The Impact of Territorial and Relational Belonging on Member Retention in Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

With the growth in social networking and the highly competitive nature of the social networking market, it is important to understand the factors that influence social network site (SNS) member retention. In order to better understand continuation intention among SNS members, the authors propose and empirically test a model built upon the IS continuance model, motivation theory, and two belongingness constructs drawn from social psychology. Results of this study indicate that positive confirmation, perceived usefulness, and perceived enjoyment influence user satisfaction, which in turn has a strong impact on continuance intention. In addition, the member’s sense of territorial belonging to the SNS has a positive influence on both continuance intention and perceived enjoyment. The member’s sense of belonging stemming from relationships with others within the community has a positive influence on both perceived usefulness and perceived enjoyment, but appears to be insignificant with respect to a direct influence on continuance intention.

KEYWORDS

Belonging, Expectation Confirmation, Member Retention, Social Networking, Virtual Community

INTRODUCTION

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social networking sites (SNSs) as a “web-based service that allows individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). There are, and have been, virtually hundreds of SNSs which have utilized a variety of revenue models and market approaches. Some have experienced great success (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.) while others have been less fortunate (e.g., The Hub, Yahoo360!, etc.). There have also been those who experienced initial success only to fade quickly (e.g., MySpace, Google+, etc.).

Looking at companies that have attempted entry into the social networking market illustrates the difficulty identifying the factors that impact success or failure. Traditionally, factors such as market positioning and timing, available funds, execution, and market leverage have been viewed as key determinants of company success. However, in the SNS market, as well as in other e-businesses, additional factors appear to be at work (Bhattacherjee, 2001a).

Walmart, with their considerable financial resources, were unable to establish a SNS presence with The Hub. Yahoo! was unable to use their well-established market presence to become a significant
player in the SNS market with Yahoo360! and MySpace, although early to market, was unable to maintain their market position against Facebook. The reasons why some of these companies succeed while others fail are complex and remain quite illusive (Westland, 2010).

Researchers investigating SNSs and the virtual communities facilitated by that these sites have conducted studies from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Researchers have suggested that network configuration and density are important factors impacting SNS success. Studies have supported the notion that larger cluster sizes and obtaining a critical mass of participants enhances SNS success (e.g., Bin, 2010; Ganley and Lampe, 2009). Others have used a resource-based view approach to investigate the impact of net benefit on SNS community sustainability (e.g., Butler, 2001).

Others researchers have explored factors that draw individuals to SNSs and virtual communities (e.g., Joinson, 2008; Ridings and Gefen, 2004). One such study considers a wide variety of virtual communities in order to understand factors that cause people to join. Responses differed significantly based on the type of virtual community. However, information exchange was the primary reason for joining a virtual community across all community types. Social support was second for those communities focused on health, wellness, and professional topics while friendship was second in communities that focused on hobbies, personal interests, and recreation (Ridings and Wasko, 2010).

A few studies have used social identity theory in an attempt to better understand SNSs. Social identity theory was originally developed to better understand the importance of membership within a group to an individual’s self-concept (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992; Tajfel and Turner, 1985, 2001; Tajfel, 1982). Social identity is concerned with cohesion between members of a social group, conformity to in-group norms, and discrimination against outgroups (Kwon and Wen, 2010; Riedlinger et al, 2004). Cheung and Lee (2010) found that social identity is related to “we-intention,” that is collective action. When studying social network service use, Kwon and Wen (2010) found that social identity is impacted by perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and perceived encouragement.

With the ever expanding use of SNSs, it becomes more critical that users become knowledgeable about navigating the sites, managing one’s identity and online data, and understanding the issues of privacy and representation (Buck, 2012). In the workplace, employers are expecting their employees to be competent in the use of digital resources, yet there is a lack of transparency, which may result in the employer not fully understanding whether or not the perspective employee has the requisite skills (Raish & Rimland, 2016). Consequently, as SNSs are used from both a social and professional standpoint, digital competence with these sites becomes an essential component for all, and understanding how individuals and companies utilize SNSs is important.

Digital media involves information sharing and gathering, entertainment, and communication tools (Park, 2012). SNSs involve all of the aforementioned aspects of digital technology, and users must be able to successfully and easily navigate the SNS. Digital media literacy is significant because the digital content is not delivered via a uniform message, and exposure to the content essentially depends on how individuals use the technology (Park, 2012). Social media in particular varies greatly from individual user to individual user. While some use users are more concerned with sharing information, others are looking for social interaction or acceptance.

In this study, we investigate two aspects of community taken from social psychology. These aspects are territorial and relational belonging. As with, social identity, the relational aspect of belonging captures the idea that humans desire to be an accepted member of a group or community. In this study we continue this thread and consider how the relational aspect of belonging enhances the individual’s view of the group through intrinsic and extrinsic rewards gained from group membership and the desire to not only be accepted by the group and adhere to group norms, but also the desire to continue as a member of the group. With respect to the territorial element of belongingness, we argue that the territoriality is established through a virtual location rather than a geographical physical location.
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