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# The Effect of Attitude, Social Trust and Trust in Social Networking Sites on Two Dimensions of Sharing Behavior

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## ABSTRACT

Although social networking sites (SNS) are among the most important means of sharing and communication in today's virtual world, little work has been done to explain the sharing behavior of SNS users in detail. This study tries to investigate types of sharing behavior of SNS users and to find important factors affecting their sharing behavior. In terms of the width and depth of sharing information, we distinguish two important dimensions of sharing behavior: sharing regularity and sharing density. As a width dimension of sharing behavior, sharing regularity refers to the frequency of sharing information with other SNS users and as a depth dimension of sharing behavior, sharing density deals with the degree of private information sharing with others. Using the Theory of Reasoned Action, we propose a research model of two dimensions of sharing behavior including sharing attitude, social trust, and trust in a social networking site. We find that social trust and trust in the SNS have a significant effect on SNS users' sharing attitude, which in turn strongly influences on two dimensions of sharing behavior. The implications of the study for research and practice will be discussed with future directions.

## Keywords

Social networking site, sharing behavior, sharing regularity, sharing intensity, social trust, theory of reasoned action

## INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNS) are among the most rapid growing means of sharing and communication in today's global village. Fast growing numbers of people are joining such sites and millions of them use SNS on a daily basis. Using these types of sites, people can connect to others and share personal information such as pictures, videos, personal opinions, and recommendations with other SNS users. A recent study shows that people of different countries have common major motivations for using SNSs although these motives may have different weights in different parts of the world (Kim, Sohn, and Choi, 2011). The most popular social networking sites based on the traffic data generated by are FaceBook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace and Google's newly developed product, Google Plus (Ebizmba, 2012).

One of the most important concerns associated with the activities of people in SNSs is the issue of trust. Although many professionals have brought trust issues including the security and privacy of personal information of users in these websites (e.g., Barnes 2006), little previous work has been done to measure the effect of trust on the sharing behavior of users in social networking sites. A 2007 study comparing FaceBook and MySpace showed that FaceBook users have higher trust in their SNS and consequently reveal more private information on the SNS (Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini, 2007). Another study concentrating on the technology acceptance model (TAM) to measure the intention to use SNS found perceived trust to be significantly effective on the intention to use SNS (Sledgjanowski and Kulviwat, 2009).

Although there are some previous work on measuring the importance of trust in an SNS environment, most of them concentrate on the intention to use SNS which results in the decision to join or not to join an SNS. We argue that it is also possible to look at the issue from another perspective. Although the privacy concern affects the intention to use SNS, it also has some effect on the SNS users' patterns of behavior especially on the sharing behavior. A study of organizational knowledge sharing showed that trust has a significant effect on the intention to share knowledge on organizational social networks (Ardichvili, Page, and Wentling, 2003). We argue that trust will have a similar effect on the sharing behavior of SNS users. Our study advances existing literature by taking a deep look at the sharing behavior of SNS users with concentration on the effect of trust.

The main contribution of this study is in identifying different aspects of SNS users' sharing behavior. From the perspective of the degree of sharing information, sharing behavior in the SNS context has two different dimensions: sharing regularity and

sharing density. *Sharing regularity* refers to the width degree of sharing behavior, which is measured by the frequency of sharing information with other SNS users in a certain period in SNSs. The more frequently a person shares information with others in a SNS, the higher sharing regularity this person has as a sharing behavior. *Sharing density*, the second dimension of sharing behavior, is defined as the degree of private information shared by a SNS user. The information shared by user can be general (e.g. links to websites) which has low level of sharing density or very private information (e.g. pictures and videos of close family and friends, personal matters, etc.) which have higher levels of sharing density. The online Oxford English Dictionary defines private as “concerning, involving, or affecting a particular person or group of people apart from the general community; individual or personal, rather than communal or shared” (private, n.d.). The more private information is shared by the user, the deeper the degree of sharing density will be. Figure 1 shows two dimensions of sharing behavior with some examples.

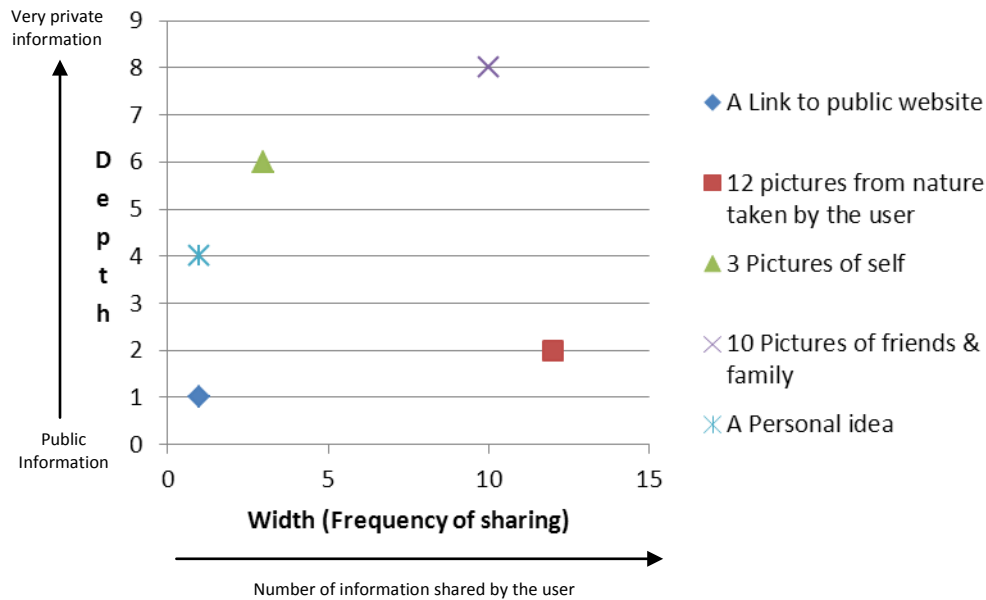


Figure 1-Two dimensions of sharing behavior

The study has three objectives: to propose a research model describing two dimensions of sharing behavior in social networking sites, to empirically validate the proposed research model using data collected from SNS users, and to provide insights regarding SNS users’ sharing behavior and its antecedents. The remaining parts of this paper are structured as follows: First, we take a look at the related literature. Second, we propose our research model and hypotheses. Third, we describe the research methodology and finally, we discuss the results of our study.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Extensive study of users’ behavior in social networking sites has been done in recent years. By now, SNS research has mainly concentrated on “impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structure, online/offline connections, and privacy issues” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007), and online marketing (Brown, Broderick, and Lee, 2007).

Press coverage has expressed a lot privacy concerns regarding SNSs, especially concerning the safety of younger users (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). A recent study (Young and Quan-Haase, 2009) found three privacy concerns of SNS users: their information being used for harmful purposes, sold, or observed by unintended audiences. They also discovered that both profile visibility and network size are positively associated with information disclosure. Moreover, they found that people use strategies such as sending private messages instead of posting on friends’ walls, tightening SNS privacy settings to maintain their privacy. Another study found that people who are more active on FaceBook and have friends with high privacy profiles tend to have more privacy settings on their SNS. Moreover, the study shows that women have more privacy concerns than men (Lewis, Kaufman, and Christakis 2008). Some other studies have had similar observations about the effect of gender on SNS privacy concerns (e.g., Fogel and Nehmad, 2009; Tufekci, 2008). It has also been found out that the tendency to disclose information decreases with age (Tufekci 2008). Another study showed that privacy concerns prevent employees from sharing personal details, such as where they lived, on a public site while they are more willing to share the same information on Beehive which is a SNS for employees (DiMicco, Millen, Geyer, Dugan, Brownholtz, and Muller, 2008).

Trust is a central variable associated with information privacy (Pavlou, Liang, and Xue, 2007). Research shows that FaceBook usage intensity has a positive effect on life satisfaction, social trust, and civic and political participation (Valenzuela, Park, and Kee, 2009). It has also been found out that a positive relationship exists between certain kinds of FaceBook usage and social capital maintenance and creation (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe, 2008).

According to Doney and Cannon (1997), trust has been widely studied in different areas such as social psychology, sociology, and economics, as well as marketing. They define trust as “the perceived credibility and benevolence of a target of trust”. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) define it as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.” They believe that trust is not necessarily equal to taking risks, but it is willingness to take risks. Gefen (2000) defines trust as the favorable expectation of future actions of others. He believes that trust is a way of reducing the complexity of understanding the behaviors of others. Hosmer (1995) has a similar idea and believes that trust in the past leads to trust in the future.

The issue of trust is an important part of today’s web-based systems (Pavlou, 2003; Rubin and Geer, 1998; Berners-Lee, Hall, Hendler, O’Hara, Shadbolt, and Weitzner, 2006). There is no agreement on the definition of trust in the cyber world. Trust has been conceptualized as the combination of integrity, benevolence, ability, and predictability of e-vendors which proliferates intention to use through reduced perceived risk among users (Gefen, Karahanna, and Straub, 2003), perceived site quality, technical trustworthiness and market orientation (Corbitt, Thanasankit, and Yi, 2003) and as beliefs in competence, integrity, and benevolence (Harrison McKnight, Choudhury, and Kacmar, 2002). Higher degrees of familiarity with an e-vendor lead to higher degrees of trust in the e-vendor (Gefen, 2000).

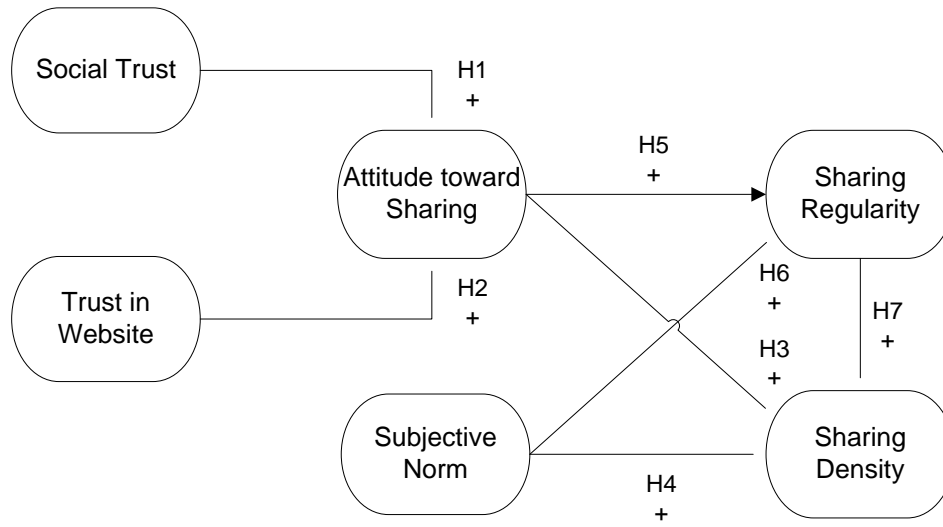
In the IS context, several researchers have studied the role of trust on purchases over the internet. Gefen (2000) investigated the role of trust in e-commerce and found it important to the inquiry and purchasing behavior of people. Pavlou (2003) showed that trust is indirectly associated with intention to transact in the e-commerce environment. Many other authors have made similar conclusions (Basso, Goldberg, Greenspan, and Weimer, 2001; Gefen 2004; Suh and Han, 2003; Corbitt et al., 2003; Salisbury, Pearson, Pearson, and Miller, 2001).

Sharing behavior is an important issue concerning social networks. A recent study on socio-technical factors affecting knowledge contribution in SNSs showed that ethical culture, sense of belonging to the SNS, and social ties among SNS users positively affect the knowledge contribution of SNS users (Chai and Kim, 2011). Another study (DiMicco et al. 2008) showed that employees share information on SNSs as an instrument for career advancement and gaining the ability to convince others to support ideas and projects. The research also showed that the most frequent actions of employees are writing comments and then creating new connections, which are followed by uploading photos, writing status messages, creating about-you’s and sharing lists. About you’s, status messages, and lists are most important ways of campaigning and gaining career advancement for employees. Moreover, research has shown that security and confidentiality considerations cause some employees to use old techniques of knowledge sharing (Ardichvili et al., 2003).

## RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Using the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) as a theoretical foundation, this study explains SNS users sharing behavior in terms of two dimensional components: sharing regularity and sharing density. TRA has been successfully applied in many research studies in social psychology, knowledge management, medical studies, and IT adoption (Chow and Chan 2008). The Theory of Reasoned Action has been widely used and validated in the IS research for explaining user intentions and behavior (e.g., Mykytyn and Harrison, 1993; Liker and Sindi, 1997; Wu, 2003; Bock, Zmud, Kim, and Lee, 2005). According to TRA, human behavior is determined by the intention to perform the behavior, which itself is the result of attitude toward behavior (reflecting conspicuous behavioral beliefs) and subjective norm (Reflecting the expectation of reference groups) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Subjective norm is a product of two different factors: normative beliefs about the behavior and motivation to comply (Bock et al., 2005). A person’s subjective norm for a behavior may be determined by considering normative beliefs from an individual concerning each relevant referent multiplied by the motivation to comply with each referent (Bentler and Speckart, 1979). TRA has recently been successfully used for determining pre-adoption intentions to use SNS (Chang and Zhu, 2011). In this research, we are studying the sharing behavior of SNS users. This means that our subjects are current SNS users and have some experience in sharing information on social networking sites. Because the subjects have shown previous behavior related to the area of the study, we can measure their behavior directly without the need to measure their intention to perform the behavior. So we have removed the intention construct from our model and have measured the direct effect of attitude toward sharing and subjective norm on users’ sharing behavior in SNS context. Considering the factors affecting the

two dimensions of sharing behavior of SNS users along with TRA as a background theory, we propose the following research model (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2-Research Model**

Trust is a significant variable relating to information privacy (Pavlou et al., 2007). According to the social exchange theory, trust is an important component of social exchange and is a result of abiding to rules of exchange by parties involving in a relationship over time (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Metzger (2004) argues that trust is highly associated with information disclosure since it decreases the degree of the perceived risk of revealing private information. So it seems that trust is more a result of favorable relationships than a precondition for it. A recent study showed that higher levels of privacy measures on the web improve perceived security, which directly affects the intention to adopt online services. Moreover, the research shows that perceived trust is affected by perceived security and privacy (Kim, Steinfield, and Lai, 2008). Another study showed that trust in SNS which is predicted by perceived security and privacy of the person in social networking site, significantly affects attitude toward SNS (Shin 2010).

We study two kinds of trust in the context of SNS: social trust and trust in social networking site. Social trust is defined here as the belief that others will not deliberately or knowingly harm us, and if possible, they will avoid it and will look after our interests (Delhey and Newton, 2005). We argue that social trust has a positive effect on attitude toward sharing. We have several reasons for this argument. Based on TRA, attitude is “determined by a hierarchically organized, limited number of salient beliefs” (Bentler and Speckart, 1979). Since social trust is a kind of belief and it has significant effect on user’s information disclosure behavior, we can argue that it has a positive effect on attitude toward sharing. Moreover, trust is an affective attitude of optimism about the goodwill and competence of others (Jones, 1996). This optimism can lead to good attitude toward sharing because higher levels of trust decrease the person’s perceived risk of sharing private information. Based on the above arguments, we hypothesize that:

H1. Social trust is positively associated with attitude toward sharing.

In addition to social trust, trust in social networking website can be an important predictor of SNS users’ attitude toward sharing. Trust in site is defined as the belief or expectations that the website can be depended with confidence to perform role responsibilities in a fiduciary manner (Smith, 1997). Research shows that consumers who trust a firm are less concerned about their privacy and more willing to reveal personal information (Schoenbachler and Gordon, 2002). Similar to its importance in e-commerce, trust in a website may have a significant effect on website usage in SNS context. There are several reasons for this argument. First, trust in site is a belief and it is a prominent one according to the literature. Second, lack of trust in the website may concern users’ about their privacy and create a negative effect on their attitude toward sharing things in SNS environment while high levels of trust in a website will let users to share things with a free mind and improve their attitude toward sharing. So we can argue that those SNS users, who have more trust in their SNS, will have a better attitude toward sharing. Thus we hypothesize that:

H2. Trust in site is positively associated with attitude toward sharing.

Since an important function of SNS is sharing pictures, videos and ideas, attitude toward sharing can positively affect the depth of the content shared by users. In other words, we propose that people with good attitudes toward sharing will reveal more private information so their sharing density will be higher. There are reasons for this argument. Good attitude toward sharing is sign of the belief that sharing is nice. When someone finds something interesting, he/she is inclined to do it more and better. In other words, a person with good attitude toward sharing is more likely to share things that he/she finds interesting and also thinks that others will like it too. Although sharing public information can be fun, but it may not be so interesting for others because such information can be accessed through other ways. Private information is different because others usually can't access it unless the owner of the information releases them. This makes private information more interesting. Considering the argument about sharing attractive information, we can expect that good attitude toward sharing will be associated with higher levels of private information revelation. Moreover, good attitude toward sharing may be associated with lower levels privacy concerns letting the person show deeper sharing behavior. The above arguments lead to the following hypothesis:

H3. Attitude toward sharing is positively associated with sharing density.

In addition to attitude toward sharing, related subjective sharing norm affects SNS users' sharing density as predicted by TRA. Those who both are surrounded by positive subjective norms expecting them to share things and have motivation to comply with these expectations will probably share more private information on their SNS. We have reasons for this argument. First, research has shown that knowledge exchange in social networks is motivated by moral obligation and community interest rather than by a narrow self-interest (Ardichvili et al., 2003). Subjective norm is a kind of collective expectation and thus can affect sharing behavior. Second, subjective norm is a reflection of expectations of people close to the person (family, close friends) about sharing things with them. Typically, we can believe that peers and family will expect the person to share private information with them reflecting his current situation rather than only sharing general public information. So, subjective sharing norm leads to deeper sharing behavior. Consequently, we hypothesize that:

H4. Subjective norm is positively associated with sharing density.

Several studies have investigated the effect of SNS usage on behavioral attributes. A study on 286 undergraduate students in US showed that FaceBook intensity can predict high levels of maintained social capital (Ellison et al., 2007). Another study showed that intention to use social networking sites is affected by attitude toward SNS (Shin, 2010). We argue that in addition to affecting the sharing density, attitude toward sharing affects SNS users' regularity of sharing. There are reasons to expect that one's width of sharing on a social networking site- i.e. the frequency with which he shares something with his friends will be affected by his attitude toward sharing. Those with good attitude toward sharing will probably be more interested in social networking. Thus they will more frequently login into their accounts and spend more time on social networking sites communicating with friends and sharing information with them. Moreover, good attitude toward sharing will cause the person to share more information which will consequently lead to more feedback from other SNS members forcing the person to spend more time on his SNS checking comments of his friends and peers. The above arguments lead to the following hypotheses:

H5. Attitude toward sharing is positively associated with regularity of sharing.

In addition to attitude toward sharing, subjective norm about sharing can also affect regularity of sharing. If the person perceives strong expectations from family and friends about sharing information with them while having a motivation to comply with these expectations, he will be forced to spend more time on his social networking site to share information with them, view the information shared by them, and read and reply to the comments of SNS friends about the information shared with them. Considering the above arguments, we propose that:

H6. Subjective norm is positively associated with regularity of sharing.

Besides attitude toward sharing and subjective norm, regularity of sharing can have a positive effect on SNS users' sharing density. There are some explanations for our argument. A recent study on SNS activity of students found that higher levels of activity on FaceBook are positively associated with greater likelihood of maintaining a private profile by the user (Lewis, Kaufman, and Christakis, 2008). A possible explanation for this observation can be higher level of information disclosure by active SNS users. The more a person is active on social networking sites, the more will be the amount of private information revealed by him and higher levels of information disclosure can be associated with higher levels of privacy concern. Moreover, those who are more active in online social networking sites will spend more time on their SNS doing different social networking activities like viewing friend's profiles, viewing the information shared by friends, expressing interest in the shared information and putting comments on friends' activities. Sharing things is another social networking activity that is more likely to be done more frequently by active SNS users than by less active ones. The information shared by a user can contain private or public information. Assuming that there is a constant proportion of private to public information shared by

the person, higher levels of SNS activity for the person will be associated with more private information disclosure. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H7. Regularity of sharing is positively associated with sharing density.

## METHODOLOGY

A sample survey method was used to do a pilot study. Data were collected from a sample of 126 undergraduate students from a large university in the southern US during a two week period. Of these, nine had missing responses and were removed from the sample. The final sample count was 117 with a usable sample rate of 93%. 67% of the respondents were male and 33% were female.

Measurement was done using 7-item Likert scale. Measures of social trust were adopted from Valenzuela et al. (2009). Measurement of trust in site was done using the scales provided by Fogel and Nehmad (2009). Measures for attitude toward sharing and subjective norm were adapted from Bock et al. (2005). Regularity of sharing and sharing density were measured by questions adapted on Young and Quan-Haase (2009) with some changes.

Analysis of the data was done using Partial Least Squares (PLS). Measurement items were tested for reliability and items that did not have good reliability or high cross-loading between two constructs were dropped to increase reliability. Table 1 and table 2 show the outer loadings and final reliability measures for each construct after removing the low-reliability items.

	Attitude toward Sharing	Sharing Density	Sharing Regularity	Social Trust	Subjective Norm	Trust in Website
ATS1	0.901594					
ATS2	0.896013					
ATS3	0.853036					
ATS4	0.825145					
ATS5	0.780765					
SD1		0.611509				
SD2		0.890345				
SD3		0.817227				
SN1					0.664875	
SN2					0.902359	
SN3					0.852769	
SN5					0.631667	
SN6					0.598947	
ST1				0.739771		
ST3				0.765602		
ST4				0.784561		
ST6				0.689338		
ST8				0.839131		
ST9				0.873862		
TS1						0.832338
TS2						0.896086
TS3						0.884813
TS4						0.854109
SR1R			0.852222			
SR2R			0.882970			

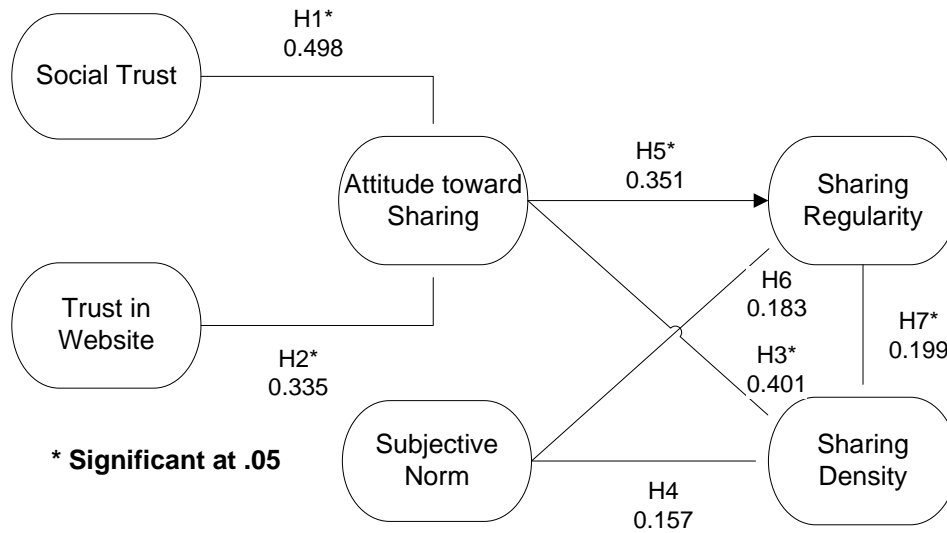
**Table 1- Outer Loadings**

	Composite Reliability	Cronbach's Alpha
Attitude toward Sharing	0.93	0.91
Sharing Density	0.82	0.68
Sharing Regularity	0.86	0.67
Social Trust	0.91	0.88
Subjective Norm	0.86	0.81
Trust in Website	0.92	0.89

**Table 2- Reliability Analysis**

Pilot study data analysis shows support for all of the hypotheses except H6 and H4. The t-values for H1, H2, H3, H5, and H7 were all above 1.96 indicating a significance level of 0.05 or higher (Gefen and Straub, 2005). The R-Squares for attitude toward sharing, sharing regularity, and sharing density were 0.528, 0.252, and 0.423 accordingly. Figure 3 shows the results of data analysis. More complete results will be presented in the conference.

**Figure 3-Pilot Study Results**





## DISCUSSION

Our main objective was to understand the influence of trust, attitude toward sharing, and subjective norm on sharing behavior of SNS users. The results show that: (1) the activity of users in the SNS environment can be well predicted using the theory of reasoned action, (2) trust is positively associated with attitude toward sharing (3) attitude toward sharing is a significant predictor of width and depth dimensions of sharing behavior in social networking sites, (4) sharing regularity is a significant predictor of sharing density. The two hypotheses that were not supported in this research were regarding the relationship between subjective norm and sharing width and depth dimensions. The insignificance of the relationships between subjective norm and two dimensions of sharing behavior are consistent with findings of Cheung, Chiu, and Lee (2011).

### Implications

This study has implications for both theory and practice. From the theoretical point of view, this study has three contributions. First, it identifies two separate dimensions of users' sharing behavior in SNS context: sharing depth and sharing width. Second, the study successfully applies a well-known theory to determine SNS users' sharing activity which can be a guide for future research. Finally, it uses both social trust & trust in website simultaneously to predict SNS users' sharing behavior.

In addition to having theoretical implications, this study has implications for the practice. Practitioners can use this study to build strategies and models for social networking sites. First, this study showed the significant role of trust in website on SNS users' sharing behavior. SNSs need to create and maintain trust to be able to retain their users. Thus they need to search for factors affecting SNS users' trust and find different trust-making mechanisms to increase users' trust and make them more active on the site. Second, this study showed the significant effect of attitude toward sharing on SNS users' sharing behavior. Social networking websites can work on improving this attitude in their users to make them more active on the website. Finally, the study showed the significant effect on the width dimension of sharing behavior on the depth dimension. This indicates that more activity of SNS users leads to more private information revelation on the website. This private information can be used by SNSs to create customized advertising for users. SNSs can search for mechanisms of increasing the user activity on the website to find more private information and increase their income from advertisement.

### Limitations

Like any other research, this research has limitations. First, the subjects were undergraduate students so the range of age and education was limited. Second, 66% of respondents were male because the students were from a single major which has a high percentage of male registration. Third, some of the constructs in this study were relatively new, were not tested before, and had relatively low Cronbach's alphas which may decrease reliability and validity of the results.

### Future Research

We provide several directions for future research. First, future research can be done by selecting a better sample containing different age and educational groups and relatively equal proportion of men and women. Second, future studies can look at the factors affecting the social trust and trust in website to give better guidelines to the practice community regarding the sharing behavior of SNS users. Third, the effect of demographic attributes can be tested in the future studies. Fourth, future studies can look for other factors affecting SNS users' attitude toward sharing to create a more complete picture of factors affecting SNS sharing behavior. Finally, since trust and privacy are highly related (Pavlou, 2003), future research can incorporate the privacy construct in the model and look at its effect on trust in site and attitude toward sharing.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined factors affecting the sharing behavior of users in SNS environment with concentration on the effect of trust. Theoretical support of this research for predicting sharing behavioral of SNS users was provided by theory of reasoned action. The validity of the model and the relationships among constructs was tested using PLS analysis and showed four important factors regarding the sharing behavior of SNS users. First, we found that there is a significant relationship between social trust and trust in website from one side and attitude toward sharing from the other side. Second, the results showed major differences between two major dimensions of SNS users' sharing behavior: the sharing regularity and the sharing density. Third, the model analysis showed that attitude toward sharing significantly affects two dimensions of sharing behavior of SNS users. Finally, we found a significant relationship between width and depth dimensions of sharing indicating that sharing regularity has a positive effect on sharing density of SNS users.

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