

Why are Users Switching Among Different Types of Social Media?

An empirical study from China

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Abstract—This paper aims to address what unique factors entice bloggers to switch to microblogging, and how they impact bloggers' switching intention. Using the PPM framework as a general guideline, low social presence is posited to form blog's push effects, while network size, and relative ease of use are posited to shape microblogging's pull effects. Furthermore, by integrating status quo bias (SQB) theory and the dedication-constraint dual model, this paper assumes that affective commitment, switching costs, and habit are important sources of inertia. Inertia is presumed to play a key role in mooring effects: it not only negatively influences switching intention, but it also attenuates the pull and push factors' main effects. An empirical study of users who use blog and microblogging services concurrently provides general support for our hypotheses. Theoretical contributions of this paper are discussed.

Keywords—IT switching; SQB theory; inertia; push-pull-mooring framework

I. INTRODUCTION

Rapid evolution across the spectrum of social media has stimulated unprecedented technology adoption pattern. On one hand, people may quickly converge on newly emerging technologies. Within 10 months after it was released in February 2004, Facebook had achieved one million active users, and this data had increased to 250 million by mid-2009. On the other hand, concurrent with the emergence of new technologies, people often leave previously popular applications en masse. For instance, with the growing popularity of sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, blogs are slowly losing their foothold, especially among younger generation. Given the large number of bloggers who lost interest and have given up on regular updates, Microsoft's Windows Live Space shut down in 2011 [1]. Similarity, Facebook has also been experiencing shrinking user base in its post-IPO era. A Global Social Media Impact Study reports that Facebook users are migrating to novel platforms, such as Instagram and WhatsApp [2]. As competing social media choices emerge in the digital market, users can easily switch to alternative services without a financial loss. The success of online communities depends on a critical mass of active users, while user migration and the subsequent change in the market share of social media is a strategic issue [3]. Investigating IT switching phenomenon is important because it is closely related to the survival of technologies.

II. RESEARCH MODEL

Existing IT research based on the push-pull-mooring (PPM) framework is insufficient to understand IT switching phenomenon [4][5]. First, most studies are concerned only with user switching within the same service, rather than across different services. Second, few researches have proposed theoretical explanation for mooring effects; the exact mechanism by which the mooring effects hamper switching decisions has also not been investigated so far. Third, most studies adopt single, general constructs (e.g., dissatisfaction and alternative attractiveness) to represent the push and pull effects, and they also fail to identify the factors unique to a particular research context.

To fill these gaps, this paper investigates why users switch among different types of social media. Specifically, we aim to address what unique factors entice bloggers to switch to microblogging, and how they impact bloggers' switching intention. Using the PPM framework as a general guideline, low social presence is posited to form the push effect of incumbent social media, whereas larger referent network size and relative ease of use work together to shape the pull effects of fashionable social media. For the mooring effects, we identify an encompassing set of antecedents (affective commitment, switching costs, and habit) to inertia. Inertia is predicted to attenuate the main effects of pull and push factors. In addition, the effects of affective commitment, switching costs, and habit on switching intention are proposed to mediate fully through inertia.

III. SAMPLE AND RESULTS

To test the model, empirical data are collected from users who concurrently use blog and microblogging. The target population for this study comprises bloggers who are also using microblogging. We obtained samples from Sina blog, a mainstream blog service in China. At the height of Sina blog in 2007, its traffic hit 3.5 million visitors a day. Thus, this sample reasonably represented a major portion of the blog population. More importantly, Sina corporation's other social media product, Sina Weibo, is the most popular microblogging service in China. As of September 2014, Sina Weibo has 167 million monthly active users. Given that Sina Weibo is widely and pervasively adopted, this approach is effective in accessing people who concurrently use blog and microblogging services and are consequently prone to switching behavior.

Given that the user's list of blog and microblogging services is not accessible, we adopted the snowball sampling technique by spreading survey invitations with the URL of the questionnaire to Sina bloggers. This technique is appropriate when a study is concerned with a small and

specialized population of people who are knowledgeable about the topic. The invitation informed that only people who are using both services were eligible for the survey. A total of 239 valid responses were obtained.

Our study has several important findings. First, our results suggest that low social presence pushes incumbent social media users away, whereas relative ease of use pulls them to fashionable social media. However, referent network size has no significant impact on user switching intentions. Although unexpected, this result is not surprising. The coexistence of a variety of social media platforms suggests that each type of social media has a specific user group, and a winner-take-all outcome to occur is impossible. For example, users may keep in touch with specific friends through blogs, and not via the total social circle. In addition, people may intentionally avoid using a popular social media, such as microblogging, which may make them look mediocre. Second, affective commitment, switching costs, and habit are important sources of inertia. However, inertia has a negative influence on user switching intention. Third, inertia exhibits significant negative moderating effects on the impact of push-pull factors (i.e., social presence and relative ease of use) on switching intention. The predictive power of push-pull factors will weaken depending on the strength of user inertia. Finally, the effect of habit on switching intention is fully mediated through inertia, which suggests that incumbent technology habit may not necessarily affect user switching decisions unless inertia is well developed. Contrary to our expectation, inertia only partially mediates the effects of affective commitment and switching costs on switching intention. As the fashion trend of blogs ebbed away, the remaining bloggers have greater loyalty and stickiness. Their affective commitment is enduring over time and stable in the changing environment. The connection between affective commitment and switching intention may happen without an individual being consciously aware of this connection. Meanwhile, given the resource constraints of users and the various social media platforms they can select from, users are likely to calculate the costs versus benefits of the known alternatives to make an optimal decision. Except for the indirect effect through inertia, affective commitment and switching costs could have direct effects on switching intention.

IV. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has several key research implications. First, this study is among the first to provide empirical validation of user switching from an incumbent social media to a fashionable one during fashion shifting. Unlike isolated users who make switching decisions individually, we regard social media users as virtual community members who are woven together to seek affiliation and socialization. Thus, specific factors related to the communal nature of social media that affect user switching decisions are identified. Second, by integrating SQB theory and the dedication-constraint dual model, we develop a better theoretical understanding of the mooring effects. Specifically, we expand the antecedents of inertia beyond cognitive determinants to include affective determinants, such as affective commitment, and explore mechanisms by which inertia operates in affecting switching intention. Finally, this study extends the applicability of the PPM framework to the context of user switching across different types of social media.

V. CONCLUSION

This study explores the factors that affect user switch from an incumbent social media to a fashionable one, as well as the mechanism behind these factors. Our findings indicate that low social presence pushes incumbent social media users away, whereas relative ease of use pulls them to the fashionable one. Affective commitment, switching costs, and habit are important sources of inertia. In the context of this study, inertia fully mediates the relationship between habit and switching intention, and only partially mediates the effect of affective commitment and switching costs on switching intention. Furthermore, inertia negatively moderates the relationships between social presence, relative ease of use, and switching intention.

To conclude, this study expands our understanding of online service switching mechanism, and identifies key factors in IT switching, such as social presence, affective commitment, and inertia. We believe that these mechanisms and key factors are not necessarily limited to online services, but are largely applicable to other contexts in which people interact with technology. Thus, this study builds a useful foundation for future research.

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