



## Retaining and attracting users in social networking services: An empirical investigation of cyber migration



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### ABSTRACT

Users are the most critical strategic resource of any online social networking service (SNS). This paper offers strategic recommendations for SNS providers based on an empirical study exploring why users switch from a primary SNS to others. We first identify important characteristics that *combine* to distinguish SNSs from conventional information systems, then develop a “cyber migration” research model that includes push, pull and mooring factors which influence user intention to switch from one SNS to another. Findings from a field survey of 180 users reveal four significant factors that promote switching: dissatisfaction with socialization support, dissatisfaction with entertainment value, continuity cost, and peer influence. Strategies grounded in these factors are suggested for SNS providers to better attract and retain users.

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### Introduction

In the last decade, online social networking services (SNSs) such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google+ have seen dramatic growth in popularity. This demand has promoted the advent of many new SNSs, meaning even the major, established SNSs face fierce competition for users. Failures in the face of such competition include the very first SNS provider, SixDegrees, which folded in 2000, while Microsoft's Windows Live Space shut down in 2010. Google Orkut has been successful in certain geographic areas, but has failed in others (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Facebook, currently the largest SNS, also faces key challenges to growth in its post-IPO era (Forbes, 2012).

Conceivably, the long-term success of SNSs depends on a critical mass of users, particularly active users (Zeng and Reinartz, 2003; Enders et al., 2008). Users can easily switch to other SNSs without a financial cost. Thus, in order to retain users, it is imperative for SNS providers to understand why users switch. What factors affect users' intentions to switch between SNSs? What are the specific constituent design and social factors that contribute to users' evaluations of an SNS? How should the answers to these questions influence SNS providers' strategy? To seek answers to these questions, we consider related theoretical perspectives and develop a research model based on the *push–pull–mooring* (PPM) framework from migration literature (Moon, 1995; Lee, 1966; Bogue, 1969). The subsequent empirical study reveals

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important and specific factors that promote the switching or migration of users between cyber communities (i.e., cyber migration). In a cyber migration, users typically do not completely terminate an existing account even after switching to another SNS. Thus, users' *switching between SNSs* can be considered a usage-level shift from their primary SNS to an alternative one.

While in strategic information systems (IS) research literature, it has been claimed that a critical mass of active members determines the success or failure of a digital marketplace (Koch, 2010), little research to date has directly and empirically investigated users' switching between SNSs. And though user switching and the consequent change in the market share of SNSs is a recognized strategic issue (Rust et al., 2004), the study of member behavior and its strategic implications in the networked business ecosystem is a relatively new focus (Merali et al., 2012). Furthermore, the extant IS literature regards users as relatively independent decision makers in the choice and use of conventional productivity-oriented ISs, while in the context of SNSs, users are tightly knit residents. This difference implies a significant change in users' relationships with systems, and hence demands a fresh look at user acquisition and retention strategies.

The literature on social networks and social media largely emphasizes issues *within* SNSs, such as privacy, security, primary functionalities and the influence of, and information sharing among, users (Boyd, 2004; Ellison et al., 2007; Jagatic et al., 2007; Aral and Walker, 2012). Research by Wang et al. (2008) that examined the effect of computer self-efficacy on users' continuance intention towards an SNS, and by Hu and Kettinger (2008) that discussed the benefit and cost factors that affect users' continuance in using an SNS, are pertinent to our research; however, the models developed did not consider competition *between* alternative SNSs and have not been empirically tested.

Prior service-switching literature, that applied the PPM framework, examined consumer behavior, but not user behavior in SNS contexts. Bansal et al. (2005), one of the most cited studies in this field, identified a list of first-order reflective push, pull, and mooring factors in the marketing context; the key factors included product quality, price, value, and consumer variety-seeking. Lui (2005) explained user switching between commercial IT services using satisfaction, price, and attractiveness of the alternatives as push and pull factors (switching cost was considered a moderator). However, purchase decision-related factors do not directly apply in the online social network context, where services are typically offered to users *free* of charge.

Recognizing this critical difference between consumers and system users, Ye and Potter (2011) used a PPM-based model to study users' switching between Web browsers; relative advantage, ease of use, and perceived security were identified as pull factors while lack of satisfaction with the current software was the push factor. Zhang et al. (2012) investigated blog service switching and found users' dissatisfaction with the existing platform, the attractiveness of alternatives, and sunk costs to be the push, pull and mooring factors. Chang et al. (2013) studied users' regret and dissatisfaction as push factors, attractive alternatives as pull factors, and switching costs as mooring factors in SNS switching. These three studies have confirmed the existence of general push, pull and mooring forces in users' switching of systems, but have not revealed more specific and actionable constituent factors for these forces for SNS providers to act upon.

We first identify important characteristics that *combine* to differentiate SNSs from conventional ISs. Based on those characteristics, we identify a comprehensive list of *specific, constituent factors* that influence users' switching between SNSs. This list elaborates on the overarching push, pull and mooring factors. Our empirical study reveals that dissatisfaction with socialization support, dissatisfaction with entertainment value, continuity cost, and peer influence are the significant constituent factors to users' switching intention. Furthermore, this research also investigates factors related to the communal nature of SNSs, such as the non-financial cost of losing connection with existing friends (i.e., continuity cost), socialization support, member policy, and entertainment value provided by different SNSs. These factors – which are important considerations in the context of today's flourishing digitalized social systems (Merali et al., 2012) – have received little attention in existing service switching and IS continuance literature. Finally, this study places users' switching decisions in a competitive context by incorporating not only properties associated with their current choice, but also a comparison with a competitor. Therefore, our findings at an individual level have clear strategic implications.

In the next section we discuss three roles of SNSs and use these to identify relevant theories. Based on this theoretical ground, we then propose a research model which consists of factors that are accountable for SNS users' switching intention. Finally, the survey, its findings and implications are discussed.

## Characteristics of SNSs and theoretical perspectives

A social networking service (SNS) is an online service where a user can create and share a personal profile, and seek, connect, and build relationships with others via personal networks (Boyd and Ellison, 2008; McDowell, 2006). In this paper, we examine three roles online SNSs play: SNSs as information systems, SNSs as services, and SNSs as cyber communities. The three roles *combine* to characterize SNSs and differentiate them from traditional ISs. We then discuss useful theoretical perspectives that help to understand user behaviors in SNSs.

### *SNSs as information systems*

From a technological perspective, SNSs are a type of *information system*. A service provider is the owner of the online technological platform, and SNS users voluntarily join and use the platform. Therefore, related IS literature is useful for understanding user behavior in SNSs.

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