



# Delineating the dimensions of social support on social networking sites and their effects: A comparative model



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## ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNSs) allow users to connect with each other by overcoming geographical and temporal boundaries and thus empower people to search for social support from online. Social support has been considered a key social value that online users can obtain from SNSs. However, few studies have systematically investigated social support in such a context. Motivated to address this gap, we have developed an advanced and theoretical framework to delineate social support on SNSs by clearly revealing the dimensions of online social support on SNSs and examining their effects on users' commitment and SNS continuance. Further, we introduce gender as a key moderator and explain in theory how differently men and women perceive the importance of the dimensions in evaluating online social support over SNSs. Our research results indicate that the identified three dimensions (informational support, emotional support, and network management) are important components of the online social support on SNSs, which is positively associated with commitment and continuance. In addition, the weight of each dimension in the evaluation of online social support varies by gender. This study is among the very first to explore online social support in the context of SNS and its effects, and has rich theoretical and practical implications.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The pervasive adoption of SNSs has a profound influence on our society. The massive amount of user generated content (UGC) on SNSs has formed a powerful force that is changing the existing structure of society and the business world. SNSs have created a situation where the traditional media no longer “own[s] the news” (Charron, Favier, & Li, 2006). Traditionally, institutions such as the government, media outlets, retailers, and manufacturers have been the primary drivers of societal change, information dissemination, and new products. However, in the era of SNSs,

the traditional top-down driving forces have been replaced by the ones from bottom up. The individual Internet users, the grassroots, are integral to these activities through their more spontaneous and real-time participation. Many people have integrated SNSs into their daily life. Individuals, especially college students, spend hours on SNSs every day. Further, the availability of social media applications on a variety of computing devices such as personal computers and smartphones allows users to logon SNSs anywhere at any time, which further facilitates the growth of SNSs. According to a report from Netpop Research (King, Li, & Chan, 2009), 76% of all U.S. broadband users actively contribute to SNSs.

Due to their popularity, SNSs have created new opportunities for firms and organizations to gain profitable business values by empowering them to interact with their customers, employees and business partners (Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Many large U.S. companies have gained business values via mindful adoption and community building on SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter (Culnan et al. 2010). It is reported that Facebook made a revenue of US\$7.87 billion for the entirety of 2013 and a profit of US\$1.5 billion (Rushe, 2014). One of the key reasons is that Facebook had over one billion active users (Fowler, 2012),

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creating marketing values for firms by exposing and promoting their products and services to a huge number of potential customers. To keep this competitive advantage, SNS firms must successfully retain their current members. As of this writing, there are hundreds of SNSs, with various technological affordances, supporting a wide range of interests and practices. Most of these SNSs support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests such as personal hobbies and political views. Therefore, researching SNS continuance is central for organizations to remain its membership and generate business values.

IS continuance has been broadly researched and has materialized into a promising research stream for IS scholars (e.g. Bhattacharjee, 2001). However, in the context of SNS, research on people's adoption and usage remains scarce. Prior research has embraced individualistic constructs as a means to study IT continuance of SNS. For example, Wang, Xu, and Chan (2008) adopted the individual level constructs of computer self-efficacy, experience, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, pleasure and arousal (components of perceived enjoyment) to study Facebook continuance intention. Likewise, Yin, Cheng, and Zhu (2011) capitalized on similar individual level constructs (e.g., PU, PEOU), but furthered SNS continuance by adding perceived privacy risk as a variable. However, these studies have not captured online social support, which has been shown to be a key social value that online users can obtain from SNSs (e.g. Bender, Jimenez-Marroquin, & Jadad, 2011). In the age of internet, it has become increasingly common for individuals to search/provide such support through the online channel. SNSs have been affecting individuals' life by altering the ways to provide or received such on social support. Indeed, online social support has been shown to be an important value that users may obtain from SNSs (Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban, 2011), which are not simply forums where individuals congregate. More important, these networks create substantial value for the participating individuals or organizations, as well as the larger societies, in multiple ways, such as providing social support (Agarwal, Gupta, & Kraut, 2008). Research has shown that social support has an important role in reducing stress and predicting good health among diverse populations (Brown & Riley, 2005; Davidson & Demaray, 2007). For example, when social support exists, strain among Information Systems (IS) managers is significantly lower (Weiss, 1983). Because of such positive effects of social support, it is important to understand its nature and impact over the most popular online communication platforms people use today such as SNSs. The unique technological features of SNS allow users to connect with each other by overcoming geographical and temporal boundaries and thus empower people to search for social support, which is a key social value for online users. Surprisingly, despite the importance of social support and its impact on SNS users' online activities, online social support has not been clearly defined and systematically studied in the context of SNS. Motivated to fill in this gap in the literature, we systematically delineate online social support by identifying its dimensions on SNSs and then examines its influence on users' SNS continuance.

Further, it is no shock that women and men use SNSs differently and in different frequencies (Mazman, 2011), informing that SNS providers need to know gender difference in SNS usage in order to retain their current users. For firms that have moved business to SNSs, being aware of gender differences in SNS usage is critical for them to maintain the relationships with and get valuable feedbacks on products and services from their customers more efficiently and effectively. Gender is one of the criteria's for firms to target the reach of their potential customers. Firms should not consider their customers at the same criteria or assume that men and women will have the same reactions to their business activities such as

advertising and promotions. Rather, firms need to be gender aware to improve their business strategy and retain their customers.

Social role theory (SRT) provides the theoretical lens through which we study gender differences in the evaluation of online social support of SNS. Basically, SRT suggests that male and female play different roles and may place different values on online social support of SNS (Eagly, 2013; Eagly & Wood, 1991; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). All types of social behavior may be framed into two distinguished terms across genders: women are communal and men are agentic (Archer, 1996). Women tend to show facilitative and friendly behaviors that can be termed communal, which indicates that they tend to act in social- and people-oriented environments. In contrast, men favor a pattern of assertive and independent behaviors, which indicates that they tend to act in task-oriented environments. Online social support is multidimensional in nature, and different dimensions have been classified such as informational and emotional support in e-commerce setting (Liang et al. 2011; Pfeil, 2009). In this paper, we propose that female may be more sensitive to certain dimensions of online social support, compared to male, and vice versa.

Altogether, we are seeking to develop an systematic and comparative framework of online social support and examine its effects on SNS continuance. This is accomplished by the following main objectives in this study: 1) Delineating online social support by identifying its three key dimensions on SNSs; and 2) Examine the effects of such online social support on users' SNS continuance; and 3) Understanding how men and women perceive different importance of the dimensions in the evaluation of online social support on SNSs;

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the relevant literature and theories, from which we identify the three key dimensions of online social support on SNSs and developed our research model. Then, we test the model, followed by the presentation of the method, data analysis, and results. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our findings, theoretical implications, and practical implications.

## 2. Theoretical development and research model

### 2.1. Theoretical foundations

The socio-technical theory assumes that a system is made up of two jointly independent yet correlative subsystems: the social and the technical (Bostrom & Heinen, 1977). The technical subsystem comprises the processes, tools, and technologies that are needed to transform inputs to outputs; the social subsystem comprises the users, knowledge, relationships as well as the reward system. The corner stone of the socio-technical approach is that the fit of these two subsystems being achieved by a design process aiming at the joint optimization of the subsystems (Cherns, 1976). Hence, any system will maximize its performance only if the two subsystems have positive impact on each other and work in harmony. The SNS system contains both technical and social aspects to enhance users' online interaction, connection, and networking (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Indeed, the technical subsystem of SNS contains the machines, tools, and technologies that enable all the activities in the world of SNS. The social subsystem contains all the users, their interactions and social relations on the SNSs, as well as rules and norms of these interactions and relations. The technical capabilities serve as the physical foundation for the social elements of SNSs; in the meanwhile, demand for higher quality interactions among users (e.g., use of multimedia, better privacy protection, better friend recommendation, etc.) drives the advancement of the technical elements of SNSs. In fact, it is exactly the fit of the technical subsystem and social subsystem that made SNSs a huge success.

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