

# SOCIAL INTERACTIONS USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN OPEN AND FLEXIBLE DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM

**Dr Sushmita Mitra**  
**Ex-Director (Student Support Services), NIOS, India**  
[sushmitam@hotmail.com](mailto:sushmitam@hotmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the status and use of social media in India with an attempt to throw light on the need to use social media in Open and Flexible Distance Learning (OFDL) systems in the country. Education and training systems are affected by several emerging trends in the current Knowledge Society. One major trend is the use of social media which are a collection of online platforms and tools that people use to share content, profiles, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives and media itself, for online conversations and interactions between groups of people. Social media is interaction driven and user controlled around user-generated content. Among the most popular social media tools are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest. But there are hundreds—even thousands—of Web-based tools for consumption, curation, conversation, collaboration and creation. Today's younger generation – people born in the early eighties or later – have grown up surrounded by different digital technologies that have shaped the way in which they live, think, learn and interact. This seems to be true in all countries including developing countries like India. The paper discusses whether social interaction using social media tools could be used in instructional environments of OFDL to increase interactions, to bridge learner isolation, and to assist in the process of cognitive development of the learners.

**Key Words:** Open and Flexible Distance Learning System, Social Media, instructional environments,

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Open and Flexible Distance Learning (OFDL) systems, interpersonal communication and feedback on learning endeavours have always been seen as an integral part of the learning process. According to Thorpe (2002), interaction and specifically interpersonal interaction is key to all main theories of learner support in OFDL because it is the only way of addressing the needs of the learners in terms in which those learners wish to express themselves. In this respect ICT has been playing a critical role. ICTs are generating new forms of support using social media and challenging our existing view of OFDL systems. Today's younger generation – people born in the early nineteen eighties or later – have grown up surrounded by different digital technologies that have shaped the way in which they live, think, learn and interact. The new technologies that have emerged over the last few years, like “Web 2.0”, which reflects as much a social as a technological development, has a profound impact in the lives of our younger generation who constitutes majority of the student population. Today many of them use social media as a means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. This aspect seems to be true in all countries including developing countries like India where more than 34% of the country's population are young people aged 10–24 years. The issue is therefore should OFDL consider conscientious integration of the emerging trend of use of social media to facilitate new models of design for education and training that will better prepare citizens and workers for a knowledge-based society? We need to look at the whole new range of social media available which focuses on choice for both teachers and learners and the estimated number of people who use it. In this work, collation and/or synthesis of existing research was undertaken to find the status of Social Media usage in India and to highlight its applications for OFDL as a parallel and alternative system for providing educational opportunities.

## 2.0 SOCIAL MEDIA: MEANING AND FORMS

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media are a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Web 2.0 is the changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that have led to the development and evolution of web culture communities and hosted services, such as social-networking sites, video sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies with an aim to enhance creativity, communications, secure information sharing, collaboration and functionality of the web. As highlighted by Bates (2011), Table: 1 provides examples of some common Web 2.0 tools which by no means is an exhaustive list—there are many more examples.

**Table 1: Examples of Web 2.0 Tools**

Type of tool	Example(s)	Application
Blogs	• Stephen's Web ( <a href="http://www.downes.ca/">http://www.downes.ca/</a> )	Allows an individual to make regular postings to the Web, e.g., a personal diary or an analysis of current events
Wikis	• Wikipedia ( <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/">http://en.wikipedia.org/</a> )	An "open" collective publication, allowing people to contribute or create a body of information
Social networking	• Facebook ( <a href="http://www.facebook.com/">http://www.facebook.com/</a> ) • MySpace ( <a href="http://www.myspace.com/">http://www.myspace.com/</a> )	A social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study, and live around them
Multimedia archives	• Podcasts • YouTube ( <a href="http://www.youtube.com/">http://www.youtube.com/</a> ) • Flickr ( <a href="http://www.flickr.com/">http://www.flickr.com/</a> ) • iTunes • e-portfolios	Allows end-users to access, store, download, and share audio recordings, photographs, and videos
Synchronous communication tools	• Skype • Eluminate • Adobe Connect	Allows free "real-time" audio and visual communication over the Web
3-D virtual worlds	• Second Life ( <a href="http://secondlife.com/">http://secondlife.com/</a> )	Real-time semi-random connection/communication with virtual sites and people
Multiplayer games	• Lord of the Rings Online ( <a href="http://www.lotro.com/">http://www.lotro.com/</a> )	Enables players to compete against or collaborate with each other or a third party/parties represented by the computer, usually in real time
Mobile learning	• Mobile phones • Ubiquitous computing devices and applications	Enables users to access multiple information formats (voice, text, video, etc.) at any time, any place
Open content	• MIT OpenCourseWare ( <a href="http://ocw.mit.edu/">http://ocw.mit.edu/</a> )	Digital learning materials available free over the Internet, for use either by instructors or learners

According to Bates (2011), the main feature of Web 2.0 tools is that they empower the end-user to access, create, disseminate, and share information easily in a user friendly, open environment. There are often few controls over content, other than those normally imposed by a state or government (such as pornography), or where there are controls, they are imposed by the users themselves. Some have called Web 2.0 the "democratization" of the Web.

Social media depend on mobile and web-based technologies. One of the most notable results of Web-based, mobile technologies has been how users have quickly seized the tools to assume more active roles in the production as well as the consumption of content around which people interact. Relationships are the heart of social media, which encompasses the myriad of interactive platforms through which individuals and communities create and share multimedia content. Social media is interaction driven and user controlled around user-generated content. It introduces substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities and individuals. Nigel Shadbolt (2006) refers to this as *'the fabric of people, being connected through the new technologies and the formation of new social communities in which we share information and carry out collective endeavours. The social aspects of the Web's topological interconnectedness are becoming increasingly important and indeed this may be the most important long-term trend'* (as cited by Anderson, 2007, p. 47).

Social media differentiates from traditional / industrial media. According to Wikipedia following are some aspects ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_media#cite\\_ref-qualitymedia\\_6-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media#cite_ref-qualitymedia_6-1)):

- *Reach: both industrial and social media technologies provide scale and enable anyone to reach a global audience.*
- *Accessibility: the means of production for industrial media are typically owned privately or by government; social media tools are generally available to anyone at little or no cost.*
- *Usability: industrial media production typically requires specialized skills and training. Most social media does not, or in some cases reinvent skills, so anyone can operate the means of production.*
- *Immediacy: the time lag between communications produced by industrial media can be long (days, weeks, or even months) compared to social media (which can be capable of virtually instantaneous responses; only the participants determine any delay in response). As industrial media are currently adopting social media tools, this feature may well not be distinctive any more in some time.*
- *Permanence: industrial media, once created, cannot be altered (once a magazine article is printed and distributed changes cannot be made to that same article) whereas social media can be altered almost instantaneously by comments or editing.*

Hence, unlike traditional media, social media is characterized by an emphasis on personalization.

By applying a set of theories in the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure) Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) created a classification scheme with six different types of social media: collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), blogs and micro-blogs (e.g. Twitter), content communities (e.g. YouTube and Daily Motion), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life). Technologies include: blogs, picture-sharing, vlogs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowdsourcing and voice over IP, to name a few. Many of these services can be integrated via social network aggregation platforms. Among the most popular social media tools are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest. But there are hundreds-even thousands-of Web-based tools for consumption, curation, conversation, collaboration and creation.

### 3.0 SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE IN ASIA

There are various statistics accounting for social media usage and effectiveness for individuals worldwide. The global snapshot of key statistics for digital, social and mobile media in the year 2015 and 2016 respectively are illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Global Digital Snapshot for the year 2015 & 2016**

Year	Active Internet Users	Active social media accounts	Unique mobile users	Mobile social media users
Jan 2015	3.01 billion Penetration: 42%	2.08 billion Penetration: 29%	3.65 billion Penetration: 51%	1.69 billion Penetration: 23%
Jan 2016	3.42 billion Penetration: 46%	2.31 billion Penetration: 31%	3.79 billion Penetration: 51%	1.97 billion Penetration: 27%

(Source: <http://wearesocial.com/uk/special-reports/digital-in-2016>, and [http://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/digital-social-mobile-in-2015/9-We-Are-Social-wearesocialsg\\_9ACTIVEINTERNET](http://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/digital-social-mobile-in-2015/9-We-Are-Social-wearesocialsg_9ACTIVEINTERNET) )

Currently (2016) with the world Population growing at a rate of around 1.13% per year, the annual digital growth as indicated by Table: 2 show that in one year

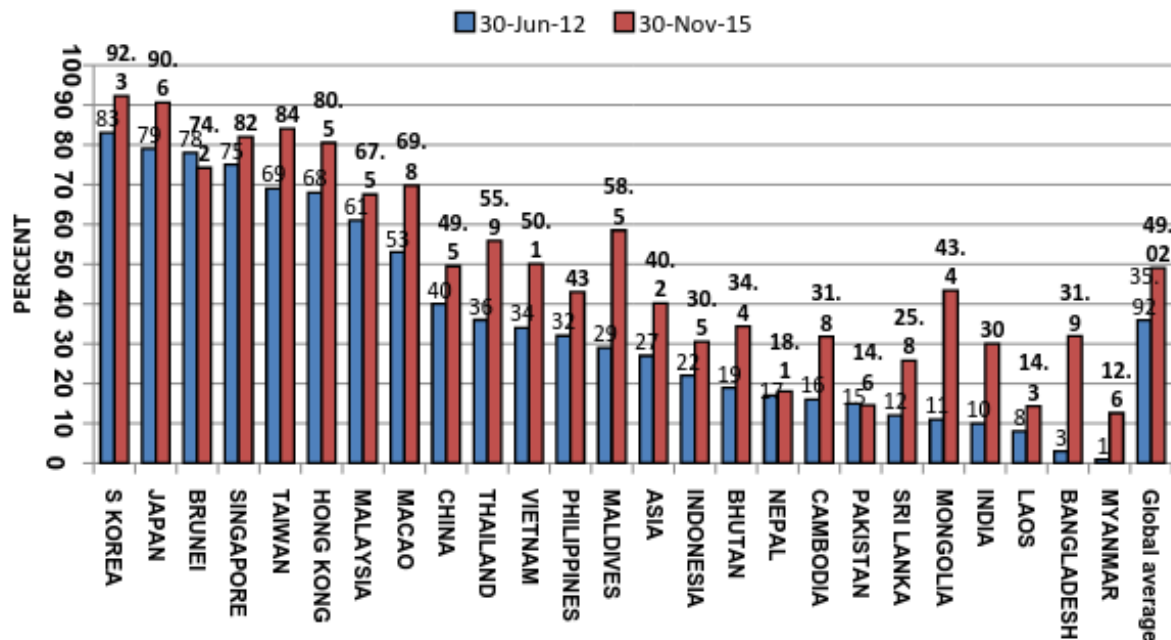
- the number of reported internet users is up by 10%, growing by 332 million;
- the number of reported social media is up by 10%, an increase of 219 million;
- unique mobile users increased by 4%, adding 141 million new users;
- mobile social media users leap by 17%, adding 283 million new users.

Asia, the most populous continent with 4.3 billion inhabitants accounting for about 60% of the world population, is more than 12 times larger than the total population of the USA ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_population)) and contributes significantly in this annual growth. Within this population, there are 1,622,084,293 Internet users accounting for 48.2% of the world's internet users living in Asia. As of Nov 30, 2015 the internet penetration rate in Asia was 40.2% (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>) while the global average is 46.4%.

Fig 1 illustrates Internet penetration for Asian countries for the year 2012 and 2015 respectively which shows that within three years there have been substantial rise in the Internet penetration for almost all countries in Asia.

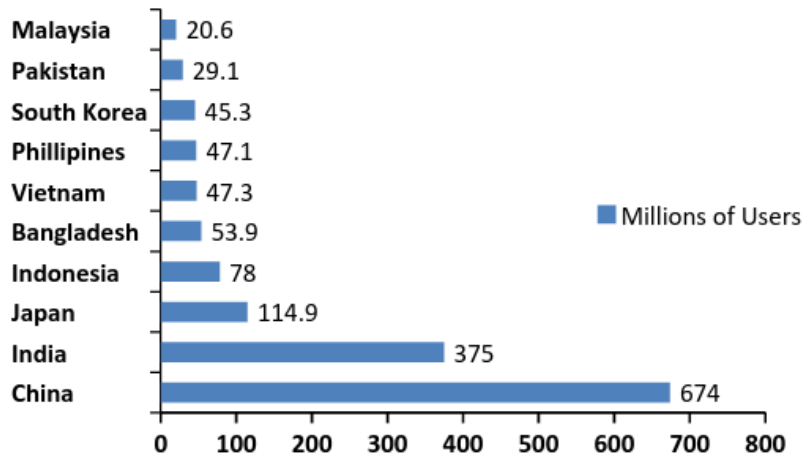
With millions of new internet users coming online each year the digital landscape is evolving and changing very quickly and consumers continue to embrace the potential of the internet. However, it is the mobile phones that are fast becoming the 'primary' device for many online adults. Smart phone penetration is reaching new heights around the globe, and we are fast approaching the point where being an internet user means being a smart phone user.

The largest Internet population in Asia is in China with 674 million users, followed by India with 375 million users as illustrated in Fig 2.



**Fig1: Internet Penetration in Asia in the year 2012 and 2015**

(Data Source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>)

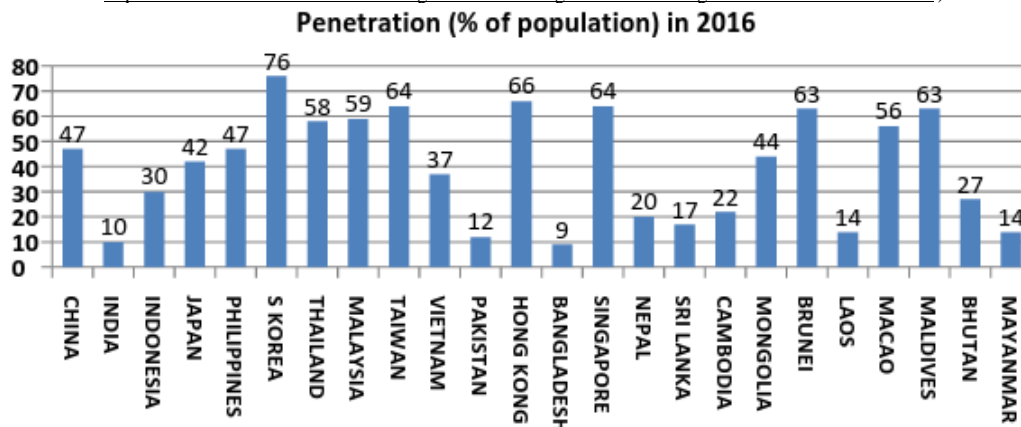


**Fig 2: Top Internet countries in Asia (as of Nov 30, 2015)**  
 (Data Source: Internet World Stats- <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>)

Undoubtedly the consequence of the internet penetration in countries is reflected in the social media usage in these countries. Fig 3 illustrates this for the year 2015 and 2016 respectively to highlight the growth in usage in Asian countries. Fig 4 shows the penetration (% of the population) of active social media accounts on the top social network in Asian countries. From Fig 1 and Fig 3 it is seen that there are either a few drops in the numbers or no substantial growth. It goes with the notion that when data was being collected by "We are Social" a number of individual countries (like Brunei) have registered lower mobile connections, possibly because of device and connection consolidation as people upgrade to data-connected smart phones that allow them to use mobile messaging, thus freeing them from the need to operate multiple mobile subscriptions in order to benefit from cheaper intra-network calls and SMSs.

**Fig 3: Social Network Usage in Asia (as of June 2012)**

**Fig 3: Active Social Media Users in Asia (as of Jan 2015 and Jan 2016 respectively)**  
 (Data Source: <http://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/2016-digital-yearbook> and <http://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/we-are-socials-guide-to-social-digital-mobile-in-asia-oct-2012>)



**Fig 4: Penetration of Active Social Media Users in Asia**  
(Data Source: <http://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/2016-digital-yearbook> )

#### 4.0 SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE IN INDIA: STATUS

India embraces social, digital and mobile technology extensively. As of January 2016, India had a total population of 1.32 billion out of which 33 % were urban. According to “*We Are Social’s DIGITAL IN 2016*” report as of January 2016 the following are the highlights for India. (<http://d1ri6y1vinkzt0.cloudfront.net/media/documents/We%20Ares%20Social%20Digital%20in%202016v02-160126235031.pdf> ).

##### 4.1 Internet Users in India

- The total number of active Internet users (including access to fixed and mobile connections) was 375 million which is 28% of the total population but went up by 19 % since the past year (Jan 2015).
- Number of Mobile connections/ subscription was 1012 million with a growth of 8% since Jan 2015 and this comprises of 77% of the total population.
- However, total number of unique mobile users (any type of handset) was 691 million accounting for 52% of the total population.
- Total number of active mobile internet users was 303 million which accounts for 23% of the total population.

Interestingly, the Internet in India took more than a decade to move from 10 million to 100 million, and three years from 100 million to 200 million but it took only a year to move from 300 to about 400 million users. Clearly, the internet is becoming the mainstream in India today.

Although this growth in a year is particularly encouraging, Internet access in India is still not evenly distributed with rural users as evident from the data reported by Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and a market research firm IMRB International. According to them as of October 2015 (<https://www.semrush.com/blog/internet-users-in-india-a-fresh-audience-for-brands/> )

- Active internet users living in urban areas = 246 million out of which 68 % users are males;
- Active Internet users living in rural areas = 129 million out of which 88% are males.
- Active Urban mobile internet users = 197 million which grew about 65%
- Active Rural mobile internet users = 80 million which grew about 99%

In other words, males dominate the Internet user base in the country, forming about 71% of the total user base, while females constitute about 29% of the Internet users. Internet usage among males has been growing at 50%, while the growth rate for female users is 46%. In urban India, the ratio of men and women Internet users is 62:38 (<http://www.livemint.com/Politics/9Vipq3XmcfQuhJRMbleuWl/Indias-Internet-users-set-to-increase-49-to-402-million-by.html>).

Further, only 7% of Internet users in India are working women, while 17 % of non-working women are on the web. According to Internet in India 2015 report by IAMAI-IMRB, (cited by <http://www.medianama.com/2015/11/223-317m-internet-users-india/>), as of November 2015, in rural areas 44% of the users used internet for entertainment, 37% for communication, 33% for social media, 14% for online ticketing and 5% for online shopping, while 71% of the urban respondents mentioned that they used the internet for communication, followed by 67% for social networking and 59% for entertainment. 24% of urban users used the internet to purchase products while 23% used it to book tickets.

The disparity is changing due to mobile access, but in contrast to most other developing nations, mobile access still accounts for less than half of India’s internet connections. Also male domination in the rural sector can say a lot about the accessibility and availability of Internet access and smart phones to rural women.

##### 4.2 Social Media Users in India

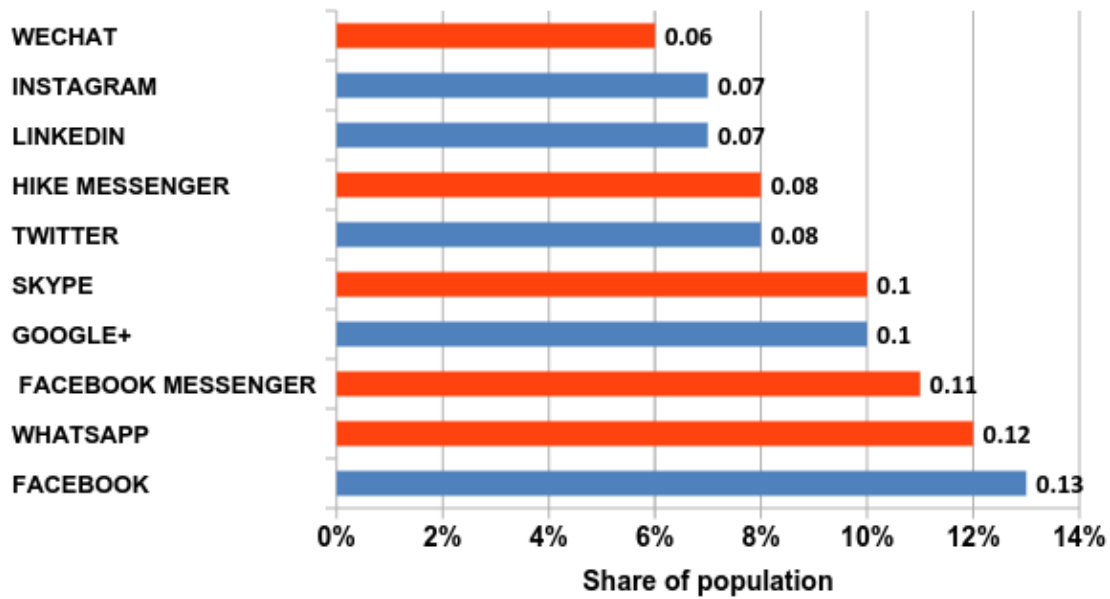
For many connected users in India, access to the Internet is primarily for accessing social media networks. According to *We Are Social’s DIGITAL IN 2016* report, as of January 2016, social media use, based on monthly active user numbers reported by the country’s most active platform, was as follows:

- Active Social media users was 136 million with penetration of 10% (i.e. active social users as a percentage of the total population);
- Growth in the number of active social media users was 15% since January 2015.

It is reported that 77% of the population or 1012 million had access to mobile connections and the growth in number of mobile subscriptions since January 2015 was 8%. As a result,

- Active mobile social users were 116 million with penetration of 9% and
- Growth in the number of active mobile social users was 16% since January 2015.

As of the fourth quarter of 2015, Fig 5 represents the social network penetration in India indicating that 10% of the population had an account with any social network and for different networks the penetration rate had been different. The most popular social network to connect and share was *Facebook* with a 13% penetration rate and 80% of this population accesses the portal via smart phones. The most popular chatting platform and actively used mobile messenger today is *WhatsApp* which had a penetration rate of 12%. *Facebook Messenger*, to converse online, had penetration rate of 11% while *Google +*, the interest-based social network had 10% penetration rate. Indian Internet users use *Skype* to connect with family, friends and loved ones. *Skype* has gained popularity and is even used for formal conversations. The penetration rate was 10%. *Twitter* a micro-blogging website that has gained popularity over the years and is now an integral part of the social media ecosystem, had a penetration rate of 8% in India and 76% of these users access the network through their smart phones. Indian internet users are also on *Hike Messenger* which is a cross platform service for smart phones that uses the internet for communication which had a penetration rate of 8%. As of January 2016 *Hike* has crossed the mark of 100 million users. *LinkedIn* which is often referred to as the Facebook of working professionals had a penetration rate of 7%. *Instagram* which is accessed by mobile and loved by youngsters who post selfies also had a penetration of 7%. *WeChat* which is a mobile text and voice messaging communication service developed in China and is one of the largest standalone messaging apps by monthly active users had a penetration rate of 6% with Indian Internet users.



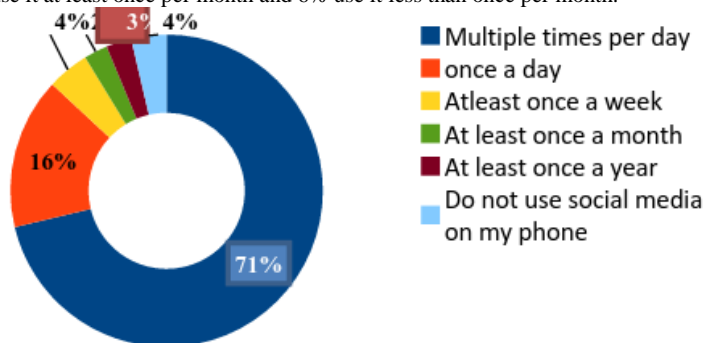
**Fig 5: Penetration of leading social networks in India as of 4th quarter 2015**

(Data Source: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/284436/india-social-network-penetration/>)

Increased smart phone adoption and better mobile broadband connectivity have allowed for mobile phones to be most people's primary day to day device. It is fair to say that a mobile phone is now the primary way people access connected services including the internet i.e. there is a shift in the way people access and consume information and content.

#### 4.3 Time Spent With Social Media in India

It is also reported (as of Jan 2016) that Indian internet users spend more time than many of their global peers using the internet. The average internet user spends nearly 4 hrs 22 min online every day via PC or tablet. The average daily use of the internet via mobile phone is 3 hrs 7mins. Moreover, 48% of the Internet users access the internet for personal reasons every day, 30% use it at-least once per week, 16% use it at least once per month and 6% use it less than once per month.



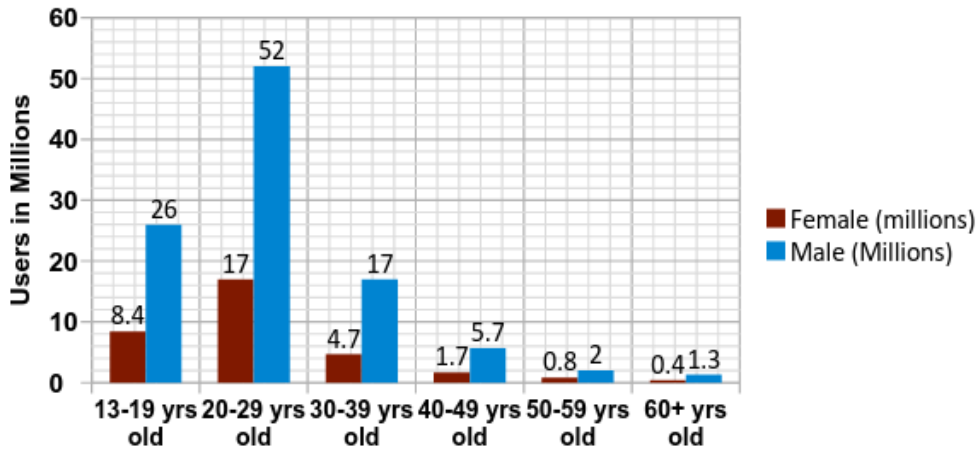
**Fig 6: Frequency of Use of Social media on their Mobile phone by the Users in India**

(Data Source: <https://infogr.am/Social-Media-Usage-in-Asia>)

For Social media the average daily use via any device is 2 hrs 17 min whereas the average daily television viewing time is 1hr 52 mins. Fig 6 illustrates the findings of a survey study on how often social media is used on their mobile phones by users in India.

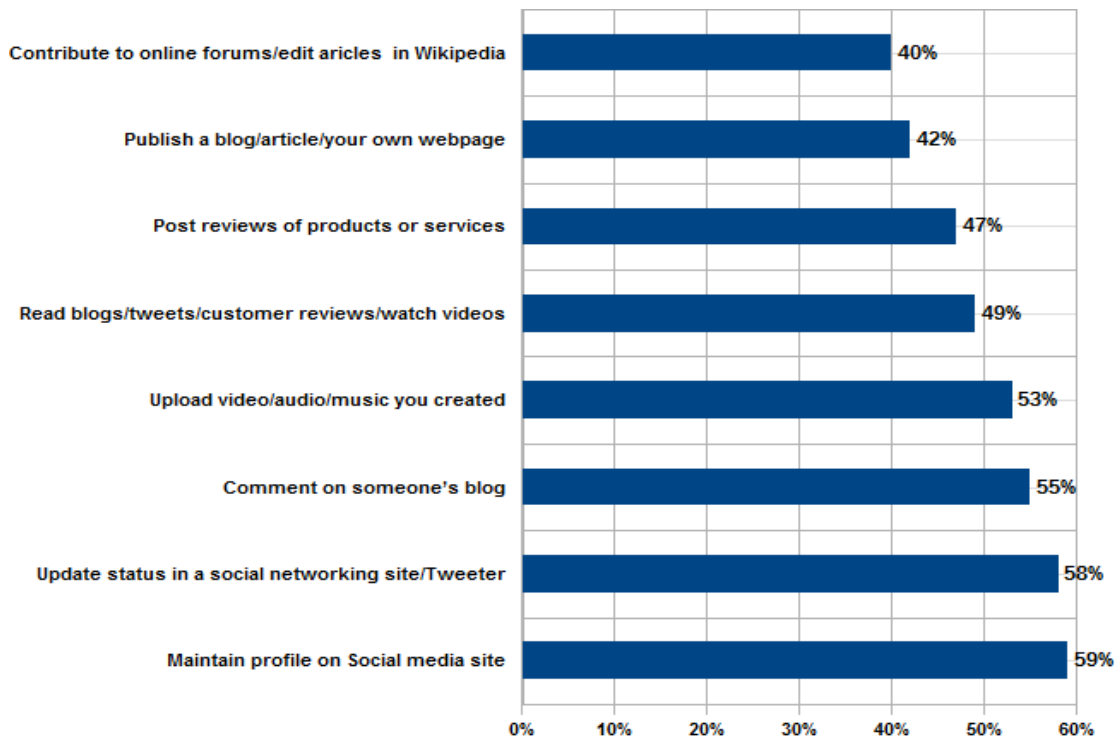
#### 4.4 User Profile and Popular Activities on Social media

In India men dominate the Facebook horizon as shown in Fig 7 below.



**Fig 7: Facebook Users By Age Group And Gender in India**

(Data Source: <http://d1ri6y1vinkzt0.cloudfront.net/media/documents/We%20Ares%20Social%20Digital%20in%202016v02-160126235031.pdf>)  
 There are about 76% male and 24% female Facebook users. However, Facebook remains the most popular social network in the 20-29 age brackets and teens are really not that keen on the network. It is Youth dominated and college students (33%) form the largest demographic of active social media users.



**Fig 8: Popular Activities Done on Social Media in India**

(Data Source: Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/FqcL24fK5aQ68qC6KzohJO/Social-media-in-India.html>)

According to a report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), cited by the e-paper ‘livemint, June 2016’ (<http://www.livemint.com/Politics/FqcL24fK5aQ68qC6KzohJO/Social-media-in-India.html>), 66% of the Internet users in urban India regularly access social media platforms.

The most popular activities on social media as illustrated in Fig 8 include maintaining one’s own virtual profile on the likes of Facebook and Twitter, posting and sharing an update as well as replying to something a friend has posted.

**5.0 SOCIAL MEDIA FOR OFDL: PROSPECTS AND CONCERNS**

It is well known that the "distance" aspect of distance learning takes away much of the social interactions that would be present in traditional learning environments. This problem must be mitigated by institutions providing a sense of personal involvement between the distant learner and the institution. Also as pointed out by SO (2010), physical distance affects learners’ perception of psychological distance and for higher levels of interaction, learners should take actions to utilize the affordances of technical interactivity for on-going communication and engagement, and in turn this activation needs to affect the development of connected feelings with other human actors.

Given the extensive, widespread and very rapid growth and popularity of both distance education and commercial **Social Networking Sites (SNSs)**, (Boyd et al., 2007), it seems logical to merge these popular two technologies with the goal of improving distance (online) teaching and learning (University of Minnesota, 2008).

For more than a decade now, Learning Management system (LMS) or **Course Management System (CMS)** has been in use by various educational institutions to provide learners with a space for online learning. In contrast to SNS, CMS, such as Blackboard and Moodle, tend to be much focused and lack the personal touch and networking capacity that SNSs offer. For example, instructors using CMS may pose a question in an online discussion board and each learner posts a response. However, these learner posts are really not interactions at all, but merely question and answer sessions. As highlighted by Brady, Holcomb, and Smith (2010), a comparison of typical SNS and a traditional CMS appears in Table 3.

**Table 3: Comparison of SNS and CMS Tools**

Tools	SNS	Traditional CMS
Forum	X	X
Blog	X	X
Media Sharing	X	....
Messaging	X	X
Wiki	....	....
RSS	X	....
Chat	X	X
Calendar	X	X
Tagging	X	....
Own Brand & Visual Design	X	....
Real time Activity Stream	X	....
Groups	X	....
Friends	X	....
Profile Pages	X	....
File sharing	....	X

(Source: Brady, Holcomb, and Smith (2010), <http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/pdf/9.2.4.pdf>)

Table 3 clearly shows that using a SNS that is user centred, rather than class centred (such as a CMS), has the potential to increase student engagement, as well as encourage high levels of online social presence among learners. Fostering a sense of community is critically important, especially in a distance learning environment where learners often do not get the opportunity to meet face-to-face with other learners or the instructor in the course. Since they facilitate the sharing of information—personal and otherwise—the technologies used in SNSs aid discussion and create intimacy among online learners, as they have the ability to connect and build community in a socially and educationally constructed network.

Researchers Deters and Mehl at the University of Arizona (2012) monitored a group of students and tracked their “loneliness levels” while posting Facebook status updates. The study found that when students updated their Facebook statuses more often, they reported lower levels of loneliness. This was true even if no one liked or commented on their posts. Researchers link the drop in loneliness to an increase in feeling more socially connected. On the other hand, when people see their social media statuses are not being engaged with as much as their peers, they can begin to feel like they don’t belong. This critical aspect of drop in loneliness in a distance learner supports the use of SNS in ODFL institutions.

A number of studies have shown that

- SNSs give learners an opportunity to create personal profiles which help them *take ownership of their learning space* (Meishar-Tal, Kurtz, & Pieterse, 2012).
- SNSs are also *useful tools for creating a sense of presence, supporting student participation and engagement, and building online communities* (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Lee & McLoughlin, 2010; Naveh et al., 2010, Aghili et al., 2014).



- SNSs *can improve learners' high order thinking skills depending on the tasks instructors choose* (Callaghan & Bower, 2012; Lu & Churchill, 2012).
- SNSs can provide *ease in sharing ideas and engaging in discussion* (Hoffman, 2009; Holcomb, Brady, & Smith, 2010). The study by Özmen and Atıcı (2014) have shown that students describe the benefits of sharing as its provision of effective and permanent learning experiences, the ability to view and utilise the opinions of their friends, its tendency to direct them to research resources allowing them to repeat with a *tendency to improve their level of motivation*.
- SNSs *allow for thinking* in order to view and answer friends' comments (Holcomb, Brady, & Smith, 2010).

Findings from many such studies do uphold the use of SNSs to be significantly beneficial, especially in OFDL context where the learners are distributed, isolated and at a distance and need interactive support to be successful. It is very well established that lack of learner support or no learning support in OFDL causes learner frustration, dissatisfaction, lack of confidence, loss of focus, and lack of motivation and these have implications for the ability of learners to persist in their courses and programs. By fostering building learning communities, Social media technologies can be said to be democratic and inclusive and adaptation is the key to survival in the Internet age.

As highlighted earlier, Facebook (FB), for example, is currently the fastest growing commercial SNS in the world, which as of March 2016 reached 1.65 billion monthly active users and 1.51 billion mobile monthly active users (<http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>). In fact, as of May 2016, India overtook the United States with over 195 million users to the United States' 191.3 million (<http://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/>). A web search on the use of Facebook was undertaken for OFDL institutions in India, Australia, UK, Malaysia and others. It is found that all over the world most institutions have an official open FB page to share information and updates about changes and developments at the institution. Some also encourage anyone to post any helpful hints or academic sources that may help the learners.

One was able to find a number of FB pages under the banner IGNOU, India created by student community as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Facebook pages under the banner IGNOU**

Sr No	Link	Page Created (Year)	About the page	Active (w.r.t last post)	Likes (as of 29 July 2016)
1	IGNOU Student Zone College & University <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ignoustudentzone/timeline">https://www.facebook.com/ignoustudentzone/timeline</a>	2011	Created to provide information and links for IGNOU Admission form, re-admission form, duplicates, provisional certificate, Examination dates, Assignment submission dates, i.e. all the information that matters to the learners.	July 2016	3990
2	IGNOU Local Business <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ignou-187951321255349/">https://www.facebook.com/ignou-187951321255349/</a>	2011	Created by an individual student. News items on IGNOU published in newspapers like Ahmedabad Mirror, TOI, India Today etc are posted.	Nov' 2014	2126
3	IGNOU @ignou1 <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ignou1/">https://www.facebook.com/ignou1/</a>	2010	Community page created by students. Posts are shared links on job prospects, careers, courses, exam results, and assignment help.	May 2013	9175

It can be believed that the young youth learners in IGNOU are already investing time and energy in social networking by creating a FB page, building relationships and their own communities of shared interests.

However, today's educators are often strongly discouraged from using commercial SNSs, including Facebook and MySpace, WhatsApp for instructional purpose because they are seen as inappropriate and incompatible with student learning. One of the problems identified in this context is related to the willingness of instructors to be "friends" of their students, thus exposing themselves to the students, and vice versa. Meishar et al. (2012) reported studies (Abel, 2005; Hewitt & Forte, 2006; Mendez et al., 2009) that have explored the possibility of instructor-student interaction online and concluded that the merging of the social with the educational environment is perceived as a violation of privacy in many cases. But with the advent of "groups" on Facebook which do not require members of the group to be "friends," it is possible to create a "study group" in which students and instructors participate without being "friends." Meishar et al. (2012) also stated that there seems to be grounds for using the Facebook group as an alternative to an LMS since a Facebook group has several distinct advantages over a conventional LMS, like ownership, login requirements, creating and sharing content, content management etc. So creating a Course Facebook could actively engage students, share content, interact, and build a sense of community (Casey & Evans, 2011).

Today WhatsApp is the most popular chatting platform and actively used mobile messenger which had a penetration rate of 12% (in 4<sup>th</sup> Q of 2015) in India. This utilizes a medium and a technology that students use every day on their mobile. By using WhatsApp group an instructor can integrate the learning environment and the real world and make education part of the students' lives. Looking into the benefits of SNSs, OFDL institutions in India need to explore and attempt to use these to support today's learners instead of misapprehending them.

## 6.0 CONCLUSIONS

SNSs can be an effective technological tool to develop online communication among students who take distance education courses in higher education (Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010). As cited by Özmen et al., (2014), Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons (2002) and Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe (2007) emphasised that not only do online social network tools remove communicative barriers they also actively encourage communication. Many are of the view that LMSs and SNSs must be used together in order to improve the quality of learning (Petrovic et al., 2014; Thoms & Eryilmaz, 2014) as it improves communication and interaction (McCarty, 2010). Combining these two platforms provides more student engagement, personal interaction, communication, peer-to-peer feedback, and social experience in distance education. Özmen and Atıcı (2014) also cited others (Razali et al., 2013; Iahad, 2012; Rozac et al., 2012; Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010; Feuer, 2009) who supported this suggestion. Alternatively social networking, course management, and university web sites ought to be combined for learning, thereby supporting distance learners to be engaged and be successful.

If young people are already using social networking sites, educators in OFDL necessarily must try to secure that captive audience in a space they feel comfortable using and support their learning by social interactions. Educators in OFDL must try to capitalize on students' pre-existing habits and skills. Undoubtedly today's educators have to learn how to insert themselves into a student's life. It

is to realise that social media is part of globalisation that has allowed the places and people to be better connected without having to be physically proportionate to each other. There is a unique opportunity to form educational communities of knowledge and OFDL institutions need to embrace this.

## REFERENCES

- Aghili, M., Palaniappan, A. K., Kamali, K., Aghabozorgi, S., & Sardareh, A. S. (2014). Unifying informal and formal learning environments: Educational use of social network sites through implementing community of inquiry framework. *International Journal of e-Education, e-Business, e-Management and e-Learning*, 4(3), 191-196. Retrieved from <http://www.ijeeee.org/Papers/329-C00016.pdf>
- Anderson, Paul, (2007). What is Web 2.0? Ideas, technologies and implications for education. *JISC Technology and Standards Watch*. Retrieved from <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/techwatch/tsw0701b.pdf>
- Barab, S. A., & Duffy, T. (2000). From practice fields to communities of practice. In D. Jonassen & S. M. Land (Eds.), *Theoretical foundations of learning environments*, 25–56. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Bates, Tony. (2011). Understanding Web 2.0 and its Implications for E-Learning. In Lee Mark J.W., & McLoughlin Catherine (Eds.), *Web 2.0-Based E-Learning: Applying Social Informatics for Tertiary Teaching*, Information Science Reference, IGI Global, NY. (pp 21-42). Retrieved from <http://www.tonybates.ca/wp-content/uploads/Final-typeset-chapter1.pdf>
- Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210-230.
- Brady, Kevin P., Holcomb, Lori B. & Smith, Bethany V. (2010). The Use of Alternative Social Networking Sites in Higher Educational Settings: A Case Study of the E-Learning Benefits of Ning in Education. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 9(2), 151-160. Retrieved from <http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/pdf/9.2.4.pdf>
- Callaghan, N. & Bower, M. (2012). Learning through Social Networking Sites--The Critical Role of the Teacher. *Educational Media International*, 49(1), 1-17.
- Casey, Gail. & Evans, Terry. (2011). Designing for Learning: Online Social Networks as a Classroom Environment, *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12 (7), 1-26
- Deters, Fenne große. & Mehl, Matthias R (2012). Does Posting Facebook Status Updates Increase or Decrease Loneliness? An Online Social Networking Experiment, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* published online 20 December 2012. Retrieved from (<http://dingo.sbs.arizona.edu/~mehl/eReprints/DetersMehlSPPS2012.pdf>)
- Hoffman, E. S. (2009). Evaluating social networking tools for distance learning. *Proceedings of Technology, Colleges, and Community Worldwide Online Conference, 2009(1)*, 92-100.
- Holcomb, Lori B., Brady, Kevin P., & Smith, Bethany V. (2010). The Emergence of “Educational Networking”: Can Non-commercial, Education-based Social Networking Sites Really Address the Privacy and Safety Concerns of Educators? *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 6 (2). Retrieved from [http://jolt.merlot.org/vol6no2/holcomb\\_0610.htm](http://jolt.merlot.org/vol6no2/holcomb_0610.htm)
- Kaplan, Andreas M., & Haenlein, Michael, (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media, *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68. Retrieved from (<http://michaelhaenlein.eu/Publications/Kaplan,%20Andreas%20-%20Users%20of%20the%20world,%20unite.pdf>)
- Lee, M. J. W., McLoughlin, C. (2010). *Beyond distance and time constraints: Applying social networking tools and Web 2.0 approaches to distance learning*. In G. Veletsianos (Ed.), *Emerging technologies in distance education*. 61–87. Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press.
- Lu, J., & Churchill, D. (2012). The effect of social interaction on learning engagement in a social networking environment. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 1, 1-17.
- McCarthy, J. (2010). Blended learning environments: Using social networking sites to enhance the first year experience. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 26(6), 729-740.
- Meishar-Tal, H., Kurtz, G., & Pieterse, E. (2012). Facebook groups as LMS: A case study. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(4), 33-48. Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1294/2295>
- Naveh, G., Tubin, D., & Pliskin, N. (2010). Student LMS use and satisfaction in academic institutions: The organizational perspective. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(3), 127–133.
- Özmen, Büşra., & Atıcı, Bünyamin. (2014). Learners’ Views Regarding the Use of Social Networking Sites in Distance Learning. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 15(4). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1790/3001>
- Petrovic, N., Jeremic, V., Cirovic, M., Radojicic, Z. & Milenkovic, N. (2014). Facebook versus Moodle in practice. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 28,117–125.
- SO, Hyo-Jeong, (2010). Towards rigour of online interaction research: Implication for future distance learning research. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 9(2), 259
- Thomas, B; Eryilmaz, E. (2014). How media choice affects learner interactions in distance learning classes. *Computers & Education*, 75, 112-126.
- Thorpe, Mary. (2002). Rethinking Learner Support: the challenge of collaborative online learning, *Open Learning*, 17(2), 105-119.
- University of Minnesota. (2008). "Educational Benefits Of Social Networking Sites Uncovered." *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/06/080620133907.htm>.

**NOTE: \*All websites were retrieved between June-August 2016**