



Seniors' loyalty to social network sites: Effects of social capital and attachment



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ABSTRACT

The populations of seniors in developed countries around the world are increasing rapidly, resulting in changes in social dynamics and purchasing behaviors, specifically in information technology and tourism. This study analyzes relationships among bonding and bridging social capital (SC), interpersonal, group, and site attachments, and loyalty to identify what makes seniors loyal to social network sites (SNSs) for tourism. Results show that bonding SC affects interpersonal and group attachment and that bridging SC highly influences interpersonal and group attachment. Also, interpersonal attachment has a positive effect on group attachment, which, in turn, is highly influential on site attachment. In particular, group attachment has a strong effect on site attachment, but interpersonal attachment is not shown to affect site attachment. It is also notable that loyalty to SNSs is greatly influenced by site attachment. The findings contribute to the academic literature and provide useful information for practitioners maintaining SNSs.

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1. Introduction

The populations of seniors in developed countries around the world are increasing rapidly, resulting in changes in social dynamics and purchasing behaviors, specifically in the tourism domain (Alén, Losada, & de Carlos, 2015; Chen & Shoemaker, 2014; Kim, Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2013). The segment of the population 50 years old and over in South Korea (hereafter “Korea”) is expected to reach 43.3% of the population by 2020, up from 33.6% in 2015 [Korean Statistical Information Service (KSIS, 2014)]. For purposes of this study, as in prior research, those 50 years old and over are defined as seniors (e.g., Anderson & Langmeyer, 1982; Kim et al., 2013). This demographic shift is important to the tourism industry because seniors are interested in travel and have ample time and income to engage in tourism (Kazeminia, Del Chiappa, & Jafari, 2015; Mahadevan, 2014). As the size of the aging population grows and information technologies continue to develop, industries must learn how to create websites that meet the preferences and needs of seniors (Mitzner et al., 2010). In response, some information technology companies are developing websites and applications specifically for

this segment of the population (Lee, Chen, & Hewitt, 2011). Moreover, social network sites (SNSs) play important roles in planning for travel and sharing travel and post-travel experiences as well as in providing travel information, reservation systems, and purchase opportunities for tourism products and services (Thu, 2015).

Seniors are more interested in using SNSs than ever before (Pew Research Center, 2014; The World Ages, 2013). According to Kim (2015), in Korea, the number of seniors using SNSs grew 127.6% from 2013 to 2014, six times faster than the number of non-seniors using SNSs (21.5%). Using SNSs is beneficial to seniors in terms of keeping in touch with their families and relatives, making new friends, keeping in touch with old friends, and getting information, since seniors are likely to have plenty of time but are not as mobile as when they were young (Cohen, 2014). Seniors are one of the fastest growing population groups on social networks, actively searching on Google, browsing Facebook, and watching YouTube videos (Beese, 2013). According to the Pew Research Center (2014), 46% of those 65 years of age and over who use the Internet, accounting for 27% of this segment of the population, use SNSs (e.g., Facebook), and these social network users connect more persistently with the people they care about than non-users.

For many seniors who live alone, SNSs facilitate the formation and cultivation of relationships; those who live far away from loved ones use SNSs to bridge the geographic gap (Cohen, 2014; The World Ages, 2013). In addition, research on senior SNS users

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suggests that SNSs improve quality of life (Cornejo, 2010), assist those seeking relationships (VandeWeerd et al., 2014), and reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness (Fritsch, Steinke, & Silbermann, 2013). Other studies have shown that in the context of tourism, SNSs are used for information searching (Chung & Koo, 2014), customer engagement (Cabiddu, Carlo, & Piccoli, 2014), and word-of-mouth (Luo & Zhong, 2015). Despite the importance of seniors' usage of SNSs for tourism-related activities, previous studies have not examined this important topic. Accordingly, this study examines seniors' behavior on SNSs when used for tourism-related purposes.

Social capital (SC) is defined as "the good-will that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and that can be mobilized to facilitate action" (Adler & Kwon, 2002, p. 17). SC has two dimensions, bonding SC, which consists of internal relations, and bridging SC, which consists of external relations (Adler & Kwon, 2002). While bonding SC creates solid ties that tend to be strong and exclusive, creating social solidarity, bridging SC creates diverse networks that often yield new information and resources; such networks are considered weak ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). An extensive body of research has examined the roles of bonding and bridging SC in usage of SNSs by all users (e.g., Chang & Zhu, 2012; Chung & Koo, 2012; Ellison et al., 2007; Lee, 2013; Maghrabi, Oakley, & Nemati, 2014; Vock, van Dolen, & de Ruyter, 2013); however, there is no research of which the authors are aware that specifically focuses on bonding and bridging SC of seniors' using SNSs for tourism-related activities.

SC resources consist of trust, norms, and networks of associations representing any group that gathers persistently for a common purpose (Garson, 2006). SC has been demonstrated to be useful in explaining senior networks (e.g., Keating & Dosman, 2009) and SNSs for tourism-related activities (e.g., Cabiddu et al., 2014; Chung & Koo, 2014; Luo & Zhong, 2015). However, studies on seniors applying SC theory have not been conducted in the tourism domain. Since senior tourism is a growing and lucrative market (Alén et al., 2015; Chen & Shoemaker, 2014; Kim et al., 2013), such studies, applying SC, may be valuable in explaining why and how seniors are loyal to SNSs.

Other theories have also proven helpful in understanding use of SNSs. In recent years, SNSs have been widely used as communication tools by individuals (Chang & Zhu, 2012). For example, Facebook, a leading SNS tool, broadcasts messages to large audiences through chats, status updates, and wall posts (Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). SNSs are more likely individual-oriented sites (Ellison et al., 2007) whereas online communities are more likely group-oriented sites (Ren et al., 2012). However, online communities and SNSs have many similarities in terms of the ways members communicate and interact with each other, such as chatting, updating status, searching for information, posting opinions and news, and exchanging ideas and experiences (Chung, Nam, & Koo, 2016). Online communities and SNSs also have many similarities in their methods of recruiting and retaining members, for example, by increasing users' motivations, social capital, attachments, and loyalty to their sites (Chung et al., 2016; Ellison et al., 2007; Lee, 2013; Ren et al., 2012; Smock et al., 2011). Because of these strong similarities, this study regards online communities as being comparable to SNSs.

Attachment theory has been demonstrated to be useful in explaining SNS usage (e.g., Chung & Koo, 2012; Chung, Koo, & Park, 2012; Lee, 2013). Strong bonds created between people and between people and objects are explained by attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1977). Several studies have confirmed that attachment theory explains members staying connected to online communities and SNSs, resulting in the subsequent successes of associated businesses (e.g., Chung & Koo, 2012; Fiedler & Sarstedt, 2010; Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007; Ren et al., 2012). Because

attachments have important roles in fundamental relationships among people, attachment theory has been demonstrated to be useful in explaining behavior of SNS users (Chung & Koo, 2012; Chung et al., 2012; Lee, 2013). Thus, this study adopts attachment theory as a theoretical framework for senior SNS users for tourism activities, along with SC theory.

Prentice, Miller, and Lightdale (1994) identified two types of groups to which individuals may belong and these two types of groups have proven useful in predicting differences in behaviors between the two types of groups. In common-identity groups individuals share a social category, for example, the same club or church (Prentice et al., 1994). Common-bond groups are composed of individuals who share interpersonal connections such as friends or acquaintances (Sassenberg, 2002). Fiedler and Sarstedt (2010), Ren et al. (2007), and Qi and Fu (2011) show that users with higher levels of attachment to SNSs have higher levels of loyalty to the SNSs. Martin and Lyday (1997) assert that seniors tend to hold feelings of loyalty that is cultivated by building relationships with other seniors. Accordingly, studies on the linkage between SC and attachment in SNSs are interesting and valuable in order to identify how to influence loyalty to SNSs. However, there has been very little focus on relationships between bonding and bridging SC and interpersonal and group attachments to SNSs. To bridge the gap, this study utilizes SC and attachment theories to explore the relationships between SC and attachment to identify why seniors are loyal to SNSs.

Researchers have shown the importance of SC for seniors in terms of social networks (e.g., de Donder, de Witte, Buffel, Dury, & Verté, 2012; Keating & Dosman, 2009), Internet use (e.g., Choi & Dinitto, 2013; Russell, Campbell, & Hughes, 2008), and well-being (e.g., Cramm, Van Dijk, & Nieboer, 2013; Forsman, Herberts, Nyqvist, Wahlbeck, & Schierenbeck, 2013). The construct of SC has been key in conceptualizing the social ties in seniors' quality of life (Keating & Dosman, 2009). Scholars have demonstrated the differing roles of bonding and bridging SC for seniors in the context of SNSs (e.g., Erickson, 2011; Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009), but such research has not yet been attempted in tourism areas. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine relationships among SC (bonding and bridging), attachments (interpersonal, group, and site attachments), and seniors' loyalty to SNSs in tourism environments. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research question: what makes seniors loyal to SNSs in the tourism context? To answer the research question, this study applies a multi-conceptual approach investigating how bonding and bridging SC are related to interpersonal, group, and site attachment and how these three types of attachments interact with each other in affecting loyalty to SNSs.

This current study provides valuable insights into the complex relationships of bonding and bridging SC, interpersonal, group, and site attachment, and loyalty that underlie senior SNS users' behaviors when using SNSs for tourism purposes and yields important insights that may be useful to SNS managers. Specifically, the results can potentially extend our current theoretical knowledge of the linkage of SC, attachment, and loyalty for SNSs to the context of senior tourism. A stronger understanding, such as this theoretical framework, could also offer SNS practitioners new ways to facilitate use of SNSs by seniors in the context of tourism-related activities.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social network sites in seniors

SNSs provide social support for seniors confronted with difficult life situations, regardless of geographical location or time (Leist, 2013). Use of SNSs by seniors has been shown to overcome lone-

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