Why Use Social Networks? Toward a Comprehensive Framework

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Abstract

Research on usage adoption of social networks is on the rise. However, despite increased attention, two shortcomings in current research persist. First, although many adoption antecedents have been proposed, a comprehensive adoption framework is missing. Most previous studies of social networks focus on few select factors and do not attempt to offer a holistic view. Second, although there are many empirical studies on social networks there is a dearth of qualitative studies in this field. Majority of studies developed a theoretical model informed by previous literature of reference disciplines and then empirically evaluated it. This limits the scope to factors known or are of interest to researchers further precluding a more comprehensive view of social network adoption. Recently there have been increased calls to leverage qualitative research in social network adoption. Our work answers these calls. We believe conducting interviews with social network users can generate novel insights which help us to better understand the reasons why people use social networks.

We examined users' intentions to use social networks from multiple dimensions. To do so, we did an extensive literature review to draw the current factors from previous studies. Then in order to develop a comprehensive framework including factors affecting users' intention to use social networks, a series of face-to-face individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate students at a large US public university. We selected students in this study, because of the propensity of social networks use among undergraduate students and the fact that they are generally digital natives, more technology-savvy and frequent social network users.

The results from the interviews have confirmed existing factors in the current literature and added new dimensions to the growing body of research on adoption of social networks. A pool of significant factors was collected and categorized to cover all variables affecting the choice of social networks and individuals' intention to use them. We categorized all the factors to develop a comprehensive classification to examine the users' intention. The findings of this study indicate that there are four major categories that cover the major variables which impact users' intention to use social networks, including Social effects, personality traits, network functionality and benefits and network features. Each category is defined based on multiple dimensions, according to the literature review and interviews. There were several new dimensions that were not known to extant literature, especially in network functionality and network features categories.

The new classification can contribute to better understanding and predicting intention of people to use social networks, especially was new networks appear online and compete with existing ones for limited time of people. We hope that the extended framework can better inform the managers of social networks in their efforts to keep and attract users.