


Chapter 42

Digital Social Networking: Risks and Benefits

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ABSTRACT

Digital social networking (DSN) sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Instagram, Pinterest, among many others have garnered millions of users worldwide. It is an instance of information and communication technology that has brought about changes in the way people communicate, interact, and affected human lifestyle and psyche across the world. Some people have become addicted; some see this as beneficial, while others are skeptical about its consequences. This risk-benefit paradox of DSN flummoxes academicians and practitioners alike. This chapter discusses the social and organizational and business risks and benefits of DSN. It goes on to provide a timeline of the evolution of DSN sites, enumeration of typical characteristics of DSN sites, and a systematic comparison of offline and digital social networking. The chapter intends to serve as a cornerstone towards developing a framework for organizational strategy formulation for DSN.

INTRODUCTION

Digital social networking (DSN) is one of the biggest disruptive technology implementations of the twenty-first century having far reaching social and economic implications (Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012). DSN sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, WhatsApp and many others have affected human psyche across the world resulting in significant social upheaval (Kane, Alavi, Labianca,

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& Borgatti, 2014). DSN has changed the way the masses communicate and exchange information. It has affected the way people act and interact as individuals, in groups, in communities and in the context of organizational networks. The speed and scale of DSN adoption have exceeded all previous technology platforms (Chui *et al.*, 2012). Today, DSN platforms permeate geographic boundaries, physical distances have become meaningless enabling users to connect with people having shared interests and activities across the globe. This phenomenon and its potential risks and benefits have caught the attention of academic researchers (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

DSN allows users' self-disclosure. It has increased users' ability to share views and opinions and propagate information, thus elevating the role of common users to social reporters. User gratification, pervasive access and mobile connectivity attributes have boosted DSN adoption (Park, Kee, and Valenzuela, 2009). Such novel networking capabilities of DSN have introduced new dimensions to social networking habits of the masses. People flock to DSN for fulfilling their social, cultural and professional responsibilities (Van Dijck, 2013). The DSN phenomenon has transcended individual use and permeated the domain of business management, introducing unique unprecedented aspects of business information management (Luo, Zhang, & Duan, 2013). It has become an alternate, albeit more powerful channel for communication, interaction and collaboration among business stakeholders (Skeels and Grudin, 2008) as well as for brand promotion activity (Kim and Ko, 2012).

The convenience in social networking and rich interaction facilitated by DSN is also laden with harmful consequences. Extant literature suggests rumor-mongering, privacy breach and health hazards as negative effects of DSN (Sprague, 2011). Social reporting on DSN led to questions regarding content reliability and which propelled the rumor theory (Oh, Agarwal, and Rao, 2013). Unscrupulous expansion of digital social network introduces social and health risks (Forte, Agosto, Dickard, & Magee, 2016; Holland and Tiggemann, 2016). User gratification is linked to DSN addiction (Ryan, Chester, Reece, and Xenos, 2014). DSN has introduced multi-vocality¹ in communication, which has reduced organizational control on information outflow and branding (Huang, Baptista, & Galliers, 2013).

Review of extant literature on DSN showed that a large number of studies have focused on the benefit facet only, there has been very limited research on the DSN risk (Fox and Mooreland, 2015). Organizational business strategy formulation needs to balance the risks and benefits for optimal leveraging of DSN potential. This necessitates a comparative study of DSN risks and benefits. There exists a gap in literature that necessitates expounding of the DSN benefit and risk paradigms in parallel. This chapter is an attempt to address this gap. It makes an endeavor to examine and expound the risk-benefit paradox inflicting DSN and provides a comparative analysis. The present work intends to serve as a cornerstone towards developing a framework for organizational strategy formulation for DSN.

BACKGROUND

To elicit and expound the risks and benefits of DSN, it is imperative to delve into the evolution and characteristics of DSN. This section provides a brief history of DSN evolution and illustrates DSN characteristics in general and in comparison to offline social networking² in particular.

In fact, social networking involves interacting with friends and connections and the phenomenon has undergone multitude of changes with the advent of internet technologies. Offline communications, such as face to face interaction and postal mail, were substituted with online communication, such as email. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, DSN emerged. DSN offered users a novel opportunity

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