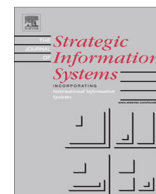




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Why men and women continue to use social networking sites: The role of gender differences

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ABSTRACT

Organizations increasingly use social media and especially social networking sites (SNS) to support their marketing agenda, enhance collaboration, and develop new capabilities. However, the success of SNS initiatives is largely dependent on sustainable user participation. In this study, we argue that the continuance intentions of users may be gender-sensitive. To theorize and investigate gender differences in the determinants of continuance intentions, this study draws on the expectation-confirmation model, the uses and gratification theory, as well as the self-construal theory and its extensions. Our survey of 488 users shows that while both men and women are motivated by the ability to self-enhance, there are some gender differences. Specifically, while women are mainly driven by relational uses, such as maintaining close ties and getting access to social information on close and distant networks, men base their continuance intentions on their ability to gain information of a general nature. Our research makes several contributions to the discourse in strategic information systems literature concerning the use of social media by individuals and organizations. Theoretically, it expands the understanding of the phenomenon of continuance intentions and specifically the role of the gender differences in its determinants. On a practical level, it delivers insights for SNS providers and marketers into how satisfaction and continuance intentions of male and female SNS users can be differentially promoted. Furthermore, as organizations increasingly rely on corporate social networks to foster collaboration and innovation, our insights deliver initial recommendations on how organizational social media initiatives can be supported with regard to gender-based differences.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, social networking sites (SNSs) have evolved from being purely hedonic platforms for private use into potent organizational tools used both internally within an organization and externally for communication and collaboration with various stakeholders (Aral et al., 2013; Jarvenpaa et al., 2015). Internally, embedding SNSs within organizations has been linked to enhanced participation (Denyer et al., 2011; Haefliger et al., 2011) and communication (Miles and Mangold, 2014), empowering employees with a voice in organizational matters. As the workforce becomes increasingly

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mobile, the social fabric created by social media may promote a greater sense of connectedness among employees, enhancing their commitment (Huang et al., 2015) and innovative performance (Ali-Hassan et al., 2015). Externally, SNSs have triggered unprecedented changes in customer relationship management, turning customers into co-creators of company value (Benthaus et al., 2016). Indeed, with 1.18 billion users on Facebook alone (Facebook, 2016), SNSs present companies with unique opportunities to connect with their customers, hear their voice, and engage with them on a more personal level. So far, company participation on social media has been linked to improvements in company reputation (Kim and Ko, 2010), customer equity (Kim and Ko, 2012), and even enhanced purchase behavior (Goh et al., 2013). Considering this potential for value, executives increasingly view social media as “a key strategic enabler” (Huang et al., 2015, p. 58).

However, this potential of SNSs to create value within and beyond an organizational context is contingent on users' willingness to continue using the platform, also known as their *continuance intentions* (Bhattacharjee, 2001). Many SNS providers have not managed to retain the interest of their audiences for long. In the private domain, platforms like Friendster, MySpace, StudiVZ, and Bebo – all once successful – lost members after a relatively short time. Even the SNS giant Facebook is not immune to these threats, as it continues to face a decline in users among its key demographics, such as teenagers (Olson, 2013). Marketers also struggle with shrinking organic reach on Facebook (Constine, 2014), making it increasingly harder for them to sustain user engagement with brand content. Similar trends have been also reported in the enterprise context, with less than half of corporate social networks used regularly (Li, 2015). Indeed, inability to sustain continued use is among the key factors behind failed information technology (IT) initiatives (e.g., Karahanna and Straub, 1999). Considering these dynamics, identifying and addressing the determinants of continuance intentions is a critical task not only for SNS providers but also for organizations who rely on social media to support their marketing strategy and employee collaboration (Jarvenpaa et al., 2015; Chang and Zhu, 2012; Chiu and Huang, 2015; Shi et al., 2010).

So far, multiple studies have attempted to identify the determinants of SNS continuance intentions, mainly in private use (e.g., Sledgianowski and Kulviwat, 2008). However, most of these studies treat SNS users as a homogeneous entity, ignoring potential group differences (Teo and Lim, 2000). At the same time, the increasing diversity of the SNS audience calls for a differential approach to encourage continued user participation. Gender differences in particular may have a pronounced effect on user willingness to further engage with a platform (e.g., Lin et al., in press). Indeed, past studies have identified significant differences in the patterns of IT use by men and women (e.g., Venkatesh and Morris, 2000; Venkatesh et al., 2012), suggesting that the determinants of continuance intentions of male and female SNS members may also differ.

From the perspective of strategic information systems, understanding gender differences in the continued use of SNSs is critical for several reasons (Lin et al., in press). First, gender groups are, by definition, the largest and easiest for SNS providers and marketers to identify. This is because indicating gender is typically required for registration on SNSs and the overwhelming majority of SNS users leave their gender information public (Gross and Acquisti, 2005). Therefore, obtained knowledge on gender differences can be leveraged in ad targeting, feature selection, and interface design. Second, since more and more companies rely on social media brand communities (e.g. private Facebook groups) to build trust and fuel interaction (Porterfield, 2016), they might use their knowledge of gender differences to adjust their communication and copywriting to better cater to the specific needs of their audiences. This is particularly important considering the constantly decreasing levels of organic reach for Facebook pages (Constine, 2014). Third, in contrast to traditional patterns of IT diffusion that emphasize the role of male users as early adopters (Laukkanen and Pasanen, 2008), social media is increasingly popular among women (socialbakers.com, 2014). Women are also more prone to generate word-of-mouth on social media, by commenting, posting, and “liking” content (Hampton et al., 2012, 2011), as well as recommending products to others (Goudreau, 2010; Levey, 2011). Since user-generated word-of-mouth has a stronger impact on consumer purchase behavior than marketer-generated content (Goh et al., 2013), providers and marketers have a special interest in understanding and supporting engagement of the female user segment. Overall, by identifying and addressing the unique characteristics of gender-based groups, platform providers may hope for significant improvements in the sustainability of their user base (Shi et al., 2009, 2010).

Nonetheless, systematic research that addresses gender differences in the context of SNSs is: (1) limited; (2) mainly built around theories of continued information systems (IS) use rather than directed by gender-related theorizing (Shi et al., 2009); and (3) primarily focused on capturing absolute differences in perceptions and behavior of male and female SNS users (Hampton et al., 2011), as opposed to taking a more theory-driven view of the phenomenon (Trauth, 2013). To fill this research gap, we investigate the following research question: What are the gender differences in the determinants of continuance intentions of SNS users?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In the subsequent section, we draw on the expectation-confirmation model (Bhattacharjee, 2001) as well as the uses and gratification theory (Blumer and Katz, 1974) to develop the conceptual model for our study. Specifically, we conceptualize SNS continuance intentions as the outcome of users' satisfaction, which in turn is determined by the gratifications¹ users obtain on an SNS. Next, the theory of gendered self-construal is used to derive the role of gender in the relationships outlined in our model. In the following step, we derive hypotheses about the moderating role of gender in defining the impact of various gratifications on user satisfaction, and thereby, continuance intentions. After this, we test our hypotheses on a sample of 488 SNS users. We conclude by discussing our findings, their theoretical and practical implications, as well as the limitations of this study and related avenues for future research.

¹ The terms “benefit” and “gratification” are used interchangeably in this study.

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