Digital Social Networks From a Social Capital Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Digital Social Networking (DSN) sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Instagram, Pinterest among many others have garnered millions of users worldwide. This instance of information and communication technology has brought about changes in the way people communicate and interact affecting human lifestyle across the world. According to many, the phenomenon has permeated geographical and cultural boundaries, disregarded age and gender barriers, diffused social and economic strata, and transgressed linguistic and ethnic boundaries. Such widespread and intense impact of technology on human life is unprecedented in human history. The unique opportunities offered by digitization of social networking, the novel capabilities of information dissemination and foraging on DSN sites, along with widespread adoption have generated academic interest in the theoretical interpretation of antecedents and consequences of DSN adoption. In this chapter, the authors offer a social capital perspective of DSN adoption.

Social capital is a manifestation of the underlying social network. It has a symbiotic relationship with social network. Social capital is determined by network mechanism, and reciprocity, both at a general and individual level. The concept of social capital applies the economic principle of rational action and economic systems to social systems maintaining its social structure. Like human capital, social capital is less tangible than physical capital but displays the potential to facilitate economic output by boosting productivity and trust. Human capital is an individual attribute, whereas social capital is an attribute of human relationships. Social capital allows conversion to other forms of capital such as human capital and intellectual capital. It distinguishes itself from financial and human capital as it is owned wholly or in parts by individuals and acts as a catalyst in mobilizing financial and human capital.

BACKGROUND

DSN is a culmination of the rapid evolution of information technology, aided by revolutionary advancements in telecom and computing technologies. The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed the emergence of DSN sites such as Friendster, MySpace, LinkedIn, Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and many others, refer Figure 1. Millennials have adopted DSN as part of their daily

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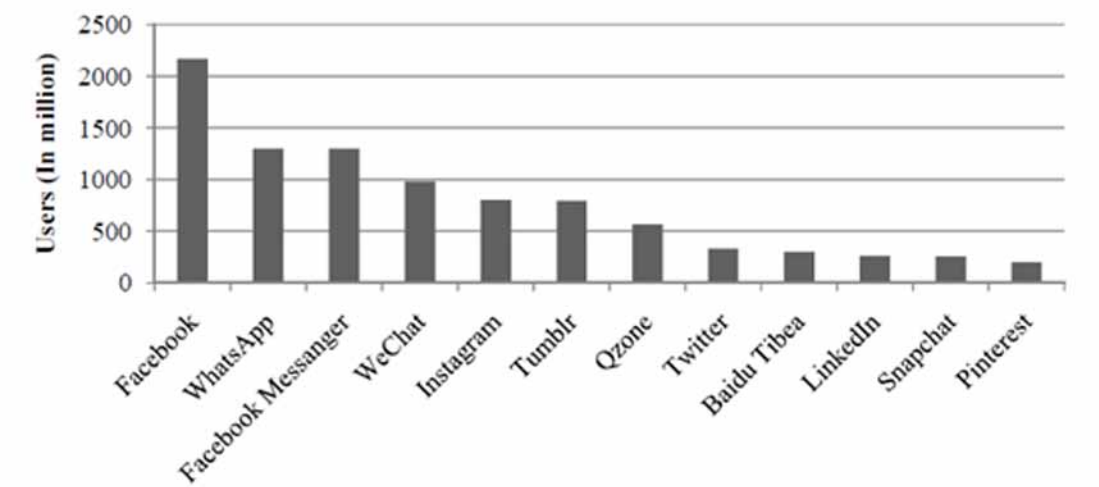
Figure 1. Users on popular DSN sites (adapted from Statista, 2018)



existence. It has empowered users to create and share content, a big difference from general users being mere consumers of content. The rapid proliferation and wide adoption of DSN has had a profound effect on social, economic, political, organizational and emotional aspects of human life (Kane et al., 2014).

DSN sites are defined as "web based services that enable users 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, p. 2). DSN allows users to create and exchange user-generated content, which empowers general users to publicly voice their opinions and views and find an audience for their creativity. DSN sites constitute websites facilitating networking or relationship building between people. Networking typically refers to forming a relationship with strangers. DSN allows people to network - to connect with strangers and expand their social horizon. It allows users to articulate their profile and make their profile and connections visible in the network (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The profile search feature on SNS aids users find people with similar interests and form new connections. It allows users maintain the relationship with their existing networks. In consequence, it aids users to maintain a larger network on DSN compared to offline social networks.

DSN affordances of expanded social reach aided by communication richness grants a paradigm shift towards enhanced social networking. This endows DSN users an opportunity to enhance their social capital on DSN. Uslaner (2000) proposed that spending more time on the internet encumbers face to face interaction which is detrimental to social relationships. DSN has belied this dystopian view - it promotes social interaction. It facilitates the meeting of like-minded people forming communities of common interest and shared goals. This improved interaction promotes social capital (Hofer & Aubert, 2013). Academic studies found that DSN show positive association with community interaction, involvement, and social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison et al., 2011; Hampton & Wellman, 2003).

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social network theory, proposed by Jacob (1934), interprets social relations and actions for a contextual, relational and systemic understanding of human behavior. In social network theory, social relations are