GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION: THE CASE OF MAURITIUS

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ABSTRACT

Technologies have a long history of shaping and being shaped by the gender of their users. In this globalised era, internet has enabled people around the world to connect and bring them closer, thus making the world smaller. Men and women use social network services differently and in different frequencies. In general, several researchers have found that women tend to use social network services more than men and for different and more social purposes. Therefore, this paper mainly examines the gender differences in social network service in the Mauritian context. The paper attempts in addressing to what extent do these social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, etc) offer new spaces for women to express themselves? How far have men’s and women’s lives changed with these network sites? Do men and women feel that they are empowered or disempowered or manipulated with these network sites?

For the purpose of this study, both primary and secondary data have been collected. A survey has been conducted, whereby a self-completed questionnaire was administered among both men and women aged between 15 to 35 years regarding their use of the social network service. A sample of 100 people consisted mainly of teenagers, full-time university students, working and non-working adults participated in the survey. Findings showed that men and women go online in different ways. Men tend to go to sites where they can absorb information without trying to build relationships, whereas women tend to seek out information from actual people, and share strategies in an equal sense, instead of trying to build up their personal social status the way men do. It has also been observed from the findings that there are more men who use for example the ‘LinkedIn’ network, which is a professional business network service as a chance to climb the social ladder; whereas women tend to go for example on ‘Facebook’ to actually communicate with people. Other gendered issues regarding social networking have also been discussed in this paper. Therefore, this paper will contribute to a better understanding of the social network service from a gendered perspective in Mauritius and also in an increasingly globalised context. It will also add more value to the issue of gender and the social media in the African continent.

Keywords: Technology, globalised era, social network services and sites, gender differences, Mauritius
1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globalization is today’s phenomenon that deserves to be studied across various disciplines. It has become one of the most cited catchwords of our time and is used to describe a process of social change on the macro level of societies. Many social scientists have tried to precisely define this pervasive phenomenon. On one hand, globalization has been defined as the process of intensification of cross-area and cross-border social relations between actors from very distant locations, and of growing transnational interdependence of economic and social activities (Beck 2000; Giddens 1990). On the other hand, Giddens (1990) viewed globalization in terms of networking and the interconnection between different social contexts or regions. The use of new technologies and internet has made it possible for people to communicate with each other between virtually all points on the earth. The need to communicate is purely human and forms part of the socialization process. However, globalization has also be seen as a new phenomenon that impacts on our everyday life and therefore, new social networks are created, thus leading to emerging new relationships.

In this new globalizing era, social networks have a phenomenon, present in many people’s lives and attracted both men and women from different ages, educational levels, cultures, etc. from all over the world. It can be observed that apart from checking e-mails, reading daily forums and newspapers or following instant message tools, people now also check their social network profiles by following others’ status changes, updating their profiles or looking at others’ profiles. According to Joinson (2008) and Lenhart (2009), many people connect to social network sites at least once a day either to check their profiles or to participate in different online activities. Technologies have a long history of shaping and being shaped by their gender of their users. Since gender is the concern of both men and women, they use technology and the social networking sites differently. Therefore, this paper examines the gender differences in social network services in the Mauritian context.

Mauritius is an island located in the Indian Ocean about 2,000 kilometres off the southeast coast of the African continent and its population is made up of approximately 1.3 million people. The peopling of Mauritius is a ‘deterriorlisation’ of people across the globe. The heterogeneity of the island is reflected by its ethnic groups, languages and religious differences (Bunwaree & Kasenally, 2007). Since its independence in 1968, Mauritius has developed from a low-income, agriculture-based economy to a middle-income diversified economy. Mauritius has no exploitable natural resources and the human resource is the only bankable resource that the small island possesses. The economy is mainly based on tourism, textiles, sugar, and financial services. Following the expansion in the financial sector, the information, communication and technology (ICT) sector is the most recent development strategy since Mauritius is aiming to position itself as the ‘cyber island’ or ‘knowledge hub’ in the African region (Human Resource Development Council, (HRDC), 2009). The government of Mauritius is investing a lot of efforts and money in developing policies and enabling the emergence of a free and democratised telecommunications market on the island. Mauritius has not lagged behind the huge growth of internet, as per the Internet World Stats (2014), there were 458,927 (approximately 35%) internet users as at 30 June 2012 and 367,900 (approximately 28%) Facebook users as at 31 December 2012 in Mauritius.
2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of Social Networks
Social networks are defined as a body of applications that augment group interaction and shared spaces for collaboration, social connections, and aggregates information exchanges in a web-based environment (Barlett-Brag, 2006). Facebook, Myspace, Youtube, Flickr, and LinkedIn are the most commonly known social network sites containing similar as well as different features. It can be seen that Facebook is handled among other social networks because of being the most popular and most heavily visited social network website (eBizMBA, 2010).

2.2 Uses of Social Networking Sites (SNS)
People use the social networking sites for a number of reasons. In most cases, they act as a social utility that help people share information and communicate more efficiently with their friends, family, and coworkers. For example, despite the fact that Facebook was launched in 2004 as a Harvard-only Social Network site, it expanded to include other high school students, professionals inside corporate networks, and eventually everyone who have access to the online world (Cassidy, 2006). The social network sites are quite easy to use, allow rapid updating, analyse and share the continuously increasing information, reflect on daily life, establish and maintain spontaneous social contacts and relationships, support informal learning practices with interaction and communication and facilitating delivery of education. Thus, these reasons explain why social network sites are adopted rapidly although they first had emerged with the purpose of sharing photos, personal information, videos, profiles and related content (Mejias, 2005; Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008).

According to Rosmarin (2007), Zywica & Danowski (2008), Facebook provides an opportunity to users, to create personalized profiles that include general information like education background, work background, and favorite interests and also to add links and song clips of their favorite bands, post messages on friends’ pages, and post and tag pictures and videos, among other things. Therefore, the social networks facilitate the sharing of photos and videos with both real world as well as virtual friends while allowing them to build unique online identities by customizing their personal profiles with a range of multimedia elements that are open to others’ reading (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). However, Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe (2007) explained that social network can be oriented towards work-related contexts, establishing new relationships, or reaching those with shared interests such as in music or politics.

Stutzman (2006) stated that social networks can be used for passing time, learning about other people, maintaining social relations, following changes at the university, class or school enrolled. Through these social networks, individuals come together, share some common goals or needs, and they also tend to build new communities and groups or participating in them comes up. Therefore, there is a shift from being passive consumers to fully functioning members among individuals by sharing their materials and views with others. Also, this cooperative activity helps members to shape the group identity in addition to their individual identities (Atwell, 2006). Lockyer & Patterson (2008) also showed that users can share their personal information with the help of their profile page, connect with other users, upload, tag and share multimedia content they have created, link others to a variety of accessible content, initiate or join sub-sets of common interest groups. In addition, Joinson (2008) underlined that people use social networks to keep in touch with old friends, find the lost
contacts, communicate with the like-minded people, join groups with shared interests, organize or join events, view and tag photos, share or post photographs, play games, update one's own status, see others’ status. Lenhart (2009) further argued that social networks are primarily used for establishing and maintaining personal or professional contacts, making plans such as by organizing an event or a cause, and simply flirting.

It should be pointed out that social network sites are considered to play an active role in younger generation’s daily lives (Lenhart, 2009; Koca 2009). Most of the social network users are young individuals most of whom are teenagers, university students and working adults. Grant (2008) acknowledged that social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, weblogs, as well as wikis are predominantly used by teenagers and young adults as an extension of their personality to show their friends and the world who they are, what they care about, and with whom they are likeminded. The most popular research areas focus and compare the different social networks in terms of their features and users’ demographics such as gender, frequency of use and their reasons for participating in social network environments. The relationship between the youth and their involvement in social network sites have also captured the attention of many researchers, whereby focusing on young people’s social network activities in relation to their privacy concerns as pertaining in their social network usage (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009; Zywica & Danowski, 2008).

Most of the studies above stated that people maintain their relations with social networks in which they formed or joined new networks to make new friends. It is noticeable that people generally tend to keeping in touch with friends, maintaining their relations, making new friends, building groups with people around common background (graduated school, department and class groups) or building new groups or joining groups with people which they have shared interest or needs (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodology used to carry out the study. Although there are literatures on social networks sites, this paper aims at contributing to a better understanding of the use of social networking sites among men and women in the Mauritian context. The paper attempts in addressing these questions: Do these social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, etc) offer new spaces for women to express themselves? How far have men’s and women’s lives changed with these network sites? Do men and women feel that they are empowered or disempowered or manipulated with these network sites?

As mentioned in the abstract, both primary and secondary data have been collected for the purpose of this study. For the purpose of this study, a survey has been conducted mainly with the teenagers, university students, working and non-working adults. The main aim of the survey was to collect information regarding the usage of the social networking sites among males and females. A self-completed questionnaire was used since it was seen to be an easier method to administer as compared to the structured interview (Bryman, 2004). Closed-ended questions were mainly used since they tend to be easier to answer and there were fewer open questions. A sample of 150 participants, consisted both males and females, aged between 15 to 35 years, were selected and but only 100 responded positively and voluntarily to the research, 10 were non-users of the social networking
sites and the other 40 persons were unavailable. The sample was also composed of different ethnic groups existed in the Mauritian society, such as Indo-Mauritians, Muslims, Genderal Population and Sino Mauritians.

Table 1 below shows the detailed description of the 100 participants in terms of age and gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Teenagers (Age: 15-19 years)</th>
<th>Full-Time University Students (Age: 20-25 years)</th>
<th>Working and non-working Adults (Age: 26-35 years)</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Females</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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A random sample was used among males and females classified into 3 categories namely teenagers, full time university students, working and non-working adults aged between 15 to 35 years as shown in Table 1. Adults were both employed and unemployed. Apart from the primary data collection through surveys, secondary data were also collected in the form of books, dissertations, internet, press cuttings and survey reports from other countries were consulted.

**4.0 FINDINGS & ANALYSIS**

Data were collected by means of a self-completed questionnaire, which consisted of two sections. Instructions were given to the respondents on how to record their answers. In the first section, demographic characteristics of the social network users were collected. General information about the respondents were obtained in terms gender, age, marital status, ethnic group, location and educational background. The second section of survey consisted of both open and closed ended questions and consisted of different themes.

The analysis of this study has been based only on 100 participants. As said earlier, 10 participants (both males and females) were not using the social networking sites because they think that it is a waste of time. Among these 10 participants, 6 male adults aged between 30-35 years who did not use social networking sites claimed that they were not interested and found it useless and it is meant for teenagers. They further mentioned that from their point of view social networking site are too time consuming and they worked for long hours and they do not have time for such stuff. This is mostly from the point of view of men who consider work to be very important and spending their time uselessly on social networking sites may make them lose their precious time and become unproductive.

On the other hand, 4 female adults aged between 25-35 years claimed not being on social networking sites, said that they have other priorities: such as looking after the house and children. Some have argued that they do not have time when they come back from work and prefer to spend time with their family members.
However, in the survey they mentioned that though they did not use social networking sites, they do keep in touch with their friends and relatives through phones and emails. However, they were also aware of these sites but they did not show interest to join these sites.

Key findings were grouped under the themes below and these themes demonstrate the significance of some previously discussed in the literatures.

- Use of social networking sites
- Number of years and time spent using the social networking sites
- Identity Construction through Profile pages
- Place of Access to social Networks
- Virtual Friends v/s Real friends

4.1 Use of social networking sites

Out of the 100 respondents, 80% were users of the many social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, YouTube, Flickr, and LinkedIn and 10% were aware of Twitter and other networking sites but were only using Facebook. Most employed adult males were users of Facebook and LinkedIn, which is a professional business network service as a chance to climb the social ladder; whereas women tend to go for example on ‘Facebook’ to actually communicate with people. According to female adults Facebook provides an opportunity to users, to create personalized profiles that include general information like education background, work background, and favorite interests and also to add links and song clips of their favorite bands, post messages on friends’ pages, and tag pictures and videos. These reasons are similar to those found in the studies carried out by Rosmarin (2007), Zywica & Danowski (2008).

Out of 50 female participants, 40 female adults aged between 25-35 years said that these social networking sites provided them more space to voice out their feelings as compared to the males. As compared to long ago, most female teenagers and adults argued that the social networking sites now act as a platform, which make the women more visible in the public domain. Most university female students also highlighted that the social sites have changed their lives and they need to check their profile at least once a day. 45 males argued that social networks are primarily used for establishing and maintaining personal or professional contacts, making plans such as by organizing an event or a cause, and simply flirting. The study also showed that in general teenagers log in several times a day to check for friend requests and comments, to add new applications and post photos.

Both teenagers and university students said they are on Facebook to show their friends and the world who they are, what they care about, and with whom they are likeminded. They keep in touch with their old friends. The unemployed adults said that these sites act as a time pass for them until they will find a job and they feel connected to the outside world. In general, males tend to go to the social sites where they can absorb information without trying to build relationships, whereas women tend to seek out information from actual people, and share strategies in an equal sense, instead of trying to build up their personal social status the way men do.
4.2 Number of years and time spent using the social networking sites

From the findings it can be pointed out that these social networking sites play an active role in young people’s daily lives as also seen by Lenhart (2009) and Koca (2009). From the findings, it can also be observed that out of 100 participants, 60 males and females have been using the social networking sites for more than 3 years. 40 males and females have been using the social networking sites for 2 years. Both male and female teenagers use Facebook more often as compared to other social sites and said they can’t live without it. It has been found that both males and females share favorite interests and add links and song clips of their favorite bands on Facebook.

Out of 100 respondents, 45 males spend more than three hours daily on social networking sites as compared to 55 females who spend a minimum of three to four hours, whereby spending a lot of time enhancing their profile page, adding new photos and replying to comments from their friends. However, the males said that they look for new friends and with a view to flirt with girls.

4.3 Identity Construction through Profile pages

Social networking sites present opportunities for identity exploration. The construction of a social networking profile is an exercise in identity building. Users identify and share their interests, beliefs and hobbies on their profiles. In most cases, young users play with different names, ages and genders.

In this study, it has been found that out of 100 respondents, 40 (25 males and 20 females) have claimed that they have used two different profiles on their favourite social network. Males have argued that one is used for professional purposes, whereas the second profile was used for personal purposes. The male adults have also claimed that they do not give detailed information about their personal lives and marital status. Out of 100, 30 females were concerned about the privacy of the photos posted on the network sites whereas 25 males were interested with the comments of their friends for their photos especially when they post semi-nude parts of their body or sexy pictures of their singers and sexy girls.

4.4 Place of Access to social Networks

In this study, out of 100 respondents, it was found that 75% had access to social networks from home and smart phones, 20% from the workplace and 5% from internet cafes and computer lab at the university as shown in the figure 1. Facebook enjoys a huge popularity, as underlined in Alexa’s¹ ranking of social networking sites visited by Mauritians.

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¹ Alexa’s country ranking accessed on 1st August 2014 (Available at: http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/MU)
Virtual Friends v/s Real friends
Technology increases the rapid growth of social networking sites and has gained its popularity among the young people. It has not only allows self-expression, communication and user interaction online but also helped in the development of other interactive applications like YouTube, whereby people can upload, share and download contents and posts comments with other users. In the study, it has been found that 40% of the participants argued that friend lists act as one of the most important features in social networks. It is also important to distinguish the type of relationships being developed online. 60% males were more likely to make new relationships whereas 40% females were more interested to focus more on the existing relationship. The females have also highlighted that they receive lots of friend requests, whom they hardly know and have never been in contact. In the study it has been found that males have an average of 200-500 friends while females have an average of 150-300 friends. Both males and females have argued that some of these friends are the virtual ones rather than real ones.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS
It can be seen that the social networking sites are continuously growing by the increasing number of users and working on better service features. These social sites now form part of people’s lives, change the way people internet and engage with each other. The social networking phenomenon encompasses all age groups and the
reasons put forward for joining these sites are diverse. However, it’s the younger people who are the quicker ones in adopting this new technology.

This study has attempted to find out the reasons for joining these social networking sites (SNS) and it can be seen that there are gender differences in the use of SNS among different categories such as teenagers, university students and young working and non-working adults. Technologies have enabled both males and females to use the SNS, thus making the world become smaller. Therefore, the advent of technologies has enabled people to interact with their loved ones through the network sites even if they are miles away. Youngsters in Mauritius find in the SNS a realm for expression of desire, feelings, emotions, ideas and opinions. It can be observed that the social network sites are not really operating like the traditional media. Men and women feel that they are empowered to a certain extent with these network sites. Key findings have shown that men and women use SNS differently and in different frequencies. It was found that men tend to use SNS more than females to climb the social ladder, whereas women tend to go for example on ‘Facebook’ to actually communicate with people and connect with their old friends rather than building new relationships. Males actually do not exhibit preferences in terms of ethnicity as they are more interested in flirting rather than seeking a serious relationship. In terms of gender, only in ‘making new relationships’ factor, males found to having higher scores than females.

REFERENCES


