BETTER THAN BEFORE? EXPLORING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE USERS' CONTINUANCE BEHAVIORS

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Recently, social media is one of the popular communication means among the public. Among various types of social media that is characterized user-generated content (UGC), the current study focuses on social networking sites (SNSs) user's continuance usage behaviors for their communicating activities. SNSs have been most emerged social media and a best example of computer-mediated communication (CMC). To examine SNS users' behavior, the research model incorporates a couple of theories with hypotheses; social exchange theory (SET) and expectation confirmation theory (ECT). Conclusion and limitations are discussed.

Keywords: Social networking sites, social exchange theory, expectation confirmation theory, flow theory

Introduction

As new electronic communication media have emerged under supporting Web 2.o technologies, network-based computer mediated communication (CMC) media have become positioned as one of the main means of communication for the public. Generally, CMC includes email, web-chatting, instant messaging (IM), and social networking sites (SNS), in which the media users communicate with each other non-physically with non-verbal expressions. Currently, such CMCs are referred to as *social media*, which is defined as "the group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 61). More specifically, social media studies suggest using more detailed categories, such as social networking sites (SNSs, e.g., Facebook), creative works-sharing sites (e.g., YouTube, Flickr, and Jamendo), business networking sites, virtual worlds, and commerce communities, etc. (Mangold and Faulds 2009).

Among the different types of social media, SNSs have become immensely popular communication tools for both individuals and organizations. Prior research has defined SNSs as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd and Ellison 2007, p. 211). Individual SNS users form relationships with previously known people, those who are just acquaintances, or new people by inviting or accepting friend requests from them. Individual SNS users are often in a position to recognize other users whose interests are similar to their own and then create relationships with them (Ross et al. 2009).

While prior studies have paid attention to information systems post adoption and their retention, prior literature is also interested in SNS users' post-adoption and their continuance usage through various theoretical backgrounds, such as social capital theory and social network theory (e.g. Cheung and Lee 2010; Kwon and Wen 2010). However, in terms of electronic communication media usage, it is still arguable as to what motivational factors lead media users' continuance use and what communication environments have affected CMC media users' retention. For example, in the context of SNSs and their users, some users realize and utilize SNSs reciprocally with their friends under voluntary cognitive efforts. However, others may access SNSs habitually, which is an unconscious repetitive behavior. Information systems users' habitual behaviors have been suggested as automatic behaviors that are driven from long-term exposure to the system and learning (Limayem et al. 2007). From these two different approaches to SNS users' behaviors, the current study focuses on SNS users' cognitive, voluntary, and repetitive uses through self-motivation, not automatic unconscious behaviors. Initial adoption of new technology does not always incur post-adoption behaviors while the post-adoption of technologies becomes automatic use of technology that is rooted in constant exposure to use and unconscious learning. Therefore, the current study aims to measure media users' rational basis of communication reciprocation in the long-term, in the context of newly emerged and one of the popular social media: social networking sites.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to identify SNS users' intention to continuance usage and actual continuance use through three research questions: 1) what factors influence SNS users' intention to continue use? 2) Does flow experience by perceived enjoyment and concentration have any impact on SNS users' perceived benefits that subsequently influences intention creation? 3) How does the social exchange perspective affect SNS users' continuing SNS usage?

This study is designed to explain SNS users' retention behaviors by incorporating the concepts of social exchange theory (SET), expectation confirmation theory (ECT), with its extended model, the expectation confirmation model of information systems continuance (ECM-IS), and flow experience. Social exchange theory is a well-known theory that accounts for any impact of reciprocal relationships from a cost–benefit perspective. Expectation confirmation theory helps to understand information systems users' continuance intention. In addition, this study applies to two constructs (perceived enjoyment and concentration) from the flow theory, in order to examine the effect of IS users' intrinsic motivation on the development of intention. The next section will address the theoretical background and the research model with hypotheses. Conclusion of this study will be discussed at the end.

Theoretical Foundations

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

While SNS is a type of online communities in which member-initiated online territory and maintain communities by members' own will, its member relationships are viewed from an exchange perspective known as social exchange (Jin et al. 2010). According to Blau's (1964) social exchange theory, these interactions are interdependent and contingent on actions with another person. Two exchange perspectives are considered: social exchange and economic exchange. Both stem from a cost-benefit exchange concept wherein individuals remain in a relationship if the perceived benefit outweighs the perceived investment (cost). Unlike economic exchange, the perceived benefit and cost of a social exchange usually comprise an intangible asset exchange such as emotion, respect, or caring among individuals (Gefen and Ridings 2002); therefore, good feelings, respect and perceiving more caring during reciprocal exchanges results in ongoing relationships. Additionally, social exchange activities do not ensure feasible reciprocal returns from invested cost (Chadwick-Jones 1976; Gefen and Ridings 2002; Liao 2008; Skageby 2010; Skerlavaj et al. 2010).

Two cognitive processes are involved in reciprocal relationships: the comparison level and the comparison level of alternatives (Kramer 2005). At the comparison level, the reciprocal relationship is retained when the perceived benefit outweighs the perceived cost after the two are directly compared. For example, SNS users will attain better relationships with their friends if the perceived benefit (e.g., closer relationships with friends than before) is greater than the perceived cost (e.g., effort, time expenditure). At the comparison level of alternatives, individuals compare the cost-benefit ratio directly with the alternatives. These results serve as the rational basis to decide whether to remain in the relationship even if there are no satisfactory results (because of a lack of satisfying alternatives). For instance, SNS users will continue using SNSs if there are no better communication alternatives.

According to Blau (1964), three constructs—commitment, perceived benefit, and trust—form the basis of social exchange theory. First, commitment is defined as "a desire to maintain a relationship" (Fullerton 2003, p. 334), and it is considered "an implicit or explicit pledge of continuity between relational partners" (Fullerton 2005, p. 1374). From a social exchange perspective, community members' commitment is an important factor in sustaining the online community in that it affects member sustainability; attaining continuous perceived benefits from ongoing reciprocation between parties results in the formation of commitment, which is "central in distinguishing social from economic exchange" (Cook and Emerson 1978, p. 728). Second, perceived benefit is deemed another salient determinant of the reciprocal parties remaining in a relationship. The theory posits that a person retains his or her relationship if the perceived benefit compensates for the perceived cost of the ongoing reciprocal social relationship; otherwise, the reciprocal party will leave the relationship, resulting in failure to maintain it. These open-ended relationships rely more on perceived benefit that stems from high resource *particularism* (e.g. affection) than resource *universalism* (e.g. monetary value) (Foa and Foa 1974). A continuous long-term relationship is sustainable only if both reciprocal parties are beneficial to each other such that the perceived (relational) benefit is foundational to the supportive relationship between the parties (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). Studies of social networks in learning- and knowledge-intensive organizations have suggested that, where reciprocity was expected but not found, perceived benefit may be the driving force of the relationship. Specifically, in a knowledge exchange, experts become sources of knowledge but have little chance to gain additional knowledge from that network (Huber 2001). These experts may perceive a benefit in the social status that evolves from being the expert (Lazega et al. 2006). In the same way, SNS users may perceive a benefit from the status of having multiple friends, connections, and so on. Third, trust is defined as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party, with the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (Liao 2008, p. 1883). Trust is another key construct in SET in that SET is anchored in an individual's faith in cooperative interaction and trust and reduces the uncertainty and risk involved in relationships (Luo 2002; Wu et al. 2010). Past research has revealed that trust influences repeat purchases and helps retain relationships between sellers and buyers (Li et al. 2006; Liu et al. 2004). McKnight and colleagues (1998) suggested the following key dimensions of the development of trust: personal traits, personal interaction, structural

assurance, initial impressions, and situational normality. Similarly, McKnight and Chervany (2001) asserted that predictability, benevolence, ability, and integrity are key factors in forming trust.

Among three SET constructs, the current study adopts the concept of perceived benefit as a key factor affecting SNS user's continuance usage under relevance the research purpose.

Expectation Confirmation Model of IS Continuance (ECM-IS)

In marketing disciplines, the Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) is widely employed to account for a consumer's satisfaction as a difference in a product purchase between pre-purchase and post-purchase expectations (Oliver 1980). ECT has four constructs: expectation, perceived performance, confirmation, and satisfaction. First, each customer builds their own expectations for certain products or services before purchasing activity. Second, after consuming the product or service, a customer then forms a perception on the quality of a product or service based on their initial expectations. Third, the customer makes a comparison between prior perceived performance before purchase and post-perceived expectations. Fourth, the customer then decides the confirmation level; if the customer's pre-purchase expectations were greater than the post-purchase performance, then the confirmation is considered to be negative. On the other hand, confirmation is considered positive when post-purchase performance outweighs the pre-purchase expectations. These relationships have played an important role in explaining the connection between customer satisfaction and confirmation in marketing and consumer research, as well as in information systems (Lin et al. 2005). Last, customers whose satisfaction levels are high return to the original purchase place to continue their purchasing activities. Otherwise, dissatisfied customers switch the purchase channel or place.

However, even though the construct of pre-expectation plays a role in determining the degree of confirmation, its importance has been subject to debate, and it is constantly being updated by the mass media and third-party opinions (LaTour and Peat 1979). In response to this potential problem, Bhattacherjee (2001) formulated the expectation confirmation model of Information Systems continuance (ECM-IS), which sheds light on perceived usefulness, as a mediator between confirmation and satisfaction, and the ECM-IS model declined expectation construct from the original ECT model.

Bhattacherjee's (2001) ECM-IS places more significance on post-purchase expectation than pre-purchase expectation. The confirmation and satisfaction constructs cover pre-purchase expectations such that confirmation implies a level of benefit that is acquired from a consumer's prior IS usage experience. Furthermore, with respect to IS use, Bhattacherjee's (2001) ECM-IS employed the perceived usefulness construct as a surrogate for post-purchase expectation because much of the literature on IS adoption and its usage has stated that perceived usefulness is representative of a consumer's intention to use IS. He assumed that confirmation has a positive relationship on perceived usefulness and that IS users adjust the level of perceived usefulness downward when uncertainty was involved, which explains the IS users' weak perceived usefulness ratings after their initial use. Prior literature revealed that ECM-IS potentially explained this finding better than ECT alone (Thong et al. 2006).

Under the notions of ECT and ECM-IS, the current study employs a confirmation construct to explain SNS users' perception between pre- and post-usage of SNS as it affects SNS users' perceived benefits. Additionally, satisfaction is replaced with perceived benefit to focus on reciprocation characteristics in the context of social networking sites

Perceived Enjoyment and Concentration

The concept of flow has been adopted by IS researchers to examine users' total involvement while using a computer communication medium in the context of IS (Koufaris 2002). Unlike perceived usefulness, which is anchored in extrinsic motivation and defined as "the desire to perform an activity because it is perceived to lead to distinct and valued outcomes" (Lu et al. 2009), a state of flow generally stems from intrinsic motivation, which is focused more on the desire to engage in an activity.

In a seminal study on the concept of flow, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defined flow as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (p. 4). Similarly, Hsu and Lu (2004) viewed the state of flow as an extremely enjoyable experience in the context of an online game. This implies that the intrinsic

motivations of people in flow states result in reduced awareness of themselves, a sense of control, and a loss of self-consciousness in an activity (Agarwal and Karahanna 2000). It is "a narrowing of the focus of awareness, so that irrelevant perceptions and thoughts are filtered out, by loss of self-consciousness, by responsiveness to clear goals and unambiguous feedback, and by a sense of control over the environment" (Csikszentmihalyi 1977).

Although the concept of flow has been acknowledged in many academic disciplines as a state of absorbance in an activity and total involvement with no awareness, measuring an individual's state of flow is regarded as being rather complex because of the term's unclear definition and the multiple dimensions addressed by many researchers (Hsu and Lu 2004). Originally, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggested four dimensions: intense concentration, a loss of self-consciousness, a sense of being in control, and a transformation of time. Afterward, Ghani, Supnick and Rooney (1991) and Ghani and Despande (1994) suggested two dimensions of flow: concentration and perceived enjoyment. Trevino and Webster (1992) then developed four dimensions—control, curiosity, intrinsic interest, and attention focus—as characteristics of people in a flow state, in the context of human–technology interaction. Webster, Trevino, and Ryan (1993) empirically measured the four dimensions (control, curiosity, intrinsic interest, and attention focus) of flow using independently developed items. However, their study had limitations, in that their empirical test did not clearly identify intrinsic interest and due to the sample size (Agarwal and Karahanna 2000). Unlike other scholars, Hoffman and Novak (1996) found that the four dimensions of the flow state served as antecedents, rather than as major dimensions, in the context of a computer-mediated environment. Recently, Li and Browne's (2006) research examined the effect of four dimensions—focused attention, control, temporal dissociation, and curiosity—on two personal aspects: the need for cognition and mood; the findings indicated that only mood was significant with the four dimensions.. Among such arguments has discussed, the current study adopts two constructs (perceived enjoyment and concentration) to explain SNS user's behavioral states because others are irrelevant to consider in the context of SNS.

Research Model and Hypotheses

According to Bhattacherjee's (2001) ECM-IS paradigm, a user's confirmation of expectations positively affects a user's perceived usefulness, in which gaps of dissonance occur (called disconfirmation) when pre-expected usefulness deviates from post-expectations and actual usefulness. Such gaps eliminate themselves, as "confirmation will tend to elevate user's perceived usefulness and disconfirmation will reduce such perception" (2001, 357). From the technology acceptance model (TAM) (Davis 1989), perceived usefulness is rooted from the cost-benefit paradigm, in which the concept is aligned with perceived benefits from SET. Therefore, in the context of SNS, SNS user's favorable confirmation will be positively effect on perceived benefit from communication. Additionally, in the context of an online game community, perceived enjoyment appropriately explains online game users' behaviors as a surrogate of perceived usefulness; the current study adopts perceived enjoyment as another surrogate of perceived usefulness in the context of social networking sites, which is one of types of online community (Jin et al. 2010).

In a flow experience, an individual may be deeply involved in activities, called concentration. However, several environmental factors are able to distract an individual's concentration on certain activities. On one hand, for example, in the context of online transactions in front of computers, online buyers receiving instant messages, telephone calls, or interruptions from other peers will have significantly distracting individual experiences (Koufaris 2002). On the other hand, in terms of an individual's internal cognitive perspective, dissatisfied emotional and cognitive states, which are negative confirmations anchored in pre-expectations outweighing post-performance, will tend to attenuate interest and involvement in activities.

Therefore, in the context of an SNS and its use, the current study posits that favorable confirmation states of SNS usage will positively influence users' perceived enjoyment and benefits, as well as the degree of SNS activity concentration; it hypothesizes that:

> **H1**: An SNS user's confirmation will be positively associated with the user's perceived enjoyment (H1a), perceived benefits from the SNS (H1b), and concentration on Facebook use (H1c).

Perceived enjoyment is defined as "the extent to which the activity of using a specific system is perceived to be enjoyable in its own right, aside from any performance consequences resulting from system use" (Lu et al. 2009). In

prior literature, perceived enjoyment has been a highly influential factor in IS acceptance as a user's intrinsic motivation to be involved in IS usage (Davis et al. 1992). A number of prior studies have indicated that perceived enjoyment induced users' feelings of pleasure and fun in a CMC environment (e.g., instant messaging and email) and had a positive effect on users' post-adoption of CMC technology use (Lu et al. 2009; Trevino and Webster 1992). Perceived enjoyment was also a key factor in the formation of sellers returning to an auction marketplace (Sun 2010). In the context of SNSs, more perceived enjoyment derives from SNS users' intrinsic motivation, which is anchored in feelings of pleasure, to return to the SNS. For example, perceived enjoyment of online gaming positively influenced online game players' continuance intention (Lee and Tsai 2010).

From a technology acceptance model (TAM) perspective, perceived usefulness is anchored in a cost-benefit paradigm; this is aligned with the concept of perceived benefit, in which perceived usefulness serves as extrinsic motivation to achieve specific goals (Hsu and Lu 2007). In terms of CMC usage, CMC users' main motivation for media use is to communicate with others, which will be the main goal of media use. Therefore, more emotionally benefits, which are feelings of pleasures and intrinsic motivation, create more benefits, which are extrinsic motivations for media usage, in order to communicate with others. Therefore, under the given arguments, this study posits, in the context of SNSs:

> **H2**: An SNS user's perceived enjoyment from the SNS will be positively associated with the user's perceived benefits (H2a) and intention to continue using the SNS (H2b).

Concentration is another important dimension related to users becoming absorbed in a state of flow, because performing multiple, simultaneous tasks prevents users from focusing their attention (Koufaris 2002; Lu et al. 2009; Novak et al. 2000). Li and Browne (2006) asserted that a bad mood diminishes a user's focused attention in the HCI environment, because it results in the users seeking external information to rectify a distressed internal state. From a CMC perspective, Lu et al.'s (2009) study found that instant messaging (IM) usage enabled users to become so engrossed in chatting or gaming with other parties that it drew them into a state of flow and resulted in the formation of favorable behavior intentions. Therefore, in terms of beneficial impact SNS user perceive, concentration on SNS activities drives a creation of more perceive benefit such as focused communication with peers. Accordingly, the current study hypotheses:

> **H3**: An SNS user's concentration while using the SNS will be positively associated with the user's perceived benefits from the SNS.

Prior studies have shown that perceived benefits have a positive impact on information systems users' continuance use intention and their actual usage. For instance, online trading system users perceived more benefits, which led to the intention to further online trade through the system (Lee 2009). In reference to actual continuance use, perceived benefits are a key factor affecting ongoing reciprocal behaviors whose ongoing relationships resulted from an individual's actual continuance behaviors according to SET; from a marketing perspective, relational (perceived) benefits play a significant role in building prolonged actual relationships (Park and Kim 2006).
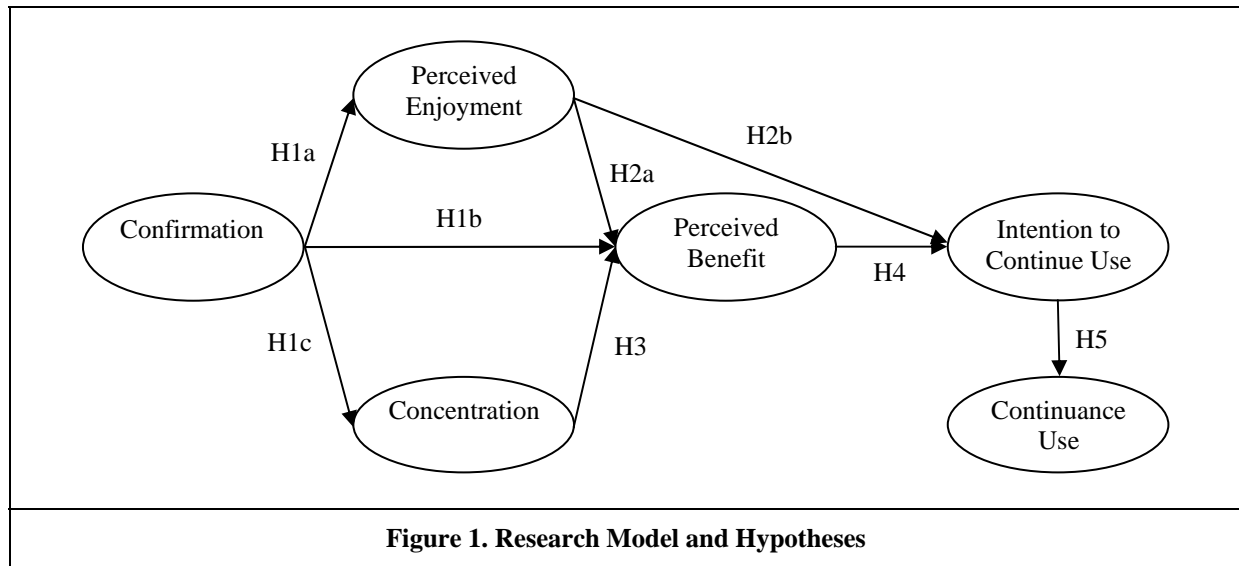
Given that an SNS is a type of online community, when an SNS user perceives a benefit to his or her use of an SNS, that benefit will have a positive effect on his or her intention to continue using the SNS. Therefore, this study hypothesizes the following:

> **H4**: An SNS user's perceived benefit from the SNS will be positively associated with the user's intention to continue using the SNS.

Many human behavior studies and theories support measuring behaviors as an ultimate goal; human behavioral theories, such as TRA and TAM, assume that prior intention to continue usage is an outstanding antecedent of actual behavior (Bhattacherjee et al. 2008). Recently, Bhattacherjee's (2008) research extended the ECM-IS model by including actual continuance behavior, from intention to continuance, and aligning it with other behavioral theories, such as TPB and TAM. Empirically, his findings confirmed that continuance intentions positively affected continuance behaviors, in the context of document management system usage. Therefore, in the context of SNSs and their use, the positive intention to use an SNS will positively impact actual continuance behaviors with the SNS, which is in line with prior findings. Thus, we posit:

H5: An SNS user's intention to continue using the SNS will be positively associated with the user's actual continuance use of the SNS

The research model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research Model and Hypotheses

Research Method

Research Context

The current study selects Facebook (facebook.com), one of the most popular SNSs, as its research context. Facebook, as of the end of March 2012, has more than 901 million active users; more than 500 million active users log on every day and use 70 different languages, and 80%, or more than 720 million of them reside outside of the United States. More than 488 million Facebook users access the site via mobile devices such as smartphones or iPads (Facebook 2012).

Selection of Measurement Items and Data Collection

This study adopts a total 6 constructs using a web-based survey. All survey questions use a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items measuring perceived benefit is adapted from Jin et al. (2010); items measuring confirmation and intention to continue use are adapted from Bhattacherjee (2001); items measuring perceived enjoyment and concentration are adapted from Koufaris (2002); items measuring actual continuance use is adapted from Bhattacherjee (2008). The items are Facebook specific.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors affecting SNS users' continuance usage by incorporating theories—social exchange theory, expectation confirmation theory, and flow experience. In the empirical research model, a total of 8 hypotheses are suggested, and the author will test them with the partial least squares (PLS) method using SmartPLS (Ringle et al. 2005). This study is in progress, as of now, so that data will be collected from the general public using a web-based survey. The current study aims to contribute to the ability to explain SNS user behaviors. First, social exchange theory has not been much applied for explaining social media users (i.e. SNSs and their users in the current study) and their behaviors yet. Therefore, research findings will provide foundational supports of SNS users' behaviors and implications to both theories and practices under the concept of beneficial reciprocation as a motivational factor. Second, the current study also attempts to extend ECT and to modify Bhattacherjee's (2001) ECM-IS model by incorporating constructs from flow experience and social exchange theory in the context of SNSs and SNSs users. Since ECM-IS model has been suggested, many scholars adopted the model

itself or the modified model to explain IS user's retention behaviors. However, few research has covered IS users specified behaviors in the context of electronic communication media or no appropriate constructs have applied for. Therefore, the current study will contribute to suggest another application of ECM-IS and its modification in the media context. Last, ultimately, the current study aims at suggesting social media user's retention behavior model by incorporating social psychological theories. The research model suggested in present study will contribute the base of retention behavior model in the context of social media.

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