

Social Network: A Broadcasting Lonely Culture

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SNS (social network service), is one type of information exchanging network either based on the interpersonal relationships or common interests. It creates an online platform and organizes people together to share and transmit information. Today, socialized has become an obvious trend in the internet industry. Many emerging Internet technology companies have started to provide social network services, such as Google, Facebook or Twitter. Based on the result of American social media report published by Nielsen¹ in the third quarter of 2011, Americans spend most of their online time (22.5%) on browsing these SNS and blog websites. Report especially mentioned that U.S. internet users spend more time on Facebook than any other web brand. Obviously, SNS has already become the most welcomed websites in the United States. However, in recent years, increasing number of people started to concern about the negative psychological effects of SNS websites. In a lecture of TED activity² in 2012, Professor Sherry Turkle provided a very important view that modern people is more easily to feel “lonely” due to the deeper dependence of SNS websites

According to the Sherry Turkle’s idea, the reason that SNS would make people feel more “lonely” mainly because SNS cannot provide us the authentic sense of community. All these SNS websites are really doing is to create an illusion that we are

¹ Nielsen. Social Media Report: Q3 2011. <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/social/>

² Sherry Turkle: Connected, but alone? http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together.html

“connecting” with our friends. This connecting illusion looks like a “commitment” that we can find a companion on the Internet whenever we need. Nevertheless, these virtual senses of connection cannot fulfill people’s emotional needs from face to face communications. The more we rely on online social networking environment, in a sense; it is more likely for us to feel lonely and depressed. In my opinion, the fundamental reason behind this “connected but alone” feeling is that SNS websites are actually forming a “broadcasting culture”. After the SNS users have adapted to this new Internet culture, it will start to influence people’s daily behaviors in reality and then create the sense of loneliness.

Usually, normal communication occurs effectively when signals carry information-bearing messages between a source (sender) and a destination (receiver)³. That means, under verbal contexts, when people want to “communicate” with someone else, they have already got a clear target to communicate with and then will have emotional exchange with that target based on the communicative contents. Nevertheless, in SNS environment, the communicative receivers are always ambiguous, which consequently make the results of SNS communication distorting. Briefly speaking, on one hand, SNS users are more like “broadcasting” information rather than “communicating” to their friends. On the other hand, their psychological feedbacks about those shared information on SNS websites are also always biased. Both of the two-way process will lead to the negative consequences of the SNS online communications.

³ Robert M. Krauss. (2002). The Psychology of Verbal Communication. *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*

For information senders: Unclear Target

As we know, information sharing is the key function of SNS websites. People can share personal lives or interests and read other's current news only by several mouse clicks. However, the process of sharing information cannot be considered as a complete interpersonal communication. Because in most conditions, when we post a new status, upload a new photo album, or make a comment about news on our Facebook webpages, usually we don't have a specific information receiver in mind. That is to say, on SNS websites, we are always "announcing" things openly about our current lives instead of communicating with our friends directly. This process looks like a FM broadcasting, everybody will use their SNS webpage as the radio stations. Information will be sent out without any barriers and all of your friends are able to see it. Yet, this broadcasting quality of SNS websites can amplify the sense of loneliness of SNS users if they don't get as much feedbacks as they expected before, among their crowds of online friends. This lonely feeling can be considered as a psychological disappointment by being "neglected" by their friends because most people have the potential desires of being concerned, or finding someone who have the same feelings. But one paradoxical point is, everyone on SNS websites are always willing to be information senders preferentially because people always want to attain more attentions from their friends. They must post or share more information in order to maintain enough exposure frequencies on SNS websites. Therefore the excessive information flow can automatically dilute the possibility of individual information of being concerned by others. In short, the amount of information senders and receivers

on SNS environments is unequal (the receivers are always “insufficient”).

For information receivers: Biased Understanding

To those information receivers, SNS websites provide them more opportunities to understand other people. When we are sharing something on SNS websites, actually we are also sending our personal viewpoints out. It means, in some conditions, our personal preferences or personalities will be reflected through our shared information. Actually, increasing number of people (especially young people) prefer to understand a new friend start with browsing his or her SNS personal webpage, rather than a face to face communication. Although this indirect online interaction can bring people less pressure and more convenience, the information receivers also will accept that information compound with personal bias, and then probably generate a negative psychological attitude. A recent psychological study⁴ shows that the social networking sites can lead to a negative self-image. In the research, many study participants were found that they always tend to overestimate other’s happiness based on what they reported to them. Therefore they have more tendencies to consider most people live happier than them. On the other side, in SNS environment, in order to withhold a healthy and positive personal image among friends, the users are more willing to “broadcast” more positive personal news. Finally, based on the biased understanding about those shared information, it is more possible for SNS users to generate lonely feelings that “I am the only one who feel unhappy”.

⁴Jenny Thai. (2011). Study shows social networking sites can lead to negative self-image. *The Stanford daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.stanforddaily.com/2011/01/07/study-shows-social-networking-sites-can-lead-to-negative-self-image/>

In total, with the increasing user's dependence on SNS websites, the broadcasting culture of SNS websites not only has changed the user's way of online communication, but also has started to influence their daily communications. They will post a crying expression on internet indicates that they are unhappy instead of talking with their friends directly; they will share an inspirational story to tell people they need some encouragements from their friends. However, this virtual communicating process can either be nullified by overmuch information flows or distorted by biased personal understanding in SNS broadcasting environment, and eventually bring people the sense of loneliness. Actually, current SNS website cannot take the place of traditional ways of interpersonal communications because it still merely is an auxiliary approach to support user's social activities. Therefore, the negative psychological feeling is the inevitable consequence if SNS users mistakenly regard the SNS broadcasting contact as the main type of their daily communication.