

IF WE BUILD IT THEY WILL COME: UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL NETWORK AFFINITY

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ABSTRACT

The motivations driving individuals to join and subsequently value their involvement in an online social network are an intriguing consumer behavior phenomenon. The implications for the understanding of such motivations are immense, since firms are increasing their social media marketing campaigns at remarkable rates (Barnes and Lescault, 2011). Our study aims to explore the concept of community which forms within these social networks; to do so, we introduce the concept of social network affinity and explain its roots in social influence theory.

Given the abundance of social networking and social media marketing and the associated social commerce boom (Stephen and Toubia, 2010), a greater understanding of the motivations behind member loyalty to such communities is warranted. As a step in that direction, we introduce a social network affinity based model which posits that member loyalty to a social network will be enhanced by both rational features, i.e. information and system quality, and social influences, i.e. belonging, interactivity, and emotional connection.

Affinity is defined as “a strong connection or relationship between people or things” (“affinity”, American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition). We bring this concept into the social networking arena by combining sense of belonging, interactivity, and emotional connection and conceptualizing these as parts of social network affinity. In recent research, Panigrahy, Najork, and Xie (2012) identify social affinity across multiple online domains and computationally show that virtual relationships can build it through repetitive and selective connections. Building on the models provided by Lin (2008) and Zhang (2010), we propose a hybrid model which focuses on developing lasting relationships between consumers and social networking firms.

Building on existing models and social influence theory, we propose a hybrid social network affinity model which focuses on developing lasting relationships between consumers and social networking firms. Our model incorporates both rational and social influence motivations as antecedents to satisfaction and loyalty. Based on 241 adult respondents, we utilize a partial least squares structural equation method, and find that social network affinity is an important predictor of satisfaction and loyalty within a social network. In addition to other implications, our study indicates that social networking firms must build a sense of belonging, encourage interactivity, and offer ways to develop an emotional connection for their consumers.

References available upon request.