**Micro-blogging and Mobile Chattering in India**

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# ABSTRACT

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We report from on-going research of ‘SMS Chatter[[1]](#endnote-1)’, the largest SMS-based mobile social networking site in India. The aim of this position paper is to share initial results from an investigation of the platform and note its emerging nature and the content of messaging. Unlike other social networking sites like Twitter where conversation, retweeting and maintaining a personalized profile take prominence, mobile social media in India shows different kinds of appropriation. SMS Chatter, seemingly, is not only for ‘egocentric’ users, but also for individuals and small and medium enterprises that choose the platform to promote various products and services. Posts that are not promotional take the form of short poetry, jokes or inspirational messages and constitute secondary content that is circulated without attribution. In this paper, we will emphasize and delineate two features of SMS Chatter, namely, a) the entwined and informal nature of social and business networking and b) the dominance of borrowed or secondary content of posts and the lack of conversational content or retweets.

## Author Keywords:

Social Media, Social networking, Mobile platforms, India, Case-study.

## ACM Classification Keywords:

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

# INTRODUCTION

India arguably, with 500 million mobile phones and 50 million internet users is looking to network on the phone rather than the net. With plunging subscription charges, and less than 1¢ charged per SMS, the mobile phone is touted as the ‘most wanted’ multi-media device in developing nations such as India. SMS Chatter, nicknamed ‘India’s Twitter’, is well-poised to exploit this potential of cellular technology. We report from an on-going research of ‘SMS Chatter’, the largest SMS-based mobile social networking site (MSNS) operating in India since 2005. It started up as ‘social messaging service to share and connect with friends and fans’ coupled with a bouquet of services such as ‘mobile marketing solutions to help businesses acquire and engage customers’ [1]. It allows users to create, manage and broadcast messages to mobile communities or groups. The service has helped create two million such groups, more than twenty-five million users and one million new users every month [2]. The aim of this position paper is to share initial results from an investigation of the MSNS platform in India and note the emerging nature and content of messaging. But SMS Chatter, unlike Twitter, has evolved specific social networking services and uses in India. We will emphasize and delineate two of its main features: a) the entwined and informal nature of social and business networking of users and b) the ‘borrowed’ nature of content in messages/posts from secondary sources.

Social networking sites (SNS), we presume, are mainly about a) people reaching out to people they know or have latent ties with, b) adopting an interactive or conversational tone while networking and c) possessing a mental model of their networks and adopting a relational behavior [3, 4]. How much of this is true for SMS Chatter? Who is using this service and for what? Can we glean and profile patterns of usage? Finally, can we provide a conceptual framework for analyzing the platform users and usages? We will dwell on several features that are characteristic of SMS Chatter and different from other MSNS sites.

**SMSChatter: BACKGROUND**

To begin, the platform adopts a twin approach, combining personal and business social networking by offering both the free group messaging service and several paid business networking services. In order to set up a free SMS group, a person only needs an email address or a mobile number. Such groups may be private or public and one user can create up to five. The owners of free groups can invite up to 25 users beyond which membership increases when people ‘opt-in’ and send a ‘Join Group Name’ message to the group owner. Most importantly, group owners may only send messages no longer than 140 characters. By contrast, the users of the enterprise edition, a paid service offered by SMSChatter, can send messages which have 700 characters or use Flash. Most subscribers to this plan are businessmen/ entrepreneurs interested in advertising their products or building a new consumer base. In a personal interview, one of them said ‘this is the only service in India were users can reach 1 million members with a single click’

The owners of free groups have the option of posting messages to their members through SMS, mobile web or the internet. Public groups also have homepages that their owners and users can access. While owners can post messages to the entire group, members can only reply to these messages. Most often, replies are in the form of requests that ask the group owner to circulate advertisements among his members to join the respondent’s group. Many of the new groups adopt a desperate or pleading tone seemingly to indicate that their group’s networking and membership potential solely rested on garnering the support of big groups for visibility on GupSup. Here is an example of an impassioned plea to a large group owner form a recently formed group owner “… Please please dear friend advertise my group for heaven’s sake… I will do my best to advertise yours when I get big like you…” Here’s another: “i have joined ur group. please join my grp and tell ur frnds also to join… plz plz plz plz plz plz plz tAke cAre...” (I have joined your group. Please join my group and tell your friends also to join… please please please please please please… take care…”)

The group’s popularity and membership strength hinges significantly on types of content the owner chooses to broadcast to his group. (There is a considerable volume of content in English transliterations of Indian languages). A short analysis of the 79 ‘most-joined groups’ on the Chatter web site, revealed the following (Fig 1). Each of the 79 groups belongs to at least one of 20 categories created by the Chatter platform. The two most popular groups, with membership ranging between 30,000-2, 00,000, can be grouped under the category ‘fun’ (romantic messages, poetry and jokes) and ‘news’ (educational and political messages). We found that ‘fun’ was the most popular category with 49 of the 79, almost 62% of groups belonging to it. This is followed by the ‘news’ category with 16 out of the 79 most-joined groups, a share of 20%. Thirteen of the 16 had a regional association, in which eight use English transliterations in Indian languages and five provided news in English. The remaining eight of the 79 were divided among computing/web help groups, educational news and alerts groups and business groups, with each having almost equal number of groups, between 3 to 6% of the total share. Interestingly, the ‘fun’ element was ubiquitously present in other group categories as added



Fig 1: Percentage distribution of group categories among the 79

most-joined groups on SMS-Chatter

attraction: many news/cricket/business groups also posted jokes, poetry and romantic messages. All groups in the most-joined category received a flood of messages from smaller groups to promote their specific groups, products and services.



**COMPUTING**

**BUSINESS**

**CRICKET**

**FUN**

**EDUCATION**

**NEWS**

Fig 2: Venn diagram showing overlap between the popular categories

Figure 2 is a representation using a Venn diagram of popular group categories on SMSChatter. The diagram also represents the degree of overlap between each of these. The name in each circle represents a category. The size of the circles represents the number of groups belonging to each category. Thus, a bigger circle means that a category has more groups in it. An overlap between two circles means that groups belonging to the overlapping section have the characteristics of both categories. As the figure illustrates, groups in most categories share characteristics with those in the ‘fun’ category. A category with a greater degree of overlap means more number of groups in it shared their characteristic with another category. Thus, all groups belonging to ‘cricket’ have an element of ‘fun’ in them while none of the groups belonging to ‘education’ share any characteristics with ‘fun’. This meant groups on Chatter, while originating and evolving around a specific interest area, reach out to include various types of content from other groups as well, some even unrelated to the core interest area, to appeal to a wider audience and prospective members.

We have, thus far, profiled 11 groups from the most-joined list of 79 groups by mining their pages on the web site and have held telephonic interviews with six group owners. The profiled groups include fun groups, educational news/alerts groups, religious groups, political news groups, computer and web surfing help groups, groups of corporations and celebrity groups. None are subscribed for the paid or enterprise editions. We do this to focus on the porosity of social and business networking achieved in the free group service as an intended and sometimes, unintended consequence. It also aided the investigation of a specific appropriation of free messaging services meant for personal/social networking interactions diverted to augment commercial prospects of business or services offered by the group owner.

**FINDINGS**

The large ‘fun’ groups (belonging to the free social platform) display a certain element of business networking and direct marketing of products. In fact, the large groups are most sought for advertising various products, services and new group promotions. We found groups, big and small, directly soliciting business for a specific product or service. By using the free social messaging services, various Chatter mobile communities used social networks of other groups to advertise their own products.

Big groups post ads for smaller groups in messages to their own members but are choosy about whom they promote. The owner of a group called ‘SpicyPriya’, who runs an on-line start-up, specifically searched the SMSChatter website to solicit members and groups who might be interested in part-time work and sent them an ad for his company which offers such employment. A TV star’s group not only had posts about his career but also those which marketed a book he has written and where it can be purchased. While small groups often replied to messages by big groups with their ads, ‘Shazyrozy’, run by Mr. Shahebaz, one of the small groups we profiled, only advertised on his ‘friend’s’ groups or groups smaller than his own, engaging in a ‘healthy competition’ for more members. In addition to direct marketing, Cadbudy India did ‘engagement marketing’ with its followers by routinely wishing them on festivals and ‘conversing’ with them about which Cadbury products they like best. Finally, a fun group called Sonu\_Rocks devised clever ways of advertising to members of a group called Internet Tips, a computer/web help group, by placing a footer at the bottom of a message about how the internet can be accessed by ‘holding down on the 0 key’.

Below, we provide two short profiles of ‘Sartaj’ and ‘Vignesh Lecturer’, two of the largest mobile communities on Chatter, from personal communication with their owners and mining the group’s posts on the web site. Sartaj, a ‘fun’ group and ‘Vignesh Lecturer’ a ‘news’ group, best represent the entwined and informal nature of socio-business networking on the Chatter platform. While sharing this informality, they display and adopt a different style of networking. Both groups as a matter of routine, generated content from secondary sources, often times without author attribution.

**Chatter 1: Sartaj**

With a base of over 2, 00, 000 members, Sartaj commands one of the largest ‘fun’ groups on Chatter. A majority of Sartaj’s posts [5] consist of jokes, inspirational quotations and poetry (much of which is transliterated), and almost all this content is drawn from secondary sources with unclear copyrighted ownership. The group owner is a 20-year-old engineering student from Mumbai, who maintains a personal blog and claims Chatter as a vehicle to ‘provide a name for himself in India’. He said, “I have been using this platform since last 2 years and have 2, 09,800 + followers who receive my messages daily…. It feels great that on a single button click I get connected to them. My group is a social group which showers the users with *shayari* (poetry), love messages, motivational thoughts, jokes…Chatter has given me a celebrity status … I love that I can share my thoughts, ideas and help people by some motivational thoughts which can change someone's life… On a funnier note, many members told me that they have impressed and acquired girlfriends impressing them by forwarding my posts…So, It a pleasure to use this service and that too for FREE…”.

There is little‘re-tweeting’ or ‘conversational’ aspects to posts on Sartaj. Being a large group, Sartaj is inundated with requests to advertise new groups and products. Many of them adopt an urgent, pleading tone to advertise their groups that post jokes, romantic poetry, internet surfing/ free download/hacking tips. This large group ‘fan’following posits a potential business prospect for Sartaj. He maintains a personal blog and the Google AdSense on it logs and tracks visitors that then attracts several ads [6]. His personal blog and the SMSChatter group act as entwined gravitational route to expanding subscribership and creating a unified socio-business mobile platform.

**Chatter 2: Vignesh Teacher**

Vignesh began his group two years ago under the category education and campus news. The group has a current membership of over 65,000 mostly across Northern India and broadcasts education news alerts, jobs in the educational sector, ads for tutorial services for students, news about education policy reform, examination dates for various courses, qualifying exam information, course syllabi and fees, alerts about exam results, course revisions, legal outcomes on educational policy and other issues. It specifically calls attention to employment opportunities mainly for teachers and, to a lesser extent, computer operators, data entry operators, lab attendants and clerks. Vignesh operates from the Northwestern region of Haryana but posts news specific to a large portion of North India. Like Sartaj, Vignesh makes use of an abundance of secondary sources for the content of his messages. He trawls government websites for the latest information on education, follows legal proceedings related to education, and most importantly, sources information from a network of friends with similar concerns. He is well versed in identifying and acquiring pamphlets, book-lets and other print data that add to his content generation.

The focus, detail and relevance of Vignesh’s news posts mark his popularity He said “I began with local news since my followers were local… but many teachers and students began to join and sometimes as many as 400 a day… and I began to post news across north India…. I even have people from my district in southern India as members”. Vignesh receives many requests from persons who offer tutorships for various kinds of examinations like national level entrance exams for academic courses. Though Vignesh refuted our suggestion that his group membership offered direct employment opportunities, we found several posts with contact numbers and websites of individuals who are circulating information about educational institutes, examinations, tutors and computer trainers. Oftentimes, we found it difficult to demarcate whether these posts and others that gave information about educational institutions were news alerts or advertisements. We decided not to disregard the possibility that Vignesh’s business initiatives are alive, nevertheless covert, on the Chatter platform. In conclusion, Vignesh owes his popularity to a keen focus on providing vital news alerts in the educational domain and linking these to employment opportunities.

Seemingly, the two Chatter personae are indulging in blurring the boundaries of groups belonging to different content categories. While Vignesh offered information and advertisements directly through his posts, addressing an older group of teachers, professionals and students, Sartaj’s messages are largely oriented towards entertainment, appealing to a specifically young crowd with replies doubling up as ads. While Sartaj attracts and posts requests from diverse groups, Vignesh is not encouraging towards non-educational post requests. Both network through multiple platforms each feeding on the other; Sartaj points to his blog while Vignesh puts out his email address. The virtual personalities of Sartaj and Vignesh are different as chalk and cheese but unite in their efforts to increase visibility and specific social networks via the SMS platform. Both perceive the possibilities of enhanced elation, visibility and business opportunity as they cruise through SMSChatter.

**CONCLUSION**

Unlike social networking sites like Twitter, mobile social media in India, it would seem, is driven by social and business networking. While there is reciprocity between group owners and members, it does not take the form of conversation or banter. Users with smaller groups usually respond to the posts of group owners with ads for their own groups. Communities and groups may be formed egocentrically as they are on SNSes, but are more likely to get formed around interest areas and product or brand promotion. SMSChatter is a platform not only for users like ‘Sartaj’ who gets ego boosts from being able to entertain a large audience, but also for small and medium business enterprises like ‘SpicyPriya’ which choose this platform to promote their enterprises and market their products. While GupSup is both a free and paid platform for social and business networking, it is predominantly perceived and employed as a ‘free and informal’ platform for direct and covert promotional messaging for new groups and commercially minded individuals and small businesses offering a variety of products and services. The entwining of ‘fun’ and ‘business’ further points to the seamless fusion of a variety of content categories in order to enhance popularity and membership, thus increasing the group’s networking potential .

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1. All names associated with the service have been anonymised [↑](#endnote-ref-1)