

Chapter 13

A Study of Networking and Information Exchange Factors Influencing User Participation in Niche Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

This article tests a number of networking and information exchange factors that may influence users' participation in niche social networking sites (SNS). The factors identified in the literature review as influential for participation in social networking sites were implemented in a model tested using quantitative data from 152 users. Gratifications related to socialising, self-status seeking, social support, and learning and innovativeness were identified as significant for participating in niche SNS. As only a subset of the general purpose SNS gratifications were found to be of statistical significance for niche sites, it is suggested that further research that includes a wider set of factors is necessary to determine the similarities and differences between gratifications influencing participation in general purpose and niche SNS.

1. INTRODUCTION

Users are a critical resource for the success of any social networking site (SNS) (Xu et al. 2014). Achieving users' participation in SNS is considered to be one of the main factors in having a sustainable community in which users remain engaged over time. For this reason, researchers and practitioners are interested in finding what the factors influencing the participation in the network are. So far, research has had a

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strong focus on large SNS, which are mostly associated with general purpose SNS like Facebook and Twitter (Leskovec et al. 2008, Foregger 2008, Goggins et al. 2011, Smock et al. 2011, Tosun 2012, Kourouthanassis et al. 2015, Chen 2014, Yang and Lin 2014) General purpose networks are only part of the SNS world, which also includes niche SNS (Boyd and Ellison 2008). Niche SNS seek to narrow audiences by focusing on characteristics of the population, activities, identity and/or affiliations (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Examples of niche SNS include Beautifulpeople.com, which is a network oriented to good looking people, Cafemom.com, which is oriented to women who are or who are going to be mothers, and Mychurch.org, which is oriented to Christian people.

One of the most accepted definitions of what a social networking site is was given by Boyd and Ellison (2008), who defined an SNS as “*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 and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system*” (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, p. 2). This definition implies that the scope of the network is defined by the system, which these authors use later to differentiate between general purpose and niche SNS. The main difference relies on the purpose of the SNS, wherein the niche ones focus on characteristics of the population as noted above, narrowing their public to people with those characteristics or people interested in what the network is about. Niche SNS are gaining part of the market due precisely to their private nature (Bhappu and Schultze 2018, Calero-Valdez et al 2018, Crawford et al 2017, Kwon et al 2017, Lim, et al 2018). An additional fact arising is that Facebook, which is the most representative example of a general purpose SNS, has been losing a significant amount of users recently, not only due to privacy issues such as Cambridge Analytica, but also due to generational change (Castillo, 2018; Welch, 2018), which helps to show how people prefer to be with others who are similar to them, known as homophily (Kim, Lee, & Bonn, 2016; Kwon et al., 2017). Since SNS are now part of our everyday routine, if people leave Facebook, they will go to another SNS, and that is where niche SNS become an alternative given the homophilous tendency of SNS users.

A parallel topic that arises with the study of SNS types is the study of SNS user types, which made it possible to discover that not everyone in the network behaves in the same way. Research like that developed by Brandtzæg (2012) proposed the following types of SNS users: Sporadics, Lurkers, Socializers, Debaters, which is similar to Constantinides et al (2010), who identified beginners, habitual Users, outstanding Users and Experts. These typologies contrast with the one proposed by Kilian et al, (2012) who, in their research about millennials, identified three clusters, namely: the restrained millennials, the entertainment-seeking millennials and the highly connected millennials. A similar approach was taken by Bulut and Doğan (2017), who identified advanced users, business-oriented users, communication seekers, and dawdlers. The classifications of SNS users shows a variety of approaches that this topic can take, producing different typologies. However, acknowledging the importance of user typologies, this topic goes beyond the scope of the present research, as we first have to find whether there is a difference between General Purpose and Niche SNS, and then we can start wondering about the types of users and their behaviours on the networks.

Due to the difficulty of accessing niche networks and their participants, it is not surprising that most research related to SNS participation typically revolves around general purpose SNS (Boyd and Ellison, 2008), leaving a gap for research into niche SNS. Given the differences in the nature and objectives of the two types of networks, it cannot be assumed that the findings obtained for general purpose networks can be generalised for niche SNS. In fact differences in motivations for using SNS may exist even for general-purpose networks (Chung et al 2015, Gan & Wang 2015, Kim and Jiyoun 2017, Phua et al.

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