

# A Descriptive Study of Facebook Uses among Indian Students

In this study, we describe the Facebook-use behaviour of a segment of college-going Indian youths. A survey of 455 students revealed that they started using the Internet in their teens and that they spend on average 1.6 hours a day on Facebook. Male and female students do not differ significantly in spending time on either the Internet or Facebook. The female respondents tend to be more connected than their male counterparts. Despite showing more connectedness, female students tend to be choosier while accepting friends' requests than their male counterparts. Factor analysis revealed five major gratifications the student-users seek while using Facebook: relationship maintenance, user-friendliness, relaxation, connecting with old friends and social interaction.

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Internet use is continually on the rise in India. The percentage of users has gone up from 0.1 percent of the total population in the year 1998 to 8.5 percent in 2010 (Internet World Stats, 2011). One of the major benefits of the Internet is that it helps people to get into social networks (The Pew Internet Project, 2006 as cited in Sheldon, 2008). In the past five years, social networks have come to increasingly populate the world (Katona, Zubcsek & Sarvary, 2011) and enabled people to connect with one another in unique ways. This is in no small part due to the characteristics of the social media: ability to connect faster (speed), ability to participate, create and generate content at a very low cost and ability to reach out to a large number of people (scale) (Datta, 2011). Social networks are now no more just limited to connecting and interacting with friends, but are also used for commercial and mobilisational purposes.

## FACEBOOK

Mark Zuckerberg, an undergraduate student at Harvard, designed Facebook in February 2004 (Sheldon, 2008). Facebook.com is the most popular social networking website in the world. It is growing rapidly at the rate of 179 percent in India, making India the fourth fastest growing market in the world (Datta, 2011).

According to information posted on Facebook website in 2007, Facebook's primary purpose was to "share information with people you know, see what's

going on with your friends, and look up people around you" (Facebook.com, 2007 as cited in Sheldon, 2008). In other words, Facebook offered itself as a communication platform that brought a host of services together than mere email. Three and half years later, in 2011, it redefined its mission as "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook.com, 2011). Stated in this manner, Facebook positions itself as a vehicle to invest its users with a communication resource and promises autonomy, if not freedom. Needless to say, some international events, such as the Arab Spring, may have contributed to Facebook reinventing its mission.

Facebook is the leading online social networking site today, especially among the youths. Because of its features, Facebook has become popular among youths putting behind other social networking sites such as Orkut, LinkedIn and MySpace. Users can connect to their friends, friends' friends, share photos, videos, post web links, post status message, develop their own home page and many other activities. Up until September 2010, there were 13 million Facebook users in India (Datta, 2011). More recently, Facebook has launched its version in six regional Indian languages (Hindi, Panjabi, Bengali, Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam).

Communication scholars have begun exploring who uses Facebook and for what purpose (Acar, 2008; Sheldon, 2008; Urista, Dong & Day, 2009). In this study, we seek to describe the Facebook-use behaviour of a segment of college-going Indian youths.

## FACEBOOK AND USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY

Located in the tradition of media effects research (McQuail, 1994), uses and gratifications approach

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investigate why audiences get involved in various media, such as radio, TV and newspaper (Ruggiero, 2000; Cha, 2010). The theory proposes that people use or access particular medium to seek certain gratifications from it to satisfy their social and psychological needs (Cantril, 1942; Blumler, 1979; Rayburn, 1996). Researchers have argued that the gratifications sought and obtained from the Internet are different from conventional mass media and have identified reasons that are unique to it (Krishnatray, Singh, Raghavan & Varma, 2009).

More recent research has investigated reasons for using social media. Scholars have found out some gratifications or reasons for using Facebook. Sheldon (2008) described that people use Facebook for six major purposes: relationship maintenance, passing time, virtual community, entertainment, coolness and companionship. Urista, Dong and Day (2009) found five major reasons: efficient communication, convenient communication, curiosity about others, popularity and relationship formation and reinforcement. Cha (2010) found that entertainment, boredom relief, interpersonal utility, escape and convenience are the motives of using social networking websites. Cha noted that although earlier studies (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000) found 'learning' as one of the most important motivational factors of Internet use, it is not so in the case of social networking websites. Baker & Oswald (2010) noted that there is a positive relationship between Facebook use and closeness with friends with whom users interact. He concluded that online social networking services can provide a comfort zone to shy individuals to interact with others, suggesting that psychological traits may have a role to play in the use of Facebook. Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn and Hughes (2009) stated that Facebook provides high gratifications to its users in their need for diversion and entertainment, need for (para-social) relationships and the need for identity construction.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between emergence of a new medium (or its application) and gender (Herring, 2003). Some studies have established that gender has an effect on online communication. A study revealed that women are less responsive during online interactions (Herring, 2003). Maldonado, Mora, Garcia and Edipo (2001) concluded that women use less online services as compared to men. However, Acar (2008) concluded that women seem to have larger online social networks as compared to men. Women also have more members in their online social networks and spend more time on social networking sites when compared to men. Women get more friendship requests comparatively and the acceptance rate of such requests is high among them.

In this study we attempt to describe Facebook use in respect of gender, requests for friendship received and rejected, length and duration of use; the study aims to understand what factors motivate the college-going Indian youths to use Facebook. More specifically, the questions for which we seek explanations are:

1. What is the profile of a young college-going Indian Facebook user?
2. Are Facebook users predominantly 'separated' or 'connected'? Is there any difference between male and female respondents with respect to the personality?
3. Is there any difference between male and female respondents with respect to time spent on Facebook?
4. Is there any difference between male and female respondents with respect to the number of friends they have on Facebook?
5. Is there any relationship between the age of users and the length of use of Facebook?
6. What activities do student-users perform on Facebook?
7. Why do students use Facebook? What gratifications do they derive from it?

## METHOD

People in the age group of 18 to 25 years form the major chunk (53 percent) of the Facebook user population of India (Datta, 2011). Our study focuses on this young age group. 550 candidates attending the admission process of one of the top communication and management institutes in India in the year 2011 were given a survey questionnaire. The candidates seeking admission came from different parts of the country.

The 550 candidates constituted the universe of the study. A clear announcement of the survey having no relation with the admission process was made at the beginning of the administration of the questionnaire. The candidates were offered the option of not answering. No names and contact details of the students were recorded on the questionnaire. Only Facebook users were asked to fill the questionnaire. After scrutiny, 455 questionnaires were found fit for analysis.

We measure Facebook-use behaviour with variables such as time spent, frequency of access, features used (such as uploading photos, videos, web links, tagging photos and so forth), chatting with friends and number of friends on Facebook and gratifications obtained from it. We study the profiles of the users with variables such as how they access Facebook, whether they have Internet at home, length of use and demographic variables (age, gender, income). As part of the users' profiles, we also studied the self-schema of connectedness and separateness for which we adopted Wang and Mowen's (1997) nine-item scale. Student-respondents were asked to rate the nine statements on a 5-point scale collectively describing traits of connectedness and separateness. Higher score on the scale indicated separateness.

One of the major objectives of this study was to find out the youth's motivation for using Facebook. Review of extant literature on uses and gratifications research led us to construct a battery of 16 items. The items described various possible gratifications derived from media/Internet and social media. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale.

## ANALYSIS

### Demographic profile

The analysis is based on 455 valid questionnaires. 41 percent of respondents are female. The average age of female and male respondents is 22.93 years and 23.92 years respectively [ $t(430) = -6.634, p < .01$ , two tailed]. A good number of student respondents' (40 percent) monthly household income ranged from Rupees 50,000 to two lakhs per month and an almost equal proportion have a monthly income of Rupees three lakhs upward. A high percentage of students' parents were educated beyond graduation (93 percent of fathers and 85 percent of mothers). Almost all students (99 percent) have TV sets at their homes, with 45 percent having two or more sets. More than half (54 percent) have one DTH but 19 percent have more than two DTHs at home.

### Internet use

Almost all (98 percent) users have access to the Internet at home. Most of the users (71 percent) are using the Internet for five to 10 years. 11 percent are using it for less than five years and 18 percent are using it more than 10 years. Most users (54 percent) use the Internet for one to three hours per day. 19 percent use it for three to five hours and 17 percent use it for more than five hours a day.

### Self-schema separateness-connectedness

Our study posits that a person's self-schema separateness-connectedness has a bearing on Facebook use. As indicated, we used Wang and Mowen's self-schema separateness-connectedness scale to determine Facebook users' self-perception in relation to others. The scale distinguishes between two types of individuals: those who perceive themselves as independent and draw clear boundaries between themselves and others as part of their self-identity and those who perceive themselves as

interdependent, show greater empathy towards others and view others as 'part' of themselves. According to Wang and Mowen, the first type of individual exhibits the 'separateness' schema and the second type exhibits the 'connectedness' schema. Table 1 shows overall scores on separateness-connectedness scale. The high mean scores on the items indicate that the sample exhibits strong individualism (separateness). The question we ask here is whether there is a significant difference between male and female Facebook users on the separateness-connectedness scale.

Our study found a significant difference between male ( $M = 3.47, SD = .41$ ) and female ( $M = 3.37, SD = .49$ ) Facebook users on the self-schema separateness-connectedness;  $t(352.440) = -2.359, p < .05$ , two tailed. Female respondents ( $M = 3.37, SD = .49$ ) show more connectedness than male students ( $M = 3.47, SD = .41$ ).

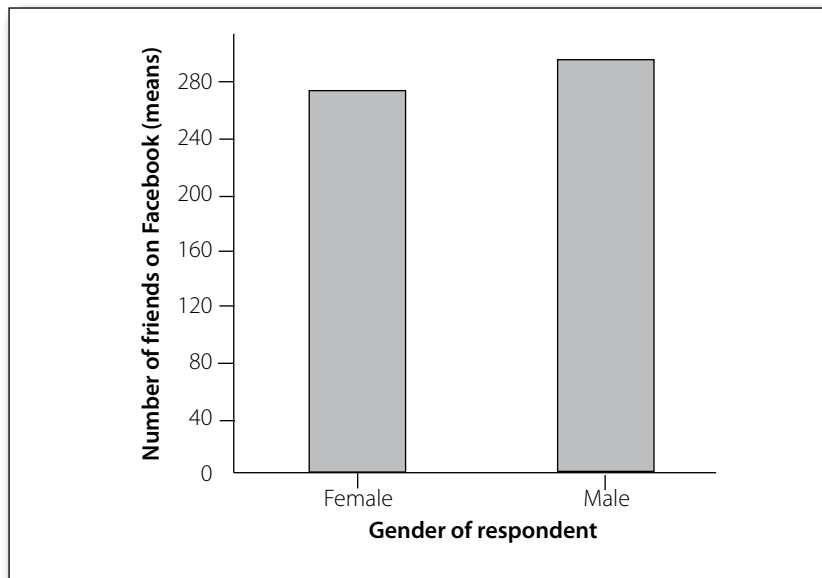
### Facebook usage

The average duration of using Facebook in this sample is three years. Computers and cellphones are the means of accessing Facebook. Nearly 57 percent of users access Facebook only on computers, 2 percent access it only on cell phones and 41 percent access it on both the media. Thirty-three percent of users access Facebook once in a day, 44 percent two to four times a day and 22 percent more than four times a day. On an average, the students use Facebook for 1.6 hours a day. There is no significant difference between male and female respondents with respect to the time spent on the Internet and Facebook. While male students spent on an average 2.4 hours on the Internet and 1.5 hours on Facebook, female students spent on an average 2.3 hours and 1.5 hours respectively on the Internet and Facebook. Interestingly, 42 percent of students use only Facebook for social networking which indicates the popularity of Facebook among the users when compared to other available social networking sites.

TABLE 1  
Overall score on separateness-connectedness scale

Items	Mean score
I often find that I can remain cool in spite of people around me being excited.	3.63
I enjoy the way I am rather than the way other people would like me to be	4.20
To become an adult means to become myself and be distinct from others.	3.55
I feel more comfortable having someone to rely on rather than dealing with my problems alone	3.27
I will stick to my own opinions if I think I am right, even if I might lose popularity with others.	3.92
I have my own privacy which I would never share even with my closest family members or partners	3.36
There should be a clear boundary between me and others, even with my parents, spouse and closest friends.	2.96
I would like to solve my personal problems by myself, even if someone else can help me	3.08
Most of the time, I do not get involved in other people's personal problems.	2.98

FIGURE 1  
Number of friends on Facebook



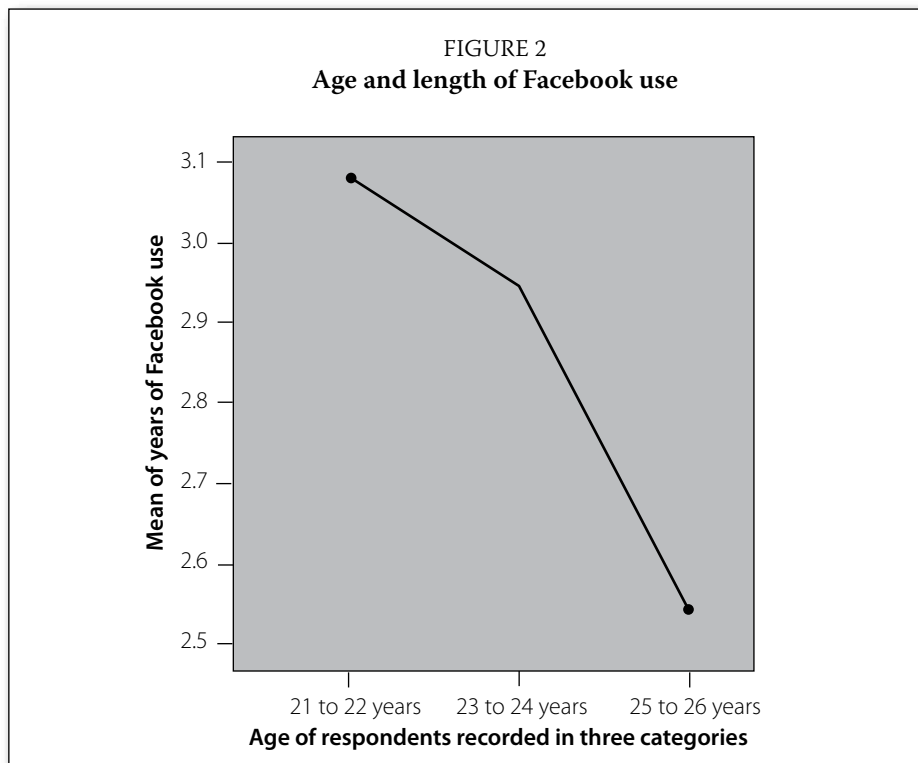
Both male and female respondents on average have 286 friends on Facebook. However, male respondents have a higher number of friends (297) than female respondents (275) but this difference between the two is not significant. Despite having a large number of friends, both male and female respondents maintain regular contact with a much smaller number (64 in the case of male and 59 in the case of female students). Again, the difference between the two categories of genders is not significant. However, our study found a significant difference in ignoring or rejecting friends' requests;  $t(237.61) = +6.66, p < .01$ , two tailed.

About 42 percent of this sample uses only Facebook. The remaining 58 percent access 19 social networking sites, the three most popular of them being Orkut (82 percent), Twitter (72 percent) and LinkedIn (66 percent). We found that those using other social networking sites spend significantly more time on the Internet than those who use only Facebook;  $t(421.37) = +4.09, p < .00$ , two tailed.

#### Age and length of Facebook use

Our study was interested in examining the relationship between age and length of use of Facebook. Anova

FIGURE 2  
Age and length of Facebook use



revealed a significant difference among the three categories of age on the dependent variable, years of Facebook usage;  $F(2, 430) = 7.09, p < .001$ . The oldest category—25 to 27 years—was significantly different ( $M = 2.53, SD = 1.14$ ) from the other two age categories: 21 to 22 years ( $M = 3.08, SD = 1.19$ ) and 23 to 24 years ( $M = 2.94, SD = 1.31$ ), in terms of the years of Facebook use. Figure 2 shows that there is a negative relationship between the age and years of Facebook use.

### Gratifications for using Facebook

One of the main reasons for conducting this study was to find out the reasons why young college-going students use Facebook. Towards this end, we designed a 16-item scale based on previous research. The analysis of data obtained from our sample showed ‘getting in touch with old and lost friends,’ ‘friends who are away from home’ and ‘getting regular updates about current affairs’ are some of the most popular reasons for using Facebook.

The students’ responses to the 16-item scale were factor analysed to determine the underlying structure of the gratifications scale. The analysis yielded five gratifications factors for using Facebook. The first factor ( $M = 3.46, SD = .43$ ) relates to *relationship maintenance* as it includes reasons such as sharing messages, finding what others are doing and what status messages they have put on their profiles. The second factor ( $M = 3.82, SD = .19$ ) denotes use-friendliness of the Facebook application and includes such reasons as clean and uncluttered interface and ease of use. This factor is similar to what Urista, Dong and Day (2009) have called ‘Convenient communication’. The third factor ( $M = 3.05, SD = .08$ ) relates to the relief or *relaxation* obtained from Facebook and has been found across different media use including the Internet (Krishnatray et al., 2009). In our study, relaxation was the least important reason for using Facebook. The fourth factor ( $M = 4.38, SD = .01$ ) is ‘connecting with friends’. It explains that young people use Facebook in order to get

TABLE 2  
Gratifications for using Facebook

I use Facebook for the following reasons	M	SD
Factor I: Relationship maintenance	3.46	.43
Helps me in sharing photographs and videos with friends and relatives	3.80	.93
Enables me to see what people have put as their ‘status’	3.42	.99
Helps me connect with friend’s friends	2.86	1.01
Allows me to see what my friends are currently doing or engaged in	3.76	.87
Factor II: User-friendliness	3.82	.19
Does not take any extra effort to learn to use it	3.64	.99
Its interface is clean and uncluttered	3.70	.95
Is easy to use	3.90	.84
Provides continuous updates of people, news and events	4.07	.78
Factor III: Relaxation	3.05	.08
Helps me relax	3.15	.99
Relieves stress	3.03	.98
Provides many hours of leisure	2.98	1.05
Factor IV: Connecting with old friends	4.38	.01
Helps me get in touch with old and ‘lost’ friends and colleagues	4.38	.70
Helps me contact friends who are away from home	4.39	.67
Factor V: Social interaction	3.71	.07
Helps me in sending messages to friends	3.80	.88
Allows me to express my opinions about different issues	3.66	.95
Helps me chat with friends	3.67	1.03

TABLE 3  
Frequency of activities on Facebook

	Every day	Once in few days	Never
Posting status messages	28	63	9
Uploading photos	2	83	
Uploading videos	2	40	58
Posting web links	11	55	33
Tagging photos	8	72	20
Posting notes	10	52	38
Commenting on other people's posts	62	35	3
Chatting	52	33	16

Note: Figures in the table are percentages.

connected with their friends who are away from home and contact those friends and relatives who are lost or not in touch for a long time. The fifth and last gratifications factor ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = .07$ ) relates to social interaction among friends.

#### Facebook activities

Linking with or commenting on other posts (62 percent) and chatting with friends (52 percent) were the most regular everyday activities of the student users. Some users were involved in daily activities such as posting or sharing their status messages (28 percent), posting notes (10 percent) and web links (11 percent). Uploading photos and videos and tagging photos were some other activities that are done once in a few days.

Out of the total respondents, 73 percent of users preferred to be offline while they are at work while 27 percent log in to the application even while at work. 48 percent stay online in chat while using Facebook whereas 52 percent preferred to be offline. Sixty percent keep themselves visible to entire friends' list while they are online whereas 40 percent remain visible only to selected friends' list.

#### DISCUSSION

The study's sample is not representative in any statistical sense but it overwhelmingly comes from that segment of the youth population that is economically well off and whose parents are well educated. With India's per capita GDP over US\$1,000, our sample's income is at least three times that amount. Coming from the class they are, it is not surprising that the youth sample tends to exhibit characteristics of separateness. For instance, the students do not want to be involved much in other people's matters and expect the same from others. In addition, they prefer to be independent even when they face problems. Despite this, we observed some gender-

based differences. The female respondents tend to be more connected than their male counterparts. This personality characteristic is similar to what Li (2003) found with the Canadian sample.

An important finding from the study is the sophistication of the use of Facebook (and the Internet) by young men and women in the age group 21 to 25 years. With the mean age of about 23.5 years, the students in our sample have been using the Internet on average for 8 years ( $M = 7.60$ ,  $SD = 2.64$ ). In other words, most students started using the Internet when they were in their teens not in the least because they had access to it in their homes. The students also are regular users of Facebook, with some using it since its launch in the year 2004. The average duration of using Facebook of the sample is three years, which is 18 months more than Sheldon (2008) had found (18 months) in her sample. We presume that with longevity of use would also come some degree of sophistication in using some of Facebook's features. Some of the common activities the students perform on Facebook are linking with or commenting on other people's posts, chatting with friends, posting or sharing their status messages, posting notes and web links. In addition to text-based activities, students upload photos, videos and tag photos once in a few days corroborating the finding that India is one of the top five countries in the world in terms of photo sharing (Datta, 2011). Most of these users prefer to be offline while working indicating that they use Facebook during off-work hours.

It is noteworthy that despite showing the psychological streak of separateness, the student respondents actively engage in online interaction. The Facebook users in the sample on average have 288 friends. While our study did not find a significant difference between genders in the number of friends, it was interesting to note that, unlike Sheldon's (2008) study, male respondents had a higher number of friends than their female

counterparts. We find a similar pattern in the number of friends the users are regularly in touch with. Although statistically not significant, male respondents were in regular contact with a higher number of friends (64) than female respondents (59). However, we found a significant difference between male and female students in accepting or ignoring friends' requests on Facebook. Despite showing more connectedness, female students ignored more friends' requests than their male counterparts. This finding is contrary to the Acar's (2008) study where friendship-request acceptance rate is comparatively high among females. We presume that female users are more circumspect and choosy than male users while accepting friends' requests in an online environment.

Although gender does not seem to account for variation in Facebook use, age of respondents appears to do so. What is revealing, however, is that the younger the user, the greater the number of years s/he has been using Facebook. Another facet of sophistication of use is the number of social networking sites used. In our sample, over 55 percent used more than one such site, mainly Orkut and LinkedIn, indicating that the choice of social networking site was purposive and determined at least partly by interest and passion.

The study identifies the reasons why young college-going students use Facebook. Student-users mainly obtain five gratifications from Facebook. The most important gratification obtained is that it enables them to connect with their old and forgotten friends and the friends who are staying away from home. It is interesting that despite wanting to maintain separateness, students wish to re-establish their friendship. Facebook's use-friendliness is the second important gratification students obtain from this social networking site. Its uncluttered ease makes it convenient to communicate with friends. The third gratifications factor relates to sociability afforded them by the site. Facebook enables users to interact with their friends through sending messages and chatting with them. While the first factor relates to re-claiming part of their friendship, the social interaction factor relates to the act of communication itself and the benefits derived from it. Relationship maintenance is the fourth important gratification obtained from using Facebook. Users can share photos, videos and can see what other people are doing or what status messages they have put on their profiles, and in so doing, maintain their relationships with their Facebook friends. Relaxation is the fifth and the least important gratification sought from Facebook.

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