Chapter 4.4
Individual Differences in Social Networking Site Adoption

Harsha Gangadharbatla
University of Oregon, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on detailing the role of five individual level factors—Internet self-efficacy, self-esteem, need to belong, need for information, and gender—in influencing the attitudes toward social networking sites (SNS) and the adoption of such sites. First, the growing importance of social networking sites in business is discussed, and their usage as advertising vehicles is outlined. Individual differences in SNS adoption are presented from a technology acceptance model framework. A paper-pencil-based survey is conducted and data obtained is used to test a structural model that explains the role of individual-level factors in influencing individuals' attitudes toward SNS, their willingness to join SNS, and their actual membership on SNS. Results are presented and managerial implications are drawn.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has radically changed the way people shop, transact, bank, and communicate with others in the recent years. With an estimated 73% of all American adults now online (Madden, 2006), the impact of the Internet on communication, commerce, and society in general continues to grow. One such impact is the proliferation of social networking sites (SNS) that are particularly popular with teens and young adults. It is estimated that over 55% of online teens use social networks and at least 48% of them visit social networking Web

sites daily or more often (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). However, very little research has been done to understand the process of social networking site (SNS) adoption.

The success of social networking sites and communication on such sites depends a lot on the innovation and adoption of such sites (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). With more and more businesses implementing these social networking sites, it becomes important to understand how and why people are deciding to use sites such as MySpace and Facebook (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). As with the successful adoption of any new consumer technology, the success of social networking sites also depends on numerous factors of which individual-level factors are often ignored in this area of research. Agarwal and Prasad (1999) suggest that individual differences are important in information technology acceptance and are often not included in technology acceptance models. Therefore, the current chapter fills the gap in literature by examining individual differences in SNS adoption from a technology acceptance model perspective.

The following section explains the concept and types of social networking sites before discussing the role of such sites in creating and adding value to businesses and their usage as advertising vehicles.

Social Networking Sites (SNS)

Social networking sites (SNS) have existed in some form or another since the advent of the Internet. Bulletin boards, user and discussion groups, multi user dungeons (MUDs), and other forms of online communities are predecessors to the present generation of networking sites like Facebook, Friendster, and MySpace. Advances in Internet technology have made it much easier for individuals to connect and communicate online through a new wave of technology often collectively referred to as Web 2.0 tools. Social networking sites are a type of online or virtual communities (such as Yahoogroups or Google

Groups) with a few differences. The emphasis in social networking sites is on (1) the individual and his or her profile information, (2) the people that the individual is connected to, (3) the groups that he or she is part of, and (4) the explicit representation of relationships. These factors determine the individual's role, involvement, and usage of SNS in contrast to traditional virtual communities where the emphasis is on public discussions and the commonality that underlies the very existence of such communities. In other words, the emphasis in the case of social networking sites is on the user and his or her network of friends whereas in virtual communities and online discussion groups the emphasis is on the content generated by members. Social networking sites are about people and their network of relationships.

Networking sites can be classified into many types. For an excellent review of classifications, readers are advised to refer to Murchu, Breslin, and Decker (2004). Depending on the type of user profiles, networking sites can be either classified as business-oriented (Ecademy, LinkedIn, or Spoke) or as social networks (Friendster, MySpace, Friendzy, Meetup, Orkut, Tickle, or Tribe). However, some networks have transcended their original purposes to extend into the other category over the years. For example, Ryze was originally intended to serve online business networking purposes but members have ever since used it for dating and other social networking purposes. Members can join social networking sites in one of the two ways—via registration or via connection. In the registration-based model, individuals sign in with a valid e-mail address and the site is open to everyone without any sort of approval or moderation, whereas in the connection-based model, individuals can only become members if they know someone who is already a member of that social networking site (Murchu, Brestlin, & Decker 2004).

The usage of social networking sites has grown from 5% of American households in 2005 to over 10% in just one year. According to a recent survey

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