One Big Happy Family: Bridging and Bonding Social capital in families using Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

Social networking has become a major mode of communication over the past decade. Professional networks such as Linkedin, Ecademy, Cofoundr have gained popularity among business and entrepreneurs while for personal use Facebook, Whatsapp and MySpace have achieved worldwide acceptability. Families, friends and significant others are using Hike, Instagram, Twitter, Messenger and other applications for regular interaction, providing social support, incite feelings of patriotism, collective identity and social interest. Studies on negative impacts of Social Networking Sites have outnumbered and overshadowed the researches that focus on its positive outcome. It is imperative to study, explore and find novel ways to use SNS for society's benefit. India is undergoing radical changes and the young adults and adolescents are building new ways of bridging and bonding social capital. The present paper presents a theoretical model that explains the causal relation of use of Social Networking Sites with social capital and psychological wellbeing in purview and highlights the positive outcomes of use Social Networking Sites (from here on SNS) among youth and its utility in maintaining family values and relations in this fast paced environment with Indian population in perspective. Need for empirical research on the positive outcome of SNS in Indian population has been emphasized along with recommendations for development of close bonds with family and caution of use of SNS among adolescents and young adults has been given.

Keywords: *Social Networking Sites (SNS), Computer mediated Communication (CMC), family relationships, family values, social capital*

Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter have become common destinations for young adults and adolescents in India. Throughout the country young people are posting pictures, commenting on other's profiles, elaborately creating and designing their own profiles and expressing their opinions and emotions regarding their relationships with others on SNS. Over the past decade,

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the landline telephones have taken a back seat and use of mobile phones, ipad, Tabs and smart phones with internet connectivity is the new found mantra for fast, convenient and economical way of communicating. The earlier lustre of appearing cool has faded to regular use of SNS as an essential part of their communication system. According to company information of Facebook (2015) there are around 1.39 billion mobile monthly users as of September 2015 out of which 83.5% of their daily users are outside of United States and Canada. Out of these users, a major chunk of population is adolescents and young adults (Pew Research Center, 2015). In India alone there are 108.9 million facebook users (Statistica, 2015) and if we add in the number of other social networking site users, the number is certainly much more.

In India, a lot of emphasis is given on upkeep of family values and family bonding even in extended circles and it is expected out of adolescents and young adults to stay in touch with their relatives and cousins. With the demands of academics, work, unavailability of time and distance problem, maintaining regular contacts with relatives has become increasingly difficult. It has been also observed that people find it easier to text, use instant message and comment on SNS than speak on phone with relatives. People are using mobile phones and other computer mediated communications such as SNS as a way of communicating (Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Social networking comes of use where individuals connect with their family and are also able to discuss certain issues with people they trust in. Social networking is an excellent mode of watching over one's loved ones as their online activities and everyday updates give a fair idea of what is happening in their lives clearly revealing that use of SNS can bring positive effects on family cohesion. With such an extensive use of computer mediated communication, it becomes a responsibility to gauge its impact and implications on the young population of the country both socially and psychologically. It is innate to be apprehensive about change and to develop an unsubstantiated bias against any novel system such as online social communication. It is time for us to realize that no matter how one perceives the upcoming of SNSs, it is here to stay. On one hand, there are scientific evidences against online communication and on the other hand there are a many studies that support and uphold the use of SNS. . In the present paper, a theoretical model that explains increase of use of SNS for building social capital and the consequent positive psychological outcomes has been presented. Relevant literature on the utility of SNS for keeping and enhancing family values and relations in the Indian context has been included. In brief, after the widespread establishment of online communication system, it is essential to bring corroborative evidence of the positive effects of the same. This will aid in gaining a holistic view of the system, identification of problems and bringing innovative solutions for maximum benefit to the society.

Social capital and psychological wellbeing
Putnam (2000, p.19) defines social capital as the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. The two main components of social capital are: *bridging social capital* which refers to values assigned to social

networks between heterogeneous groups such as peer group, online groups and extended circles and *bonding social capital* that pertains to the value assigned to social networks that are homogeneous in nature such as close relationships, parents and siblings. Bridging social capital is often *weak ties* that are between distant and dissimilar members of the community and that are not closely related however family and close friends form bonds that are *strong ties* that provide internal sense of belonging to similar individuals. The benefits of social ties and social influence on health and related behaviours such as exercise and diet have been well explored in the past. The direct effect of integration in social groups on positive psychological states such as sense of belonging, purpose, security and self worth has been studied and proved (Cohen, Underwood and Gottlieb, 2000).Social capital emanating especially from family have strong effects on resilience and hardiness of an individual (Fleming et al., 2008).Intimate relations tend to help in fighting stress and reduce depressive symptoms (Cohen and Hoberman, 1983; Morgan and Cotton, 2003).

Social Networking Sites Use and psychological wellbeing
In India, around 80% of student population use SNS where the students find use of SNS as convenient, fast and effective mechanism to connect with their peer group (Manjunatha S., 2013). While there are innumerable studies that suggest the negative impacts of SNS use on socio emotional development of youth, there exist a number of studies favouring the use of SNS for overall development of adolescents and young adults. The importance of SNS is illustrated in Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten (2006) studies where they found that the frequency of SNS use has an indirect effect on self esteem and well being. It has been noticed that not only self esteem but also numerous psychological correlates such as self efficacy, need to belong, need for cognition and collective self esteem are positively affected on use of SNS (Gangadharbatla, 2002). Thus, the need for social acceptance and development of social identity propels youth towards SNS use. Use of SNSs such as Facebook benefit users who have low self esteem and low life satisfaction thus enhancing their psychological well being (Ellison et al., 2007). Shaw and Gant (2004) established the significant impact of internet use on loneliness and depression and increase in perceived social support and self esteem.

Social Networking Sites Use and Social capital
Use of SNSs prove to be excellent platforms for self disclosure which is important for young adults to form strong bonds with friends and for emotional support, trust, loyalty and sharing with intimate others (Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006). The positive usage of SNS contributes towards greater feelings of bonding, social capital and lower loneliness is illustrated by Burke, Marlow & Lento, (2010).

It has been suggested in various studies that people use SNS not only to make new connections but also revive old ones such as school friends, college friends and distant relatives. This aids in bridging social capital and proliferate their support networks. It has been observed that individuals balance their online and offline lives by overlapping the members in each domain.

Young adults use SNS predominantly to connect with their online and offline friends (Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). The online and offline worlds of emerging adults are overlapping and interspersed to the extent that they use online communication for offline issues and to connect with people in their offline lives (Subrahmanyam et al, 2008) .Many people use SNS for connecting on a daily basis for coordination of events and daily activities (Whon D. Yvette et.al, 2011). This implicates that regular contacts via SNS with family member and friends tends to increase level of bonding. In other words, SNS plays the role of a catalyst to form better bonds reducing stress, depression and other negative psychological distress; increases self esteem and psychological well being which in turn acts as a reward system to increase the behavior of usage of SNSs. The thematic of the theoretical model of the above is depicted in Figure 1.
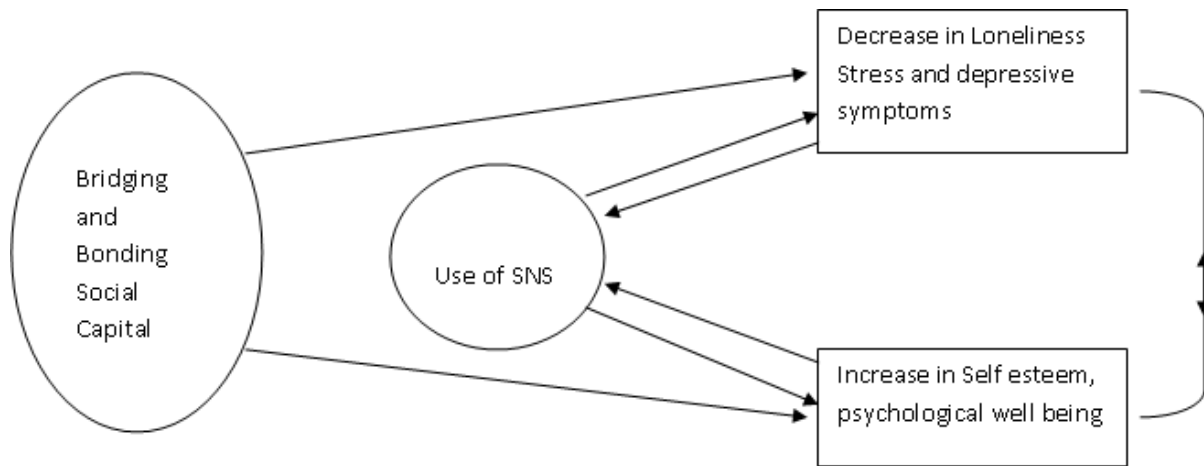

Figure 1: Theoretical model of causal relationship of Bridging and Bonding social capital with use of SNS, psychological distress and psychological well being.

However, building social capital on SNS depends upon the types of site activities contrasting one-on-one communication broadcasts to wider audiences, leads to passive consumption of social news, and also depends on the individual differences among users, their social communication skill and their self-esteem. Receiving messages from friends is associated with increases in bridging social capital. However passively reading news helps those who have lower social fluency to draw value from their connections (Burke et al, 2010).

Thus the use of SNS has many advantages and can be tapped to enhance an individual's overall socio-emotional well being. In India, the extensive use of SNS and its utility in forming social bonds has been studied only sparsely.

Bridging and bonding social capital using SNS in India
India is known for its heritage and culture. The upholding of one's religion and family values is not unfamiliar. It is an unwritten rule in India that one must respect and maintain cordial relations with their relatives and cousins and even in business (Hofstede, 1980). Touching elders' feet, saying *Namaste* with hands folded and enquiring about the well being of everyone in the household are basic manners taught to Indian children from their childhood. Even during the

emotional disengagement period of adolescence, most Indian teenagers and young adults abide by these rules. Indian families including immigrants strive for continual contact and are close knit with extended families and remain in contact however face problems of time, distance and professional engagements to maintain relations (Poulsen, S. S., 2009). Immigrants go one step ahead by returning to India and have long term visits from family members to strengthen their children's sense of ethnic identity (Hickey 2012).This indicates the emphasis Indian families give on their religion, traditions, values and cultural heritage. Thus, adolescents and young adults stay in touch with their relatives over phone and through SNS though there is sparse empirical research done in this domain. In her article "Use of social networking in a linguistically and culturally rich India", Mahajan P.(2009) shows the use of SNS to raise voice against negative elements affecting culture and enhancement of vigilantism against activities that do not uphold the spirit of the nation and its culture. According to the study, SNS enables connectivity across distance and time and thereby its popularity and increased utilization. The feelings of patriotism, collective identity and social interest are demonstrated by SNS users on their profiles and comments. The values, tradition and cultural factors are kept in mind by users when they are using SNS. With the demands of academics, unavailability of time and distance problem, maintaining regular contacts with one's relatives has become increasingly difficult. Whitty (2008)established that use of computer mediated communication (CMC) may actually be a better way of communication as the users tend to reveal their true selves online and that use of CMC can induce greater feelings of love and support even if that person is not receiving face to face communication. In India, millions of adolescents staying in hostels and away from home on the account of their academic and professional reasons remain in regular contact with their loved ones through SNS. Rau, Gao and Ding (2008) found that people join SNS to develop and maintain relationships. They propose that the main aim of SNS is to gratify socio-emotional needs and not informational needs and it connects person-person in a more direct and interpersonal fashion. Corenjo et al (2013) found that the content shared in SNSs strengthens older adults' social network by enriching and complementing traditional social engagements such as those conducted over the phone or in-person. Senior citizens staying in old age homes or whose kith and kin reside abroad have found this as a very convenient way to share their lives and feel much more cared for through video chats on SNS. Stern and Messer (2009) investigated and found that e-mail has become an important tool in maintaining core familial social networks, especially when the family members live outside the local area and also that the use of Computer Mediated Communication helps in maintenance of these familial networks and developing social capital. Asian users have been found to prefer multi-party chat, audio-video chat, and emoticons in digital media (Kayan , Fussell & Setlock, 2006), to benefit more from rich communication media in negotiation (Veinott, 1999), and to be less satisfied with asynchronous communication. According to Choi et al (2011), the use of SNSs for relational purposes and the resulting social capital and relationships are still culturally driven, reflecting the prevalent values and norms of the particular cultures in which the users belong. They found that the level of relationships is at a more advanced stage of development in Korean networks in SNSs than American counterparts. As Asian culture is said to be internally similar, Indians' SNS use for forming closer bonds is

apparent. Interdependence, harmony, relatedness and connection are primal in Asian cultures. Adolescents and youth of India carry forward their culture and embed it in the technological systems as well. A need for more empirical research in this area is seen to find how use of SNS enhances family bonding and social capital among Indian adolescents and young adults.

Recommendations

Based on the existing plethora of literature available on SNS use , it is noticed that researches proving the negative impacts of SNS overshadow the positive aspects of the unstoppable use of SNS. Almost every household in India especially metropolitan cities have adolescents and young adults actively involved in using SNS. It is apparent that it has an impact on their socio emotional well being.

- Parents and authority figures need to understand that change in ways of communication is inevitable and families also need to change their perspectives on how to use SNS positively to form stronger bonds and keep up family relations by overcoming the distance and time difficulty for face to face interaction with near and dear ones.

- The culture and heritage of India is embedded in today's youth however their ways of expressing them is changing such as posting the Indian Flag in their display pictures on national holidays. Thus, there is an immediate requirement to find whether and how family bonding, family cohesion and social capital can be enhanced by using SNS in the upcoming generation of India.

- There is a pressing need for empirical research on finding solutions on how to tap the resources of SNS for upkeep of family relationships, culture, values and heritage of India.

- SNS designers are recommended to design SNS keeping families and expression of positive emotions towards families in purview and utilize programmed instruction for developing positivity in adolescents and young adults when they contact their family members regularly.

- Adolescents and young adults must be made aware of the ill effects of overuse and misuse of SNS not just by parents but via the SNS system itself.

- Adolescents and young adults should be made aware of the positive effects of self disclosure to their families and encouraged to use overt expressions to communicate their problems, voice their opinions , "talk out" their issues and seek solutions from trusted members of family by adding them in their online circles instead of seeking advice from strangers on SNS. This will keep them safe from cyber bullying, cyber stalking and cybercrimes.

CONCLUSION

The reality of upcoming of Online Social Networking cannot be evaded. Use of technology is not limited to utilitarian purpose but also should be taken into account to enhance psycho social development of today's youth. There are innumerable studies of the negative impact of SNS on adolescents and young adults however just as one cannot neutralize the impact of televisions on individuals , the use of SNS as a mode of communication by adolescents and young adults

cannot be controlled to a large extent. There is a dearth of empirical research in India with adolescents and young adults in perspective and the positive impact of SNS on their psychological well being. It is time for us to realize that in the fast paced environment SNS can be an excellent way to cope with the pressures of work and time along with upholding family values and build social capital and social relationships for today's generation. On one hand one cannot negate the ill effects of excessive use and misuse of SNS but on the other hand one must look into the positive ways of using the sites for holistic development of individuals. Adolescents and young adults can interact with their families and extended families online and find social acceptance, care, nurturance and love. With intricate webbing of regular interactions between family members there is enhancement of social capital, interdependence and psychological wellbeing making each family – A BIG HAPPY FAMILY.

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