

Chapter 14

Mobile Social Networks: Communication and Marketing Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Social networks are migrating to mobile. Mobile social networks combine community-level interactivity with mobile communications and location-awareness, and hence represent a novel phenomenon with unique properties. Due to the growing business potential of this new trend and its increasing impact on the realm of communications, mobile social networks started to draw scholars' attention. Researchers in computer-mediated-communication have been investigating the phenomenon from a variety of angles, yet marketing literature is falling behind. This chapter aims to review existing academic knowledge on mobile social networks and provide a conceptual framework to study and understand this complex, emergent phenomenon and discuss related future research avenues.

INTRODUCTION

The emerging phenomenon of mobile social networks is probably one of the best manifestations of the concept of “convergence”. Mobile social networks not only extend online social networks to the mobile medium, but also converge real and digital lives of individuals in an unprecedented way. *Context awareness, ubiquitous connectivity, and identifiability* features provided by mobile

devices make content shared in mobile social networks very personal and “real” in nature. Further, mobile social networks help coordinating congregations in the geographic world, and alleviate some of the challenges of interacting with others in public via facilitating the exchange of social / location information and contributing to a sense of commonality among users in public spaces. Therefore, beyond mere facilitation, mobile social network systems fundamentally affect

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the ways that people communicate, self-disclose, and interact.

Recent technological developments in mobile communication infrastructure transformed Internet-enabled mobile handsets into indispensable personal companions. The penetration rate of mobile handsets has already surpassed the total number of Internet users (Shannon, 2008), and the number of users who use their mobile handsets to connect to the Internet is rapidly increasing, especially among youth (Lenhart, 2009). These developments gave birth to the age of “perpetual contact” (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), and this paradigm shift has tremendous implications for the theory and practice of both communication and marketing disciplines. Accordingly, distinct research streams focusing on this novel medium of communication have appeared within these over-arching fields. Yet, the accumulated literature related with mobile medium focuses primarily on dyadic interpersonal or brand-consumer communication rather than on information exchange / interaction in mobile social networks (Kleijnen et al., 2009). Very few extant studies are dedicated to mobile social networks. Therefore, very little is known about the underlying dynamics and structural properties of mobile social networks and their impact on various aspects of daily life. This chapter aims to review existing academic knowledge on mobile social networks and provide a conceptual framework to study and understand this complex, emergent phenomenon and discuss related future research avenues.

DEFINING MOBILE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social network sites and mobile communications each have their own uniquely powerful characteristics. A social network consists of a set of users and the relations defined on them (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). With the emergence of social network sites, social networks have migrated to

the cyberspace. Boyd and Ellison (2008) define a “social network site” as

“web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” (p. 210)

Most of these sites support the maintenance of pre-existing social connections, others help strangers to establish relationships based on their shared interests. A study by Lenhart (2009) have revealed approximately 90 percent of social network site participants join these sites to stay in touch with friends, while only half of them use their profiles to meet new friends. In communication literature, these interpersonal relationships within social networks are also called ties. The strength of an interpersonal tie (i.e. strong, weak, or absent) is a linear combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services which characterize each tie (Granovetter, 1973). Although a great majority of connections in social networking sites are people who are personally known by the profile owner, many of them are absent or weak-ties (e.g., old friends, distant relatives, barely known colleagues), such that the intimacy, emotional intensity and the amount of time spent together is relatively low.

When compared to social network sites, mobile communications are more likely to be organized around stronger ties (Lugano, 2008), such as close relatives and friends with whom the user frequently spends time together. Mobile handsets also have several unique properties that enable distinct communication experiences among communicating parties when compared to other interpersonal technologically mediated communication channels. Mobile handsets are always on, always connected, and always with

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