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Motivations and Incentives in Joining and Using Social Networks: A Systematic Review

Ghassan H Felemban and Miguel-Angel Sicilia*

Communications, Information and Technology in the web society, University of Alcala, Madrid, Spain

Abstract

Social networking sites provide a medium where users can interact on a personal level. The paper under review evaluates several studies that have been conducted in relation to the topic. The research papers were appraised to establish some useful patterns that will form the basis for further research. The use of current and relevant studies is vital in ensuring that the results are useful to the research questions. Noteworthy, the information obtained indicates that there is a gap concerning the reasons individuals use social media sites. Ultimately, the journals stated that individuals join social interaction platforms due to personal objectives.

Introduction

A social networking site (SNS) is an online community type that largely depends on users. People routinely create thousands of new social media accounts on different sites. Statistics show that social network users worldwide will hit 2.13 billion unique user accounts in 2016, up from 1.4 million accounts in 2012 [1,2]. Because of its high usage, a number of questions arise relating to what is behind user motivation and participation in the creation and use of these accounts. The elements that make social networking sites successful are largely unverified, including the elements that contribute to user loyalty and highly-motivated users. Knowing what exactly stimulates user loyalty and motivation is critical information to human factors engineers and SNS designers. In addition, users' personal incentives are also important just on a personal level [3]. People want to know why they seek out what they do. Information regarding the factors that influence individuals to use social media for various factors is still in its infancy since the phenomenon is recent [4]. This study is essential as it identifies the primary reasons people are motivated to join and continue using social networking sites. The data generated by the assessment will offer useful insight to companies that design social interaction platform, including understanding on how create portals that meet the needs of diverse individuals [5]. This paper concentrates on case studies relating to social media usage. Further, the authors have excluded understanding of online communities and the reason behind them since the question will necessitate the expansion of the scope of the evaluation, which time does not permit.

A number of studies have explored both why people engage in social networks, and why others choose not to, regardless of availability and access of the SNS. These studies have led to a number of theoretical frameworks that have focused on only specific types of users. Some studies suggest that bloggers consider connecting with people and showcasing their own feelings as the most valued blogging rewards [6]. Other studies have found that other motivation factors contribute to people using online communities (see Table 1). In other words, people turn to online communities to connect with others, be in the know of products, and to cultivate and explore interests and hobbies. Because of the ease of use, and the general accessibility of these sites, people turn to them for their emotional and social needs, as each account is just one click away, and the access to millions of other users, products, events, and more are relayed almost immediately to a user [7,8]. Social network sites that target large volumes of people, such as Facebook, need to have a strong understanding of the psychology of human social interaction, as well as the types of activities people want to carry out regularly on the sites they join [9,10]. Knowing the history and evolution of social networks does not provide these answers [11]. Rather, knowing the people using these online communities are a better way to understand motivations and needs [12]. One of the best ways to understand motivations is to study users' subjective reasons for joining in the first place. Through reviewing several studies, the use of communication and information technologies were declared by users to be major reasons they join [6]. The rest of this paper follows the research methodologies of these studies.

Research Questions

The main objective of this paper was to conduct a systematic review of previous studies regarding the motivations of people who use and join social networking sites. Through literature reviews of these studies, gaps, comparisons and contrasts can be formulated. This understanding will help in identifying personal incentives behind the motivation, which then will be compared to those proposed by another research study [8]. Two research questions were focused on, which this systematic review will explore:

Papacharissi, 2011[7]	Mcquail, 2010[8]
Shared interests	Feedback channels
Sociable and supportive relationships	User visibility
Experiences and needs	Large user population
Sense of shared identity	Ease of use
Strong feelings of belonging	Accessibility
	Product access

Table 1: Factors motivating people to use online communities.

***Corresponding author:** Sicilia MA, Communications, Information and Technology in the web society, University of Alcala, Madrid, Spain Tel: +3491 885 65 34; Fax: 91 885 66 46; E-mail: msicilia@uah.es

RQ1: What are the findings of the case studies that have been made so far evaluating the motivational factors that influence people to join and use social networking sites?

RQ2: What gaps are still relevant for further research in the case studies concerning effect of motivational factors in encouraging people to join social media?

Review Method

The review method followed the guidelines of the Cochrane Collaboration Handbook and was also guided by the eight major steps on how to conduct a systematic review [13]. The following guidelines were used to organize this study:

a. Formulation of review questions, which was done on section 2

b. Identification of inclusion and exclusion criteria in order to set the boundaries of the literatures to be selected

c. Development of strategy for search and where to find the related studies

d. Selection of studies after going through the abstracts

e. Data extraction that may include information such as demographics, sample size (if applicable), design of the study

f. Assessment on the relevancy of the study

g. Results interpretation

h. Summarize and conclude

Literature searches were done electronically using articles that were published from 2005 onwards. The year 2005 was chosen to be the starting point of the search because it was when Facebook become a "high school network" and started to become popular, alongside with the launch of YouTube, Yahoo! 360, Bebo, Asian Avenue, Black Planet and Ning [3]. The databases used were Science Direct, Wiley Online Library, Emerald Insight and Research Gate. The following keywords were used to search for related titles, abstracts and headings to have a wide range of information. This list is from "The World's 21 Most Important Social Media Sites and Apps in 2015" [14] (see Table 2).

The initial search started with the first group of key words such as "social networking", "social networking sites", "social media" and "joining social networking sites". The search yielded 17,600 publications in the open access field. To narrow it down further, articles were subjected to title review. Those titles that seemed far from the topic were discarded. This yielded 120 abstracts that were chosen according to specifications.

The next phase of screening was to select those that met the following criteria:

• Paper was published in journals

• Case study research method

• The study covered e-commerce

• Social support theories, motivation theories

• Employment opportunities

• Professional applications such as medicine and politics

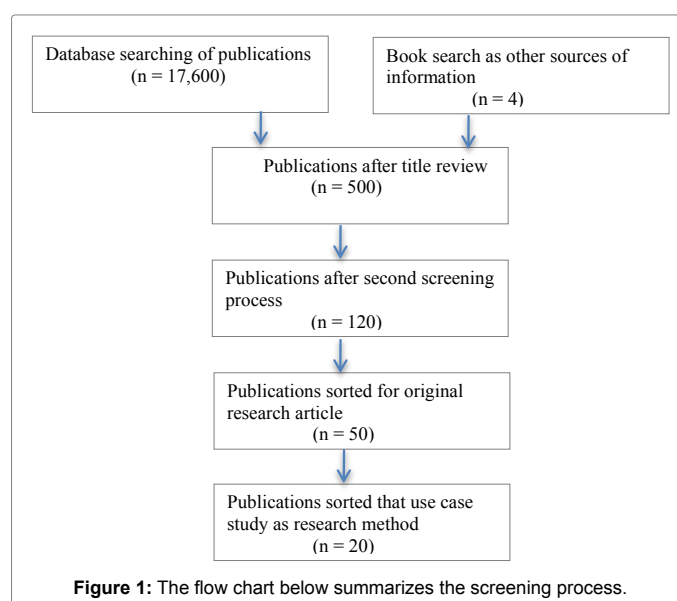(See Figure 1 for a flow chart summarizing the screening process).

Relevance criteria

The literature used were studies that were chosen and outlined through a database that was made using inclusion and exclusion criteria. Those that were included were only those research papers that described social network sites in full. Studies that only described individual social network sites without giving the number of users or reasons for using them were excluded from this study. This study ensured that the journals' outputs were considerable to ensure that the research population covers different variables. Fundamentally, the use of many publications was to improve the overall result and guarantee that the findings were a true representation of the study under review. Moreover, the approach would reduce any likelihood of bias occurring. This review focused only on what motivates people to join and use various social network sites and, therefore, did not include the general use of the internet. Those works showing different application software and their uses were also excluded. Research papers that showed different statistics of the users of these sites were included.

During the review phase, there were several papers containing similar information about a certain social network site, particularly Facebook, such as those indicated various studies [3,12,14,16-19]. This confirmed the wide reach of Facebook and the variety of applications it is being used for, making these studies relevant for this systematic review.

Results

A total of 20 studies were extracted following the review outline. Generally, all 20 papers reviewed showed personal incentives or multiple reasons for using social network sites, as declared by the users. Two studies [19,20] used case studies of online purchases and empirical testing by PLS-SEM on a model investigating social factors, respectively.

Internet	Vine	Facebook	Google+	Pinterest	Youtube
Social Networking	WhatsApp	Twitter	Disqus	Twoo	Motivation
Social Networking Sites	vk.com	LinkedIn	LinkedIn Pulse	MyMFB	Incentives
Social Media	Meetup	Friendster	Xing	Snapchat	Meetup
Digital Media	Instagram	MySpace	Renren	Tumbler	Medium

Table 2: The World's Most Important Social Media Sites and Apps in 2015.

Figure 1: The flow chart below summarizes the screening process.

One study [20] investigated social factors influencing the quality of relationships and social commerce through a survey conducted among Facebook users. They found that there was a strong influence of social network sites on the success of e-commerce. Another study[21] explained how motivation to join and use social networking sites are related to the theories on the development of Technology Acceptance Model, Uses and Gratifications theory, and Acceptance of Technology and Unified Theory of Use. The attempt that explained user motivation well is the Uses and Gratifications theory. This is because it explains the occurrence of certain media behavior. This theory considers users as goal-oriented with principles for their use of various media.

The main motivational needs driving users to adopt the use of social media include information, personal identity, social interaction, and entertainment [8]. A similar study was conducted using sequential equation modeling (SEM) of 402 respondents of an online empirical research [22]. They found that network externalities and theories of motivation explain the reasons why people join social networking sites, and that gender differences produce different influences [23]. These two studies explain the different behaviors produced when joining social networking sites that basically point to the same desire to satisfy certain needs to be accepted and highly influenced by the enjoyment produced by joining these sites.

Among the literature reviewed, one of the most relevant was one study in which comprehensively identified 12 categories as the motivation to join social networking sites [19]

- New relations
- Friends
- Socializing
- Information
- Debating
- Free SMS
- Killing time
- Sharing or consuming content
- Unspecified fun
- Profile surfing
- Family
- Others.

Facebook, the most common social network site, served the need to be connected, while Twitter was popular in discussion forums like expressing opinions and starting debates. Others also pointed out that another key motivational factor are the changes that social media sites have brought to the business environment [19,24]. Further, social networking site business occurs in the context of brand loyalty, in which customers relate with a brand community via social networking namely, product, company, brand and other consumers [24,25]. Other research [19] further supported this notion [24] by explaining that a new stream of e-commerce has emerged which is known as social commerce, which is drawn from the social support theory [26]. Their study showed a new picture of consumer behaviour highly influenced by social commerce that have motivated more business-minded online users to join and use social network sites. For example, Facebook became a virtual marketplace where young entrepreneurs could simply create accounts that allow them to promote and market their

products. Banner ads of bigger companies also use Facebook to capture the attention of online users. Two studies focused on the application of social networking sites other than social interactions. An example of which were medical information related as shown in the study of Kind et al., explaining how social networking sites become venues for engagement in health education that were gathered from case studies of medical online users; and another study of Johnson et al., on political campaigns that used social networking sites. Both of these studies point out the advantages of having a wider reach when social networking sites were used.

Related theories on continuance theory, flow theory, social capital theory and the unified theory of acceptance and the use of technology (UTAUT) were used by other studies [27] to empirically test the behaviours of Internet-based, social network users in China. Another related study [1] focused on the switching behaviour among online users between SNS and mobile devices in which the study stated that both have their respective advantages. Convenience and peer pressure are the main reasons why users switch among different SNS platforms, while mobile capabilities and real-time access are the top reasons why users switch to mobile SNSs [1]. On the other hand, the role of social conformance on why people join and use SNS has also been explored [28], and social conformance appeal was supported in the study on "addiction" to social networking sites [22]. The study explained two main types of personalities, extroverts and introverts, made these sites appealing to the mass: extroverts use social network sites for social enhancement and introverts use them for social compensation. These enhanced motivations to join and use social networking sites, making these two group of personalities spend more time surfing the Internet for social purposes with different intentions.

The pioneer researchers of many of these studies described difficulties they faced when separating several motivations as they are closely related. Therefore, they classified them into four groups as mentioned earlier. These are information, social interaction, entertainment, and personal identity. 18 out of the 20 studies did not mention identity or self-presentations as one of the main motivations for using social network sites despite them terming these sites as technologies for personal narcissism and branding. Therefore, they link contact with friends as a very strong feeling of belongingness as well as a heightened sense of social identity.

Several studies [8,12,17,21,29] specialized in analyzing responses from older virtual communities. The results were similar to other studies [19,30]. In general, people utilize social network sites to link with those whom they share offline connections and even those that they have never met. They go beyond the boundaries of friends, family or fellow students.

Discussions

The findings from the various case studies and papers analyzed indicate that the motivation for joining social networking sites is influenced by a number of reasons. One of the initial motivations for joining SNS is the sense of personal identity. Individuals joining under this motivation want to establish their own distinct personalities because one is able to shape the perception people have on him or her [31]. Further, social interaction is a primary variable that drives individuals to social networks, considering that a large part of the society uses the online medium to interact. In relation, the avenue provides the opportunity for people to engage in discourse concerning various topics that attracts users [4]. Again, information is critical, which the social network sites provide due to their borderless natures,

in addition to swiftness and ease-of-use. Moreover, entertainment is a major motivator since the social platforms provide diverse fun activities that include, among many other things, jokes, music, and videos. Notably, many people join the virtual realm to avoid boredom while killing time, especially when they are idle [32]. Importantly, the studies indicated that entrepreneurs that have adopted the social network approach market their products and advertise their services on those sites. Similarly, another segment of the population was found to use the forum to seek medical interventions through various remedies that are available online. As expected, the variables detailed as the motivational factors have been rationalized through a number of theories that include the social support thesis. This thesis asserts that individuals desire to be part of social group that has ideals similar to theirs [9]. Furthermore, the user and gratification concept is another important doctrine that has states that people join social networking sites for their own interests [33].

Conclusion and Recommendations

After reviewing the literature, the main motivation that made people engage in social network sites was to create, maintain, and nurture social relationships. Five of the reviewed literatures, including the book of Watkins [8,20] and studies [34,35] agreed that the most crucial reason for joining social network sites is to connect with new people. The second important reason found was to keep connected with friends. Therefore, people have varied reasons for joining and using social network sites. For easy analysis, these reasons were categorized into 12 groups, as systematically lumped by the study of Watson. Other studies can even fit in to the 12 groups since a lot of the researches yielded almost the same results.

In addition to the 12 categories, there were subcategories in these groups to give a clearer picture of the motivations behind but would practically yield to the same, non-conflicting findings. One of the gaps identified, though, entailed only preliminary analysis of all the data collected. This data are eventually further stratified into simpler groups. Later, the results gathered from each narrowed demographics are compared to form a more factual, research-based conclusion. This may not be enough to give results of high accuracy, and therefore, we recommend that future researchers expand their studies through additional analysis that will demonstrate the linkages between the different motivational factors. Another gap found was that there were no studies regarding the reasons people stop using social network sites that can be integrated in order to understand this complex human behaviour. Another interesting study would be the apprehensions of some online users in joining SNS, since one of the greatest risks that has not been solved by network researchers are issues like identity theft, cyber-bullying and purchase scams. If these will not be solved soon, SNS can be just a "global fad" and may potentially die natural deaths. The challenge now is how to sustain these SNS, while maintaining their appeal to the global community.

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