



# Key quality factors affecting users' perception of social networking websites

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The main aim of the present study is to evaluate the quality factors of websites and their effect on users' perceptions about quality in the context of social networking websites.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This is an applied study conducted as a field survey. A conceptual framework of website quality is proposed and empirically tested that combines quality factors and users' overall perception about quality. Based upon conceptual frameworks in the areas of information systems and using responses from 300 users, a seven factors scale has been validated and data were used to test the conceptual model. To test validity of conceptual framework, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted and regression analysis was performed to examine the suggested hypotheses in the conceptual framework.

**Findings:** In this study, six different significant factors namely efficiency, entertainment, community drivenness, privacy, user friendliness, efficiency and navigability were identified to be significant for the service quality of social networking websites. Using the survey conducted in the statistical sample, only the factor of web appearance was identified as less important for social networking website users.

**Practical implications:** Findings from this research provide a set of essential and desired quality factors that social networking website developers can use to improve the quality of existing websites in turn increasing its numbers of users, thus bringing benefits to the company. Second, this study shows how perceived quality has a direct and profound effect on the degree of consumer perception about website quality.

**Originality/value:** This study, expanding a conceptual model, tries to identify the set of service quality factors for social networking websites. The information of these quality factors as a major predictor of consumers' quality perception provides social networking websites management an initial point for making successful quality management practices for their e-commerce.

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## 1. Introduction

There are numerous types of websites such as affiliate, social bookmarking site, social networking site, video sharing, web portal, wiki, blog, brand building site, community site, content site, corporate website and electronic commerce etc. Among all these, social networking websites are built upon the concept of traditional social networks present in the “real world,” which connect users to known and new people having common interests. Social networking websites have become the worldwide consumer fact. Two-thirds of the Internet population in the world are visitors of a social network (Nielsen Company, 2009). The social networking website has become world's fourth most popular online segment. People are spending ample amount of

time on social networking websites such as Facebook, Myspace, Classmates Online, Orkut, LinkedIn, Twitter, Beboo etc., and this high usage has also brought changes in the way people behave. These social networking websites present a variety of features for their users to facilitate socialization.

People use these social networking websites in multiple ways to stay connected online with their offline friends and new online friends, or share photos, videos, bookmarks, blogs, private messages etc. These social networking websites were also used for his election campaign by Barack Obama for the Presidency of the United States in order to convey his message, and to solicit donations etc. (Talbot, 2008). The multipurpose usage of these websites can also be seen in case of Facebook on which a course is being offered in Stanford University, in which students were invited to build attractive applications for Facebook (Baldwin, 2007). Today, Facebook, which was founded in 2004, is being considered the most famous Internet societal group of the world. In the world “three in every ten people” visit this website online (Facebook Statistics, 2008), and “nearly 1 out of every three users

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visits Facebook several times a day; 84% of Facebook users check in at least 1–2 days every single week” (Smith, 2011).

Google has introduced a social networking application Google+ to compete with Facebook social site that has gained much popularity among its users. Google+ offers good features for sharing contents with friends; however, Facebook is a deep-rooted rival with more than 750 million users (Khan, 2011). These social websites offer different applications, designs, and contents for their customers/users. How these websites make themselves different from each other, and how they persuade users to join their social network or how these enhance the quality of their image in users' mind are the questions that need to be addressed. The study of quality factors of social networking websites may provide the answers to these questions. It may be argued that providing quality of features may be the best way to attract members for online community. The quality of services and products is necessary to create customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in a physical environment (Bauer et al., 2004); similarly the “quality of services” provided through a website is also a major success factor for companies (Shankar et al., 2003). To identify the quality factors of websites is an important step for successful quality management and providing a sophisticated level of service through social networking websites. Thus, success of a website depends on the definition of quality from web users' perspective. Several studies have been conducted on the website quality evaluation methodology (e.g. Cox and Dale, 2002; Dragulanescu, 2002; Webb and Webb, 2004). Many of these researches proposed frameworks which contain group of quality factors that are adopted from SERVQUAL Service Quality model proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). None of these researches were conducted in the context of social networking websites quality; therefore, considering this limitation, the present study is an attempt to assess different quality aspects of social networking websites from users' perspective and their influence on shaping users' perceptions about quality of these websites. The study aims to develop a multiple-item scale for measuring social networking website service quality which includes additional aspects such as community drivenness. Along with it, it also aims to study the influence of perceived quality on users' perception of website quality.

First, a review of the most relevant literature regarding the concepts analyzed is developed and a conceptual framework of website quality is proposed. Second, the hypotheses are described. Third, conceptual framework of website quality containing hypotheses is empirically tested which combines quality factors and users' overall perception of quality. Lastly, the study's main conclusions and management recommendations are discussed. The research questions of this study are as follows:

- Q1: What are the key factors that affect quality service of social networking websites?  
 Q2: How are service quality factors of social networking websites related with users' perceptions about quality?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Service quality factors of website

A website's service quality and reliability are crucial for increasing the number of its visitors, thus bringing profits for companies. Website service quality is measured by many researchers from several disciplines. These researchers developed and tested a large number of factor items to measure website service quality (e.g., Zhang and Von Dran, 2001; Ranganathan and Ganapathy, 2002; Liu and Arnett, 2000); however, the service quality of websites is still an under-defined construct (Aladwani

and Palvia, 2002). Past research showed that there is confusion in defining and interpreting the meaning of service quality of websites (Yang et al., 2005). The confusion in defining the meaning of service quality of websites may occur as there exist a variety of websites. For example, six types of commercial websites classified by Hoffman et al. (1995) are content, shopping mall, incentive site, online storefront, Internet presence and search agent. Consequently, service quality factors differ according to each category of website. Factors of security/privacy are the most important ones for websites that market products requiring physical delivery (Saraph et al., 1989).

During recent years, different approaches to measure quality regarding websites have been introduced. Yoo and Donthu (2001) have developed the SITEQUAL scales consisting of four factors namely ease of use, esthetic design, processing speed and security to measure the perceived quality of an online shop. Similarly Barnes and Vidgen (2000) developed the WebQual 4.0 scale, divided into five factors: usability, design, information, trust, and empathy. Bai et al. (2008), by conducting survey, investigated two major constructs of website quality namely functionality and usability. They mentioned that functionality refers to purchase information, service/products information, destination information, quality of information and contact information, whereas usability refers to language, layout and graphics, information architecture, users' interface and navigation and general features. Kim and Stoel (2004) studied six website quality factors such as web appearance, entertainment, informational fit-to-task, transaction capability, response time and trust of apparel retailers. They found informational fit-to-task, transaction capability, and response time to be significant predictors of shopper satisfaction. Wu et al. (2009) by using both quantitative and qualitative methods constructed a multi-stage scale development procedure and checked and disclosed five factors namely efficiency, system functionality, security/responsiveness, personalization and enjoyment structure for assessment of blog website service quality.

Perdue (2001) developed and tested a conceptual model containing factors of site navigation, visual attractiveness, and information content for website evaluations. Liu et al. (2000) found that a well-designed website creates favorable attitude or perception toward the site and its products. Over the past three decades, researchers have attempted to discover the global or standard attributes of a service that are important to the customer and that contribute significantly to customers' quality assessment. Despite ample efforts made to measure the quality construct perceived in Internet service distribution, it is considered that research in this area is still at an early phase (van Riel et al., 2001). In fact, some deficiencies can be observed in previous work. These are as follows:

- Majority of the studies are found to be conducted in the context of online retailing/shopping/commercial websites, and few studies were conducted in context of social networking websites, so the studies conducted previously regarding website quality factors are limited.
- Secondly, many of the studies are found to be focused on technical aspects (such as graphics, fonts, number of clicks etc.) as well as transactional aspects (such as secure payment methods), thus it would seem reasonable to study additional aspects, such as community drivenness, in depth.

Table 1 shows the analysis of some of the previous studies which used different website quality factors across different contexts such as blogs, commercial websites, general website, social networking, museum's website, government websites, e-banking portals, apparel retailer website and e-commerce websites.

All of the studies on website quality are conducted in different contexts (see Table 1). So, many of the factors of website quality

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