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Effects of Users' Familiarity and Trust on Perceived Community Support

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Abstract

The growing use of social network sites raises the question of what encourages members to create and foster perceived community support. The success of a social network site – as a community of relationships – is precisely the development of a potential source of support and participation in it, and consequently, a sense of membership, identity, and attachment to it. The purpose of this research is particularly to expand theoretical research of what contributes to perceived community support, focusing on users' familiarity and trust. On the one hand, familiarity is described as the extent to which consumers know about a social network site. Less familiarised users tend to engage in community participation but in a limited way, preferring to be readers rather than writers. On the other hand, social capital exists when users have a strong identification and trust within the social network site. Lack of trust will represent one of the reasons explaining lurking behavior. To sum up, our study proposes evaluating the effects of users' familiarity and trust on perceived community support.

Keywords: Perceived community support, trust, familiarity;

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1. Introduction

Assuming that the ultimate success of social network sites (hereinafter, SNSs) derives from a cumulative usage, long-term viability of SNSs and their eventual success will depend on the formation of a perceived sense of community and community support – *e.g.*, support seeking and support providing (*cf.* Ellison *et al.*, 2007). In particular, perceived community support (hereinafter, PCS) is considered as an essential indicator of community success. By integrating three perspectives, familiarity, social capital, and perceived risk (and trust), a richer understanding of PCS can be gained and consequently, promote social relationships among community members, the amount of time spent, and the social interactions frequency with the others (*cf.* Chiu *et al.*, 2006).

Firstly, familiarity (*i.e.*, a dynamic, situation-specific individual difference) defined here as the number of SNS-related direct or indirect experiences that have been accumulated by members, is considered one of the main complexity-reduction methods (a) explaining social behaviour and (b) stressing the users' skills in order to interact with other community members (*cf.* Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001). Secondly, trust is an efficient criterion to assess and determine the extent to which one should engage in a virtual relationship—being risk a constituting dimension of virtual vulnerability. Trust is also a crucial factor when members face relationships without having complete information and knowledge regarding the others.

The proposed framework theoretically therefore examines how familiarity and trust affect PCS. There are very few studies that analyse these concepts. This paper will thus address these theoretical questions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The success of SNSs – as communities of relationships – should be the development of a potential source of support, active participation in a SNS, and consequently, the sense of belongingness to a SNS (*cf.* Herrero & Gracia, 2007). Nevertheless, the growing use of SNSs raises the question of what encourages members to participate enduringly and maintain accumulated social capital (*i.e.*, perceived community support; hereinafter, PCS). This paper will particularly analyse the direct effects of users' familiarity and trust on PCS.

2.1. Familiarity

Familiarity about the functioning of an SNS is defined as the number of SNS-related direct or indirect experiences with the SNS that have been accumulated by members (*cf.* Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001). Users' familiarity (and knowledge) will affect customer information processing activities in several ways (*cf.* Alba & Hutchinson, 1987), leading, for instance, to a more elaborated cognitive structure (*cf.* Fiske *et al.*, 1983; Mitchell & Dacin, 1996). As users use a service more frequently, they are more familiar with it, reducing uncertainty in future decision situations (*i.e.*, perceiving less risk), and simplifying relationships with others by generating a cognitive structure (*cf.* also Bhattacherjee, 2001; Flavián *et al.*, 2006; Gefen, 2000).

2.2. Trust

Trust is essential in SNSs where the absence of workable rules makes a reliance on the socially acceptable behaviour of others (Ridings *et al.* 2002). Particularly, without trust the virtual community would not exist. Indeed, “perspective risk will enhance social loafing behaviour and members will limit their contribution in order to protect themselves” (Shiue *et al.*, 2010, p.769). Trust could then be an efficient criterion to assess and determine the extent to which one should engage in a relationship - being especially important when community members (inevitably independent and not fully predictable) are still unfamiliar with the SNS (and its members).

Trust is defined as the user's perception of different aspects of the SNS (and its members) decreasing the uncertainty of the relationships between the user and other members. Trust reduces perceived risk, increases the perception that short-term sacrifice will result in long-term gain, and consequently, reduces the transaction costs in the relationship.

2.3. Familiarity, trust and PCS

Though familiarity, trust and PCS are distinctly different, they are related. Users' familiarity has positive impacts on their voluntary participation in co-production and affective contribution to SNS (*cf.*, Groth, 2005). When the members are familiar with the others, they tend to be more informal and are more willing to share personal information and to produce an emotional bond, thereby (a) resulting in increased co-opportunities to deepen their knowledge about them and (b) achieving greater PCS (*cf.* Tu & Mclsaac, 2002). Users show more PCS once they could also understand the value, norm and rule of the SNS.

As users become familiar with an organisation or its employees, relationships based on trust and reciprocity often develop (Groth, 2005). "Familiarity not only provides a framework for future expectations, but also lets people create concrete ideas of what to expect based on previous interactions" (Baym, 1997; Fiske *et al.*, 1983; *cf.* Gefen, 2000, p. 728). As Yu *et al.* (2010) summarise, a higher familiarity implies a larger amount of accumulated knowledge derived from experiences during previous successful interactions, reducing uncertainty and fostering trust in social relationships. Familiarity therefore acts as a probable long-term uncertainty-reduction strategy –emphasising trust. To enhance users' familiarity does not necessarily indicate that users will participate in SNSs and consequently, develop a sense of membership, identity, and attachment to them. Our study also theorises on the (mediating) effect of trust on PCS, under conditions of vulnerability and interdependence (*i.e.*, online relationships).

Although users' familiarity can bring them to SNSs, members will not take part if they do not trust each other. Trust favours integration of members and to increase active interactions among them (*cf.* Ridings *et al.*, 2002). To promote trust with the other party is therefore a precursor to increase information-sharing. Greater levels of trust will increase (a) participation in an SNS to share knowledge and ideas related to mutual interest (Koh & Kim, 2004), (b) feelings of being supported by the SNS (*i.e.*, perceived support and resources available to users in an SNS), and (c) identity, belonging, and attachment to it. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) summarise that when trust exists between the parties, users are more willing to engage in cooperative interactions and consequently, in social exchanges.

To sum up, "without these complexity reduction methods people could not interact with others on more than a onetime and uncommitted manner, and probably would not wish to either" (Gefen, 2000, p. 726).

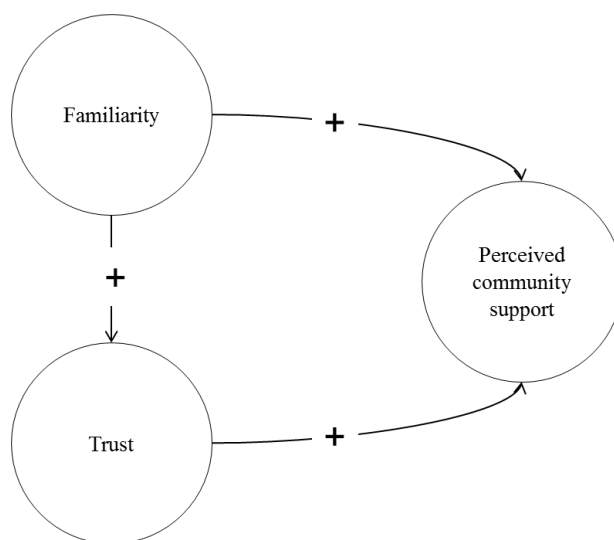


Figure 1. Theoretical model

3. Discussion

Assuming that “the study of the community as a relevant source of support has been comparatively lacking” (Herrero & Gracia, 2007, p. 197), the purpose of this research was particularly to expand theoretical research of what contributes to PCS. The reluctance of many individuals to participate actively in SNSs and consequently, foster feelings of identity and attachment to a group implies that research is needed to understand more comprehensively how PCS can be engendered in online social settings.

This research reaches two main conclusions. On the one hand, familiarity is considered one of the main complexity-reduction methods (a) explaining social behaviour and (b) stressing the users' skills in order to interact with other community members. On the other hand, relational capital exists when individuals have a strong identification and trust within the SNS. Lack of trust will represent one of the reasons explaining lurking behavior, damaging community relationships between members and social knowledge exchange. To sum up, our study theorised on the effect of familiarity and trust on PCS.

However, the model did not include all the relevant variables. In particular, norms of reciprocity are necessary to assess perceived community support. If members believe that the SNS (or its members) is engaging in unfair practices, they may perceive that the SNS and its members have broken the implicit trust of the relationship. Despite the authors' interest in familiarity and trust in online environment, future research should not omit the norms of reciprocity from the model.

Moreover, empirical studies are needed to validate, expand, synthesise, and generalise these theoretical framework. To generalise the results of this research, it is necessary to apply empirically the study, using a wider sample of users and SNSs.

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