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User-switching behavior in social network sites: A model perspective with drill-down analyses

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ABSTRACT

Social network sites (SNSs) are considered the most representative and influential Web 2.0 applications. Users frequently switch between SNSs and user devices because of the intense SNS market competition and the increasing mobile-device user base. However, the switching behavior of SNS users is yet to be explored to gain new knowledge and practical suggestions. This study uses a higher level research model and lower level switching pattern drill-down analysis to understand the actual switching behavior of SNS users. Users of major SNSs filled out an online questionnaire, which yielded 343 valid samples. The partial least square (PLS) results of the proposed research model show that both service quality and switching cost indirectly influence the switching intention of users through the satisfaction and switching barriers, respectively. Convenience and peer pressure are the top reasons for switching SNS platforms, whereas mobile capabilities and real-time access are the top motivations for switching to mobile SNSs. Six managerial implications are derived from the research model and the switching pattern analysis. Two research limitations are also provided with the conclusions.

1. Introduction

The development of the Internet has led to the emergence of a variety of Web 2.0 network applications, of which the social network sites (SNSs) are prominent. For example, Facebook and Twitter are trends that are sweeping the world. In addition, as users of smartphones and mobile browsing devices, such as tablet PCs, continue to grow, the combination of SNSs and mobile devices coincides with the concept of community media (FIND, 2010). Therefore, using mobile devices to surf SNSs is one of the latest network applications and has become a major driving force encouraging people to surf mobile Internet.

According to the information published by the United Nations in 2012, the worldwide cell phone user population has exceeded 5 billion, and 950 million of them use mobile phones to go online; thus, smartphones have the most growth potential among all mobile devices that can access the Internet (FIND, 2012a). eMarketer estimates that the number of US consumers with a smartphone will more than double from 93.1 million in 2011 to 192.4 million by 2016, when 58.5% of the total US population are expected to own smartphones (eMarketer, 2012). The smartphone market share in Taiwan has reached 62% in the fourth quarter of 2011, and among the reported Internet activities, browsing SNSs is the highest (20.5%), whereas updating SNSs content ranked third (15.3%) (InsightXplorer, 2012). As the frequency and influence of using mobile devices to browse SNSs rapidly increase, mobile phone users are in the early stage of developing mobile social behavior. Therefore, it has become a hot topic requiring attention and discussion so that mobile SNS players can gain new users and retain existing ones.

Most of the current SNS-related studies are focused on the applications and development of SNSs. One school of thought utilizes a distinct viewpoint, i.e., coherent theoretical model, to discuss usage behavior, royalty, satisfaction, key factors of success, and assessment index (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Kim, 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011; Waters, Burnett, Lammb, & Lucas, 2009), as well as the effects on different traits or types of SNSs (Ganley & Lampe, 2009; Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2009; Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010). To our knowledge, current studies focus only on a few specific domains such as the impact of Facebook on school education (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Ellison et al., 2007; Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2012; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Roblyer et al., 2010). This observation is supported by Boyd and Ellison (2007), who proposed that many previous studies only focused on a few areas,

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including image management and friendship performance, networks and network management, as well as online and offline connectivity and privacy. With the rise of mobile SNS, the SNS market has become more competitive and dynamic. Whenever users find another SNS platform that better fits their personal needs, they may be inclined to switch. Therefore, recent studies have started to investigate why users switch between SNSs or online service platforms, as well as how online service providers can retain their users (Choi, Jung, & Lee, 2013; Haj-Salem & Chebat, 2013; Hsieh, Hsieh, Chiu, & Feng, 2012; Zhang, Cheung, & Lee, 2012; Zhang, Lee, Cheung, & Chen, 2009). In particular, some studies introduced the switching cost concept to the social and mobile domains to explain such switching behavior (Kim, Park, & Jeong, 2004; Haj-Salem & Chebat, 2013; Hsieh et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2009).

In SNS literature, no formal research has discussed the switching behavior between SNSs and corresponding devices, which are critical and practical issues that must be considered by SNS providers to enable them to succeed in future market competition and share change. Therefore, this paper addresses general switching issues on both SNSs and devices by proposing a higher level research model with a corresponding lower level switching pattern analysis to gain basic knowledge and insights into consumer perceptions and behavior. Background literature is reviewed, and an empirical study is conducted to provide useful discussion and interpretation in the remaining part of the article.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social network sites

Before SNS was coined, Creulo, Ruane, and Cayko (1992) defined an online community as a group of members communicating with each other through an electronic platform. Later, Tredinnick (2006) pointed out that SNS is a website driven by user participation and the content generated by users. Boyd and Ellison (2007) further defined SNS as an Internet-based service that allows individuals to do the following: (1) establish a public or semi-public personal data system with restricted access; (2) have a list of other users and share connections with them; and (3) browse within this system and link to other users via the user list. Therefore, SNSs are web-based services and communities established within the Internet, mainly by a group of people with common interests, activity preferences and experiences, or by professionals in a certain field in order to have an interactive platform, in which members can participate in various social communications, emotionally contact each other, and exchange information.

Most SNSs provide a variety of services, including online chat (MSN and Yahoo instant messaging), e-mail, video and file sharing (Youtube), discussion groups, blogs, and others, to allow participants to communicate with each other and share information. SNSs often have millions of registered users, and have become part of the daily lives of their users. Numerous SNSs are available at present, and the most popular ones are Facebook, Plurk, and Twitter. According to the April 2012 survey of InsightXplorer, the overall SNSs flow in Taiwan has reached second place, ranking only after the portals. In addition, the phenomenon of using mobile Internet to browse SNSs has shown a rising trend along with the expansion of wireless network construction. As global mobile Internet users connect to SNSs through mobile devices, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter remain the most widely used and the most frequently visited SNSs by mobile Internet users in the U.S., which is estimated to reach 5.62 million in 2013 (FIND, 2012b).

The rapid development of SNSs has also triggered research on the intentions or motivations of SNSs users (Cheung et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011; Vasalou, Joinson, & Courvoisier, 2010), and the influences of different factors on behaviors or applications (Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2012; Men & Tsai, 2011; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Research shows that majority of SNSs users use these to interact with others, such as to seek new friends and maintain relations with old friends or parents (Cheung et al., 2011; Forkosh-Baruch & Hershkovitz, 2012; Kim et al., 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011; Men & Tsai, 2011; Vasalou et al., 2010; Zhong, Hardin, & Sun, 2011), and to find enjoyment or entertainment (Cheung et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2011; Lin & Lu, 2011). The culture factor has also been discussed in these studies to determine whether or not different cultural traits influence various user aspects (Kim et al., 2011; Men & Tsai, 2011; Vasalou et al., 2010).

Privacy, information disclosure, and uncertainty concerns are among the top issues discussed in resent SNS studies (Antheunis, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010; Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Humphreys, 2011; Kim, 2011; Men & Tsai, 2011; Stutzman, Capra, & Thompson, 2011; Tokunaga, 2011; Waters & Ackerman, 2011; Weiss, 2009). Some of these problems have been resolved and research suggestions, such as that of Weiss (2009), have been adopted by SNSs providers. However, with the rapid increase of information flow on SNSs, especially in terms of private data, the visible part of privacy topics only reveals a small amount of the whole, i.e., the iceberg model (Debatin et al., 2009).

The survey summary shows that logging into SNSs to update their status and to check the status and photos of their friends have become part of the daily routine of SNS users. Separating users from SNSs has become increasingly difficult because of the increasing popularity of surfing the Internet through mobile devices. Therefore, understanding user satisfaction with mobile SNSs and their willingness to switch is also a key point that the current study aims to examine. Most of the users have been attracted by the benefit of using SNSs, such as establishing relationships with people and searching for entertaining or amusing contents in SNSs, but are displeased with issues related to the invasion of their privacy. Thus, SNS providers should consider how these factors influence user perception when they offer such functions or services.

2.2. E-service quality (E-SQ)

The phenomenal growth of e-services has prompted a stream of research to develop our understanding of the dimensions of e-service quality (e-SQ) and its relationship with overall performance. Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra (2002) proposed a model for understanding and improving e-service quality, which relates the design and operation of the website to certain customer perspectives. Related studies in e-SQ do not fully concur with the dimensions and statements explored. However, Hernona and Calvert (2005) identified the following guidelines: (1) e-SQ is multifaceted, not unidimensional; (2) most of the personal service issues are part of recovery service, which involves dimensions that are different from the core service; (3) e-SQ affects satisfaction, purchase intention and purchase; and (4) technology readiness, a customer-specific construct, is related to the perceptions of e-SQ.

Based on the evolving literature, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005) combined various concepts of online service quality (Loiacono, Watson, & Goodhue, 2002; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003; Yoo & Donthu, 2001) and proposed the most comprehensive work on e-service quality. They used an empirical test and a multiple-item scale (E-S-QUAL) to assess the service quality of online shopping providers. Their study divided service quality into two categories, namely, core web service quality (E-S-QUAL) and the E-Recovery Service Quality (E-RecS-QUAL). In comparison, previous studies have only provided important theoretical framework and research instruments.

Majority of recent studies on website e-SQ have touched on commercial behavior, which is fundamentally different from the