

Analyzing the Perception of Social Networking Sites as a Learning Tool among University Students: Case Study of a Business School in India

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Abstract—Universities and higher education institutes are finding it increasingly difficult to engage students fruitfully through traditional pedagogic tools. Web 2.0 technologies comprising social networking sites (SNSs) offer a platform for students to collaborate and share information, thereby enhancing their learning experience. Despite the potential and reach of SNSs, its use has been limited in academic settings promoting higher education. The purpose of this paper is to assess the perception of social networking sites among business school students in India and analyze its role in enhancing quality of student experiences in a business school leading to the proposal of an agenda for future research. In this study, more than 300 students of a reputed business school were involved in a survey of their preferences of different social networking sites and their perceptions and attitudes towards these sites. A questionnaire with three major sections was designed, validated and distributed among a sample of students, the research method being descriptive in nature. Crucial questions were addressed to the students concerning time commitment, reasons for usage, nature of interaction on these sites, and the propensity to share information leading to direct and indirect modes of learning. It was further supplemented with focus group discussion to analyze the findings. The paper notes the resistance in the adoption of new technology by a section of business school faculty, who are staunch supporters of the classical “face-to-face” instruction. In conclusion, social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn provide new avenues for students to express themselves and to interact with one another. Universities could take advantage of the new ways in which students are communicating with one another. Although interactive educational options such as Moodle exist, social networking sites are rarely used for academic purposes. Using this medium opens new ways of academically-oriented interactions where faculty could discover more about students' interests, and students, in turn, might express and develop more intellectual facets of their lives. hitherto unknown intellectual facets. This study also throws up the enormous potential of mobile phones as a tool for “blended learning” in business schools going forward.

Keywords—Business school, India, learning, social media, social networking, university.

I. INTRODUCTION

MILLENNIALS are the first generation to grow up with digital media in multiple forms and they are extremely adept at multitasking with multiple devices [1]. Most University students are now part of the millennial generation [2]. Mobile technology has become an integral part of their everyday life. Most university students around the world carry this miniature computing and communication device, using

them almost exclusively for personal purposes [3]. Mobile devices are cheaper than a personal computer and are used by many millennials because of their affordability and utility.

Social media networking systems have helped people all over the world to communicate more effectively about a specific topic or issue transcending firms, consumers and institutions at any point in time [4]. Social media networking systems have the capability to connect faculty and students in the educational domain any time from any place in the world for sharing information or collaborative projects [5], [6]. Unfortunately resistance to end-user systems by educators and professionals is a major problem which needs to be addressed [7]. To better predict, explain and increase user acceptance, it is necessary to understand why people accept or reject technology.

This article tries to understand the manner of usage of social media by the young, urban “Generation Y” or millennial students of India. The beauty of new social and digital technologies is their immediacy, reach and flexibility. Social media create highly interactive platforms leveraging mobile and web-based technologies through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content [8]. There currently exists a rich and diverse ecology of social media sites, which vary in terms of their scope and functionality.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term “Social media” is broadly used to describe any number of technological systems related to collaboration and community [9]. There has been unprecedented growth of Web 2.0 technologies [10], [11] and the future looks exciting. Web 2.0 is a more inclusive term while referring to Social Network sites (SNSs) and other social media [11]. SNSs are web-based services that allow users to make personal profiles, create content and are used interchangeably with terms such as social networking or online social networks [11], [12]. Moreover, “Social Media” encompasses SNSs such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter; creation and publishing tools like Wikis and blogs; Media sharing sites such as You Tube and republishing through RSS feeds [13], [20].

The research organization “Pew Research Center”, while working on “The Pew Internet Project”, an initiative of the Pew Research Center, collected extensive data on the social impact of the internet while studying the utility of social networking sites [11]. Lenhart *et al.* found 72 % of online 18-29 year olds used SNSs which was significantly higher than

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those aged above 29 (39%). Email and search engines were the most frequently used SNSs among all ages, considering all web-based applications. SNSs make individuals more noticeable to others or maintain connections while being used for personal issues, work-related issues or shared interests like music, sports or politics [28]. Facebook, for example, allows its users to have online profiles and invite others to be their “friends”. The special features of Social media/SNSs are as follows [14]:

- Social media involve different channels aiming at targeting the largest number of audience such as blogs, photo and video sharing, event services, email, and podcasting.
- Social media change over time, which allows different sites to be built based on the same concepts.
- Social media are participative; therefore, users are expected to generate content.

Boyd and Ellison [15] defined SNSs like Facebook as web-based services that allow individuals to:

- create a public profile within a bounded system;
- accumulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and
- view and use their list of connections and the lists made by others within the site (the nature and characteristics of these connections may vary from one site to another).

There is no greater impact of Social Media today than at the universities where technology is transforming the ways students communicate, collaborate, and learn [11]. Essentially, it is promoting a flexible learning approach across various “touch points” like the classroom, off campus, within the workplace and virtually anywhere with internet access [16], [22]. According to [17], the most popular social media networking systems used and accepted in the market are Facebook (901 million users), Twitter (555 million users), Google+ (170 million users) and LinkedIn (150 million users) [6]. Hence social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google plus have the potential to become important disruptive technologies [18] and build innovative models of management education. These tools are increasingly being used as an essential communication tool by prospective students to contact current students or alumni for a more authentic and holistic view on the institution. [19] also noted the impact of social media like Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Second Life on a learning environment.

Table I depicts a classification of Social Media based on the degree of self-disclosure and type of self-presentation. To narrow the range for this study, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Google +, Twitter, Blog and LinkedIn were chosen to be the focus in recognition of the prevalence of SNSs. Given the importance and relevance of these SNSs in our study, a brief discussion of each is given in the rest of Section II:

A. Facebook

Developed in 2004 by then Harvard undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook is the face of online social networks and is the “dominant” social networking site [13]. Facebook

users have personalized websites called “Profiles” that they develop through easy-to-use menus. Users can adjust the privacy settings of their accounts to limit access to their Facebook profile. “Friend” status generally enables full access to a person’s profile including the ability to view all the photographs in the person’s albums and post comments to it. Facebook groups, however, do not require their members to be friends with each other and the members of the group can easily swap and upload files, links, articles, information and videos at no cost in real time. A Facebook page can, therefore, be used as a central page for students and faculty to share and discuss information.

TABLE I
CLASSIFICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY SOCIAL PRESENCE/MEDIA RICHNESS
AND SELF-PRESENTATION/SELF-DISCLOSURE [8]

		Social Presence/Media Richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self- presentation	High	Blogs	Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook)	Virtual Social Worlds (e.g. Second Life)
Self- disclosure	Low	Collaborative Projects (e.g. Wikipedia)	Content Communities (e.g. YouTube)	Virtual Game Worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)

B. LinkedIn

Used primarily for professional networking, LinkedIn is a networking site that launched in 2003. LinkedIn users usually affiliate with others in their work maintaining a list of contacts for people they know and trust. LinkedIn is a business- and employment-oriented social networking service that operates via websites and mobile apps, the only difference being that a LinkedIn profile is created based more on a business focus, instead of a personal focus for Facebook. In other words, a LinkedIn profile has a professional resume aspect, highlighting education and past work experiences, while enabling other users to see the connections lists of each other as well as the endorsements made to or received from other users [6]. The basic premise of this SNS is the trust factor as connecting with others requires either a pre-existing relationship or some mutual contact [21].

C. Blog

A weblog or blog is essentially an online journal where several contributors participate by commenting about a topic of mutual interest. Blogs allow users to post personal content, to comment on and connect to other media sites, as also to make remarks about other users’ posts [11]. A “blog” is a web-based log, journal, or chronicle that features informal, diary-type commentary, often with critiques and links to online articles or relevant articles [17]. Blogs can be a great medium for sharing content among a course’s learners/students and the instructor/faculty. The instructor/faculty might create a blog covering the progress of the course, session by session. PowerPoint slides, lecture notes, videos of lectures or class sessions, etc., might be included for learners/students and others (assuming this is openly posted on the web) to view. Learners/students might share notes on articles, interviews, and other materials related

to class assignments on the blog. Ideally this allows bloggers to cover much more material than they would be able to on their own [23].

D. Twitter

Twitter is a social networking site that is often termed a micro blogging service [24]. In contrast to Facebook or LinkedIn, Twitter limits posts or updates to 160 characters. It is particularly useful for fast exchanges of thoughts, ideas, and information. Generally, tweets are about what the sender is currently doing or thinking, or to alert followers about some imminent event or particularly notable resource. Other Twitter users who have been accepted as followers of a person's tweets will receive them. Twitter has been characterized as the prime example of Mobile 2.0, a communication platform accessible anywhere and anytime. Faculty can tweet information relevant to their subjects and they can even tweet homework or reading work to their students following them.

E. Google+

Google+ is an interest based social networking system from Google that offers functionality and many features comparable to Facebook [6], [25]. Google+ has developed and introduced "Circles" used to share information among different groups of people, "YouTube" for offering videos and articles, and "Hangouts" for video chatting with friends along with other unique features [6]. These are of great value for faculty teaching at institutions that are located at a distance from their students. YouTube is a video sharing service that allows users to view, rate, share, report and comment on videos posted by other users, as well as upload their own videos [6]. The main benefit of Google+ Hangouts is that it enables faculty to reach out to more students simultaneously, enabling cost reduction for the institution.

III. TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE MODEL

"The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is an information system (a system that consists of all the network communication channels used within an organisation) theory that demonstrates how users accept and use specific technology" [6], [26]. The model indicates the various factors influencing their decision about how and when they will use specific technology when users are confronted with a new software package [26]. [27] indicated that user motivation can be explained by the constructs; 'Perceived ease of use', 'Perceived usefulness', and 'Attitude toward using the system'. A fourth construct of 'System accessibility' was introduced later in 1993.

The first construct is 'Perceived usefulness' which is described according to [27] as, "... the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance". The second construct which is 'Perceived ease of use' is defined as, "... the degree to which an individual believes that using a particular system would be free from effort" [26]. The third construct is 'Attitude towards using' and is defined as, "... the degree of evaluative affect that individual associates with using the

target or the target system in his or her job". The last construct is 'System accessibility' which refers to organizational context variables. These constructs were embedded in the research study as it had been validated in an earlier study [29]. The next section deals with the research methodology and the findings of the research.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The methodology involves a survey questionnaire of students of a reputed business school as part of the initial exploratory study. This is followed up by focus group analysis to supplement and analyze the findings.

A. Survey Questionnaire

A questionnaire with four major sections was used to collect data. The questionnaire was evaluated by two faculty members specializing in Information Systems to demonstrate its appropriateness. The results of the evaluation have confirmed the validity of the questionnaire.

The first section of the questionnaire consisted of demographic data including gender, marital status, work and educational status. The second section explored the students' involvement in SNS including their adoption and use. The third section discussed the frequency of using SNS for viewing and posting information. The fourth section was to study the perception of students regarding the type of information. Data were gathered and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to get frequencies, percentages, tabulations and other information of interest.

1. Demographic Data

Figs. 1 and 2 provide a demographic profile analysis of the sample chosen from a reputed private business school in the eastern part of India. The ages of the students are in the bracket of 20-30 years, pre-dominantly in the 21-25 group representing 'Generation-Y' of the country. All the students are graduates, pre-dominantly from Engineering stream. Average work experience of sample chosen is 2 years and they are all single. The proportion of male and female among the sample chosen is 70:30. The household income of the respondents indicate them to be coming from urban higher middle-class income group (many respondents did not respond to this sensitive question).

2. Adoption of SNS

Fig. 3 indicates students' adoption of SNS. All the respondents owned a smart phone and were heavy users of the internet for a reasonably long period (mean=10 years). The students were asked to identify the social network accounts they had. The results revealed Facebook as the most popular site among students with 98 percent; Google+ was second with 83 percent and LinkedIn was third with 78 percent. The survey showed most students had more than one social network account, although blogging was not very popular with only 20 percent opting for it.

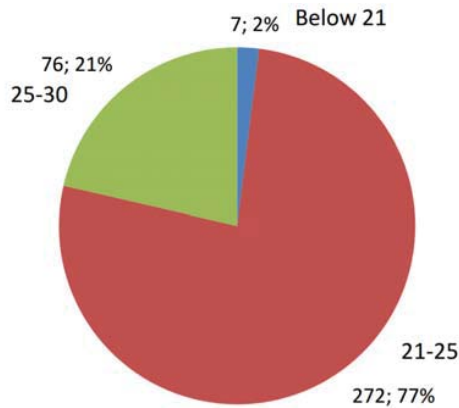


Fig. 1 Age distribution of respondents

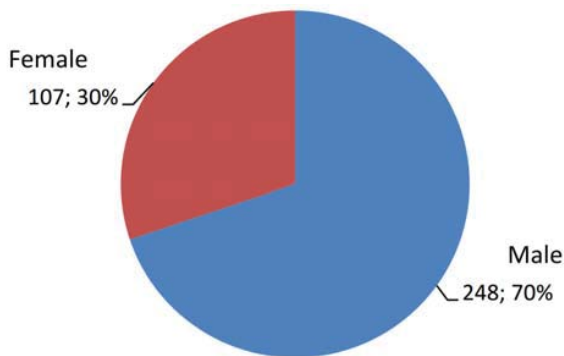


Fig. 2 Gender of respondents

3. Involvement in SNS

An overwhelming majority of more than 85% students use Facebook as a tool of communication relative to the other tools mentioned in Fig. 4. LinkedIn seems to be another medium of choice among students while Blogging does not seem to interest the surveyed students. Students tend to use SNS tools more than the traditional Email (65:35), probably due to more informal communication groups amongst them.

4. Utility of SNS

Fig. 5 provides the tasks for which the SNS is most frequently used amongst the students. While most the students use SNS for communicating with friends/relatives or sending/receiving messages, they hardly use it for building romantic relationships. Many students seem to use SNS as a tool to gather knowledge while the usage for other activities (visibility among peers, sharing photos, entertainment and jobs) seems to be scattered.

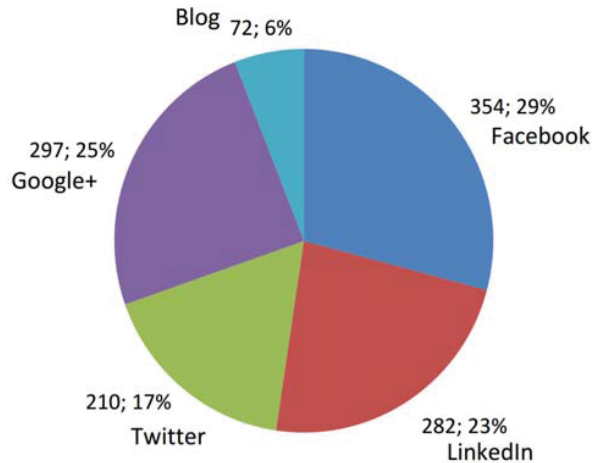


Fig. 3 SNS adoption by respondents

5. Frequency of Using SNS for Viewing and Posting

Fig. 6 indicates the frequency of using SNS for viewing and posting. The results indicated that 183 students (52 percent) view their accounts many times a day and 129 students (36 percent) open their accounts at least once a day.

B. Focus Group

The second part of the research involved detailed responses from a focus group of class representatives of Business Management sections chosen for participation in two different rounds, the students being mutually exclusive.

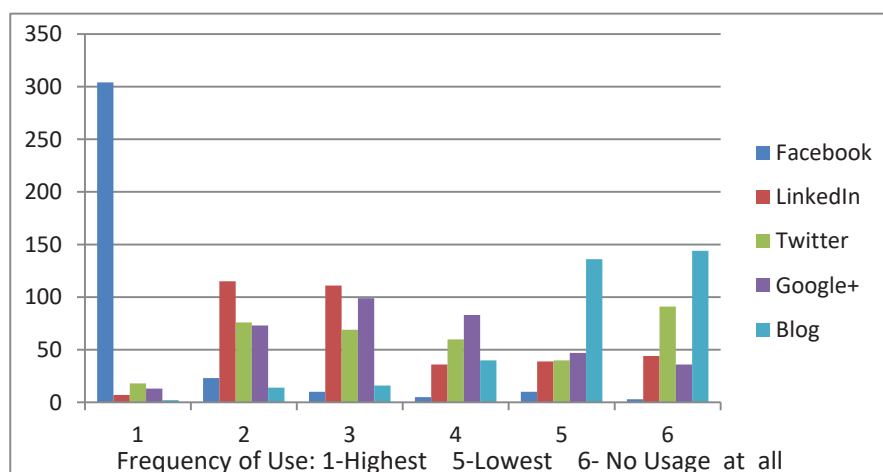


Fig. 4 SNS involvement of respondents

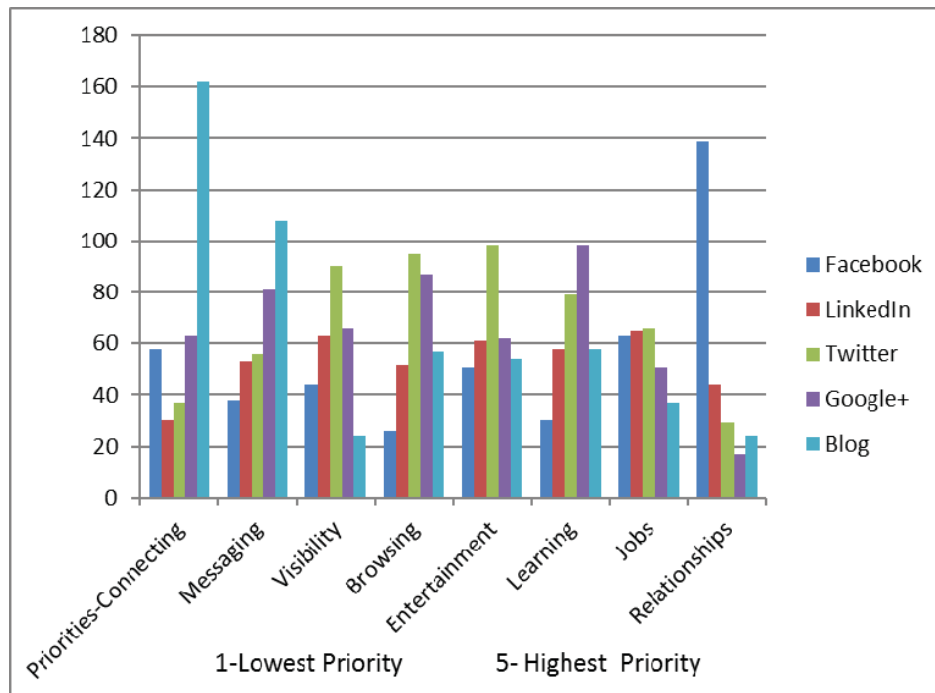


Fig. 5 SNS utilities for respondents

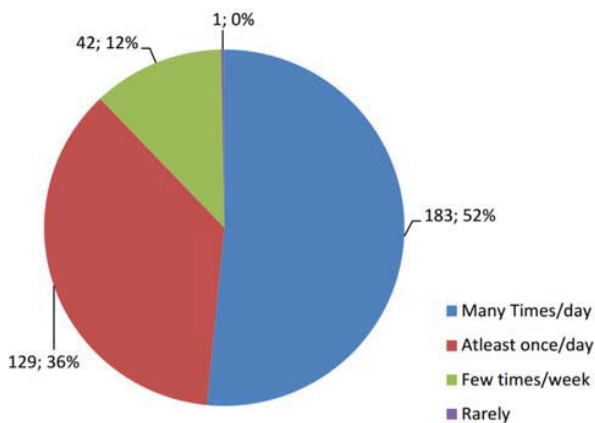


Fig. 6 SNS frequency of use

The first round had 8 participants and the second round 6 participants, with the same questions put forward as provided in Table II.

The participants had earlier been part of the survey carried out to understand awareness and preferences towards social media. The focus group discussion was carried out in one of the classrooms of the institute with a current doctoral student acting as the facilitator in both the rounds. Six related questions guided the focus groups, who deliberated on the questions for 110 minutes and 90 minutes respectively. For a two-hour focus group, ten related questions would be sufficient to gain desired information while giving the participants and facilitators ample opportunity to pursue issues without feeling rushed [29]. The objective of the information gathering session was to learn about:

- 'Perceived ease of use' of SNSs
- 'Perceived usefulness' of SNSs to students
- 'Attitude towards using' SNSs by students
- 'Intention to use' SNSs by students
- 'System accessibility' of SNSs
- 'Preferences of activities' by students using SNSs

The deliberations of each focus group were recorded on a smartphone and subsequently transcribed to organize and analyze the data. As there were no major new points arising after discussions with the second focus group, it was decided not to pursue with the qualitative study further. The focus group responses were organized into subcategories and the comments from the class representatives used to infer results discussed in the next section. Table II summarizes the context of the focus group discussions.

V. DISCUSSION

The study yielded a wealth of rich qualitative data. Analysis of the data assimilated from focus group discussions are summarized below:

A. Perceived Use

Generation Y students have in general strong preferences and dislikes. They are also dictated by peer pressure, which explains why all the students own a smartphone, despite varying family incomes. It is apparent that this generation has been using the internet extensively over the past decade, albeit with different media. It enables this generation of students to be quick adopters of new technology and familiarization with new gadgets come naturally to them. The need for staying

relevant among peers makes them learn to use SNS and find information.

TABLE II
FOCUS GROUP QUESTION CATEGORY

SNo	Category	Sub category
1	Perceived Use	Ease of usage of SNS Ease of learning to use SNS Ease of finding information
2	Perceived Usefulness	Usefulness in communicating Usefulness in course related studies Usefulness in increasing overall productivity
3	Attitude	Positive attitude towards SNS Negative attitude towards SNS
4	Intention to Use	Intention to use SNS frequently Intention to return to SNS frequently
5	System Accessibility	Ease of accessing SNS
6	Preference of Activities	Activities pertaining to networking Activities pertaining to careers Activities pertaining to relationships Activities pertaining to knowledge acquisition Activities pertaining to communication Activities pertaining to entertainment

B. Perceived Usefulness

An overwhelming majority of students use SNS as the medium of communication between themselves. Facebook is most popular due to the wide array of functionalities it provides and the informality of the medium. A major finding was the usage of Twitter in communicating messages, although the popularity of WhatsApp as a messaging tool came into the fore during focus group discussion. Students tend to use SNS as part of their course related studies but feel there is scope for increasing the usage with adequate support from faculty teaching the course and adopting the medium. The opinion was divided as far as the issue of productivity was concerned, with some focus group users of the opinion that it decreased productivity due to unnecessary distraction at work.

C. Attitude

Most focus group users had a positive attitude towards SNS as it was a useful tool to keep them connected with their peer and community groups. Moreover, access to information is crucial today and hence anyone with a negative attitude towards SNS will find it difficult to survive in the cut-throat competitive environment. However, a couple of users advised caution in handling SNSs as they tend to influence intellectual and behavioral changes detrimental to the interest of the individual. The positive impacts were better connectivity with friends, relatives and peers while neglecting study or work and the time consumed in social networking is a corollary of negative impact.

D. Intention to Use

A major finding of the study was the behavioral aspect of the students towards SNSs. The propensity of returning to SNS multiple times in a day was found in most students. It essentially meant they used as well as intended to use SNSs

frequently every day. It is expected that intention to use will only increase with increasing volumes of users.

E. System Accessibility

The students expressed satisfaction on the IT infrastructural capability of the institute which enabled them to access SNSs 24 X 7. There were no complaints regarding downtime, navigation, interaction speed and latency tolerance.

F. Preference of Activities

Students preference of activities was linked to their preference of SNSs which facilitated their interests. For example, Facebook was an overwhelming favourite with the students as all students had Facebook accounts and multiple functions like sharing photos, messages, documents and messages was possible through this medium without any hassle. Similarly, LinkedIn was used by a large section of students wanting to make a mark in a professional capacity and making themselves visible as a 'prospect'. Blogging was less popular probably because not everyone can find time out from the busy schedule of a management student. Moreover, creativity is certainly not a common trait of an individual and you require discipline to maintain a blogsite. You Tube, Hangout and Gmail (part of Google+ offering) was also popular with the students and has the potential to be a useful medium to capture knowledge and serve as a learning platform. Of late, WhatsApp appears to be the most popular messaging tool surpassing even Facebook, mobile SMS and Emails, both due to its ubiquity with smartphones and free usage. However, Emails (particularly Gmail) are extensively used in formal communications. The crop of students representing the business school seems to be more career conscious than establishing relationships.

Furthermore, there is no significant difference in the perception of students based on their gender. Similarly, the choice of SNS is not dictated by gender or prior web usage. Since the study is carried out for a category of graduate students, it is difficult to establish the correlation between choice of SNS and age or education-level.

VI. FUTURE AGENDA

While the study gave a positive perception of SNSs among University students, its acceptability as learning tool among faculty needs to be investigated as part of future scope of work.

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