterrent to stalkers who can hide from or avoid this scrutiny. The networks themselves may be susceptible to hacking or phishing attacks (Facebook, 2009b). SNS have the ability to scan and remove content they regard as undesirable. SNS can also respond to complaints about unwelcome attempts to make contact or unwelcome content which people post about them. However, this is after the event. Thus self-regulation can influence or correct undesirable behaviour, but cannot entirely prevent it. *Regulation* by Governments in countries like China can block access to sites like Facebook (Wauters 2009). In Western countries, regulating the internet is far more difficult because doing so may also block content which the society regards as valuable (Hendry 2008), as well as denying commercial interests the opportunity to profit from the networks (McKinsey 2007, 2008) and users the chance to gain content that suits them (Bonhard & Sasse 2006). Governments can mandate privacy, fair use and complaint handling requirements, but often the providers of services lie outside their jurisdictions. Particular institutions like schools and workplaces may block access to particular sites, but be powerless to stop employees and pupils getting access elsewhere. Software of the "Net Nanny" type is available but parents are unlikely to want to block complete access to SNS behaviour, just prevent behaviour or access to content they regard as undesirable.

Public *education* may also be possible. The first way is to educate parents about the possible dangers that their children take and ways to moderate this behaviour (Hayes 2008). This itself poses potential dangers as children may be far more internet savvy than their parents and certainly more practised in using SNS as Table 3 shows. What is forbidden may also create a sense of adventure and excitement, producing behaviours contrary to parental intention. The second approach is to promote ethical practices to adults. SNS are themselves the places to promote ethical behaviour using traditional advertising spaces available there, while some targeting of parents in more traditional media may also be necessary. Children can also be taught moral codes about how to moderate their own behaviour by treating friends fairly. Lobby groups may also have a role (Stopcyberbullying 2008) in educating the public. Finally, *users can regulate their own behaviour* and that of their peers. Profiles can be changed and privacy protected. As SNS continue to evolve making more and more connections between individuals, groups and organisations, the balance between freedoms to enjoy and profit and the desire to protect the vulnerable will only get more problematic. Market interventions are possible to effect behavioural change, but a range of public policy and marketing techniques should be used as no single approach can be completely effective.

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