Professional Social Network Site Participation: 
A Longitudinal Examination

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ABSTRACT

Online professional social networks have become a noteworthy tool to help professionals create, strengthen, and maintain valuable business connections. However, the question remains as to who is actually using online professional social networks and how the diffusion of the social network has occurred. Looking at diffusion and usage through innovation diffusion theory, critical mass and a network effects lens, this paper seeks to examine the diffusion of an online professional social network (LinkedIn) for a specific population of university business schools. Using longitudinal analysis (2008 compared to 2011) our findings advocate network dynamics of homogeneous populations display consistent patterns of participation and non-participation. The authors’ findings suggest LinkedIn diffusion is not consistent across all business schools examined. A greater critical mass and network effect appears to have been achieved across larger research universities when compared to smaller university populations. An analysis of the results and future research directions are presented.

Keywords: Critical Mass, Innovation Diffusion Theory, Network Effects, Professional Networking, Social Networking,

INTRODUCTION

Online social networking has gained enormous popularity over the last ten years with users numbering in the hundreds of millions. Social network sites have become a prevalent destination for most online users in recent years and many have integrated the sites into daily routines. According to Nielsen, people spend twice as much time (22.7%) using social networking sites as compared to any other online activity (NielsenWire, 2010).

This level of use has spawned a substantial amount of coverage in the popular press and interest from academic researchers (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Previous scholarship has addressed issues such as the demographic characteristics of social networking site users

DOI: 10.4018/jvcsn.2012100102
(Hargittai, 2007), the personal information they reveal on these sites (Acquisti & Gross, 2006), factors influencing use and participation (Pagani & Hofacker, 2010) and the building and maintenance of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). While these avenues of study are all important and worthy of investigation, substantial antecedent questions have been largely ignored (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Are there clear patterns of who is and who is not using social networking sites, and why does the diffusion of these sites vary between potential user populations across time? This paper seeks to address these questions through a longitudinal analysis of user participation in a specific social networking site: LinkedIn.

One user segment benefiting from the growth and developments in the social networking arena are professionals. Professionals view a social networking site (SNS) as a way to maintain existing relationships or as a means to form new relationships and aid in the job hunt (Suki, Ramayah, & Kow Pei Ming, 2010). While recent information systems (IS) studies have started to address online social networking issues (e.g., Cheung & Lee, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Sangwan, Guan, & Siguaw, 2009), little research has examined adoption and non-adoption longitudinally. A significant challenge for studies trying to answer questions about who is and who is not using SNSs is that the samples on which they are based (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007) typically include such a small number of non-users that there is little variance present to explain differentiated basic adoption of using these sites. Even when these problems are not present the studies tend to use convenience samples of university students which might not completely mimic the whole population (Hargittai, 2008). That is, given earlier work on differentiated Internet use among people from different backgrounds there is no reason to assume equal adoption of SNSs across population segments (Hargittai, 2002). This article fills a gap in the literature by examining SNS adoption and non-adoption of a homogeneous professional population across two time periods.

This paper aims to explain and gain a better understanding who is utilizing online professional social network services. Since an enormous amount of social interaction today is facilitated by SNSs, research focused on professional social networks is particularly warranted. Understanding SNS populations is crucial for the academic community, as this new communication platform supports the development of valuable interpersonal business relationships. SNSs have matured over the last ten years along with a strong increase in usage. Despite the recent academic endeavors to understand the rapidly growing use of social networking websites, there have been few studies investigating SNS populations over time. Given this gap in the literature, it is critical that we examine SNS populations. Accordingly, this paper is centered on the following research question:

*Is there a longitudinal association between adoption and non-adoption for a homogeneous professional population using a specialized social network website such as LinkedIn?*

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section introduces the SNS of LinkedIn and reviews the relevant theoretical frameworks for examining online professional social network diffusion. We then present our hypotheses, research methodology and data analysis. We conclude with a discussion of our results, research implications and directions for future research.

**SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES**

Social network sites (SNSs) are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view
Convergence of Mobile TV with Everyday Life and Culture
www.igi-global.com/chapter/convergence-mobile-everyday-life-and-culture/49607?camid=4v1a