

Chapter 81

Gender Differences in Motivations to Use Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates gender differences in motivations to use social networking sites (SNS), a subset of social media. The present research focuses on Facebook given its prominence among currently available SNS. Analysing a survey of university students in Australia, the results indicate that female consumers are more likely than male consumers to use Facebook to seek information (to research and learn new things and to discuss products and brands) and for convenience (to obtain things with little effort). Both of these reasons in turn relate positively to their degree of engagement on Facebook, where engagement is operationalized as cognitive absorption which is a state of deep involvement with an activity.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years the internet has resulted in significant changes in how we communicate, gather information, and purchase goods and services. Innovations in online social media have resulted in websites that not only allow users to retrieve information, but also encourage the interactive sharing of information and the creation of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In particular, there has been an explosion in popularity of social networking sites (SNS) which is an online platform that has the main objective to facilitate regular communication among individuals. These include various social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, as well as photo and

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video sharing sites such as YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, Flickr and Pinterest. Facebook is a popular SNS where people can search for other people and businesses, and keep friends updated with the latest pictures, videos, news and information (Chi, 2011; Curran, Graham & Temple, 2011; Lukka & James, 2014). One of the reasons online social networks provide an important topic for research is that consumers' media habits have been consistently shifting away from traditional mass media, such as television, towards the internet (Deloitte, 2014) and notably social media. Hence, companies benefit from having their brands present on social media, including SNS, as it is where consumers spend more and more of their time.

Within a social networking context, the research objectives of our study are to: (1) determine what motivates people to use SNS; (2) discover the relationships between motives and engagement in SNS; and (3) ascertain any gender differences in the use of SNS. The analyses of responses to an online survey capturing the reasons for using Facebook provides insights on the gender differences in survey respondent motivations and related engagement with social media.

BACKGROUND

Motivations for Using Social Media

Until recently the types of media used worldwide remained mostly unchanged, dominated by traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, cinema and books. For a long time traditional media have been playing a key role in our cultural development as they fulfil an important individual need to connect with society (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974; Katz, Haas & Gurevitch, 1973). This connection with society, via traditional media, happens through the filter of a few; namely editors, writers and others who decide on what is to be widely communicated. The media type and these filters render such traditional media primarily unidirectional in that information and opinions flow from the media to the audience, with little interaction flowing in the reverse direction, limited for example to selected letters from readers that are published in specific sections of newspapers and magazines. The development of the internet and the creation of social media and in particular SNS, pushed by the mass adoption of Facebook, drastically changed the characteristics of media. The development of social media democratised communications, allowing people to interact with each other in new ways which were fast, low cost, and large scale, reaching people with ease almost anywhere in the world.

This new way to connect with other people has also catapulted the practice of multi-directional communication flows. Now consumers share their views not only with their own friends and communities, but also directly with businesses and governments both in public and private ways. By publicly participating in the conversation, people in turn create a large body of content that represents the views of society in a way that adds to the views disseminated by mass media, businesses and governments. Hence, social media has allowed individuals to more thoroughly fulfil their need to connect with society – not only by helping people to express themselves, but also by facilitating access to all sorts of information and opinions from others.

SNS are defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). As a type of media, it is fruitful to look at motivations to use SNS by employing, as a starting point, the theory of uses and gratifications of media (Katz et al., 1974; Katz et al., 1973).

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