THE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

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"Don't be so humble... you're not that great."

- Golda Meir

Abstract: Connectivity is considered as one of the most desired preconditions of development in a world of technologies developed so far. Communicating using technology is important here. Social Network Sites (SNSs) enhance communication widely as they allow people to stay connected altogether. SNSs are something that create networks and bind societies together by bringing parts of a society together and bridging them. That is what these networks are supposedly doing. As 'human cannot not communicate' and 'man cannot live alone', this is why these sites are attracting people, and getting more and more popular day by day. Studies conducted worldwide indicate that people not 'plugged into' a social network feel 'out of the loop'. But there are incidents out there that question the 'all good' ideas about these sites. Are social networks really making people 'more social'? Are these sites all good? – These are the questions now experts are raising and examining throughout the world. There arises the question: what measures should be taken to settle that problem most effectively? – These are the concerns of this essay.

Keywords: Connectivity, social network, new media, social media, computer-mediated communication (CMC), violence and violent content, internet addiction disorder

What are Social Networks?

Social network sites are web-based services that allow individuals to: (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). According to the Wikipedia, an online free encyclopedia, a social network is "...a social structure made up of a set of

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actors (such as individuals or organizations) and a complex set of the dyadic ties between these actors. The social network perspective provides a clear way of analyzing the structure of whole social entities." A social network, thus, is an online service and platform that focuses on building and reflecting of social networks or social relations among people, for example, who share interests and/or activities.

The term 'social network site' or 'social networking site' (SNS) appears in public discourse, and the two terms are often used interchangeably. 'Social Networking' emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers, among societies irrespective of geographical boundaries. It is a popular form of computer-mediated communication (CMC). To be practical and very precise, social networks are just a part of what we outline as the *New Media*. Some such very popular sites are: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Orkut, Hi5, MySpace, Bebo, XING, Friendster, Mixi, renren etc.

Who and how many are using these sites?
There is no boundary regarding age, sex, gender, occupation, income and social status to decide who can use and who cannot. Though there are some indications requiring a minimum age to be 'within the network' in some sites, but these are not very practical because there is no way to identify if the user is giving false information about age while creating or opening an account on a particular site.

There is no perfect estimation of total users of these sites across the globe. A UK-based website (*www.e-crm.co.uk*) reported of 'the top 750 social networking sites and tools'. So, it can be concluded that more than 750 such sites are in regular use worldwide. Another site (*mashable.com*) claimed on July 07, 2009 claimed that the Number of Social Networking Users Has Doubled Since 2007. *Bdnews24.com.bd*, a leading news agency from Bangladesh reported in May 2011 from statistics by the BBC that only Facebook, one of the most popular SNSs, has achieved 700 million users worldwide.

Social media use is enormous, and growing; as of January 2013, active monthly membership of Some popular sites measured: Facebook 1Billion, YouTube 800 Million, Google+ 343 Million, Twitter 200 Million, LinkedIn 200 Million, Tumblr 77 Million, Flickr 75 Million and Pinterest 40 Million (*edudemic.com*). Besides these, there are at least 86 SNS sites that have more than a million users (*en.wikipedia.org*). This figure, with others having less than a million sets a picture of what is going on around the globe!

Why people use SNSs?
There are concerns with the overuse of social networks and the kinds of effects (both good and bad) that social media has on people. But at first, reasons should be understood that make people use them so immensely. Following reasons are notable among others in this regard (Jen Williams, 2011):
1. People like to interact with others.
2. Group mentality comes into play when people interact through social media.
3. It is also possible for people to feel as though they have others who care about them when they use social media.
4. Social media can help mental health.

Other positive impacts of SNSs
It cannot be ignored that if there were no positive effects, people perhaps would not care for these sites. Some of the positive impacts expected and achieved from these sites are as:
- Entertainment, news or information, education, culture, and even music
- Sharing cultural experiences
- Learning important values and lessons of life through good acquaintances
- A platform for discussing controversial events
- Developing critical thinking
- SNSs can help introduce users to information that may not be available locally.
- Interactions with people from different cultures can rich knowledge and encourage better understanding of the world.

These are some of the positive impacts of SNSs that cannot not be ignored. But simultaneously, it can also create adverse impacts if people spend too much time on these sites communicating.

SNSs can play vital role as social change-makers
The social networks can play vital roles in changing the status quo – whether social or political. This has been proven true in case of the Middle East, for example. "The street violence and repression continues in Libya with the outcome for the Gaddafi regime unclear but it seems that the entire culture of the Middle East has changed. From Al Jazeera TV to Twitter and Facebook, it's clear that this new generation is angry" (Paul Mason, 2011). True or not,

but we cannot ignore the power of these media and/or social network sites in shaping a society into a better one.

Negative impacts of SNSs: How risky are social networking sites?

"People will post just about anything on social networking sites. And the information can be used against them" (Randall & Richards, 2008). So, SNSs are not just all good, as stated earlier, and can do harm a lot. Some of the most-happening 'dangers' found through studies worldwide are noted below:

SNS usage 'localizing' bonding of Social Capital

Social capital describes the benefits derived from interpersonal relationships at both individual and collective levels. The concept of social capital captures the benefits accrued from personal relationships. It is typically distinguished in two forms: bonding social capital, which is derived from one's closest relationships; and bridging social capital, which is associated with weaker ties and access to novel or non-redundant information.

There is evidence that establishes a negative relationship between measures of using social network sites and the perceptions of social capitals. An opposite relationship exists between the two concepts (Vitak, 2008). Relationship between SNS using and weakening of the bonding social capital has been proved to have direct links (Vitak et al.).

Internet Addiction Disorder and the emergence of 'Social Network Addiction'

SNSs emphasize Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD). 'Compulsive use' of the Internet being the main feature of the addiction, it paves the way for the SNSs to reinforce it among the users. And experts agree that Internet use causes problems in the life of an 'Internet addict', whether it is personal or professional. Sometimes, it can even cost lives. A news story titling 'Parents Neglect Starved Babies to Feed Video Game Addiction' explained how Internet Addiction can become even lethal (*foxnews.com*).

Symptoms of Internet Addiction Disorder, according to relevant professional body is (www.netaddiction.com):

- Failed attempts to control behavior
- Heightened sense of euphoria while being online
- Neglecting friends and family
- Neglecting sleep to stay online
- Physical changes such as weight gain or loss, backaches, headaches, carpal tunnel syndrome
- Withdrawing from other pleasurable activities

Recently, the discuss is about 'social network addiction'. Internet Addiction and Social Network Addiction, in particular also started being recognized as psychological disorders all over the world. While several 90's studies focused on Internet Addiction, the next decade saw the growth of a new addiction related to all manner of social networking sites (Pamoukaghlian, 2011).

Internet victimization
Recent researches have highlighted the adolescent health issues represented by unwanted sexual solicitation and Internet harassment. *Youth Internet Safety Survey-2* quoted a 16-year-old girl: "Someone that I go to school with started spreading rumors about me by posting things in chat rooms and sending e-mails that were talking about me doing sexual things with all these different guys that were not true at all. I didn't even know the guys". According to the US Department of Justice, the Internet is an effective and anonymous way for *predators* to seek out and groom children for criminal purposes. With so many children online, the Internet (mostly the SNSs) provides *predators* a new place to target children for criminal acts.

In a local study (Sarker, 2012) in Dhaka city of Bangladesh, 37 out of 231 guardians questioned replied, their children were somehow exposed to sexual/adult/vulgar/assaulting contents or 'situations' by matured/older persons (43%) and by minors and/or teenagers (57%). It is worth mention that 87% of the guardians questioned acknowledged their children to have psychological and/or physiological stress for shorter or longer period of time. It clearly establishes the idea that online victimization is associated with emotional strain and concurrent psychosocial problems, including depressive symptomatology and offline victimization (such as physical assault by peers).

Identity theft
Photographs, contact numbers, email addresses, and other personal information are easy to gather from these sites. Someone can obtain a photograph of a particular person and use it as his or her own. It is very easy for a person to become another using that person's personal information.

Cheating
It is obvious that users must be 'careful' because 'there are also scammers' who will prey on the compassion of others and cheat people out of money and possessions (Magid, 2010).

'Buy-me-that' syndrome
George Gerbner (August 8, 1919-December 24, 2005), a professor of

communication and the founder of the highly explored *Cultivation Theory*, and several other researchers have identified a 'buy-me-that' syndrome among the children caused by too much exposure to television contents. Lucrative exposure of products makes a drive among them to get the product 'by all means' and 'without any delay'. As new media like the social networks make it possible to have people of common interests together, advertisers are now getting more and more interested in the SNSs. A local study (Sarker & Jahan, 2011) on SNS users (aging from 25 to 40 years) in Dhaka, Bangladesh showed the growth of a variant of the syndrome among adults also. In the study on a total number of 46 persons (25 male and 21 female), 37 of them told to have grown more or less addiction or stronger desire (than before) for products and/or services especially they got acquainted to while surfing the internet and/or using SNSs.

SNSs taking lives
Let's consider the headline: 'Teacher dies after naked pictures of herself appear on Facebook'; 'Teacher kills self after ex posted naked photos on Facebook'. One case in the UK describes, 13-year-old Megan Meier hanged herself after being *cyber-bullied* on MySpace by Josh Evans – not even a *real* boy! It was later discovered that the 'boy' was a creation of neighbors who tried to made fun with that little girl. And this is how a life can be ended even by someone does not exist.

Misrepresenting people
'Electronic relationships' make it easy for 'friends' to *misrepresent* themselves – always showing their best sides. A report titling Internet Safety Guidelines for Foster Carers said, "Remember that people online may not be who they seem. Because you can't see or even hear that person it would be easy for someone to misrepresent him or herself. Thus someone indicating 'she' is a '12-year-old girl' could in reality be a 40-year-old man."
It can be exhilarating, at least at first, to connect with long-lost friends. But, the downside is growing confusion between people's weak ties and strong ties. The distinction between genuine friends and acquaintances is becoming blurred. Electronic relationships make it easy for 'friends' to misrepresent themselves – always showing their best side, for instance (Jarvis, 2009).

Demoralizing users
Anonymity can harm unthinkably. It allows darker impulses to flourish, as the identity of a certain user cannot be challenged or ensured. Users are taking advantages of anonymity to some extent and posting false but positive information about them, even making false accounts with fake identities.

Diminishing quality of communication
Someone could be talking on the phone while surfing the Internet; a person could be checking e-mail and using mobile phone simultaneously. However, although people think that they are saving time by engaging in *multitasking*, and they are becoming more social by getting connected to more people, the net effect actually poses threat against the quality of communication as people cannot give undivided attention to any part.

Reducing face-to-face interaction
The SNSs have made it possible to keep in touch with people from anywhere in the world. But this has led to a decrease in face-to-face interactions among people. Communicating with someone face-to-face has always been encouraged as it allows people to watch their nonverbal cues, such as a smile or a frown, and this is another layer of communication that can enable us to judge 'true' and 'false'. SNSs do not allow people to catch these sorts of nonverbal cues. "I think there is the potential for greater richness in face-to-face interaction because you lose the body cues and facial expressions when you're doing work on the Internet. The subtle forms of communications are lost over the Internet" (Neyman, 2012).

Increasing social isolation
SNSs are 'social' networks that are enabling us to be more 'social', supposedly. But in reality, one of the biggest downside to communicating through SNSs is that even as we are able to *communicate* with more people using various technologies with these sites, some people feel more 'isolated' than 'connected'. Some people who use the Internet a lot to communicate actually feel more isolated than before (Sarker, 2012).

Increasing lying in the communication process
SNSs are encouraging people exploring their 'darker' sides. Anyone can have any identity. No one can ensure if a person is lying. A person can lie, cheat and exploit other people almost without letting a chance to be detected.

Hiding possible dangers
SNSs are making all the people look good while they are not. Just all the people exist in the society are not good. But the SNS accounts make very charming and sophisticated profiles of the users. And this leads people to be unaware of possible dangers, and is increasing the risks of being victimized by.

On-sale 'privacy'
Information people share online are being sold to the highest bidders based on myriad data points, and people do not even know it (Singer, 2012). Facebook sells personal data of its users to the advertisers without letting the users know it (Krivak, 2008). A presentation titled 'Social media landscape in Australia' published in the www.slideshare.net says, '...in the social media world, people are no longer targets for your marketing. They are part of your marketing'.
These data are definitive enough to conclude that the users' *privacy* is not as maintained as the sites claim to keep; rather the users' privacy is even sold for direct and/or indirect economic profit.

Encouraging crimes
Being very popular and having millions of users, SNSs are very much attractive to the criminals. Close relationships are usually made from mere 'friendships' and personal information like name, age, bank account details are achieved, and crimes are committed accordingly. As getting information and chances to commit misdemeanors are possible so easily, crimes are likely to be being encouraged. Users of different age can interact with almost anyone here and these make them feel free and *friendlier* because there is no boundary and all are categorized as 'friends'. Options like *commenting* or *poking* on these sites encourages users to 'feel free' while on their social and face-to-face interactions also, which leads to higher risks of 'eve-teasing' (Sarker; 2012).

Violence and violent contents: the most deteriorating effects of violence by the SNSs
Violent materials are available and easily accessible on these sites. Contents related to eve-teasing, sex/vulgarity, pornography, murders, accidental or intentional deformation of human bodies (and other living beings) are some of these materials portrayed, uploaded and downloaded without any limitations. This portrayal has a profound negative impact on the users on both short and long-term basis, especially on the children and the youth.

Violent programming affects people with a direct 'cause and effect' link. Viewers of any age are more or less vulnerable to violent images and messages. Three potential responses to media violence in people are:
1. Increased fear - also known as the 'mean and scary world' syndrome.
2. Desensitization to real-life violence.
3. Increased aggressive behavior.

Emphasising the Thanatos

The duality of human nature emerged from two basic instincts: Eros and Thanatos. Eros is the instinct for life, love and sexuality in its broadest sense, and Thanatos, the instinct of death, aggression (Freud, 1930). In easy words, the Eros is the constructive part of the *psyche* (mind/brain) that shows the world as beautiful. It enables people to perceive the world as good and makes a positive view of it in mind. And thus emphasizing on the positive contents, it creates a constructive drive within a person. The *Thanatos*, on the other hand, does the opposite; it emphasizes people to see the *mean, scary, bad* world. This makes people think evil, be evil. And experiencing violent materials consistently triggers the destructive part of the brain (Thanatos), which can lead people to disastrous circumstances.

Disruption of workflow at the workplace

As effective communication has positive returns, it brings the opposite – if hindered. Communicating too much through new media like SNSs often lead to shortfalls in communication skills. Most users are not taught how to be effective electronic communicators and 'a constant barrage of less-than-useful' message sharing 'disrupts workflow and robs employees of productive time' (Jackson et al., 2003). Such disruptions act as a huge barrier to proper workflow at a workplace (Jackson & Hooff, 2012).

Diminished productivity in the workplace

Social networking increases productivity. But social media and networking sites cause distractions through information overload created by excessive use of such sites at workplaces and causes loss also. Some organizations find technology sometimes magnifying shortfalls in communication skills (Frazee, 1996). "Social media is one of the top three concerns for enterprises in 2012, according to our recent Foresights security Survey, and it's easy to see why: Malware, social account hijacking, data leakage, HR concerns, regulatory compliance — these are just some of the most frequently cited challenges" (Hayes, 2012).

In a recent study from the University of Athens, Greek psychiatrists claimed that a woman who had gone as far as losing her job on account of her compulsion to check and update her Facebook, could be identified as a 'social network addict (Veronica Pamoukaghlian, 2011). A slideshare presentation (*www.slideshare.net*) claims: half of Australia's population is on Facebook and an average of 5.9 hours are spent weekly on Facebook. Another 2010 study has identified the same risks.

Interrupting the work pattern

Besides having effects on work outcomes, interruptions can also affect the personal state, in particular the emotions of the worker. "Apart from having effects on work outcomes, interruptions can also affect the personal state, in particular the emotions of the worker. ... Research carried out by Solingen into communication interrupts showed 15-20 percent of an employee's effort is spent dealing with interrupts and in real terms 15-20 minutes per interrupt. ... The results showed the effort spent on interrupts required approximately 20 minutes for each occurrence, including the time spent handling the interrupt, and that the average developer receives three to five interrupts per day. This consumes roughly 1 to 1.5 hours per day of the developer's time" (Jackson et al., 2003)
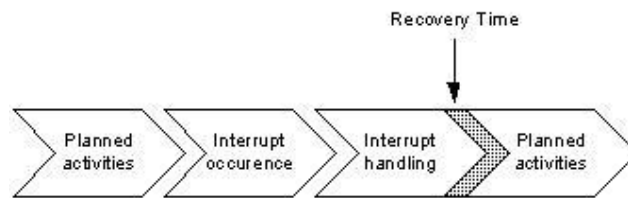

Figure-1: Three Phases of Interruption (source: Jackson, Dawson & Wilson)

Monetary loss

It takes a fair amount of money to be online. Access to the Internet, and the software and hardware needed here costs a lot. In Bangladesh, Internet connection charge and monthly subscription fees are still very high comparatively to the economic status of the majority of the total population of this country. An average cost of per-hour access to the Internet at the cyber cafes (or shops with similar service) is no less than an average of 40 BDT.

SNSs can destroy a nation if intended to

It has been reported throughout the media that the 'So-called Arab Spring' in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the Mid-East had heavily relied on the social media like Twitter, TwitPic, Facebook and YouTube in the early stages to accelerate social protest. Those reports say, these social networks and the public were manipulated through the accounts in those networks to fulfill some specific countries' interests. For instance, a report on January 17, 2012 titled Social Media Advances 'Revolution' In Egypt claimed that the social media played a vital role in the uprising against Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. The *revolution* gained support and was kept alive by means of the social media

(Aitamurto, 2011). It was even explained and established how the Egyptian revolution began on the Facebook (Vargas, 2012). The social media played a very vital role in the revolution, and it is very easy to use and/or manipulate the SNSs in such manner for political mobilization (Storck, 2011). It is evident that the 'revolution' was started and nourished by the social media without any doubt (Griffin, 2011).

It becomes clear that the social media possess an immense power, and it can turn even a country upside down, if intended to.

Other negative impacts of SNSs

The term 'Social Networking' misleads people to believe they are social beings. Sitting in front of a computer for hours and chatting with friends while playing games or listening to music does not indicate social skills are in practice. People become dependent on the technology and forget how to interact with the *real* world around them. Social networks provide an outlet for the socially challenged to express themselves in digital form.

A report published in *www.ksee24.com* on February 14, 2012 titled 'Nude Photo Posted on Facebook Costs High School Teacher His Job' explains how things can be detrimental in SNSs.

On the other hand, someone's online personality may be completely different from one's offline persona, causing chaos when the two 'lives' intersect. The negative impacts of social networking sites are evident in online dating when the couple meets face-to-face for the first time. Commonly their personalities do not match their self-written descriptions.

Information posted on a social network is permanent. When someone posts pictures or videos on the Internet, they go viral. By the time the user deletes a video from his or her SNS profile/account, someone else may have posted it on another site already.

Risk factors for the minors

Children of the present world are getting more and more aware of the technologies they are growing with around them. But excessive and unrealistic use of technology can do harm for the children (Magid, 2008). It is mostly because they cannot judge between right and wrong. Magid also addressed attention to the fact that children could seek out such materials but may also come across it on the web via social networking sites, even if they are not looking for it.

Suggestions that can be of use to diminish negative impacts of SNSs
Communicating is not something to be doomed. But if communicating of certain type in certain manner becomes detrimental, measures must be taken without hesitations. Some measures could be of help are as follows:

- Social media only affect people to the extent that they let it. If people find themselves getting too involved with social media, they should take a break.

- The best safety tool would be to gather information and analyze them to understand how much and what types of communications are desired and safe, and what brings perils.

- Children can be brought under safety by talking and making them understanding what are the possible threats.

- Questions could be asked to the users about their whereabouts on the Internet. Parents (or guardians) must know, besides a certain amount of privacy, children also need parental involvement and supervision in their daily lives.

- Legislative acts are needed to control SNSs.

- Trying to be more realistic, being able to distinguish fantasy from reality.

- With the recent explosion in satellite and digital specialty on the Internet, people now have access to a plethora of both good quality and inappropriate contents. In this crowded environment, the key for parents is to search out quality-contents filtering others for their children.

- There is no need to feel everything bad about SNSs; rather it will be more practical and effective to confess the miseries they could bring if over-used.

The CyberTipline, operated in partnership with the FBI, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Postal Inspection Service, U.S. Secret Service, military criminal investigative organizations, U.S. Department of Justice, Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force program, as well as other state and local law enforcement agencies, proposed some initiatives that can help reduce child sexual exploitation online:

- Examine and evaluate the contents.
- Add related information that may be useful to law enforcement.
- Use publicly available search tools to determine the geographic location of the apparent criminal act.

David Kleeman, Director of the American Center for Children and Media, suggests four questions to ensure choosing a better TV program. Those questions, if modified, could be of use deciding the intensity of concentration and time to be given to these sites:

- Do the sites positively engage users – physically or intellectually?
- Do everything in these sites worth respect?
- Do these sites make a real and respectful profile of me online?
- How do creators/owners of these sites evaluate their users?

A much more practical and responsible decision can be taken evaluating the answers.

The safety for the children online is a critical issue. The same general parenting skills that apply to the 'real world' also apply while online (Internet Safety Guidelines for Foster Carers).

In short, social media have a vast impact over people's mind. These sites, presently, define and determine the social structures of relationships people usually get into and even shape them.

Conclusion
The use of new media has grown rapidly in recent years as it enables people to communicate in ways and up to what people have not been able to in the past. Although its ease of use, quickness, and ability to reach many individuals make it attractive communication medium, these characteristics can lead to negative consequences also. Thoughtful approaches to prevention that focus on users' behaviors online and their general psychosocial profile (such as aggression problems or depressive symptomatology) instead of particular technologies (which will continue to evolve into new and more interactive applications) are needed in this regard. Policy proposals that aim to reduce the vulnerability of online victimizations should focus not only on restricting access to certain types of online communication tools but instead mental health interventions for vulnerable audiences, and Internet safety education that apply to all types of online communications are needed to be addressed. In such a context, SNSs are important to be analyzed and understood in a comprehensive and all-encompassing manner. This, in turn, will help establish a safer use of these sites.

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