



# Applying uses and gratifications theory and social influence processes to understand students' pervasive adoption of social networking sites: Perspectives from the Americas



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 30 June 2015

Received in revised form 26 October 2015

Accepted 7 November 2015

Available online 26 November 2015

### Keywords:

Technology adoption

Pervasive adoption

Embedment

Embracement

Social networking sites

Social influence processes

Uses and gratifications theory

National culture

## ABSTRACT

This study provides nascent information on university students' needs to adopt social networking sites (SNSs) pervasively. The study drew from the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) and social influence (SI) processes framework. Relevant hypotheses were formulated to test the proposed research model. Data was collected in a survey of university undergraduates in four countries in the Americas (i.e., United States, Canada, Mexico, and Argentina). Data analysis using partial least squares (PLS) supported 8 out of the 10 hypotheses formulated. The SI process of internalization and identification, as well as UGT categories of self-discovery, entertainment value, social enhancement, and the need to maintain interpersonal connectivity through the construct of behavioral intentions, were found to have positive impacts on students' pervasive adoption of SNSs. The results also revealed that the cultural factor of individualism–collectivism had a positive impact on the pervasive adoption of SNSs, such that greater levels of engagement were observed for students from more individualistic cultures.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) are web-based services that allow users to connect and interact with one another (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Chiu, Cheng, Huang, Chen, 2013). Essentially, SNSs enable users to form friendships online and to maintain contacts offline as well (Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2005; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Popular SNSs include Facebook, Badoo, Bebo, Friendster, Renren, and LinkedIn. It is worth noting that regional preferences exist in the choice of SNSs. For instance, Badoo is popular in Latin American; Bebo has more users in the United Kingdom (Ku, Chen, & Zhang, 2013), and Renren is popular in China (Bai, Yao, & Dou, 2015). Regardless, the one important fact that remains unchanged across regions of the world is that young adults are engrossed with or pervasively adopt SNSs (DailyMail, 2014; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2015). Among youth, university students' use of SNSs is reported to be alarmingly high (DailyMail, 2014; Junco, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2015; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Smith & Caruso, 2010). In fact, Smith and Caruso (2010) noted

that about 97% of university students in the United States reported actively using an SNS daily. In 2008, a study by Raacke and Bonds-Raacke reported that university students spent about three hours each day on SNSs. The level of students' SNS use has since shot up astronomically (DailyMail, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2015; Pempek et al., 2009; Ryan, Chester, Reece, & Xenos, 2014). For example, a news media outlet in the United Kingdom recently reported that university students in that country spend up to six hours each day on Facebook (DailyMail, 2014). It is possible that higher levels of engagement exist in other parts of the world that have not been reported. It is not surprising that such high levels of student use of SNSs worldwide have become cause for concern (Koc & Gulyagci, 2013; Pempek et al., 2009; Turel & Serenko, 2012).

Recent studies of SNS adoption have discussed the addictive influences of such technologies on youth (Koc & Gulyagci, 2013; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011a, 2011b; Turel & Serenko, 2012; Ryan et al., 2014). The focus of this study is not the addictive effects of SNSs given the established body of work in that area of study. Instead, we are interested in better understanding the factors leading to university students' pervasive adoption of SNSs, with an emphasis on their embedment in, and embracement of, such technologies (Vannoy & Palvia, 2010). To date, several researchers have examined SNS adoption from the perspective of use or usage (characterized by frequency and volume of use), intention to use, and continuance

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usage intentions (Hsu & Wu, 2011; Kang, Min, Kim, & Lee, 2013; Kim, 2011; Ku, Chen et al., 2013; Mäntymäki & Kai Riemer, 2014; Pinho & Soares, 2011; Sledgianowski & Kulviwat, 2009).

To the best of our knowledge, no prior research has investigated the pervasive adoption of SNSs; thus, this current research will add to existing information about SNS adoption. Of note is the fact that very little research has been conducted about the factors likely to influence students' high engagement with and immersion in SNSs (these terms are akin to the notion of pervasive adoption used herein) (Park et al., 2009; Turel & Serenko, 2012). In this study, pervasive adoption refers to the extent to which users of SNSs willingly accept and make SNSs a central part of their lives (Turel & Serenko, 2012; Vannoy & Palvia, 2010). Knowledge of salient influences on students' pervasive adoption of SNSs will help service providers develop appropriate strategies for this particular segment of the population; others, including university administrators and business operators, can benefit from findings and conclusions on the topic.

Social and individual needs, which vary from one person to another, constitute the main reasons why individuals use SNSs (Kang et al., 2013; Jackson & Wang, 2013; Ryan et al., 2014; Park, 2014). In broad terms, some people use SNSs to enhance personal creativity and visibility, while others use them for self-expression (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Koc & Gulyagci, 2013; Lin & Lu, 2011; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Social motives for SNS use include the need to strengthen social ties, collaborate with other SNS members, develop community engagement, and enhance friendships and relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Kavanaugh et al., 2005; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Park et al., 2009; Zhong, Hardin, & Sun 2011). To further understanding of the factors likely to impact students' pervasive adoption of SNSs, it is appropriate to begin by recognizing the critical role of individual user needs, gratifications, and social influence in the discourse. Therefore, this study is based on two relevant theoretical underpinnings (i.e., uses and gratifications theory [UGT] and the social influence [SI] processes framework) that emphasize individual needs and gratifications and social imperatives. By considering both individual needs or gratifications and social influence together, we believe that useful information regarding students' pervasive adoption of SNSs will emerge, which each paradigm alone might not readily offer.

Several previous studies have used UGT (Baek, Holton, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011; Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Hsu, Tien, Lin, & Chang, 2015; Park et al., 2009; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011; Zolkepli & Kamarulzaman, 2015). In investigating the links between components of UGT and SNSs use, these studies demonstrated support for the applicability of the theory in explaining people's acceptance of SNSs and related platforms (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Mäntymäki & Kai Riemer, 2014). Examples of individuals' needs and gratifications commonly cited include information seeking or self-discovery, entertainment or enjoyment, and social enhancement. Knowledge of how such needs impact the pervasive adoption of SNSs is very limited. Given that no prior study has specifically examined the influence of needs and gratifications on students' pervasive adoption of SNSs, we intend to shed light on this aspect. The first research question is as follows:

*RQ1: What are students' needs and gratifications in pervasively adopting SNSs?*

Researchers have suggested that more useful information will emerge when studies focusing on tools such as SNSs, which are primarily designed to accommodate complex social communication and interaction, take into account the role of SI (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Cheung & Lee, 2010; Song & Kim, 2006; Vannoy & Palvia, 2010). Studies that used SI processes to investigate the adoption of SNSs revealed that normative influences or norms boded well for individuals' decisions to use such technologies (Cheung & Lee, 2010; Cheung et al., 2011; Li, 2011; Qin, Kim, Hsu, & Tan,

2011). Based on Kelman (1958, 1974), three commonly used SI processes are compliance, internalization, and identification. However, there is a void in the literature regarding how each of the SI processes impact university students' pervasive adoption of SNSs. This paucity of knowledge motivates the second research question, which is as follows:

*RQ2: Which social influence processes facilitate students' pervasive adoption of SNSs?*

Even though UGT and SI processes are considered pertinent theoretical paradigms that can guide this study, we still accept that richer insight will emerge if the effects of national culture are duly considered. In fact, researchers have shown that national culture is an important factor impacting technology adoption and use (Erunbam & de Jong, 2006; Srite & Karahanna, 2006). National culture is defined as "the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 2001) and has several dimensions. The cultural dimension of individualism–collectivism (ID–CO), which is more applicable to this study and has been widely used in comparable studies, will be considered. The literature reveals that ID–CO accounts for differences between SNSs users across contexts (Hsu et al., 2015; Jackson & Wang, 2013; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Vasalou, Joinson, & Courvoisier, 2010). No prior study has produced information on the impact of ID–CO on university students' pervasive adoption of SNSs. Thus, the third research question, which is designed to help enlighten in this regard, is as follows:

*RQ3: What influence do national cultural differences (as indicated by ID–CO) have on university students' pervasive adoption of SNSs?*

This study is important for a variety of reasons. First, researchers have fused UGT with other relevant theoretical frameworks, such as innovation/diffusion and critical mass theories (Chiang, 2013; Ku, Chen et al., 2013; Zolkepli & Kamarulzaman, 2015). Mäntymäki and Kai Riemer (2014) used UGT and SI to study the continued intention to use virtual worlds. However, studies that have combined UGT and SI processes to examine university students' pervasive adoption of SNSs are rare. UGT and SI processes frameworks complement each other given the commonality of socialization factors in both paradigms. Second, this study's dependent construct, pervasive adoption as operationalized by embedment and embracement, has not been widely used in the literature (Vannoy & Palvia, 2010). We add to the frontier of knowledge relating to SNSs adoption by using such variables. Third, the empirical data, which was collected in the Americas, that is, Canada, the United States, and the Latin American countries of Argentina and Mexico, will provide information that has been under-represented in the literature. For example, very few people have studied SNS adoption in Latin America (e.g., Rocha, Jansen, Lofti, & Fraga, 2013). We argue that perspectives from all other parts of the world benefit from knowledge accumulation in the area.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: background literature on SNSs adoption, the notion of pervasive adoption, national culture, and the theoretical underpinnings of the study are presented. The following section presents the research model and hypotheses. Next, the research methodology and data analysis sections are described. Finally, discussions and conclusion of the study's results are presented.

## 2. Background literature

### 2.1. Related work on SNSs adoption

Several research studies on SNSs adoption by university students and other segments of the population have been conducted across the world (Chang & Zhu, 2012; Kwon & Wen, 2010; Lin &

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