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Expectations of social networking site users who share and acquire health-related information[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Researchers in the public health and the management information systems fields have attempted to improve understanding of the intentions of people who use social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and blogs) to share and acquire health-related information. The aim of this study was to identify factors (e.g., opportunities for socializing and self-improvement of health) that affect the performance expectations of people who use social networking sites for this purpose. The analytical framework was the theory of planned behavior. Data from a survey of 203 active Facebook users in Taiwan revealed that both attitude and subjective norms were significantly associated with behavioral intention. Additionally, behavioral intention significantly affected health-related information sharing and acquisition. Finally, health-related information sharing and acquisition significantly affected socializing activity, but health-related self-improvement did not. The theoretical and practical implications of this study are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The growing popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) has motivated researchers to explore the roles of these sites in improving understanding of health-related concepts and in inducing health-promoting behaviors in their users [1]. A social networking site is defined as a web-based platform that can be accessed by a specified group of subscribers who use the platform for communicating, collaborating, sharing interests, or publishing content [2]. A Harris Interactive Poll indicates that approximately 74% of adults had received or disseminated health-related information on the Internet (including via social networking sites), and the prevalence ratio is continually increasing [3]. Additionally, social networking sites are now among the most common ways to access health-related information on the Internet.

To maximize the advantages of this novel technology platform, social networking sites providers require a clear understanding of the factors that affect the use of social networking sites for acquiring and sharing health-related information. This study investigates these factors by applying the theory of planned behavior (TPB), which has demonstrated content validity in studies of health communications and online behaviors [4]. Notably, studies of information acquisition and sharing

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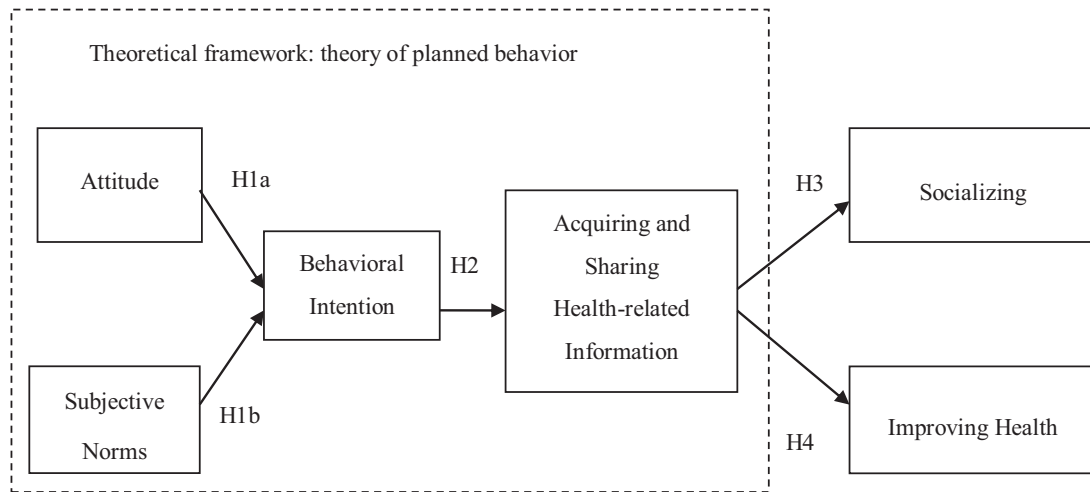


Fig. 1. Research model.

in three social networking sites have found that the most important performance expectations for these online activities were opportunities to socialize and self-improvement of health [3,5]. Thus, socializing and health self-improvement were used as dependent variables to reflect the performance expectations of social networking site users who acquire and share health-related information in the context of this study.

A review of the extant literature shows that no studies have used the theory of planned behavior to investigate the behaviors of social networking sites users who acquire and share health-related information. Thus, the aim of this study was to narrow this gap in the literature by answering the following two questions:

- (1) According to the theory of planned behavior, what factors affect the acquiring and sharing of health-related information by social networking sites users?
- (2) To what extent do social networking site users acquire and share health-related information in order to socialize and to improve health?

This paper is organized as follows. First, the existing literature on the theory of planned behavior and on health-related information sharing and acquisition on social networking site are reviewed. Our research model and hypotheses are then proposed. Second, the research methodology and data analyses are described. Finally, the major findings of this study and their implications for theory and practice are discussed.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

Fig. 1 shows the research model.

2.1. Theory of planned behavior

The theory of planned behavior developed by Ajzen [6] is a socio-psychological theory of how certain factors affect a particular behavior. The three main factors considered in a theory of planned behavior analysis are attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control [6]. According to the definitions proposed in Beck and Ajzen [7], attitude refers to individual feelings or actions; subjective norms are individual perceptions of social pressure to perform or not perform a behavior; perceived behavioral control refers to the self-perceived ability to perform a given behavior. Since using a social networking site is a voluntary activity, users who lack confidence in their ability to acquire and share health-related information are expected to have difficulty performing these behaviors [8]; hence, the analysis in this study did not consider perceived behavioral control. That is, of the three components in the theory of planned behavior, this study only analyzed two components (i.e., attitude and subjective norms) to explore how antecedents of behavioral intention affect the use of social networking sites for sharing and acquiring health-related information.

According to the theory of planned behavior framework, behavioral intention is a consequence of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Behavioral intention refers to the self-perceived likelihood of being able to perform a given behavior [9]. The effects of attitude and subjective norms on behavioral intention have been demonstrated in studies such as George [10], who reported that attitude and subjective norms have significant positive impacts on the purchase intentions of e-commerce website users. In Al-Debei et al. [11], a study of 403 college students who used Facebook also showed that attitude and subjective norms significantly affected their intentions to continue using Facebook. Thus, this study tested the following two hypotheses:

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