

Chapter 4

Drivers and Barriers to Online Social Networks' Usage: The Case of Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Although the past years have witnessed growth in online social networks, the underlying factors driving and inhibiting its diffusion are not well understood. This paper presents empirical research that investigates the factors driving and inhibiting the online social networks usage. It gives a brief overview of the academic literature on the diffusion online social networks. The conduct and findings of a mail survey are then reported. The paper concludes that online social networks in general and Facebook in particular will become an extremely important tool in the future, with the drivers overcoming the barriers in influencing the rate. Furthermore, the study has enhanced previous theories related to Facebook, and it offers a platform for further investigations to take shape in light of what has been discussed and analysed.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century there have been new trends emerge in social computing where the scope shifts from corporations to social organisations (Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007a). The main current development in internet use is undoubtedly the rise of social networking websites. These

websites act as a forum for socialising that would have previously taken place on playgrounds, student unions, or public houses. The rise of social networking sites has developed from a standing start and captured millions of children, teenagers and young adults (Keynote, 2008). Due to the popularity that can be seen in social computing, it is thought that it represents a new frontier for information systems. In general, social computing

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environments create settings for data collection useful to researchers that are interested in online behaviour of individuals (Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007a). Studies in this area have shown that during the lifetime of social networking, systems have undertaken redesign, user populations have changed and it is thought that individual users' social context may evolve. The understanding of these social computing systems has become essential as they become a more prevalent piece of interaction landscape (Lampe et al., 2008). The rapid adoption of these systems raise questions about the functionalities they offer that make them so popular and about the communicate dynamics that are shaped by their use (Tong et al., 2008). The rise of social computing has the potential to create gaps in social capital and transform the role of weak ties and shift the boundaries between public and private ties (Tufekci, 2008).

The popularity of social networks has triggered research that spans over a number of years. However there is one social network in particular called Facebook that is still relatively new and has become a new research phenomenon. Within just 18 months of its launch in the UK, Facebook was among the top five most visited websites, rubbing shoulders with giants such as Google, Microsoft's MSN and Yahoo (Keynote, 2008). Facebook is the first dataset of its kind to be made publicly available and is designed in a way that is of interest when looking to study the relationship between virtual and real life (Lewis et al., 2008). On many levels, Facebook is fascinating as an interactive image laden directory featuring groups that share lifestyles or attitudes (Bugeja, 2006).

However, despite the range of inhibiting and motivating factors identified regarding the diffusion of online social networks in general and Facebook in particular, it is not known how useful these are in explaining the adoption of online social networks. Few studies can provide strong theoretical or statistical support in this field, often because of the exploratory nature of these studies. As such they deal more with the potential than the reality of Internet use in practice. To partially fill

this void, using the Facebook as an example, this study makes a thoroughly empirical investigation of online social networks' drivers and barriers.

Research Objectives

This paper pursues the following objectives:

- To identify the main drivers for Facebook use,
- To identify the main barriers for Facebook use and,
- To provide some suggestions as to how the barriers can be overcome to limit there effect on the drivers.

In the following sections, first the development of the conceptual background of the study is presented. Next, the methodology of the study is discussed followed by the analysis and results. More specifically, the suggested divers and barriers are tested using one sample T-Test, and data collected by survey of 91 people. Finally, the conclusions and their implications are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background/History of Facebook

Facebook was created in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg who was a student at Harvard University. Zuckerberg stated that, "the idea for the website was motivated by a social need at Harvard to be able to identify people in other residential houses" (Ellison et al., 2006) and "a social utility that connects you with people around you" (Charnigo & Barnett-Ellis, 2007).

Facebook initially focused on college students and then high school students and left out older people by design. The forming of relationships is considered as an important part of the college experience and it can be argued that Facebook facilitates such interactions (Hargittai, 2007).

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