The Implications of Social Influence Theory on Continuance Intention for Social Networking Among Chinese University Students

Xuan Xiao, Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin, China
Tienan Wang, Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin, China

ABSTRACT

A better understanding of users’ continuance intention towards social networking services (SNSs) gives SNS providers greater insight to reducing turnover rate of their users. Drawing on social influence theory, this study develops a theoretical model to investigate users’ continuance intention towards SNSs within the context of China. Specifically, this model examines how sociability and social overload mediate the impact of subjective norms, peer effects and social identity on continuance intention. Data of 286 Chinese university students were collected through an online questionnaire and analyzed by the partial least square method. Results reveal that although subjective norms have an insignificant impact on continuance intention, both peer effects and social identity positively impact continuance intention, and their impacts are partially mediated by sociability and social overload. The findings highlight the importance of peer effects and social identity, the positive role of sociability and the negative role of social overload in determining continuance intention.

KEYWORDS
Continuance Intention, Sociability, Social Influence Theory, Social Networking Services, Social Overload

INTRODUCTION

Social networking services (SNSs) such as Facebook have become well-established online services that facilitate the building and maintenance of social relations among people who share connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). In the past decade, the viral growth of SNSs has caused them to penetrate most countries in the world. Despite the fact that China owns approximately 600 million users—one of the largest user base in the world—at the end of 2014 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2015), little is known about SNS users’ participation in the specific context of China for which the implications of Facebook may not stand. According to the 33rd Statistical Report on Internet Development (China Internet Network Information Center, 2014), SNS users accounted for more than half of all Chinese netizens; nevertheless, nearly one-fifth decreased their use of SNSs compared with the prior year. As SNS providers can only survive and flourish if individuals actively use their services (Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010), the trends associated with users’ continuance intention have attracted increasingly attention from both providers in China and researchers all over the world (e.g., Sun, Liu, Peng, Dong, & Barnes, 2014). Therefore, it is important to explore the underlying mechanism that leads to Chinese users’ continuance intention, and thus provide a reference for academics and Chinese SNS providers.
Previous studies on users’ continuance intention focus mainly on individual utility and cognitive factors (Kang, Hong, & Lee, 2009; Kang & Lee, 2010; Shi, Lee, Cheung, & Chen, 2010; Wang, Xu, & Chan, 2008) regardless of the social nature of SNSs (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Kim, Shin, & Kim, 2011). However, “much of human behavior is not best characterized by an individual acting in isolation (Bagozzi, 2007 p. 247),” instead, people act jointly with others, in response to social pressure or as members of groups on SNSs (Cheung & Lee, 2010). Specifically, in collectivist cultures such as China, people tend to behave the same or similar way as their peers (Xu, Yan, & Zheng, 2008). Thus, it calls for an examination of Chinese users’ continuance intention towards SNSs from a social perspective. Several researchers have investigated social factors such as subjective norms (Al-Debei, Al-Lozi, & Papazafeiropoulou, 2013) and critical mass (Chen et al., 2012) that can affect continuance intention. Although the findings of these studies both show that social factors matter, there is a paucity of research that provides a comprehensive account of how social influence impacts continuance intention. To fill this research gap, we draw on social influence theory (Kelman, 1958, 1974) to provide a systematic explanation of social influence on users’ continuance intention towards SNSs, as social influence theory has been shown to be useful for interpreting collective behavior in online social phenomena (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). For instance, Chang et al. (2014) has verified the impact of social influence on continuance intention to play online games.

In addition, we posit that sociability (Li, 2011) and social overload (Maier, Laumer, Eckhardt, & Weitzel, 2015) serve as the primary mediators that translate social influence into continuance intention. On the one hand, social influence causes users to benefit from the resulting sociability. This makes it likely that they will intend to continue using SNSs. On the other hand, social influence can draw users into exhaustion by social overload that results from dealing with too many social demands from other members. Users’ continuance intention may therefore decrease. Accordingly, sociability and social overload may together explain the diversity of continuance intention between individuals in the same social environment.

This study therefore aims at developing and validating a research model within the specific context of China that 1) investigates users’ continuance intention towards SNSs based on social influence theory and 2) examines how sociability and social overload mediate the effect of social influence on continuance intention. By doing so, we intend to get a better understanding of how and through which specific pathways social influence facilitates and/or hinders one’s intention to continue using SNSs, and thus provide insight for Chinese SNS providers on maintaining active engagement and reducing turnover rates of existing users.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we build our research model, which integrates social influence theory with the concepts of sociability and social overload to explain continuance intention. Subsequent sections describe data collection and research method, followed by data analysis and results report. We conclude by discussing the findings and their implications for both research and practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH MODEL

Theoretical Framework

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented increase in the usage and dispersion of SNSs, which are web-based services that enable users to create profiles and network with other users (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). A wide range of recent research has investigated how to promote individuals’ continuance intention towards SNSs and prevent individuals’ turnover. Some researchers (Kang & Lee, 2010; Wang et al., 2008) apply and deepen the classical technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989) regarding SNSs to predict users’ continuance intention. This stream of research focuses on utility factors perceived by individuals, such as usefulness, ease of use, and enjoyment.
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