

Social Capital Mobilization in Social Networking Services

Emergent Research Forum papers

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Abstract

The advent of internet-enabled mobile devices has ushered in a new era of online social networking. Recently, there has been an increase in the use of mobile internet and rise in social media access via mobile phones. Many social networking services (SNS) have introduced mobile apps for users to access them “on the fly” via smartphones. Our study contributes to the literature by uncovering the relationships between SNS use and social capital mobilization. The results show that SNS intensity and SNS network size influence social capital mobilization both directly and indirectly by increasing social participation. Furthermore, use of mobile applications for social networking significantly increases SNS intensity. Finally, SNS network size is an important predictor of use of SNS mobile applications.

Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) not only has changed the way businesses operate, it has also brought significant changes to our personal and social lives. Today, ICT is used on a daily basis for different purposes including social networking. Facebook is the most popular SNS that has attracted over a billion active users in less than a decade. Almost half of the time people spend for social networking is through mobile devices (ComScore 2013). Mobile social networking not only increases the amount of time people spend on social networks, it also extends the use of various types of content, such as the ‘location-based services’, currently offered by many SNS (ComScore 2011).

The concept of social capital, which is related to networking and relationship-building, has become a vital part of business and life in our world (Parker 2008). Social capital is complementary to other forms of capital (Godfrey 2008) and essentially refers to the resources accumulated through the relationships among people (Coleman 1988). SNS allow users to build relationships, make “professional connections” (as in LinkedIn), have “friends” (as in Facebook), and have “circles” of contacts (as in Google+). The social capital theory (Lin 1999) conceptualizes social capital as the resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions. SNS have helped people tap into their connections to use their social capital and use it purposively through various actions such as finding jobs, obtaining references and recommendations, searching for businesses and learning opportunities, and collaborative online shopping (Kim, Suh and Lee 2013). Such use of social capital is known as “Social capital mobilization” (SCM) (Putnam 1998). SCM essentially refers to purposive use of social capital as a productive resource that includes networks of relationships built by users. The size of one’s social network is determined by the number of connections the person has in his/her network (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2011).

Although SCM has often been discussed in previous research, it has seldom been the focal point of any empirical studies. The same is true with regard to the effect of network size on social capital (Lin 1999). Drawing on social capital theory (Lin 1999), this study investigates the relationships between SCM and various aspects of social networking including the use of mobile social networking applications and SNS network size. This study has three objectives: (1) to propose a research model describing how different

aspects of social networking affect SCM of individuals, (2) to empirically validate the proposed research model using data collected from SNS users, and (3) to provide academia and practitioners with insights regarding the relationship between mobile social networking, social network size, and SCM.

Theoretical Background

The term “social capital” was popularized by Putnam in late 90’s. Social capital is essentially a sociological concept related to the connections between social networks (Young 2011) but it has also been explored in sociology, economics, political science, business and more recently in computer application studies (Valenzuela, Park and Kee 2009). Social capital is composed of a variety of different entities with two elements in common: social structures and actors within the structure (Coleman 1988).

Social capital theory (Lin 1999) conceptualizes social capital as the resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions. This definition lays down three dimensions for social capital: the resources embedded in a social structure, the accessibility of the social resources, and the purposeful use or mobilization of social resources. This theory states that social resources, which are embedded in social networks, can be used to improve one’s socioeconomic status. Such purposive use of social capital is known as social capital mobilization. SCM facilitates actions that range from an individual’s occupational attainments (Marsden and Hurlbert 1988) to a firm’s business operations (Burt 1992). Social capital relationships exist only on the basis of the relations of exchange which implies that these relationships are maintained by some material or symbolic exchange (Bourdieu 1986). In order to build and use social capital, one needs to be connected to others as actual source of advantage (Portes 1998). Thus, the extent of one’s social capital depends on the extent of the social relationships that can be mobilized through the resources possessed by his/her connections (Bourdieu 1986).

Research Model and Hypotheses

This study investigates the effect of using SNS on social capital mobilization. Drawing on social capital theory, we propose a research model explaining the relationship between different aspects of SNS and SCM. Figure 1 depicts our proposed model. From the SNS-related constructs, we study network size, SNS intensity, and use of social networking mobile applications. While theory suggests that network size is an essential predictor of social capital in social networks (Bourdieu 1986; Flap 2002), empirical evidence supporting this relationship is limited (Lin 1999). As a result, network size is the focal point of this study. We operationalize network size as the number of connections an individual has in his/her SNS. Other studies have used network size in a similar manner, for instance network size have defined network size as “number of friends” (Ellison et al. 2011) and number of members in an online gaming community (Hsiao and Chiou 2012).

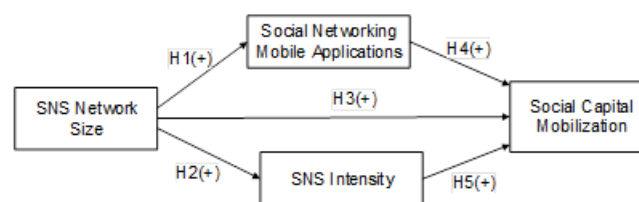


Figure 1- Research model

Mobile phones provide people with ubiquitous and instantaneous communication services such as voice, texting, instant messaging, internet connectivity, and social networking. Such services turn mobile phones into a means for communicating with a large number of people. Hence, as the need for communication grows among people, the use of various mobile services increase. Within the context of SNS, people with larger number of SNS connections can utilize their mobile phones to maintain their relationships within their SNS. Mobile social networking applications allow individuals establish a continuous, “always-on” connection with their SNS and communicate with their connections, anytime, anywhere. Thus, people with larger network size are more likely to use mobile social networking for communicating with their SNS connections. Consequently, we propose that:

H1: Network size positively affects mobile social networking.

Individuals with a larger network size are more likely to spend a greater amount of time interacting online. They are more likely to have greater social networking intensity as well as more access to friends and contacts as a pool of resources. Larger SNS network size is also associated with higher levels of information disclosure (Young and Quan-Haase 2009) which may result in increased communications. The larger the network a person maintains on SNS, the higher is the probability of starting a discussion on SNS. Thus, larger network size requires the user to be more active on SNS to keep in touch with their social circle. Based on the above argument, we hypothesize that:

H2: Network Size positively affects social networking intensity.

Studies have emphasized the importance of network size on social capital and stated that social capital is a function of the size of the network and the volume of capital held by network members (Flap 2002; Lin 1992). Dense networks are high in reciprocity and provide generalized social support (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001) whereas weak ties may also offer the opportunity to foster relations and build connections (Granovetter 1973). Although internet makes immense amounts of information available, there are still certain skills needed to locate and evaluate this content and to take full advantage of it (Hargittai 2007). Similarly, SNS act as a vast reservoir of untapped social capital resources for the users until they decide to mobilize it by using their network to their advantage. While random 'friending' behavior is frowned upon, greater network size is associated with higher levels of perceived social attractiveness to other users (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell and Walther 2008). Network size is also related to bridging social capital (Ellison et al. 2011) which is strongly related to SCM as sharing of necessary information is an underlying factor for both. Hence, we propose that:

H3: Network size positively affects social capital mobilization.

Because of their potential to enable fast and cheap communication and their network-building capabilities, (Tapscott 2010), SNS have implications when it comes to SCM. The usage of mobile phones to stay connected via SNS makes communication even faster and more accessible. It allows individuals to stay connected with their offline ties more constantly and consistently, through online channels (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007). Many activities are time bound and it is likely that users of SNS who are knowledgeable and aware on how to best use these platforms would use their mobile phones to rapidly 'spread the word' and mobilize their contacts and networks to act. The accessibility, efficiency, and ease of connecting to SNS on mobile phones allows for greater interaction. Individuals will be able to use this aforementioned speed and connectivity to stay in touch with a larger number of connections and interact rapidly with them. Consequently, social networking mobile applications can facilitate social network mobilization. Hence, we posit that:

H4: Mobile social networking positively affects social capital mobilization.

Users of SNS use these online applications to strengthen their offline relationships and engage in information sharing activities. People view other users' posts or comments and share information with them as to maintain current relationships and to create new ones. Research shows that intensity of Facebook use is positively associated with different dimensions of social capital (Valenzuela et al. 2009). The more active a person is on SNS, the better they will maintain current online and offline relationships and the more they will make new relationships. As a result, SNS intensity acts as a social capital enrichment tool, enabling users to build strong social ties with others. The social capital built through SNS activity can later be mobilized for purposive goals. This brings us to the following hypothesis:

H5: Social Networking Intensity positively affects social capital mobilization.

Methodology and Expected Contributions

To validate our model, we are developing a survey instrument whose items consist of both adapted and developed scales. We will use Partial Least Squares (PLS) for analysis of our data.

This study is expected to have implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the recent knowledge and developments in studying the effect of SNS on individual's lives by studying the role of SNS in SCM. This relationship is highly understudied and opens new directions for future research. In addition, this study adds to the body of knowledge regarding mobile

social networking, which is still in the nascent stage of scholarship development. We also introduce the concept of SNS network size as a focal point of SNS activity. This dimension of SNS activity is expected to be a significant predictor of SNS intensity, mobile social networking, and SCM and creates many opportunities for future research. Although previous studies have shown the effect of SNS network size on social capital (Ellison et al. 2011), to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that explores the relationship between network size and SCM.

From a practical perspective, this study allows practitioners to be cognizant of the importance of network size in social networking. The research model suggests that those with a larger network size build higher levels of social capital and consequently make more gains from it. Network size is also expected to be a significant predictor of SNS intensity and mobile social networking. Users with large networks are thus important assets of SNS and should receive special considerations from SNS.

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