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Why Do People Use Social Networks?

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ABSTRACT

Online social networking (OSN) sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are among the most popular sites around the World. In the case of Mexico, these sites are considered to be in the top. Users have different tools for reading and sharing information with his friends and/or contacts and for searching for new users that might have common interests. These sites have changed the way people get connected to each other on the web. The popularity of these sites is represented on its registered users: as today Facebook has about 500 million, and Twitter about 175 million. As these numbers grow, we believe that there is a great opportunity to study critical characteristics of online social network in order to identify the key success factors based on end-users' perception. Identifying such factors would provide important information for improving current information systems by including social software characteristics as well as to design new high impact applications for online social networks.

This paper presents the results obtained through a focus group study to identify the most important issues and perceptions about OSN. Results give us an idea where and what we should be doing for future research in the subject.

Keywords: Social Network, social software, user perception, software quality.

INTRODUCTION

Information Technology (IT) has changed the way people get information. New data types such as rich multimedia content (video, animation and pictures) have caused that the tools for managing such data have also evolved for faster processing. Nowadays, we can find a number of tools that allow us to establish different types of transactions without moving from our seat, avoiding stress because of the traffic jam and crowds. For instance, bank's portals allow us to make financial operations from the comfort of our home. In addition, we can see what is happening in other places all over the world through the use of Online Social Networks (OSN) (Gyarmati & Trinh, 2010) which are tool that has changed the way people connect each other on the web.

Piedra, Chicaiza, López, Tovar, and Martinez (2009) believes that sharing information and experiences gained by experts using social software is the key factor for generating changes on

collaborative education that is student-oriented. Information diffusion through social software such as blogs and microblogs (Gruhl, Guha, Liben-Nowell, & Tomkins, 2004; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Kwon, Kim, & Park, 2009) and social networks such as *Flickr* and *Facebook* (Cha, Mislove, & Gummandi, 2009; Sun, Itamar, Marlow, & Lento, 2009; Xu & Liu, 2010) is performed quickly and in a massive way.

According to Facebook press site (Facebook, 2010), there are 500 millions of active users only on this site, with an average of 130 contacts or “friends” per user. Besides, 50% of users log in any day of the week and about 200 million users make access using mobile devices. In addition, Twitter has about 175 million registered users with traffic of 95 million tweets a day (almost 1,100 messages per second). Nielsen (2010) mentions that the world now uses over 110 billion minutes on social network and blog sites. This numbers represents 22% of all online time.

In México, the main activities of online users are e-mailing, instant messaging, contacting friends and family on social networks and searching/reading national and international news. However, social networking is the principal entertainment activity being Facebook, YouTube and Twitter the most popular (Menéndez & Juárez, 2011).

Growth on Social Networks usage is undeniable and, at the same time, the research focusing on social networking sites. However, there is still a lack of assessment about the impact of this type of sites (Cha, 2010). One attempt is being performed by the Carnegie Mellon Software Engineering Institute (SEI) looks for create a concept lab for exploring how social networking technology and software engineering technology need to be designed and operated (SEI, 2011).

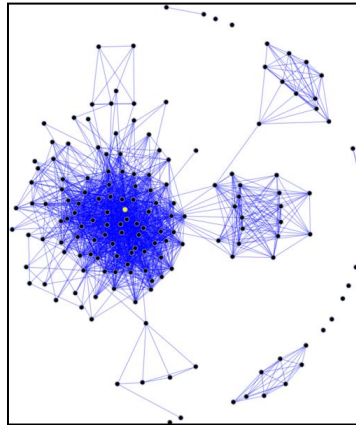
The present study attempts to identify why and how people use social networks as well to identify their opinion on some usability considerations for the Mexican case.

BACKGROUND

Social Networks (SN)

An individual has a few or a lot of people who are related in some way (family, sports, work, business, neighbors, etc.) and this is called his *social network* for different purposes. Contrary to many people’s thought, “Social Network” is not a new term, this was coined by J. A. Barnes (1954) to describe the way a person was related to another person like bounded groups and social categories. Past research has focused on the issue how people get connected to each other (Bonsignore et al., 2009; Lee, Scherngell, & Barber, 2010; Yonghong, Jaideep, Tiejun, & Noshir, 2010). However, there is a great need in research regarding how people use OSN tools.

Nowadays, “social network” also is understood as “online social network” (OSN) and it is presented on Figure 1. In this figure, each dot represents a connection within the social network, and each line represents the existing connection between several persons.

Figure 1: Social Network Diagram (Adapted from “Social Network,” 2011).***Social Software (SoSo)***

The term social software was coined by Parikh (2001) but without giving a formal definition. Pacuit on his doctoral thesis gave the following definition “...social software is an interdisciplinary research program that combines mathematical tools and techniques from game theory and computer science in order to analyze and design social procedures...” (2005, p. 2). The key idea behind social software is to apply this simple idea to social situations.

Farkas describes SoSo “...as a tool that must meet at least two of the three following conditions: 1) allow people to communicate, collaborate, and build community online; 2) It can be syndicated, shared, reused, or remixed, or it facilitates syndication; and 3) It lets people learn easily from and capitalize on the behavior or knowledge of others...” (Farkas, 2007, p. 1).

Some social tools like electronic mailing lists and forum software were developed about 20 years ago, but most of them have been created in the last 10 years such as blogs (Wordpress), wikis (Wikipedia), text-chats/instant messaging (Skype, Messenger), social bookmarking and social networks (Facebook, Linked In, Hi 5).

Therefore SoSo enables socialization among groups and/or individuals for many purposes, which are important to study.

Social Network Sites (SNS)

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to build their own profile, making lists of friends or contacts and crossing information with other people within the system. Services offered by each owner of SNS may vary from one to another. For example, Linked In is a social network focused on professional profiles to make business connections, Facebook allow sharing photos, videos and microblogging with a very different focus than Linked in.

The reasons of why people are connected and which OSN use are diverse and may vary from site to site. For example, privacy has very important differences; some SNS’s allow the visibility of

user's profiles but others give the option to the user of being more discrete and decide their own level of visibility.

If a person wants to join to a SNS, it is required to provide some important information such as e-mail, date of birth, name or nickname, and a picture so people can recognize your account. Once you are registered, you will be prompted to identify other people in the system to make a relationship, link or request with the people you know or want to know, other way is to search for other people's contacts to see if you know somebody that could be interested to get in touch with you.

The way people get communicated on these SNSs is by leaving messages on their contact's profiles or using instant messaging. Another way is by social bookmarking or social tagging in photos or videos to share it with people your think could be interested on seeing it.

In conclusion, there are many variables why people use SN, SoSo, SNS as well as preferences in selecting one above the other. We believe that identifying such variables could lead to a better understanding of the effects that an OSN might have in people's work, recreational, and social activities. This study intends to make an identification of such variables as a first step in our work.

METHODOLOGY

In order to research why, when and where people use social networks, we invited a sample of 20 people with ages from 18 to 60 years old; schooling varies from junior high school to a master degree. This represents about the 70 % of the Mexican population and about the 75% of on social networks population in Mexico (Menéndez & Juárez, 2011). These numbers also represents about 78% of Mexican users on Facebook (Facebook, 2011). This fact is very important because 90% of social network users in México have a Facebook's account (Menéndez & Juárez, 2011).

Data were collected through the use of a focus group in a one and half hour session. Participants were invited without knowing whether they have, or like, OSN. Participants were free to drop out from the study at any time; however, all completed the study. Researches were conducting the study using an instrument as guideline. First, a question was asked; then, participants share their opinions, which were argued by the rest. The session was tape-recorded. In addition, each participant filled the instrument regarding OSN.

The instrument was designed according to information found on AMIPCI report regarding Internet users in Mexico (AMIPCI, 2009). This instrument is divided into two sections 1) basic demographic information, and 2) OSN preferences and actual use.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using frequency distributions and central tendency measures. The results are as follows.

Table 1 shows the impact on the use frequency of OSN. Eighty percent of people who have a social network account get connected daily and stay there at minimum 30 minutes. In addition, people use OSN daily and the principal places where they get connected are at home and work.

Table 1: General Information.

1. Gender:	Female	61.9 %
	Male	38.1 %
2. Scholar Grade:	Jr. High school	9.5 %
	High School	47.6 %
	Two-year college	9.5 %
	Bachelor	23.8 %
	Masters	9.5 %
3. Use of internet by place (average hours)	Home	11.1 hours
	Work	5.19 hours
	Study Center	2.81 hours
	Public Internet	0.52 hours
	Other house	2.048 hours
4. Use Frequency of OSN	80% connect daily	
5. Time of use by day of OSN	78% connect at least 30 minutes	

Table 2 shows information about the purpose why people use an OSN. Data show that people mainly use OSN for entertainment purposes (4.81), followed by socializing (4.62), and updates about contacts (3.62). Crossing these aspects with what video shows, we can say that participants are more concern with having good time instead of trying to participate in relevant discussions. Some people use Social Networks as a search engine as we can see in the “finding information” issue in the same manner “getting opinions” is another issue that some people use to know what people thinks about certain event or idea. Thus, these issues should be studied further. On the other hand, participants are not interested in receiving “junk” information regarding promotions (1.52), sharing experiences (2.38). It seems like they are not interested in information that is only marketing-oriented.

Table 2: Use of Online Social Networking.

Use (1, Unused; 7, Always)	Mean	Median	Mode	Std.Dev
1. Finding Information	3.0	3.0	3	1.612
2. Getting Opinions	3.1	3.0	2	1.513
3. Being entertained	4.81	5.0	6	1.436
4. Socializing	4.62	5.0	4	1.499
5. Being update about my contact's information	3.62	4.0	4	1.564
6. Sharing personal Experiences	2.38	2.0	2	1.284
7. Getting promotions	1.52	1.0	1	1.327

Table 3 shows participants' main interests. The most important issues are security (2.14), privacy (2.62) and speed of information acquisition (2.84), private profile (3.05), truthful information (3.10), and reliability (3.14). This might be related to the fact that the press has reported some events where OSN was at the center of problems. For example, not having privacy could lead to identity theft, which can be very harmful for any person. Thus, we believe these issues must be researched further.

On the other, it seems that people are not really interested in receiving notifications by e-mail (4.57), public communication (3.62), public profile (3.52), sharing files (3.48); and private communication between groups are not important. Therefore, these issues must be revisited so that they could be part or not of further research.

Table 3: Perception about Services Provided by OSN.

Services (1, Completely Important; 7, Completely Irrelevant)	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.
1. Public communication	3.62	4.0	4	1.431
2. Reliability	3.14	3.0	1	1.740
3. Sharing files	3.48	3.0	3	1.289
4. Truthful information	3.10	3.0	2	1.446
5. Speed of information acquisition	2.81	3.0	2	1.365
6. Mail notifications about Information Updates	4.57	5.0	5	1.363
7. Handling Security Information by the user	2.14	2.0	1	1.276
8. Private communication between contacts	2.62	2.0	2	1.431
9. Private communication between groups	3.24	4.0	2	1.670
10. Public profile	3.52	4.0	4	1.365
11. Private profile	3.05	3.0	4	1.359

Also in this study, people were asked for qualifying the utility of OSN from “1, Useless” to “10, Completely Useful.” Results show an average of 6.4, which means that people consider that OSN is useful to their purposes.

CONCLUSION

At the present study we found that most of people have an online social network account, make access on a daily basis and spent at least 30 minutes a day. Besides this study is focused on two dimensions, the first is about the use of OSN in order to identify why people use OSN, the frequency and places where users get connected; and second, the purpose and issues related to using OSN, getting the following main characteristics:

First dimension (usage):

- Entertainment, socializing, being update about my contact's information.

Second dimension (services):

- Handling security, privacy, speed when acquiring information, Private profiles, Truthful information, Reliability, Private communication between groups and Sharing files

In general, people have a good impression about OSN and consider them useful. These findings are consistent to studies cited previously at this article.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Results found in the preset study are only at a very early stage so they must be taken cautiously. In addition, since the study was only a focus group that is similar to the Mexican population that is using OSN, it is important to conduct a more comprehensive study to identify which variables contribute to the phenomenon on adopting and using OSN.

In addition, since correct literature in the subject is scarce, it is necessary to update the literature review so that contributing important factors can be identified and confirm in a future research. The following challenge is to investigate more about the characteristics found on this study.

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