Predicting Social Networking Site (SNS) use: Personality, attitudes, motivation and Internet self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Few studies have considered the personal characteristics that may predict the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs). We examined the prediction of SNS use from distinct personality traits (i.e., sociability and shyness), attitudes toward SNS use, motivations for SNS use and Internet self-efficacy. Participants were 352 Chinese college students who used the QQ zone. Results indicated that sociability, shyness, attitudes, motivations and self-efficacy predicted SNS use, prediction depending on the function of SNS use. Specifically, sociability, attitudes, social interaction motivation, entertainment motivation and self-efficacy were significant predictors of SNS's social function. In contrast, shyness, attitudes, relaxing entertainment motivation and self-efficacy were significant predictors of its recreational function.

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1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of young adults with access to the Internet and a proliferation of Internet applications available for social and recreational functions. One such application is the Social Networking Site (SNS), a virtual community that allows users to communicate with each other, engage in a variety of social and recreational activities and, to a lesser extent, acquire needed or desired information. Decades of psychological research indicates that the primary developmental task of young adults is to establish close relationships with peers and intimate relationships with a romantic partner (Brown & Larson, 2009). Young adults' peer groups are their most important source of social support, more important than their families (Brown & Larson, 2009).

Researchers, recognizing the potential importance of SNS use to young adults' development, have been working to identify the personal characteristics that best predict use (Deng, Liu, Li, & Hu, 2013; Lee, Ahn, & Kim, 2014; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Seidman, 2013). However, a review of the literature reveals that our knowledge of predictors use is still limited for a number of reasons. First, predictors identified in previous research have been, at best, only weak predictors of SNS use. The Big Five personality factors are among the most frequently examined predictors but findings indicate that they explain only a small percentage of the variance in use (Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012; Orr et al., 2009). This may be attributable to the fact that the Big Five factors are too broad to render predictions of specific behavior. More narrow and distinctive personality traits, such as sociability and shyness, may be better at predicting SNS use.

Second, research that has examined the influence of motivations on SNS use suggests that motivations should be included along with personality factors in predicting use. According to Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), motivations should be even more important predictors of SNS use than personality traits because motivations are more proximal causes of behavior than personality (Ajzen, 1991). Thus, examining motivational and personality influences in the same design will deepen our understanding of SNS use.

Third, within the SNS research there are concerns about how use has been measured. Use is often measured by a single item or by the total amount of time spent on SNSs. These single-item measures are of questionable reliability. One exception is a study by Smock, Ellison, Lampe, and Wohn (2011), where use of specific Facebook features was measured by a set of items about frequency of use. However, measures used in that study focused only the social activity of SNS use, such as status updates, while other

important functions, such as the recreational function (e.g., relaxing entertainment) were not considered. Although there are also several studies which have measured SNSs use with multiple-item measures, the types of SNSs activities were not differentiated (Kwon & Wen, 2010; Wang, 2013). Measures of SNS that include the multiple motives that may be satisfied by SNS use would provide a more complete understanding of why so many people spend so much time on SNSs.

The present research was designed to overcome the limitations of previous research and thus extend our knowledge of the predictors of SNS use. Using a sample of young adults in China (college students), we examined the influence of two distinct personality traits – sociability and shyness, multiple motivations for SNS use, attitudes toward SNS use and Internet self-efficacy on SNS usage.

1.1. The QQ zone in China

The QQ zone is one of the most popular SNSs among Chinese young adults. Based on our own pilot study, Chinese college students use the QQ zone for the two functions discussed earlier – a social function (e.g., social interaction) and a recreational function (e.g., relaxing entertainment). These two functions encompass the top seven functions of SNSs reported by the most recent CNNIC report (2013). Specifically, the report indicates that keeping in touch with old friends, reading news, passing time, playing games, searching for old friends, making new friends, writing blogs and uploading photos are the top features that attract young adults to SNS use.

1.2. Predictors of SNSs use

1.2.1. Personality traits: sociability and shyness

Sociability is frequently included in research on SNS use because of its presumed importance to the development and maintenance of virtual communities. Individuals high in sociability tend to be conversational and interpersonally active and enjoy being the focus of others' attention (Lee & Ashton, 2004), suggesting that they have a strong need to belong to groups such as SNS groups. Research supports the view that sociability predicts online socializing. For example, a study by Gangadharbatla (2008) found that individuals who were high in the "desire to belong" were more likely to use SNSs than individuals low in the belongingness desire. Therefore we hypothesized that sociability will predict SNS use for its social function. Greater sociability will predict greater SNS use (Hypothesis 1).

Shyness is defined as discomfort and inhibition that occurs during normally expected social behavior in the presence of strangers or casual acquaintances. Shy individuals feel insecure and anxious about being evaluated or rejected by others during face-to-face social interactions (Ebeling-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007; Ryan & Xenos, 2011). Previous studies found that shy people tend to use SNSs more than do non-shy people (Orr et al., 2009; Sheldon, 2008). In another study by Ryan and Xenos (2011), however, shyness was negatively related to chat room activity and positively related to passive engagement activities. It is reasonable that shy people may use SNSs more for their recreational function because, although anonymity is assumed on SNSs, it is not guaranteed. There are often user-identifying factors that make social judgments of those who use SNSs possible. This may hinder the shy individual from engaging in any of the social functions available on SNSs. Therefore, we hypothesized that shyness will be negatively related to using the social activities available on SNSs (Hypothesis 2) and positively related to using its recreational function activities (Hypothesis 3).

1.2.2. Motivations for SNS use

The U&G Theory's holds that individuals are active and goal-directed in their media use and intentionally choose media and content to gratify psychological needs or motivations (Katz et al., 1974). These psychological needs or motivations may include relaxation, social interactions, companionship, habitual pass time, professional advancement, expressive information sharing, or escape (e.g., Smock et al., 2011). U&G suggests that multiple media compete for users' attention, and users select the medium that satisfy their needs. Hence, it is rational that individuals use certain SNSs features because they obtain something out of that experience. Weibull (1985) suggested that individual needs lead people to select certain media to satisfy those needs, which in turn leads them to use that medium again because using it was gratifying. The U&G takes into account not only the gratifications people search for in a media but also the attitudes of the audience towards the medium and its contents (Fagerlind & Kihlman, 2000). Additionally, it underlines the role of individual differences (e.g., personality traits) in selecting media, and holds that users utilize media to gratify their felt needs arising from social and psychological conditions. Moreover, U&G considers the role of self-efficacy in determining users' behaviors, because Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) proposed that gratifications sought and obtained can be regarded as an expectancy value in explaining how needs influence media use selection, which is closely tied to self-efficacy.

Prior studies have applied U&G Theory to investigate the relationship between motivations and SNS use and found that SNSs can satisfy different needs among users (Smock et al., 2011). Smock et al. (2011) examined the predictive effects of users' motivations on collection of Facebook features. They found a correspondence between users' motivations and the SNS feature they used. The motivation for social interaction predicted commenting, private messaging and chatting. For users with social interaction motives these one-to-one communication features of SNSs can fulfill their social interaction needs because they promote more direct communication with another or others (Smock et al., 2011). Considering the evidence that a variety of motivations can be satisfied by using different SNS features, we hypothesized that motivations will predict which features of SNSs will be used. Social motivations will predict greater use of the social features of SNSs whereas recreational motivation will predict greater use of the recreational features of SNSs (Hypothesis 4).

1.2.3. Attitudes for SNS use

According to Theory of Reasoned Action, individuals' attitude toward a behavior would influence his or her intention towards a specific behavior, which in turn influence the target behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Research has confirmed a positive relationship between attitudes toward the Internet and Internet use (Poude, Zamani, & Abedi, 2011; Tsai et al., 2009). Shin and Shin (2011) found that attitude plays an influential role in users' intention to use SNS. Therefore, we hypothesized that attitudes toward SNS use will predict actual SNS use (Hypothesis 5).

1.2.4. Internet self-efficacy and SNS use

Self-efficacy is defined as a belief in one's ability to perform a given task (Bandura, 2000). Individuals perceived higher capabilities often approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered, while those with lower confidence in their abilities hold themselves back from such tasks. In terms of Internet self-efficacy, it was found to be related to Internet use, with higher levels of self-efficacy predicting higher levels of use (Eastin & LaRose, 2000). When using Internet, individuals need to master skills in establishing and maintaining Internet connection, as well as using the applications offered on Internet. This might scare off those users with little computer experience (Igbaria & Iivari, 1995). For