

Online Social Networks and Friending Behaviour: A Self-Determination Theory perspective

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Abstract

Links between the underlying motives for using online social networks and resulting user behaviours remain under-researched. Friending is one such behaviour. The friending process joins user profiles together into a network web, creating links through which users can navigate the network by moving between profiles. The articulation and public display of friendship differentiates social networking sites from other social media sites. Understanding what drives users to grow their networks will provide a framework for the development of retention strategies. Using Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), this paper investigates the role of online social networks in supporting friending behaviour, and suggests site usage satisfies basic psychological needs.

Keywords: Online social networks, Self-Determination Theory, Motivation.

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Introduction

Broadly defined, online social networks are web-based platforms that allow people to interact, communicate and share their lives (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Currently popular sites include Facebook.com and MySpace.com. Online social networking sites allow people to establish, re-establish and maintain connections with a large group of people in both a time and cost-effective manner. Considerable enthusiasm for this form of communication has led to the increasing popularity of online social networking.

For media owners, online social networking sites are primarily advertising platforms (Krishnamurthy and Dou, 2008). For marketers, they can facilitate the spread of positive word of mouth. To be successful sites must encourage friending, network growth and site loyalty, so that higher advertising rates can be charged as the network grows. Research is therefore warranted in order to understand friending behaviour.

Perceived satisfaction of the basic psychological needs is hypothesised to lead to a range of online user behaviours including friending (defined below), content contribution and lurking. This paper aims to provide some insight into the underlying motives for friending through the development of a theoretical framework that draws on a synthesis of the motivation and online social networking literatures. The outcome of this process is an explanation for the motivations behind online social networking use and resultant friending behaviour. From this we draw a series of research propositions for future empirical testing.

Through the employment of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) we suggest the influence of motivation on behaviour in online social networks can be examined (Deci and Ryan, 1985). The link between consumer behaviour and the perceived satisfaction of the basic psychological needs has been studied in non-online contexts (e.g. Reeve, Nix, and Hamm, 2003). Our research proposed to take SDT in a new direction, expanding it into the context of online social networking. Applying SDT in this new domain will provide an opportunity to test its claims in a realistic manner, which provides a partial response to Deci and Ryan's (2002) call for further investigation of SDT in real humanistic contexts.

Friending

In everyday vernacular the term 'friend' usually signals a strong tie relationship, rather than a weak acquaintance. In online social networking terms however the term friend simply indicates a consensual association between two site users; all possible relationship types are represented equally (boyd, 2008).

'Friending' is the process of linking user profiles. The process incorporates extending friendship requests to other users, accepting requests and declining or ignoring requests, as well as blocking specific individuals. As an ongoing process, users are prompted to search for and request friendship from other users of the network. Acceptance of these requests results in the formation of a network link, giving each user access to the others' profile information (Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini, 2007; Walther et al., 2008). In addition to this sharing of information, each user profile displays the name and a photo of all of that user's friends (boyd, 2008). Friending joins user profiles together into an egocentric network web, creating

links through which users can navigate the network by moving from friend profile, to profile, to profile (boyd, 2007b). This articulation and public display of friendship differentiates social networking sites from other sites which support computer-mediated communication (boyd, 2006, 2007a). Managerially, understanding friending behaviour is of key importance if the aim is to encourage and foster site usage and network growth.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory of motivation (1985) is proposed as a theoretical base from which to study online social networking behaviour. SDT views the organism as an active initiator of behaviour, with intrinsic, universal psychological needs providing energy for the organism to act on the environment (Deci and Ryan, 1985). The framework suggests that individual differences result from the constant interaction between people's needs and the structures provided by their social environments. SDT identifies three fundamental (basic) needs; the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

Autonomy refers to acting out of volition, will or by choice (Jang et al., 2009). Individuals have an organismic desire to act according to an integrated sense of self, with the perception of being the origin or source of their behaviour (Deci and Ryan, 2002). SDT defines competence as the need to be effective in interactions with the social environment, whilst experiencing the opportunity to express and implement ones capacities and abilities (Deci and Ryan, 2002). Relatedness is acknowledged as the psychological need to feel connected to others. It involves caring and being cared for, belonging with others and to a community (Bowlby, 1969). Relatedness is not concerned with outcomes, but rather a psychological sense of security, belongingness and the intimacy of being with others (Deci, 2000).

SDT focuses on motivation type or the degree to which the activity is intrinsically motivated (self-determined) versus controlled (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are regarded as reflecting various degrees of self-determined motivation lying along a continuum. Intrinsic motivation is defined as doing an activity for its own sake as an end in itself; and for the satisfaction and pleasure derived from the involvement (Deci, 1975; Grouzet et al., 2004; Guay, Mageau, and Vallerand, 2003).

Interest in an activity is hypothesized to be relative to perceived need satisfaction whilst engaging in the activity (Deci and Ryan, 2002; Reeve, 2009). People persist with activities they find interesting (because they are intrinsically motivated) or important (due to well-internalized extrinsic motivation) (Deci, 1975; Ryan, 1995).

Discussion

According to SDT, in supportive environments, needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness generate feelings of curiosity, interest and a desire to affect change on the environment (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Reeve, 2009). It can be argued that popular online social networks are indeed supportive environments, due to the enthusiasm with which consumers voluntarily use them.

SDT suggests people will tend to pursue goals, situations and relationships that support need satisfaction, resulting in positive psychological outcomes. The type of motivation or level of self-determination, resulting from environmental factors and perceptions of basic need satisfaction, is hypothesised by SDT to predict behavioural outcomes (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

Our research proposes that online social networks provide users with a basic need supporting environment, generating feelings of curiosity, interest and a willingness to act. These feelings encourage users of online social networks to act with persistence, to make friends and be interested in the lives of others, and to contribute information to share within this social environment.

Integrating SDT and our knowledge of online social networks, we propose the following articulated model; we propose a relationship between perceptions of basic need satisfaction, self-determined motivation (experienced as feelings of interest and curiosity) and resulting usage behaviours. Additionally, we expect a relationship between basic need satisfaction and friending behaviour. This theoretical framework leads to the following research proposition:

P1: Perceived satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness leads to feelings of interest and curiosity which in turn motivate initial and continued site use.

According to SDT, intrinsic motivation develops a predisposition to seek out novel activities and challenges (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Although the link between competence and friending has not been researched in the academic realm, there is considerable academic literature suggesting that friending provides a challenge for users, satisfying the need for competence, and providing the energy to adapt to new challenges in changing contexts (White, 1959). For example, although the average user has around 130 friends in line with offline networking theories (e.g. Dunbar, 2004), some users have an excessive number of friends and many of the ties are meaningless (Zhou et al., 2009); some users view their friend list simply as an address book (Acar, 2008; boyd, 2008).

Competence motivation also encourages interest and learning (Deci and Ryan, 2000; White, 1959). Online social networks build interest from the foundation of prior knowledge. The novelty involved in reading about friends' activities is experienced as being enjoyable and satisfying (boyd, 2007b). Functionally, friending links users to share information (Hargittai, 2007; Walther et al., 2008), allowing navigation from profile to profile. An increase in networked friends increases the amount of available 'new news', entertainment, and information content that is available to the user (Burke, Marlow, and Lento, 2009; Skageby, 2009; Tufekci, 2008).

SDT suggests that the key environmental conditions to support competence satisfaction are "optimal challenge, clear and helpful structure, and high failure tolerance from others" coupled with positive feedback and a perception of progress (Reeve, 2009 p.156). The process of friending seems to offer many users an opportunity to satisfy the need for competence. The highly structured process provides users a challenge, along with positive feedback, through friendship acceptance. Progress is publicly displayed with a count of the 'number of friends'. This link between competence and friending is supported by studies suggesting that the displayed 'number of friends' can have important social status and power implications (Donath and boyd, 2004; Tom Tong et al., 2008; Walther et al., 2008). Zywicki and Danowski (2008) report that those who are popular offline use online social networks to further enhance their social status. Those who are shy or less popular offline use online social networks to compensate for this (Orr et al., 2009). These findings suggest that competence is the key motivator for continued site usage, facilitating active friending behaviour, leading to the following research proposition:

P2: Perceived satisfaction of the need for competence is positively related to continued site use.

SDT suggests that stable cultures support internalization and socialization, in-turn promoting cultural evolution and associated memes (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Satisfaction of the need for autonomy is perceived as acting with an integrated sense of self (Deci and Ryan, 2002). Friending promotes the integration and internalization of cultural memes. In the process, users articulate who is part of their 'in-group' and who they see as their imagined audience (boyd, 2007a). The displayed connections reveal meaningful information about that person (Donath and boyd, 2004). Friends provide social context as part of the perceived audience. They set standards of behaviour and social norms (boyd, 2006; boyd and Ellison, 2007; Zhou et al., 2009).

In contexts which support autonomy, behaviour is experienced as personally relevant and of value (Hagger and Chatzisarantis, 2007). Extant literature supports this argument, asserting that friends provide an actual audience, a reason to produce content, providing feedback and reinforcement (Steinfeld, Ellison, and Lampe, 2008). In virtual knowledge sharing communities Ardichvili, Page and Wentling (2003) found that an audience provides users the opportunity to establish themselves as experts. In the online social networking context, a user who feels autonomous motivation is likely to feel a sense of choice regarding their friending behaviour. Users of online social networks do so voluntarily, suggesting the environment, culture and relationships within, support autonomy by providing opportunities for self-direction. These findings lead to the following research proposition:

P3: Perceived satisfaction of the need for autonomy is positively related to the extension of friendship requests.

Current academic literature (e.g. Ross et al., 2009) argues that friending provides users with a number of personal benefits, providing indirect support for a link between friending and the satisfaction of the need for relatedness. Friends provide social capital (Golder, Wilkinson, and Huberman, 2007; Maletsky and Valdivieso, 2008). Online communities generate and allow the maintenance of social capital by strengthening relationships between people who have met earlier, but would not have kept in contact if not for the convenience of the network (Ardichvili et al., 2003). This is supported by empirical findings that most friendship requests come from people users already know offline (Stern and Taylor, 2007). Social capital is defined by Steinfeld, Ellison and Lampe (2008) as the benefits received from relationships with other people. In line with SDT, it reportedly leads to better health, academic success and also better emotional development in young people, providing the expectation of emotional and practical support (boyd, 2006). It is argued that social loneliness due to relocation, retirement or empty-nest syndrome for example, can be remedied by engaging in social networks (Rosenbaum, 2006). A need for relatedness leads people to seek interaction (Ryan and Deci, 2000). When a social bond is created, and there is a perception of caring, the need for relatedness is satisfied. SDT recognises that relational supports do not have to be proximal for intrinsic motivation to be maintained (Deci and Ryan, 2000). This is demonstrated by common intrinsically motivated behaviours which occur in isolation, such as playing solitaire (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Online social networks equally support relationships regardless of tie strength (Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe, 2007). Although users are proximally isolated, online social networks are designed to bring people together, to satisfy needs for relatedness. Active friending behaviour is predicted to result from a desire to satisfy of this need. Rosenbaum (2006) argues that for users of online social networks, loyalty increases as

feelings of companionship and emotional support from their network increase. These findings lead to the following research proposition:

P4: Perceived satisfaction of the need for relatedness is positively related to extending and accepting friendship requests.

These findings suggest that for users of online social networking sites, the process of friending is a process of value creation through need satisfaction. Need satisfaction prolongs task engagement and persistence, and reengagement behaviours (Reeve, 2009). It is therefore important for media owners to encourage the process of friending to increase user satisfaction and the likelihood that they will repeatedly use the site (Rosenbaum, 2006). From a business perspective, customer loyalty equates to continued site usage and customer retention, key indicators of site value.

Conclusion

As a new technology, online social networks are a new frontier for marketing. This paper extends the current body of knowledge through the development and articulation of a conceptual model of friending behaviour. This is an important step in improving our understanding of the nature and dynamics of consumer motivation in this context. Understanding the motivational antecedents of behaviour in online social networking sites is important since it is likely to provide significant managerial guidance regarding how to make the sites useful for users. User retention is important in terms of long term site profitability, especially in the online environment where switching costs are low (Li, Browne & Chau, 2006). Managerially, understanding the motives behind friending behaviour is the first step in understanding consumer motives for friending a brand, and thus this study has obvious commercial application.

Friending allows users to navigate the network, but it also facilitates communication and word of mouth. Friending behaviour must be supported and encouraged if these sites are to grow. Using Self-Determination Theory, this preliminary analysis suggest that friending behaviours displayed by online social networking site users are related to the underlying basic psychological need that the site allows them to satisfy. Empirical testing is required to advance our theoretical knowledge of consumer need satisfaction and friending behaviour within the online social networking site context.

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