

Chapter 38

Online Social Capital Among Social Networking Sites' Users

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to explore types of online social capital (bridging and bonding) that the Emiratis perceive in the context of social networking site (SNS) usage. A sample of 230 Emiratis from two Emirates, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, was used to investigate the hypothesis. The results showed that WhatsApp was the most frequent SNS used by the respondents. Also, a significant correlation of the intensity of social networking usage and bridging social capital was found, while there was no significant association between SNS usage and bonding social capital. The factors determined the SNSs usage motivations among the respondents were exchange of information, sociability, accessibility, and connections with overseas friends and families. Males were more likely than females to connect with Arab (non-Emiratis) and online bonding social capital. Both genders were the same in their SNSs motivations and online bridging social capital.

INTRODUCTION

Internet and Social Media Connect People

In geographic communities, people typically get to know each other in face-to-face settings, and then maintain contact via communication technologies, such as telephone and email. When geographic communities have high Internet penetration, people, groups, and organizations readily turn to email and the World Wide Web to stay in touch and exchange information (Kavanaugh, et al., 2005). Early and continuing excitement about the Internet saw it as a stimulating positive change in people's lives by creating new forms of online interaction and enhancing offline relationships. The Internet would restore community by providing a meeting space for people with common interests and overcoming the limitations of space and time (Wellman, et al., 2010: 438).

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Gershuny (2002) argued that the Internet has changed the nature of leisure activities; the same might be said of social networking sites (SNSs). Instead of displacing leisure or communication, Facebook constitutes a new communication activity that supplements communication amongst friends. Social media provides individuals an interpersonal connection with others, relational satisfaction, and a way to learn about the surrounding cultural milieu (Croucher, 2011: 261). Online sites are often considered innovative and different from traditional media, such as television, film, and radio, because they allow direct interaction with others (Pempek, et al., 2009: 229).

To summarize, SNSs provide users with meaningful ways to make, maintain, and enhance relationships. For many “Friends”, the site is the primary method through which to stay connected (Vitak, 2012: 469).

Internet Access and Social Media in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Social networking has spread around the world with remarkable speed. In countries such as Britain, the United States, Russia, the Czech Republic, and Spain, about half of all adults now use Facebook and similar websites (Kohut, et al., 2012: 1).

The UAE has been ranked (13) in the world in terms of individuals using the Internet, with 88% of the country’s residents now online. This is just behind the United Kingdom (89.8%) and Bahrain (90%), according to the United Nations Broadband Commission report (2014), which elaborates on the number of Internet users, specifically broadband, in 191 countries. In global rankings of countries with the highest frequencies of Internet access, the UAE holds 13th place, way ahead of United States, which is in the 19th spot, and Germany, which has grabbed the 20th position (p: 102–103). It should be indicated here that the demographics of UAE residence are very unique as it includes various nationalities from Asia, Europe, USA and others. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2010), the UAE nationals are 11.5% of the total population that exceeds 8.264.070 million and the non-national are 88.5% of it (P: 10).

Ayyad (2011) indicated that the United Arab Emirates’ high percentage of Internet users makes it the “most wired nation in the Arab world and one of the top nations of the online world” (p: 43).

Al Jenaibi (2011) concluded that social media has a very strong presence in the lives of a sample of 556 Emiratis from the seven Emiratis of UAE. Most participants agreed that the use of social media is on the rise in the current teenage and adult population (Twitter, YouTube, the iPhone, Blackberry, and iPad were mentioned frequently). They had a clear conception of a wide range of uses for it, defining it as useful for contacting others, discussions, searching for information, selling products and logos, making announcements, and distributing surveys (p: 19, 20). Wiest and Eltantawy (2012) found that nearly 90% of a sample of UAE universities’ students have created a profile on one of the social networking sites and 78.5% have a profile on more than one such site (p: 214). Karuppasamy, et al. (2013) found that most of a sample of the students of Ajman University of Science and Technology (n = 300) were found to be users of social networking sites, and Facebook was the most popular SNS (p: 248).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Like traditional media, Facebook and other social networking sites consist of a one-to-many communication style, where information presented reaches many “viewers” at a time. However, with social networking sites, users are now the creators of content, and they view one another’s profiles and information rather

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