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Assessing Social Networking from Three Different Perspectives: Toward an Integrative View

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ABSTRACT

Social networking is penetrating all corners of our daily life. Many researchers study social networking websites as a special form of computer-mediated communication to be adopted among users, while the social perspective of the phenomenon has been largely ignored. In this study, social networking sites are viewed not only as technological platform of communication and information sharing, but also a social platform of relationship building. Three perspectives of technical, communicational, and social are incorporated in the development of an integrative view of social networking.

Keywords

Social Networking, SNS, TAM, MOA, Trust, Social Influence

INTRODUCTION

Although a relatively recent Internet phenomenon, social networking sites (SNS) are accepted by millions of web users, many of them having integrated SNS into their everyday life (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). According to Comscore (2011), an online audience measurement company, social networking accounted for nearly 1 in every 5 minutes spent online globally in October 2011, ranking as the most engaging online activity worldwide. As of September, 2012, Facebook, a popular SNS, claimed to have over one billion monthly active users (Fowler, 2012). Recently, another popular SNS, Twitter, reported to have 200 million-plus monthly active users (Berman, 2013).

The proliferation of social networking has affected our life in many aspects. People have devoted significant time to maintaining their accounts at social networking sites (Li, 2011). Companies quickly acknowledge the trend and attempt to explore the business potential. For example, marketing managers have recognized social networking sites as important channels for marketing communications and customer engagement (Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2011; Westland, 2012); human resource managers are using social networking sites for recruiting and candidate selection (Judith, 2007; Kluemper and Rosen, 2009; Davison et al., 2011). Educators also see the potential of using social networking sites for language learning (Harrison and Thomas 2009).

Given the growing importance, social networking sites have received increasing attention among IS researchers. Social networking sites are widely viewed as an Internet-based information technology featured with Web2.0 (Harrison and Thomas 2009). Thus, many researchers treated SNS as a special form of computer-mediated communication (Faraj and Johnson, 2011) and developed research models based on technology-driven frameworks, notably the technology acceptance model. However, the social aspect of SNS is largely ignored (Wang et al., 2010).

This paper attempts to develop an integrative model of SNS. SNS is viewed as not only a technical platform of communication and information sharing, but also a social platform of relationship building. Incorporating various perspectives in the study of SNS will enrich our understanding on people's behavior of using SNS.

To serve this end, the paper reviews the existing literature of SNS. Three perspectives of technical, communicational, and social in the study of SNS are discussed, key factors are identified with hypotheses regarding their impacts on individual behavior.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

SNSs are primarily used for casual social interaction and social relationship maintenance (Li, 2011). Popular features provided by SNSs include (1) creating online profiles and identities, (2) articulating connections with other users, and (3) expanding these connections through searches of other profiles and networks, and interactions with other users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). All these features center on a social function of relationship building. This is well reflected in the numerous definitions of SNSs in the literature. For example, Boyd and Ellison (2007) describe SNSs as "services based on Internet that

allow individuals to ... create a list of other users that share a connection, and see and navigate through their list of connections and of those created by others within the system” (p.2). Kwon and Wen (2010) also depict SNSs as “websites that allow building relationships online between persons by means of collecting useful information and sharing it with people” (p. 255). As such, SNSs can be viewed from various angles, including the technical perspective, the communication perspective, and the social perspective.

EXPLAINING THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING: THREE PERSPECTIVES

The proliferation of social networking has attracted much research attention from different disciplines. In this section, three theoretical perspectives are reviewed for their theoretical roots and main propositions.

Technology Acceptance: the Technological perspective

TAM, introduced by Davis (1989) and Davis et al. (1989), is one of the most widely accepted approaches to explain the adoption of any technology (Venkatesh and Davis, 2000; Lin and Lu, 2000; Gefen et al., 2003a, b; McKechnie et al., 2006; King and He, 2006; Kim et al., 2009), including SNS (e.g. Wang et al., 2010; Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2011). The core model of TAM postulates that one’s behavioral intention (BI) to adopt/use a certain technology is determined jointly by the person’s perceived ease of use (EU) and perceived usefulness (U) of the target technology; in addition, perceived usefulness partially mediates the relationship between perceived ease of use and behavioral intention. Recent meta-analyses (e.g., King and He 2006) have concluded that TAM is a parsimonious and powerful model to explain people’s behavioral intention to adopt and use a new technology.

Applying TAM in the context of SNSs, the following hypotheses are developed:

H1: The perceived usefulness of a SNS will positively affect one’s intention of using the SNS.

H2: The perceived ease of use of a SNS will positively affect one’s intention of using the SNS.

But the application of TAM in the SNS research is not without concern. TAM has its theoretical roots in behavioral research about behavior formation (i.e., the theory of reasoned action) and psychology research about behavior regulation and change (i.e., the social cognitive theory) (Davis et al., 1989). The two references share a common theme: one conducts certain behavior because he/she views the target action as feasible and valuable. In other words, one’s behavior is the result of a subjective judgment on the expected consequences. The instrumentalism tradition is also evidenced in TAM: the key determinant of behavior intention – perceived usefulness – is defined as “the prospective user’s subjective probability that using a specific application system will increase his or her job performance” (Davis et al., 1989; p. 985). Thus, TAM holds an implicit assumption that using the target technology will affect one’s overall utility, tangible or intangible.

Examining the environment of SNS suggests that such assumption may not hold for SNS. For example, in a study of people’s behaviors in online communities, Chu (2011) found that helping behavior is phenomenal among many members; the prevalence of such altruistic behavior, violating the assumption of utility-driven egotistic behavior, drives the development of SNSs as online communities. The limitation of TAM suggests for other theoretical perspectives in the study of SNSs.

MOA: A Marketing Communication Perspective

Social networking can be viewed as a special channel of communication. In the communication, an entity, either institutional (e.g., a firm) or individual, tries to attract other users through the delivery of information; if the information presents value or is of interest, users will be motivated to pursue relationship with the entity through SNSs. As such, SNSs serve as a channel of communication and deliver information to a large population of users. The way people surf social networking sites is analogous to the way consumers obtain and process brand information from advertisements. The marketing communication theory of MOA provides another theoretical lens for examining the use of SNSs among individual users.

Advertising is an important marketing means for vendors to deliver brand information to consumers. The effectiveness of communicating brand information is in part driven by consumers’ motivation, opportunity, and ability (MOA) to process the information. The MOA theory, originally proposed by MacInnis and Jaworski (1989), posits that the degree to which individuals process marketing communications is based on three factors: (1) motivation, which is driven by the value of the information, refers to the readiness, willingness, interest, and desire to engage in information processing, (2) opportunity, reflects the extent to which a situation is conducive to achieving a desired outcome, and (3) ability, represents the extent to which consumers have the necessary resources (e.g. knowledge, intelligence, money) to achieve an outcome. All the three elements need to be present to enable the process of brand information among consumers. Communication effectiveness can be proactively managed by enhancing individuals’ levels of the MOA elements (MacInnis et al., 1991).

The MOA framework can be used to explain the degree to which users enter into and engage in the information exchange with other users through SNSs (Gruen et al., 2005). Adjusted for the special context of SNS, motivation can be explained as a user's desire or readiness to engage in SNS-enabled information exchange due to the perceived value of doing so; opportunity can be studied from a negative perspective of impediments (MacInnis et al., 1991) and defined as the restrictions that an individual faces (e.g. time, connection availability, organizational policies); ability can be viewed as the skills or proficiencies that an individual process to engage in the SNS-mediated information exchange process. According to the MOA theory, the three elements will jointly affect users' behavior of using SNSs. Thus, the following hypotheses are developed:

H3: The perceived value of a SNS (motivation) will positively affect one's intention of using the SNS.

H4: The perceived restrictions of accessing a SNS (opportunity) will negatively affect one's intention of using the SNS.

H5: The perceived competency of using a SNS (ability) will positively affect one's intention of using the SNS.

Trust and Social Influence: A Social Perspective

SNS is not only a technical platform of information sharing and communication, but also a social platform of relationship building. The latter has been widely recognized as the main purpose of many SNSs (Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2011). Thus, overlooking the social aspect of SNS will mislead the research by ignoring a major force of driving of users' behavior with SNSs.

There are several social theories explaining the mechanisms through which individuals build and maintain relationship. The social exchange theory is one of the most popular social theories in the IS research community. Emerged from the interactions between economics, psychology, and sociology, social exchange theory was developed to understand the social behavior of humans in economic undertakings (Homans, 1958). Social exchange theory takes a social psychological and sociological perspective that explains the reciprocity in social relations as the processes of negotiated exchanges between parties. The theory posits that individuals or groups interact with one another on the expectation of rewards and the avoidance of penalties or punishment (Emerson, 1976; Bandura, 1986). Important factors suggested by social exchange theory include perceived benefits, perceived risks, trust, and perceived social values. Of these factors, trust is of great importance to e-commerce in general and to SNSs in particular.

Trust is often defined as "the willingness of a party (trustor) to be vulnerable to the actions of another party (trustee) based on the expectation that the other (trustee) will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other party (trustee)" (Mayer et al., 1995; p. 712). In e-commerce, conducting transactions require customers to provide sensitive information in the absence of formal control mechanisms to monitor such information being appropriately used (Hoffman et al., 1999). Thus, initiating, building, and maintaining trust among customers are widely believed to be the key drivers of success for e-vendors (Friedman et al., 2000; Ba and Pavlou, 2002; Gefen et al., 2003; Pavlou and Gefen, 2004). The same applies for SNSs, a common place for social interaction. To overcome security concerns such as lack of control on information sharing and exchange, users rely on trust to direct their engagement with a SNS. As argued by Ridings and colleagues, the success of SNS is retaining members and promoting use through trust development (Ridings et al., 2002).

H6: The level of trust with a SNS will positively affect one's intention of using the SNS.

Another social factor that has been widely studied in IS is social influence (Venkatesh and Morris, 2000; Venkatesh et al., 2003) or subjective norm (Davis et al., 1989). Based on the theory of reasoned action ((Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), social influence is widely accepted as an important source of information that influences one's behavior on the use of a technology. This is particularly true for SNS, an environment in which one's behavior is deeply immersed in the social interactions with other users.

H7: social influence will positively affect one's intention of using the SNS.

CONCLUSION

Social networking websites have become among the most frequently visited sites on the web. SNSs facilitate social and professional relations among members through discussions and postings, sharing of multimedia content, and organizing events, and accordingly are now comprised of hundreds of millions of members from varying demographic backgrounds (Swartz, 2010). As such, SNS is featured not only as a technical platform for communication and information sharing, but also a social platform of relationship building. SNS studies should carefully examine these features; emphasizing on one and ignoring the other may mislead the research.

The paper studies people's behavior with SNS from the technical, communicational, and social perspectives that are closely related to the phenomenon of social networking. Key factors from each perspective are identified and their impacts on individual behaviors are discussed. The attempt is to develop an integrative view of SNS and to enrich our understanding of the important phenomenon that is presenting an increasing influence in our daily life.

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