Professional Social Network Participation of Business School Graduates: Effects of University, Degree Type, and Gender

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ABSTRACT

Social networks are having a profound impact on how professionals communicate and connect with each other. Online professional social networks have become a significant resource for building and maintaining invaluable business connections. Recent university graduates are a particular population often in search of building social networks to further professional development. Participation in online social networks provides a valuable tool for recent university graduates to create and sustain their professional connections and business relationships. This paper seeks to gain a better understanding of the effect university (nationally ranked, large urban, and regional), gender and degree type (undergraduate and graduate) has on online professional social network participation. The authors’ business school college graduate findings suggest that university, degree type, and gender were associated with the likelihood of joining the online professional social network LinkedIn. An analysis of the results and future research directions are presented.

Keywords: Business School, Gender, LinkedIn, Professional Networks, Social Networking

INTRODUCTION

There is an old adage that says, “It is not what you know so much as whom you know.” This statement may be no truer than in today’s business environment. Business professionals often rely on their connections and relationships for individual promotion, performance and growth. Professionals will make many contacts during their business careers. These contacts may become customers, prospective clients, colleagues and centers of influence - or they might drift away. A particular population often looking for the opportunity to build, manage and create their professional networks is new university graduates. It is particularly important for recent university graduates to seek out ways to build social capital within their selected industries (Chakrabarti & Santoro, 2004). Technological developments enabled by online social

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networking services help business professionals to stay in touch with contacts, keep the connections fresh and deepen the relationships over time. The last few years have seen vast diffusion and exponential growth in the use of and popularity of social networking websites such as: LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook. For instance, at the end of 2009, 75% of online adults ages 18–24 had a profile on a social networking website (Lenhart, 2009). Furthermore, the usages of social network sites are viewed to enhance and not detract from the growth of interpersonal relationships and social skills (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). With all of the associated growth and popularity of social networking services, there is a need to further understand the factors which drive participation in professional online social networks.

While recent information systems (IS) and social science studies have started to address online social networking issues (i.e., Hazy, Moskalev, & Torras, 2010; Sterbini & Temperini, 2011), little research has examined the likelihood of joining online professional social networks such as LinkedIn. Given LinkedIn’s focus on professionals it becomes important to understand how this population segment, along with its many sub groups and demographics, chooses to participate in professional social networking activities. Specifically in research focused on online social networks, subgroups defined by gender, demographics and socio-economic status have been shown to have distinct network behaviors (Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, & Wimmer, 2008). At the same time, when examining professional social network participation, earlier research suggests that the user’s gender may be a factor driving one’s involvement decision. Extant evidence suggests that men and women differ in their views regarding the use of information technology-related innovations and online services (Venkatesh & Morris, 2000). Their findings suggest that similar distinct subgroup behaviors may be evident in a professional social network context. Consequently, there is an increasing need for further investigation about the impact of gender on professional network participation.

Given the gaps in the literature, it is critical that we consider a comprehensive research model that examines the factors driving professional social network participation. This paper aims to gain a better understanding of the effect university (nationally ranked, large urban, and regional), gender and degree type (undergraduate and graduate) have on online professional social network participation. Since an enormous amount of social interaction today is facilitated by social networking websites, research focused on professional social networks is particularly warranted. Understanding factors explaining the usage of professional online social networking sites is crucial for the academic community, as this new communication platform exhibits important development of interpersonal business relationships. Despite the recent academic endeavors to understand the rapidly growing use of social networking websites, there have been few studies that investigated the motivations and factors influencing the use for building and maintaining interpersonal business relationships. Given this gap in the literature, it is critical that we examine factors driving LinkedIn participation. Accordingly, this paper is centered on the following research question:

• **Is an association between university, degree type, and gender evident in participation of a specialized social network website such as LinkedIn?**

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section introduces LinkedIn and reviews the relevant online social networking literature. 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.

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