Diffusion of a Professional Social Network: Business School Graduates in Focus

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ABSTRACT

Online professional social networks are becoming an instrumental tool to facilitate relationships between business and technology professionals for career success. Even though tools such as LinkedIn can be used to manage human capital for career success use and adoption still is not universally accepted. This paper seeks to better understand the effect university, gender, and degree type has on the diffusion of an online social network (LinkedIn) across three years (2011 to 2014). The authors’ findings show diffusion is not consistent across business school graduates. Their business school findings suggest that university, gender, and degree type have significant associations with LinkedIn participation. This is the case even though the majority of graduates still have yet to join the LinkedIn social network. An analysis of the results and future research directions are presented.

Keywords: Business School, LinkedIn, Social Network Diffusion, Social Networking

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social networking websites such as Facebook®, LinkedIn®, and Orkut® have gained massive popularity with user numbers in the hundreds of millions (Folorunso et al., 2010). Social networking has etched its way into regular everyday life. A social networking website allows users to create a personal profile based on personal information, professional experience, and/or educational history (Gerard, 2012). One user segment benefiting from the progress and development of social networking websites are working professionals. One prevalent social networking site focused on the professional demographic is LinkedIn (Zide et al., 2013). Professionals join LinkedIn as a way to maintain existing business relationships, form new relationships, self-promote themselves, and aid in job seeking (Claybaugh and Haseman, 2013).

Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is adopted and is accepted by a community. A community will use an innovation – in our case a professional social networking site- when they find benefits in its use. Professionals identify the benefits to include: manage and maintain professional relationships, a means to form new relationships and aid in the job hunt (Suki, Ramayah & Kow Pei Ming, 2010). Even with all of the benefits of joining a social network not all potential users have joined a professional social network (Claybaugh and Haried, 2012). Given LinkedIn’s focus on professionals it becomes important to understand how this population segment, along with its many sub groups and demographics, chooses to participate in professional social networking activities. Specifically in research focused on online social networks, subgroups defined by gender, demographics and socio-economic status have been shown to have dissimilar network conduct (Lewis et al., 2008). At the same time, when examining professional social network participation, earlier research suggests that the user’s gender may be a factor driving one’s involvement decision (Claybaugh and Haried, 2014). Extant evidence suggests that males and females differ in their views regarding the use of information technology-related innovations, ecommerce, cyberbullying, and online services (Adam et al., 2003; Joseph and Mukhopadhyay, 2010; Van Slyke et al., 2010; Zhu, 2011; Bhattacharya, Sinha, & Sheorey, 2014). Thus, gender and social status may have very different implications when it comes to professional behavior and how each gender perceives the use of technology. Consequently, there is a need to investigate how socio-demographic factors influence the diffusion of professionals adopting social networking technology.

This study expands on previous studies on technological diffusion and examines professional social network adoption and non-adoption for a given population over a period of time. This study examines if there are clear patterns of who is and who is not joining professional social networking sites, and why does the diffusion of these sites vary between potential user populations across time? Against this backdrop, this study seeks to investigate how university type (nationally ranked, large urban, and regional), gender and degree type (undergraduate and graduate) influence professionals to participate in LinkedIn at two points in time. Through this longitudinal analysis of user participation, significant associations on adoption will be examined. As a result, this study is centered on the following research question:

*Is there a longitudinal association between university type, degree type, and gender evident in the diffusion of a specialized professional social network website such as LinkedIn?*

The study contributes to the IS literature in a number of ways. First, by analyzing the diffusion of LinkedIn across two time periods we show how professionals vary in their patterns of adoption of a technology used to support careers. The study provides the specific number of participants of LinkedIn for four business schools at two points in time which helps us to understand
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