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Wu, Hsiu-Lan, "Utilitarian and Hedonic Values of Social Network Services" (2009). *AMCIS 2009 Proceedings*. 289.
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Utilitarian and Hedonic Values of Social Network Services

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ABSTRACT

Social network services (SNS) have simplified social interactions between users. However, some SNS attract many users in the early stages, but suffer from turn over later. SNS of practice should aim to retain its existing users and attract potential users by providing superior customer value which leads to greater satisfaction and loyalty. This empirical study applied SEM to explain the impacts of hedonic and utilitarian value on satisfaction and loyalty by providing an integrated model within the SNS context. Findings reveal that utilitarian and hedonic value of SNS is positively related to satisfaction which leads to positive word-of-mouth and repatronage intention.

Keywords

Utilitarian value, Hedonic value, Satisfaction, Loyalty

INTRODUCTION

The characteristic ubiquity of Internet has brought lots of innovations and applications in Internet since the inception of it. One of the recent innovations in web-based applications is social network services (SNS). SNS are one of online communities that specially focused on self-presentation and maintain connections. They allow people to easily and simply create their own online pages or profiles and to construct an online network of contacts, often called 'net-friends'. The increase of social network sites is representative of its entry into mainstream culture and its integration into many persons' daily lives. The main reason for this phenomenon is online services make it dramatically easier for people to obtain information, maintain connections, deepen relationships, and meet like-minded souls that they would otherwise never have met (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004).

Practitioners who offer SNS would naturally prefer to attract as many visitors as possible to their websites, engage potential users in "sticking" for a time, and even provide enjoyable activities encouraging users to their sites. Unfortunately, many SNS have failed due to the reluctance of members to continue their participations in these websites. These findings point to an important research questions: Why do user participations translate into such low levels of loyalty? Moreover, how this can be improved? One likely reason for this situation may be that many SNS managers simply have not found a way to create superior value for surfers. Obviously, it is necessary for SNS practitioners and e-marketers to determine the core value sought by surfers and excel in that core value delivery.

Although SNS is growing popularity, academic marketing research into the context of SNS is still scarce. Cowles, Kiecker and Little (2002) argue that online services research should consider the motivations or perceived value behind customer use of the medium. Value perceptions have been shown to influence satisfaction and loyalty (Cronin, Brady and Hult, 2000), but nearly all studies examining such constructs have been in the context of bricks-and-mortar and online shopping. In regards to SNS, there are still many questions exist, including whether the customer value dimensions identified in the retailing and service marketing literature are equally relevant within SNS context, and if so, to what extent these differences in value dimensions influence the consequences (e.g., satisfaction and loyalty). Motivated by such concerns, this study tries to explain the impacts of different value on satisfaction and loyalty from hedonic and utilitarian points of view by developing an integrated model in the online social network context.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The online community phenomenon has been investigated in such diverse disciplines as psychology, information systems and communication studies which focus on understanding and explaining the nature of interaction within online communities. Marketing as a discipline has embraced as a core concept the notion of customer value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Service marketing studies increased in the 1980s and this era saw the evolution of different theoretical perspectives on customer value. Past research has conceptualized value as simply a tradeoff between quality and price (Bolton and Drew, 1991), though a number of recent researchers argue that value is more complex, that other dimensions of value should be considered by scholars and managers (Bolton and Drew, 1991; Grewal, Gopalkrishnan, Krishnan and Sharma, 2003). A multidimensional view has been encouraged as better depicting the different dimensions of customer value in specific services (Childers, Carr,

Peck and Carson, 2001). Traditional scales for measuring customer value, whether it is a bricks-and-mortar or an online experience, are generally divided into utilitarian value and hedonic value (Babin, Darden and Griffin, 1994; Chitturi, Raghunathan and Mahajan, 2007; Jone, Reynolds and Arnold, 2006; Mathwick, Malhotra and Rigdon, 2002). Batra and Ahtola (1990, p. 159) argued that consumer perform consumption behavior for two basic reasons: “(1) consummatory affective (hedonic) gratification (from sensory attributes), and (2) instrumental, utilitarian reasons concerned with expectations of consequences.” In sum, utilitarian value refers to the functional, instrumental, and practical benefits of consumption offerings, and hedonic value refers to their emotional, experiential, and enjoyment-related benefits (Babin et al. 1994; Chitturi et al., 2007, 2008).

In many cases, SNS users will seek both utilitarian and hedonic benefits from SNS but to varying degrees. For example, one may join a social network site because of its utilitarian attribute of providing a venue to visit with his or her like-minded friends. In addition to the perceived utilitarian attributes offered by SNS, the same person may join it because of its hedonic attributes as well, such as to do something different to escape his or her daily routine.

In light of increasing competitive pressure within SNS contexts, retaining the existing customer base becomes crucial for the future success. As a consequence, practitioners are increasingly interested in understanding the factors influencing and driving customer loyalty. Here, the research considers two marketing related components of SNS users’ loyalty. The first is “repatronage intention,” which is the user’s intentions to revisit the website and ties to the virtual community in the future. Such an intention implies willingness to stay committed to the community and to meet any conditions, such as fees, that are required for membership. The second is the user’s intention to recommend the SNS to others. In marketing, such oral communication is referred to as “word-of-mouth”.

UTILITARIAN AND HEDONIC VALUE OF SNS

Utilitarian value

Marketing research has long focused on the utilitarian and functional aspects of the consumption experience, which has often been indicated as task-related and rational (Batra and Ahtola, 1990). In other words, customers are concerned with consumption in an efficient and timely manner to achieve their goals (Childers et al., 2001). Online users seek functional benefits when they go online to fulfill specific activities (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). Ghosh (1998) states that convenience, information, customization and interaction are the primary motivations for Internet users. This study categorizes utilitarian value into convenience, and information availability based on the research findings of To, Liao and Lin (2007). According to SNS, this study further adds in one variable, sociality, which reflects participants seek relationships via SNS.

Sociality

Humans are social animals, so they are evolutionarily biased toward a social orientation (Wang, Baker, Wagner and Wakefield, 2007). The objective of SNS is to encourage users to establish relationships with other users in the cyberspace as in the offline world. SNS users often keep online diaries or blogs which are based on the tasks such as socializing, discussing and exchanging ideas, forming relationships, interactivity and getting involved with others. People who join a social network site for this purpose are likely to have utilitarian purposes if they are able to successfully accomplish their functional goal of socializing with others. Presently, SNS have opened numerous opportunities for users to socialize in ways no one could have imagined before. Hence, the motivation driving people to use SNS might be related to the intentions of communicating and expanding relationships with others beyond a virtual space such as the one offered by social networks. Besides, SNS are commonly used to avoid embarrassing personal confrontations with others. In operational terms, sociality can be described in terms of the extent to which participants are provided with the opportunity and ability to extend and develop relationships with others through SNS.

Convenience

Convenience refers to the extent to which a user feels that SNS is simple, conserving temporal and psychological resources, and time efficient. Customers who are interested in utilitarian value are concerned with achieving their goals in an efficient and timely manner (Childers et al., 2001). Verhoef and Langerak (2001) indicate that convenience and time efficiency are the primary factors of online services. SNS has lowered the barrier to initiating contact so that it can economize on time and effort by making it easy to find others and procure offerings. Computer-mediated communication enables users to keep in contact with others no matter the geographical boundaries and time lag existing among them. Hence, users may surf online because of convenience of locating, and conserving temporal and psychological resources (Grewal et al., 2003; Mathwick et al., 2001).

Information Availability

In the computer-mediated environment, the user tends to rely on the use of visual and auditory details for information gathering. SNS allow individuals to present themselves to other users using a variety of formats, including text and video, which make participants exposed to a wide variety of personal information. Just like chat services, SNS incorporate a list of other users with whom individuals share a connection. But unlike any other web service, SNS allow individuals to make visible their list of connections to others and to traverse their social networks (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Compared with a conventional service, SNS provide a wider range and a greater variety of selections to users (Srinivasan, Anderson and Ponnnavolu, 2002). To et al. (2007) contend that web-based services provide the most efficient means for consumers to get the information. Customers are only a few clicks away from receiving abundant information about potential partners who they are interested.

Hedonic value

Hedonic value reflects the value received from multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of the consuming experience (Babin et al., 1994). Increased arousal, heightened involvement, perceived freedom, fantasy fulfillment, and escapism all may indicate a hedonically valuable experience (Babin et al. 1994). Besides providing functional benefits, it is believed that SNS can also offer hedonic value to its participants. Because services are intangible, heterogeneous, perishable, and inseparable from the service provider (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985), SNS users will place a greater amount of emphasis on concentration and pleasure derived from online experiences. This research categorizes hedonic value as adventure, escapism and affiliation according to the works of Arnold and Reynolds (2003) and Mathwick et al. (2001).

Adventure

Webster, Trevino and Ryan (1993) argue that people would experience a sense of curiosity during the interaction with Internet. This sense of curiosity would generate the feelings of adventure. Adventure means that customers encounter something novel and fantasizing, and experience the joy of exploration during the process of consumption (To et al., 2007). The online environment gives people the opportunity to come together and explore a new world of fantasy and entertainment where they can engage in role-playing games where everything seems possible (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). The hedonic perspective views consumers as pleasure seekers engaged in activities which elicit enjoyment, entertainment, amusement, and fun.

Escapism

Participants of SNS sometimes surf online for stress relief and alleviating a negative mood. Babin et al. (1994) recognized the value as a self-gratifying, escapist, and therapeutic activity, describing people who view consumption as a “pick-me-up” and a “lift” when they feel depressed. Escapism is one of emotions that allows the user temporarily “get away from it all” (Mathwick et al., 2001). Therefore, SNS could be acknowledged as a form of emotion-focused coping in response to stressful events or simply to get one’s mind off a problem.

Affiliation

Hedonic value includes identity expression and a sense of belonging and affiliation with others (Rheingold, 1993). Through SNS, users can express salient aspects of their identity for others to see and interpret. It is grounded in affiliation theory of human motivation, which describes on people being cohesive and seeking acceptance and affection in interpersonal relationships (Arnold and Reynolds 2003). Bressler and Grantham (2000) argue that when joining a community, people fulfill a number of basic psychological benefits. These include a sense of belonging to the community, identity expression through SNS, and a sense of affiliation with other users in the community. Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) state that consumer treasure the time spent with others and also enjoy social activities through online communities. When SNS users feel a sense of belonging and affiliation with others, they will stick online longer and pay more attention to the community.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Utilitarian/Hedonic Value and Satisfaction

The generally accepted and most widely applied method for conceptualizing customer satisfaction is Oliver’s Expectancy-Disconfirmation model (1980). The model depicts that satisfaction with a product/service result from expectations of customers. They evaluate post-consumption experience relative to their initial expectations. Meanwhile, satisfaction also reflects the degree to which a customer evokes positive feelings (Rust and Oliver, 1994). Spreng and Mackoy (1996) contended that customer satisfaction is a rather complex concept which involves evaluation, comparison, and even emotion. Satisfaction is thought to be comprised of both affective (Mano and Oliver, 1993) and cognitive judgments (Oliver, 1993). Therefore, satisfaction with a service depends on the accumulated affective experiences (hedonic) with a service and other

cognitions (utilitarian) which are retained and updated over time (Oliver, 1997). A related theory of needs satisfaction suggests that all consumption experiences are capable of fulfilling needs at lower, more functional levels (i.e., utilitarian), as well as higher, more psychological levels (i.e., hedonic) (Oliver, 1997). Given this background, it is reasonable to expect that customer perceptions of value should be related to satisfaction. As a reflection of this, consumption studies have shown linkages between utilitarian and hedonic value and satisfaction (Babin et al., 1994; Chitturi et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2006). From the above, this study deduces the first two hypotheses as follows.

Hypothesis 1: Utilitarian value of SNS is positively related to satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Hedonic value of SNS is positively related to satisfaction.

Satisfaction and Word-of-Mouth/Repatronage intention

Organizations that focus on customer satisfaction are able to build loyal clients. The positive effect of satisfaction on loyalty has been widely supported in marketing literature (Chitturi et al., 2008; Cronin et al., 2000; Fornell, 1992). Highly satisfied consumers are less prone to overtures from competition. High satisfaction can raise the likelihood of the consumer recommending the service and increase the repurchase intention (Cronin et al., 2000; Fornell, 1992).

Satisfaction can be viewed as the key to building and retaining a loyal base of long-term website users. Website users can be motivated when their needs are satisfied, or when their satisfaction lies in the content of the activity (website use) itself. On the other hand, user dissatisfaction may lead to unfavorable consequences, such as negative word-of-mouth, less repatronage or switching to alternative service providers. Even in the online services context, satisfied customers are more likely to indulge in word-of-mouth and report greater repatronage intention.

Hypothesis 3: Customers' satisfaction with SNS positively affects their word-of-mouth.

Hypothesis 4: Customers' satisfaction with SNS positively affects their repatronage intention.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The scales in this study were adapted from previous published research and were refined through expert review and pre-testing using a small number of SNS users. A preliminary questionnaire was first developed in English, then translated into Chinese and retranslated several times until it was user friendly and captured the desired constructs. Once refined, the final instrument with 37 items (Table 1) was collected using an online survey (<http://survey.youthwant.com.tw>). With an offer of prizes to selected participants, respondents were recruited via numerous Internet related sites. Visitors to the survey website were instructed to complete the survey in terms of a social network site from which they had recently and frequently joined. The survey was implemented over one week and resulted in 875 usable responses. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This study employed structural equation modeling (SEM) via Maximum Likelihood estimator of LISREL 8.8 to model the relationships among the constructs.

Items		Sources
Utilitarian value		Mathwick et al., 2001
U1	I think this website can extend personal relationship. I can develop relationships with others on this website. I can share opinions with others on this website. I can know new friends without embarrassment on this website.	To et al., 2007 Wang et al., 2007
U2	I could get the information that I am interested on this website. This website is easy-to-navigate. This website makes exchanging information easily.	

U3	<p>Keeping relationships on this website fits with my schedule.</p> <p>The way this website displays its services is efficient.</p> <p>Keeping relationships on this website is an efficient way to manage my time.</p>	
Hedonic value		Arnold & Reynolds, 2003
H1	<p>While navigating on this website, I felt a sense of adventure.</p> <p>During the navigating process, I felt the excitement of the hunt.</p> <p>Compared to other things I could have done, the time spent navigating at this website was truly enjoyable.</p> <p>Navigating this website was truly a joy.</p> <p>I enjoyed being immersed in exciting new information on this website.</p> <p>This website makes me feel like I am in my own universe.</p> <p>I was able to do a lot of fantasizing on this website.</p>	<p>Babin et al., 1994</p> <p>Jones et al., 2006</p> <p>Mathwick et al., 2001</p> <p>Overby & Lee, 2006</p> <p>To et al., 2007</p> <p>Wang et al., 2007</p> <p>Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004</p>
H2	<p>When I am in a down mood, I logon this website to make me feel better.</p> <p>To me, this website is a way to relieve stress.</p> <p>Navigating this website truly felt like an escape.</p> <p>Visiting this website “gets me away from it all”.</p> <p>I get so involved when I visit this website that I forget everything else.</p>	
H3	<p>I seek identity of myself on this website.</p> <p>I seek a sense of belonging to this website.</p> <p>I seek a sense of affiliation with others on this website.</p>	
Satisfaction		Overby & Lee, 2006
My decision to use this website is a wise one. (S1)		Oliver, 1993; 1997
Using this website makes me feel happy. (S2)		
I am pleased to navigate this website. (S3)		
Overall, I am satisfied with this website. (S4)		
The overall feelings about the services on this website are better than what I expected. (S5)		
Loyalty		Overby & Lee, 2006
I would be willing to recommend this website to my friends and relatives. (W1)		Srinivasan et al., 2002
I say positive things about this website to other people. (W2)		Wang et al., 2007
I am willing to recommend this websites to others who seek my advice. (W3)		Zeithaml et al., 1996
I intend to continue to visit this website in the future. (R1)		
The likelihood that I would continue to visit this website is very high. (R2)		
In the future, this website is one of the first places I intend to visit when I need the type of services it provides. (R3)		
I anticipate revisiting this website. (R4)		

Table 1. Questionnaire Items

Confirmatory factor analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis was run for the measurement model including the five latent constructs. The measurement model had a χ^2 value of 768.53 (123 degrees of freedom), and the χ^2 /d.f. ratio value of 6.248 was unsatisfactory. Furthermore, the model fit also used several fit measures, as shown in Table 1. All the model-fit indices exceeded the respective common acceptance levels suggested by previous research, demonstrating that the measurement model exhibited a good fit with the data collected. Therefore, the researcher proceeded to evaluate the psychometric properties of the measurement model in terms of reliability and validity.

The reliability of the measure is assessed using composite reliability (CR) and variance extracted estimates (AVE). CR of each construct exceeded 0.7 in this study, satisfying the minimally acceptable level. On the other hand, AVE were all above the recommended 0.5 level. All of the items in the research model had factor loadings greater than 0.7, indicating that all factor loadings have convergent validity (Table 2).

Factor		Standardized factor loadings	t-value	Reliability	Average extracted variance
Utilitarian				0.897 ^a	0.744
sociality	U1	0.834	29.434**	0.696 ^b	
information availability	U2	0.866	31.126**	0.749	
convenience	U3	0.886	32.262**	0.785	
Hedonic				0.902	0.754
adventure	H1	0.849	30.329**	0.720	
escapism	H2	0.886	32.479**	0.786	
affiliation	H3	0.869	31.475**	0.755	
Satisfaction				0.943	0.767
	S1	0.867	32.046**	0.751	
	S2	0.921	35.506**	0.848	
	S3	0.912	34.953**	0.832	
	S4	0.889	33.455**	0.791	
	S5	0.782	27.346**	0.611	
Word-of-Mouth				0.919	0.792
	W1	0.868	31.898**	0.753	
	W2	0.893	33.474**	0.798	
	W3	0.908	34.436**	0.825	
Repatronage Intention				0.896	0.682
	R1	0.883	32.490**	0.779	
	R2	0.797	27.755**	0.636	
	R3	0.810	28.117**	0.656	
	R4	0.811	28.601**	0.658	
Goodness-of-fit indices: (N= 875)					
CFI= 0.987 NFI=0.984 GFI=0.911 AGFI=0.876 SRMR=0.032 RMSEA=0.077					

** $p < 0.001$ ^a Indicates the composite reliability. ^b Indicates R^2 -value (square of factor loadings).

Table 2. Summary Measurement Statistic

Structural Model Results

Table 3 summarizes the result of path analysis. A similar set of fit indices was used to examine the structural model. The results of the proposed model achieve a fairly good fit. Good structural model fit exists when there is reasonably high explanatory power (measured by R^2), indicating the ability of the proposed model to explain variation in the endogenous variables. In the present study, R^2 values for word-of-mouth, repatronage intention and satisfaction are 0.766, 0.698 and 0.623. The proposed model

All path coefficients in the current model are statistically significant and are as hypothesized, as listed in Table 3. This study had empirically demonstrated a positive relationship between customer value and satisfaction. Utilitarian and hedonic values influence loyalty (word-of-mouth and repatronage intention) through satisfaction. Results from this study also revealed that hedonic value had a relatively greater influence on satisfaction compared with utilitarian value as is evidenced by the standardized path coefficients of 0.505 for hedonic value and of 0.364 for utilitarian value.

Path	Standardized coefficient estimate	t-value	Result
Utilitarian→Satisfaction	0.364	10.259**	H1 is supported
Hedonic→Satisfaction	0.505	13.742**	H2 is supported
Satisfaction→Word-of-Mouth	0.835	26.856**	H3 is supported
Satisfaction→Repatronage Intention	0.875	28.874**	H4 is supported
Goodness-of-fit indices: (N= 875)			
CFI= 0.985 NFI=0.983 GFI=0.903 AGFI=0.870 SRMR=0.0389 RMSEA=0.08			

** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Structural Model: Standardized Coefficient Estimates and Fit Indices

CONCLUSION

The primary contribution of the current study is to conduct an empirical examination of the effects of utilitarian and hedonic value derived from the experience of SNS on specific attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (i.e., satisfaction, loyalty). The findings of this research should benefit both practitioners and academics by adding to our knowledge base to help us understand, explain, and possibly predict relationships between these constructs within SNS context. This is a vital topic for further research that has significant managerial implications for marketing strategy as follows.

For practitioners, this work can significantly help SNS managers in their decisions pertaining to allocate website resources and how to manage relationships with their online customers. Most of marketers and website designers focus on means of enhancing the utilitarian value, providing ease of navigation and convenient options for selection, so as not to put off those browsers who visit for primarily functional reasons. However, for hedonic information systems (such as SNS), hedonic rather than utilitarian value is expected to prevail. Results from this study revealed that hedonic value had a relatively greater influence on satisfaction compared with utilitarian value. Thus, they should also try to encourage website visitors to reach an enjoyable condition in which users may lose their sense of time and place, and which they assume will increase users' satisfaction and tendencies to loyalty. In sum, marketers could create a websites environment carefully so that consumers can better perceive value through utilitarian or hedonic views of point.

Although customer satisfaction has been used as a means of achieving the business goals of most firms, the assumption that satisfied customers will make repeated purchases and tell others about their satisfying experiences may no longer hold in highly competitive markets. The researcher believes that the incorporation of customer value into the context of SNS delivery will shape important consumption outcomes that ultimately improve the probability of success. From a marketing perspective, SNS practitioners should recognize the importance of delivering the value users perceptions and desire. Thus, if SNS providers could develop and deliver the service offering on the basis of customers' perceptions, they could "lock-in" their members instead of turning over.

The findings of this study will contribute to the academic literature by providing clarity of customer value framework in the context of SNS. Not only are the findings will be a vital addition to the developing stream of literature related to the

utilitarian and hedonic value framework, but the results will also be significant because they provide new information on a previously uninvestigated area – SNS. Therefore, the findings of this research will help to begin the process of organizing a framework for understanding the link between customer value (i.e., utilitarian, hedonic) and important consequence constructs (i.e., satisfaction, word-of-mouth, and repatronage intention) within SNS. Simply put, in testing the proposed model, not only can we examine support for specific relationships, but we can also gain some knowledge concerning the relative impact of each value on satisfaction and loyalty in the context of SNS. Finally, on the basis of this research, the researcher will offer implication for SNS marketing theory and propose avenues for further research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is supported by the R.O.C. National Science Council through grant NSC 97-2410-H-268-003.

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