Virtual Socialization: A Step Towards Social Transformation

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Abstract

The latest developments in communication technology are driving the societies towards a totally transformed structure of socialization i.e., virtual socialization. Socializing with friends and family, shopping, banking, media consumption and other daily individual activities have now been transferred to the world of web. New technologies are leading the society towards virtual socialization leaving the face-to-face real world communication far behind. This research study is aimed at finding out the relationship between the use of social networking sites and the trend of virtual socialization among the youth of Lahore. For this survey research, a 5 point Likert Scale close-ended questionnaire was used as a research tool. The researcher applied stratified random sampling technique. To trace the the causal relationship between social networking sites and virtual socialization the statistical test of Regression was applied. The results show that the youth of Lahore is getting more involved in and thereby dependent on virtual socialization. This dependency on virtual relations is leading the society towards social transformation. It is also affecting interpersonal communication skills of the people.

Key words:

Social Transformation, Virtual Socialization, Virtual World, Cyber Links, Offline Relations.

Introduction

Socialization is a basic human trait. According to Aristotle, man is a social animal who cannot survive in isolation in the absence of any social bonding (Gilje & Skirbekk, 2000). According to the sociologists, the process of human socialization is a combination of two factors: nature and nurture. (Collins et al 2000). While gifted with many innate qualities, the child has the ability to learn social behavior. Feeble and helpless at birth, the newborn depends on others for sustenance and care. Therefore, interaction begins from the very beginning, adding parental and cultural traits to the basic instincts. This interaction leads to develop nurture. This lifelong process of transformation through imbibing the norms of the society is termed as 'socialization.'

Socialization is a process of learning the common social behavior through social interaction. Social interaction teaches us how to play our roles. So, the nature gives the capabilities, which are ripened through nurture. Socialization can be identified as a lifelong learning process by which individuals identify their human capacities and learn their cultural patterns, which also lead to the development of self-concept (Erik and Joan, 2006).

Social and cultural values shape up social behavior. Each parent ensures that their child adopts socially acceptable behavior by giving him rewards and penalties for appropriate and inappropriate behavior. The reward may be in the form of an affectionate action like kiss, hug, pat on the shoulder, gift, cash or outing. Similarly, a warning, a slap, withdrawal of pocket money or outing may be a punishment. So a child grooms socially with these rewards and punishments.

To gratify the need of socialization, humans have been inventing innovative ways. The generation born after 1980s is called 'digital natives.' This generation is lucky enough to have an open access to social networking platforms that is helpful in shaping their personality in a new socializing pattern. The Internet is the key player in facilitating this type of socialization. The internet technology has established platforms to boost up socialization process in the form of virtual entities, instead of traditional real world entities (Khalid, 2014).

In Pakistan, people especially the youth are getting more involved in virtual socialization. Now a days, they remain in touch with their family and friends all the time despite any distance, commitments or busy schedule. Online interaction via Social Networking Sites (SNSs) particularly Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram is gradually becoming more popular as well as easily accessible. People love to share their status, pictures, videos and any interesting information on their profile. Youth of today does not hesitate to share their personal status and pictures publicly, which was not socially acceptable a generation ago. Technology is leading the society towards virtual socialization leaving the face-to-face communication far behind. This dependency on virtual relations is driving the society towards social transformation (Saleem, 2015).

The Internet offers too many socializing platforms. An online message board is a virtual forum to share opinions and viewpoints on any topic. It also allows users to select a board or thread of discussions as per their choice for reading and contribution. These message boards do not provide an immediate response; hence require a continuous check from the users for responses. This virtual socialization through online platforms has been labeled as "social networking". Consumers on these networking sites with common interests and goals are treated as virtual communities. Social media has an effect on trade and business as well. The concept of 'viral marketing' has become popular overnight among marketing companies. SNSs are a platform for advertising as well.

Online chat rooms facilitate people to communicate with anyone, anytime and anywhere. In chat rooms, users communicate with each other through written messages. An inbox and message window are some extra features that are provided by these sites. There is usually a list of the online participants in the room, which facilitates the users to see who are with them in their virtual community. Through online chatting, members of virtual community get to know each other as if they were acquaintances or friends in the real life.

SNSs are the most recognized form of virtual community. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Myspace are all virtual communities. Anyone can create a profile account on these sites, can add and follow friends. So, digital natives can remain connected in a virtual world. These sites also keep people up to date with the activities and status of their online friends. For example, Facebook allows its users to upload photos, videos, add friends, send friend request and join groups. Users can poke and like pictures, videos and status of their online friends. All of these features facilitate users to form a virtual community which facilitates them to develop social networks to share their own ideas or publicize their products (Jenkins et al., 2005).

Research Objectives

The aim of this research paper is to explore the frequency of society's shift towards virtual socialization.

Following are the objectives of the study:

- To investigate the impact of social networking sites on face-to-face socialization
- To discover the level of involvement in online relations
- To assess the involvement of youth in online activities
- To find out the trend of virtual socialization among the youth in the city of Lahore

Literature Review

In their research, "Real friends and virtual life?" Domahidi, Scharkow & Quandt (2012) conclude that despite public fear of community life replacement by virtual life, there is an expansion of social connectivity among youth in America. People are more comfortable in virtual networking

platforms. They are virtually alive by communicating through the Internet, checking on each other's status and feeling that they all are in touch. This dependency on virtual life results into social isolation because the virtual life is so different from real life.

While interacting in a virtual community, people may feel that in spite of knowing each other, they really do not. In fact, they have no idea who the real person behind the window is. This social virtualization is also making people lazy (Martin and Gilson, 2014). In old times people used to meet each other on their way, stop, shake hands and chat for a while before leaving, but after this technological invasion, people walk by with little or no contact at all. Now, things are not as personal or meaningful as they used to be in the past.

The youth of today is too involved in online socialization to participate in public affairs. The sense of isolation and the trend of individualization are increasing among the youth due to heavy dependency on SNSs. Most of the time, the youth is in online communication with family and close friends. There is a direct relation between weak offline relations and heavy exposure to SNSs (Saleem, 2014).

The approach of the youth towards real life relations is changing due to growing dependence on SNSs. They feel no hesitation in discussing private or public affairs online (Jain and Gupta, 2012). Due to unlimited exposure to the virtual world and a limited ability of self-direction, the youth is also more vulnerable to cyber related risks.

Online communication is used not only for socialization but it is also used for marketing, advertising and human resourcing. Online socialization is helpful in personal grooming but several risks are also involved in it. Virtual predators are hunting for some susceptible individuals. It is easy to be a member of SNS but it is very difficult to leave it as it becomes an addiction. In addition to virtual communication, these sites have emerged as a main source of cybercrimes (Reshma, 2012).

Virtual friends may prevent loneliness, as people in the old age can get "virtual friends" to eradicate the feeling of loneliness. The life style would be changed in the coming years like 2025. (Anonymous, 2007). The middle aged parents of today would be the older generation by that time. Most health care would be technologically based in future. In future, life will depend upon "virtual friends". The idea of "hug suit" has been introduced. This hug suit will accelerate emotional state of hugs or other feelings. The same idea has been shared by Guttsman (2008) in her news story, "Virtual friends in a Cancer World". She writes that after being diagnosed with breast cancer, she updated her status on Facebook and shared this news with her virtual friends. In a few hours, she got hundreds of responses from her online friends who were sharing their personal stories. They were supporting her, wishing her good luck and sending virtual hugs. Talking to a woman who had suffered through

the same situation gave her courage to face the disease with courage. She concludes that in this busy world, virtual ties save us from isolation in the time of crises.

Arjan (2011) explores the virtual ties among team members and the impact of virtual leadership in a traditional face to face working environment in his research, "The relative importance of leadership behaviours in virtual and face-to-face communication settings". It was a survey research in Shell Global Solutions among 419 technical engineers. The result shows that virtual settings support more professional leadership behaviours related to the task and work place relationship. The comparative significance of guidance and management activities lifts the "degree of virtualness" in daily routine of team members.

Theoretical Framework

This research explores the effect of modern media on individual's life. Two theories i.e. Uses and Gratification Theory and Time Displacement Theory serve as the background of this research.

Time Displacement Theory

The Time Displacement Theory by McQuail explains that the adoption of any new technology or hobby may result in the decline of time given to other technologies and activities. The main assumption of this theory is that human activities have a zero-sum property – that is, people cannot begin a new activity without decreasing time devoted to prior activities because everyone has only 24 hours a day to spend. Application of this hypothesis to usage patterns of modern media technologies shows that high dependency on modern media i.e., Internet usage reduces the time given to other media and offline activities (Nie & Erbring, 2000).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory by Blumer and Katz (1959) supports the limited effect of media. According to this theory, media effects depend on the approach of media consumers, rather than the media message. It deals with the audience as active consumers who use and adapt media messages as per their needs. These needs may vary from person to person and society to society. This theory narrates the behavior of media consumers how they gratify their needs through media. As to become a member of a social group is in human nature, so man of today's technological world is gratifying his socialization need through virtual world.

The main emphasis of this study is to explore how the society is facing a shift towards virtual socialization especially the youth. The research is important as the usage of the Internet for social needs, education, banking and trade purposes is becoming common. Even traditional media and famous national and international brands have their accounts on SNSs like Facebook and Twitter to communicate and transact with their audience and customers.

Research Questions

Following research questions were designed and investigated in this study:

Q1:   Does exposure to new communication technologies lead to virtual socialization?

Q2:   Is virtual socialization particularly through SNSs changing traditional patters of socialization?

Methodology

For this survey research a close-ended questionnaire designed on 5-point Likert scale was used as a research tool. A sample of 300 youngsters (both male and female) between the ages of 18-24 years from the city of Lahore was selected. Stratified random sampling technique was used to select the sample. The strata were based on gender. In this research, Internet was marked as an independent variable and virtual socialization was measured as a dependent variable. The research was done to examine the causal relationship between the pattern of Internet usage and virtual socialization by applying statistical test of Regression.

Results & Discussion

The results show that the youth of Lahore is more involved in online communication that results in frequent virtual socialization. Communication through traditional mail and face-to-face communication has decreased a lot. To find out the trend of virtual socialization, Multiple Regression Test was applied on data. Multiple R value 0.971 shows the strong relation between SNSs and virtual socialization.

The sample of the study comprised of 53% females and 47% males. In the sample, students constituted almost 92% of the respondents and 8% of employees. The data shows that 65% of respondents were quite happy to have more than 200 online friends. The value of standard deviation is 18.33 with an average of 5.2 friends.

Reasons for Virtual Socialization

It was found that there were some common factors that were leading the society towards virtual socialization like fabricating virtual community by joining interest groups. Almost, every SNS has a forum to share thoughts and post comments. People create photo albums by uploading their photos and share photos with their online friends. These sites are also helpful in finding the old friends.

The data shows that about 77% people use SNSs to relax themselves from their busy schedules of studies or office work. This shows that the use of these SNSs even for a few minutes is helpful for the users during the hectic routine of the office or institute.

Almost all SNSs provide instant messaging services through Instant Messenger. The data analysis shows that 50% of the respondents do not use this facility as they do not need it and 50% of the respondents use Messenger very frequently while they are online.

The study also discovers that the working youth finds SNSs as a tool of entertainment and leisure after their busy and hectic schedules. Self-identity and self-discovery are the two main motives behind using the networking sites. Countless number of online communities provides an easy opening to find compatible people for sharing and debating ideas.

The data analysis also shows that the Internet users depend on traditional mail service for official purposes only. Use of traditional mail for socialization has been totally replaced by the SNSs. Even sending emails for socializing purposes has been replaced by posting exclusive messages on their profiles or on friends' profile pages. The data shows that more than half i.e. 86% (Figure 1) of the respondents never used traditional postal services and e-mails to communicate with friends. They prefer Whatsapp, Viber and Facebook for communication. Only 14% of the respondents use e-mails to communicate with their friends. Gmail, Yahoo and yMail were the most used email sites among the users. The respondents prefer SNSs for easy and affordable communication. The results show that a paradigm shift in communication patterns has taken place.
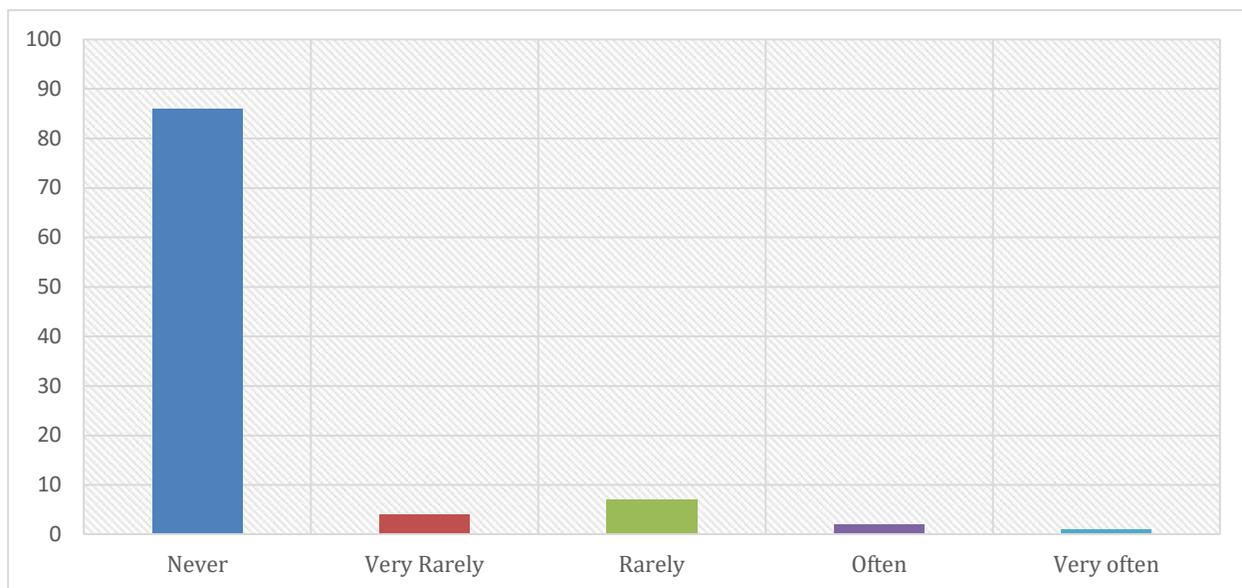

Figure **1: Use of Traditional Mail for Socialization**

The data shows that this virtual communication also helps students in their studies and others in their official performance. A question was asked about the level of negative influence of virtual socialization on their academic and official performance. The findings reveal that 21% of the respondents strongly agreed to the statement of the asked question, 29% of respondents agreed with the statement and 23% respondents were of the view that virtual communication has no link with the academic and official performance. Seventeen percent (17%) of the respondents did not agree with the statement, and 10% strongly disagreed with the statements.

The users of SNSs are also of the view that virtual communication is easier and more fun oriented. They can share unlimited information with their friends that cannot be possible in the traditional ways of socialization, as to approach a number of friends at a time is not possible through offline communication in traditional socialization. Virtual communication facilitates easy and affordable social ties.

The respondents were asked about the frequency of posting their comments including feedback and personal experience about any product or hired services. The data showed that 64% of the respondents shared their views online whereas 36% said that they did not post their comments on respective sites (Figure 2).
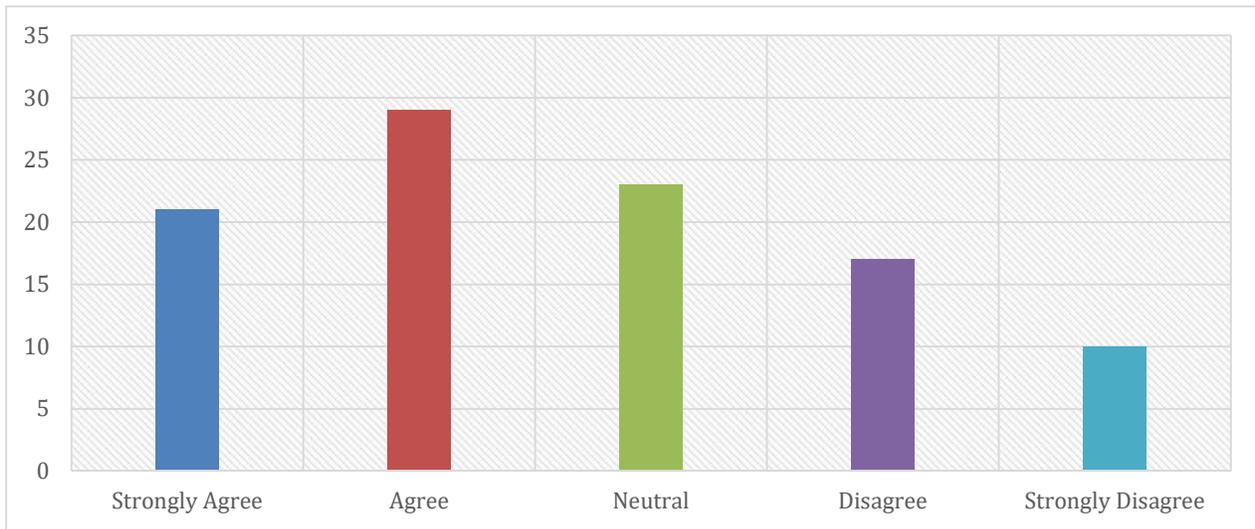

Figure 2: **Virtual Socialization has Negative Impact on Studies & Official Performance**

Respondents were also asked about online shopping, e-banking and online booking of services. It was found that 23% of the respondents preferred e-shopping as it saved time and energy. It was found that about 82% among the females preferred to go out for shopping as for them shopping was an entertainment in itself. Forty-one percent (41%) of the respondents said that they preferred e-banking.

Risks Related to Socialization in Virtual World

SNSs have a great impact on the socializing patterns in today's modern world of technology. The youngsters of today's generation whether students or employees, keep themselves socially alive through online communication.

One of the objectives of this research was to analyze the trend of virtual socialization. Like any other phenomenon, virtual socialization has some risks as well. Due to easy and open access of SNSs, the information posted on them can be easily accessed by hackers. Open access provides opportunities for cyber-crimes to criminal minded people. The results revealed that. 77%

respondents were aware of the possibility of hacking and illegal e-trafficking but they still shared very personal information on these sites. This hyper-virtual socialization may lead towards virtual victimization through misuse or theft of data. Regarding to this concern, this research has made an attempt to identify the intensity of alertness of users in revealing their very personal information, photos and details on virtual platforms.

The results also show that in spite of being helpful in studies, SNSs have negative impact on studies. Interesting and funny posts in the form of photos, videos and trends are fascinating modes of diversion. . This leads to a heavy frequency of interruptions in the daily routine of users. This diversion can adversely affect the studies of students by wasting their time Sometimes technical errors like low bandwidth, programming errors, connection problem or an expired domain may cause an obstruction in online communication. Such obstructions may cause emotional disturbances among the users of SNSs. The data shows that mostly females (47%) get frustrated as compared to males (25%) due to an interruption in virtual communication. The ratio of the female respondents, who are emotionally disturbed due to the interruption in online communication, is approximately double than that of the male respondents. These findings disclosed high emotional fascination of female users towards virtual communication as compared to the male users.

Multiple Regression Test

Multiple R: .971

R Square: .919

Standard Error: .229

F Value: 2.022 (p: .000)

Table: 1

Regression Output

Variables	B	SE	Beta	T	Sig.
Face2Face Communication with Friends & Family	.743	.031	.697	22.119	.000
Social Activities	1.127	.031	.1.60	35.503	.000
Virtual Communication and Relaxation	-.890	.025	-.796	-34.550	.000
Use of traditional Media for Socialization	.417	.055	.271	7.269	.000
Helps in Studies and Official Commitments	.417	.055	.271	7.269	.000
Preference to e-banking & online shopping	.849	.029	.699	23.129	.000

The value of Multiple R in Statistical Test Regression Table 1 is 0.971 that confirms a strong positive relationship between the independent and dependent variables 'SNSs' and 'virtual socialization' respectively. The 0.919 value of R square concludes that the Regression Model is

describing 59% of the variance in the standard variable. Regression Model has been proved significant statistically on the basis of F value 2.022 and Sig.000 of the ANOVA.

Conclusion

As technology is getting more and more innovative, it must be kept in minds that that the information in the form of photos, videos and contact details can easily be maneuvered or distorted. It is important to protect one's personal information while communicating online. However, being over cautious may go against the basic philosophy of the virtual socialization, where anyone wants to be a friend of others. On the other hand, it should be the utmost priority of SNSs to secure the users information from any misuse and manipulation.

Apart from all hazards and insecurity, it is a fact that millions of people from every corner of the world have met through these social networking platforms. Virtual world brings an end to the physical distance among the users. A lot of people become the members SNSs to find and make new friends to fulfill the ultimate desire of socialization. On the other hand, many people use these sites to keep contact with their real world or old friends. Apart from socializing, these sites are being used for business and trade purposes as well. Therefore, whatever the dangers may be, virtual socialization has very much set in and changes the socialization patters even in Pakistan. Technology has led to social transformation of communication patterns.

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