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Relationship between the level of intimacy and lurking in online social network services

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of online social network services (SNSs) leads to new research questions. Unlike in other online communities, people in SNSs expect to gratify social-emotional needs rather than informational needs, and they are connected in a person-to-person manner which is more direct and interpersonal. The author argued that the factors influencing members' public posting in SNSs differ from those in traditional online communities. Interpersonal intimacy was postulated to influence lurking behaviors in SNSs. To investigate the relationship between intimacy level and posting frequency in SNSs, an online survey was conducted in Wallop, a SNS provided by Microsoft. Responses (102) were collected, in which the first 40 posters and the first 40 lurkers were selected for statistical analysis. The result shows significant differences exist in both verbal and affective intimacy level between lurkers and posters. The level of verbal intimacy and the level of affective intimacy are positively correlated with posting frequency. The result of discriminant analysis shows that verbal intimacy and affective intimacy are useful for discriminating posting/lurking groups of users. In addition, significant gender differences in perceived intimacy and posting behaviors were found. The result implies that people lurk in SNSs because they believe that their social-emotional needs may not be satisfied even if they post.

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1. Introduction

Online communities exist not only for task-orientated communications, but also for personal relevant information sharing, trust and intimacy creation, and social relationships building. During the past five years, explicit social networking sites (SNSs) have mushroomed together with the wave of Web 2.0 technologies. These systems are designed specifically to help people build online presences and building social networks. Users' active and public participation is critical to the success of such services. Active posting is desired. However, the motivation and behavior of people using such environments are supposed to differ from that in traditional online communities, and reasons why they post or lurk may also differ. Previous studies found that people do not post in online communities since their informational needs can be satisfied without posting. However, people rarely use online social network services solely to seek information. Contrarily, social-emotional supports, friendship and intimate interactions are sought out in SNSs. In addition, people in SNSs are connected in a person-to-person manner, which is more direct and interpersonal than in other online communities. Therefore, the social ties and interpersonal relationships among members of SNSs are supposed to influence posting behavior of user in SNSs. Intimacy is an essential aspect of the social network tie and interpersonal relationship. It motivates people to seek warm, close, and validating experiences.

This study is to understand the reasons behind lurking behaviors in SNSs with the aim to help the developer improve the design of such services and ultimately enhance user experience with such services. The author examined the relationship between the intimacy level in SNSs and the posting behavior in SNSs, with a hope to facilitate further exploration of user behavior in SNSs.

2. Literature review

2.1. Computer mediated communication and online community

Considerable variability exists in the assumptions about the influences of computer mediated communication (CMC) on social interaction processes and interpersonal relationship developments. On the one hand, some researchers suggested that CMC was improper for complex, emotional, and equivocal communications, due to its lack of social-emotional cues (Barua, Chellappa, & Whinston, 1997), reduced social presence (Connell, Mendelsohn, Robins, & Canny, 2001; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and lower media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987). Only illusions of real communities can be created in such an environment (Beniger, 1987). Other researchers, however, argued that some early findings depreciating CMC were based on inadequate field observation (Walther, 1992). The social information processing theory, proposed by Walther (1992), emphasized that people need to develop relationships even in the absence of visual and oral cues, and this need motivates people to adapt the textual cues for complex tasks such as forming interpersonal impressions and attaining psychological-level knowledge. People may even find experiences in CMC communication more desirable than face-to-face interactions because of selective self-presentation and the resulting idealized-perception of partners within CMC (so-called hyper-interaction). Some other researchers adopted the uses and gratifications approach (Blumer & Katz, 1974; Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985) to analyze the use of new media and the impact of CMC. The uses and gratifications approach arose out of the functionalist perspective on media (Herzog, 1944). Essentially, it assumes that audience members of a medium actively use the medium to fulfill specific needs, and the gratification opportunities provided by the medium influence the usage of the medium. They suggested that CMC provides disparate gratification opportunities compared with traditional media, and could be a superior to richer media in the case that richer does not fit the needs or the constraints (Dimmick, Kline, & Stafford, 2000).

2.2. Online social network services

The notion of social network, coined by Barnes (1954), denotes a description of the underlying patterns of social structures. Social network theory models persons as nodes of a graph and their relation-

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