

A Study of Networking and Information Exchange Factors Influencing User Participation in Niche Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

This article tests a number of networking and information exchange factors that may influence users' participation in niche social networking sites (SNS). The factors identified in the literature review as influential for participation in social networking sites were implemented in a model tested using quantitative data from 152 users. Gratifications related to socialising, self-status seeking, social support, and learning and innovativeness were identified as significant for participating in niche SNS. As only a subset of the general purpose SNS gratifications were found to be of statistical significance for niche sites, it is suggested that further research that includes a wider set of factors is necessary to determine the similarities and differences between gratifications influencing participation in general purpose and niche SNS.

KEYWORDS

Information Exchange Factors, Networking Factors, Niche Social Networking Sites, Social Media, Social Networking Sites, User Participation, Uses and Gratifications Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Users are a critical resource for the success of any social networking site (SNS) (Xu et al. 2014). Achieving users' participation in SNS is considered to be one of the main factors in having a sustainable community in which users remain engaged over time. For this reason, researchers and practitioners are interested in finding what the factors influencing the participation in the network are. So far, research has had a strong focus on large SNS, which are mostly associated with general purpose SNS like Facebook and Twitter (Leskovec et al. 2008, Foregger 2008, Goggins et al. 2011, Smock et al. 2011, Tosun 2012, Kourouthanassis et al. 2015, Chen 2014, Yang and Lin 2014) General purpose networks are only part of the SNS world, which also includes niche SNS (Boyd and Ellison 2008). Niche SNS seek to narrow audiences by focusing on characteristics of the population, activities, identity and/or affiliations (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Examples of niche SNS include Beautifulpeople.com, which is a network oriented to good looking people, Cafemom.com, which is oriented to women who are or who are going to be mothers, and Mychurch.org, which is oriented to Christian people.

One of the most accepted definitions of what a social networking site is was given by Boyd and Ellison (2008), who defined an SNS as “*web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with*

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whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, p. 2). This definition implies that the scope of the network is defined by the system, which these authors use later to differentiate between general purpose and niche SNS. The main difference relies on the purpose of the SNS, wherein the niche ones focus on characteristics of the population as noted above, narrowing their public to people with those characteristics or people interested in what the network is about. Niche SNS are gaining part of the market due precisely to their private nature (Bhappu and Schultze 2018, Calero-Valdez et al 2018, Crawford et al 2017, Kwon et al 2017, Lim, et al 2018). An additional fact arising is that Facebook, which is the most representative example of a general purpose SNS, has been losing a significant amount of users recently, not only due to privacy issues such as Cambridge Analytica, but also due to generational change (Castillo, 2018; Welch, 2018), which helps to show how people prefer to be with others who are similar to them, known as homophily (Kim, Lee, & Bonn, 2016; Kwon et al., 2017). Since SNS are now part of our everyday routine, if people leave Facebook, they will go to another SNS, and that is where niche SNS become an alternative given the homophilous tendency of SNS users.

A parallel topic that arises with the study of SNS types is the study of SNS user types, which made it possible to discover that not everyone in the network behaves in the same way. Research like that developed by Brandtzæg (2012) proposed the following types of SNS users: Sporadics, Lurkers, Socializers, Debaters, which is similar to Constantinides et al (2010), who identified beginners, habitual Users, outstanding Users and Experts. These typologies contrast with the one proposed by Kilian et al, (2012) who, in their research about millennials, identified three clusters, namely: the restrained millennials, the entertainment-seeking millennials and the highly connected millennials. A similar approach was taken by Bulut and Doğan (2017), who identified advanced users, business-oriented users, communication seekers, and dawdlers. The classifications of SNS users shows a variety of approaches that this topic can take, producing different typologies. However, acknowledging the importance of user typologies, this topic goes beyond the scope of the present research, as we first have to find whether there is a difference between General Purpose and Niche SNS, and then we can start wondering about the types of users and their behaviours on the networks.

Due to the difficulty of accessing niche networks and their participants, it is not surprising that most research related to SNS participation typically revolves around general purpose SNS (Boyd and Ellison, 2008), leaving a gap for research into niche SNS. Given the differences in the nature and objectives of the two types of networks, it cannot be assumed that the findings obtained for general purpose networks can be generalised for niche SNS. In fact differences in motivations for using SNS may exist even for general-purpose networks (Chung et al 2015, Gan & Wang 2015, Kim and Jiyoung 2017, Phua et al. 2017, Krasnova 2017, Bae 2018, Bulut & Doğan 2017). This paper’s objective is to test this assumption, by examining a number of factors related to networking and information exchange identified for general purpose networks in a niche SNS environment. A better understanding of the reasons for using niche SNS and the differences from and similarities to general purpose ones could have significant implications. For example, it can inform the design and promotion of such networks when competing against the general purpose ones for users’ attention. Given the above, in this project we adopted the uses and gratifications theory in order to study users’ participation and, more specifically, the networking and information exchange factors that affect participation. The section following presents the relevant literature and the hypotheses to be tested. The paper then continues by outlining the methodology followed. In turn, it presents the results and findings of the analysis, which are put in the context of the previous studies. The paper concludes by considering future research avenues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the most significant indicators of SNS health is the proportion of active users, showing to what extent people are using the network, which can be complemented by the number of transactions or the amount of bandwidth required. Since the success of the network is mostly associated with participation, this has become the main focus for academics and practitioner research. The most common approaches to studying SNS participation are framed within the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Hajli et al. 2015, Huang and Shiau 2015, Chen et al. 2016) and its variation, the Decomposed Theory of Planned Behaviour (Girona and Korgaonkar 2014).

TPB aims to explain a particular human behaviour based on the intention, which is influenced by attitudinal beliefs and social norms and perceived behaviour control. According to TPB, attitudinal belief is orientated towards the favourability that the user has towards performing certain behaviour. Subjective norm is related to the social pressure to perform the behaviour, and perceived behavioural control (PBC) is related to the resources and opportunities available that may influence the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). One of the main criticisms of the TPB is the unidimensionality of the factors involved in the standard TPB model for explaining belief formation (Hsu et al., 2006, Taylor and Todd, 1995). Closely related to the TPB, the Technology Acceptance Model has also been used to investigate participation (Shen 2015, Zhu et al. 2014, Xu et al. 2012, Lorenzo-Romero, Constantinides, & Alarcón-del-Amo, 2011), Kwon and Wen 2010). This model, similarly to the TPB, predicts the behaviour based on the intention, considering attitude, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as antecedents. The parsimony of TAM is also one of its potential shortcomings as “*it is unreasonable to expect that one model, and one so simple, would explain decisions and behaviour fully across a wide range of technologies, adoption situations, and differences in decision making and decision makers*”. (Bagozzi, 2007, p. 244). These theories find their origins in the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975), and are based on a cognitive/behavioural framework, aimed at predicting a behaviour (in this case SNS participation) based on the intention to perform that behaviour. A second stream of user participation research follows the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory (Baek 2011, Giannakos et al. 2013, Yang and Lin 2014, Hsu et al. 2015, Chiu and Huang 2015b, Chiu and Huang 2015a, Wei et al. 2015, Bulut and Doğan 2017, Bae 2018, Gan & Wang, 2015), which is based on psychosocial variables attempting to understand decision making processes about media (Rubin 2002). For this project a flexible approach such as the U&G theory was better suited to the aims of the project, as it includes a broader variety of constructs to understand users’ participation.

The theory of uses and gratifications (U&G) was postulated by Katz et al. (1973), based on sociological and psychological foundations. U&G has been used to explain the reasons for choosing one particular medium over another, suggesting that “*people’s needs influence their media selections; by seeking out and using specific media, people can meet these individual needs*” (Foregger 2008, p. 2). The initial aims of U&G theory were “a) to explain how people use media to gratify their needs, b) to understand motives for media behaviour, and c) to identify functions or consequences that follow” (Rubin 2002, p. 166). The original foundations of the model were proposed by Katz (as cited by Forreger 2008, p. 15) in five elements: “*a) the audience is active, b) media choice depends on the audience’s link between media and need gratification, c) media compete with other sources, both interpersonal and other media, for need satisfaction, d) audience members can self-report their needs, and e) value judgments of mass media content should be suspended until motives and gratifications are understood*”. These assumptions were revised by Rubin (Rubin 2002), who proposed an updated version based on the evolution of the media. The revised assumptions are: firstly, that communication behaviour is goal-directed, purposive, and motivated; secondly that people select media; thirdly that many factors guide our media selection; fourthly, that media compete with other channels for messages; and finally that people are typically more influential than media (Rubin 2002). The updated version considers the role of the user as a more active element, influenced mainly by needs, social and psychological factors and interpersonal interactions (Rubin 2002), along with the influence of

the messages in the selection of the media. These assumptions fit with the aim of the research as people have the choice between general purpose and niche SNS to post what they want to say, as well as where to look for information and where to spend their time. Baek et al. (2011) stated that the main objective of this theory is to examine the motivations for media use, as well as the factors influencing these motivations by the users. Given the above, this paper focuses on the networking and information exchange factors that affect user intentions to participate in niche networks. These are discussed in more detail below.

2.1. Networking and Information Exchange in Niche Networks

2.1.1. Networking and Socialising

Networking and socialising are needs related to building and maintaining a network of contacts, as well as the benefits obtained from the contacts in the network. Bulut and Doğan (2017) studied how social gratifications such as socialisation and status seeking influence not only the usage of the networks, but also how they change according to the type of user present on the networks. The creation and maintenance of contacts in the social network looks to build the network of contacts either with relationships previously created (offline) or with new relationships created online (Cha 2010, Foregger 2008, Kim et al. 2010, Kim et al. 2011, Papacharissi and Rubin 2000, Park et al. 2009, Sangwan 2005, Xu et al. 2012, Hou 2011, Hsu et al. 2015, Bae 2018). Regarding the benefits obtained from the network, the gratifications of this type are related to what can be achieved (and/or offered) through the interaction with the members of the network. Thus, *socialising* is at the core of the gratifications for SNS participation (Goggins et al. 2011, Chen 2014, Cheung et al. 2011, Hsu et al. 2015, Park et al. 2009, Cocosila and Igonor 2015, Bulut and Doğan 2017). Due to the social needs of human beings, SNS have been gaining terrain as a space to develop and enhance the social activities that were held offline previously, hence having a positive influence on SNS participation. Associated to socialisation are the gratifications related to *interconnectedness*, which relates to expanding your network of contacts by finding people through existing contacts, having a direct relation with SNS usage (Foregger 2008, Ali-Hassan et al. 2015, Syn and Oh 2015). Another frequent use of SNS is *maintaining of old ties* (Foregger 2008, Joinson 2008, Ellison et al. 2007, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 2008), which is exemplified by bringing friends from offline networks, such as friends from school or former work colleagues, and adding them to your online network. Along with the use of SNS to find their old friends, people are highly motivated to use SNS to find new friends (*seeking friends*) (Kim et al. 2011, Ellison et al. 2007, Huang 2008, Papacharissi and Rubin 2000, Smock et al. 2011).

Based on the presented literature we hypothesise that:

H: (1) Socialising, (2) interconnectedness, (3) maintaining old ties, (4) seeking friends, have a positive and significant effect on the intensity of participation in niche SNS.

Using SNS to share information with your whole network or part of it is a popular gratification. Among the examples are the changes in relationship status such as being in a relationship, break-ups, engagements, etc., or sharing photos from different events. Likewise, the groups are used to arrange events and resolve conflicts in the group (Dimmick et al. 2007, Baek et al. 2011, Ramirez Jr et al. 2008, Hsu et al. 2015).

Interpersonal utility (Cha 2010, Papacharissi and Rubin 2000, Wong 2012), which is related with the information that the user finds important for personal life, such as the opinion that other people have about him or her, information about social events or keeping up to date with what is going on in the user's circles. Following the utility of the SNS, there is an additional gratification related with the image that the user wants to project in the SNS, which is labelled *self-status seeking* (Park et al. 2009, Hsu et al. 2015), which has traditionally been presented as the efforts that people make to present themselves in a particular manner to others. The image that the user portrays in the network can be a real reflection of the user's life, or a desired image that the user wants to project,

which is associated with belongingness and narcissistic behaviours (Schau and Gilly 2003, Pugh 2010, Zhao et al. 2008, Mehdizadeh 2010). In this regard, Chung et al (2017) presented the self-image, which is closely related to self-status seeking, as a “constant process of controlling and managing information to continuously deliver one’s specific image to others” (p. 82), which can be connected with the finding of Baek et al. (2011), who found the likelihood for people to share information about themselves, with this information sharing having an impact on SNS usage. A final gratification in this group is *seeking social support*, which is very common in networks related with health issues like Ihdacancer.com, in which the members support each other by providing pastoral care as well as sharing treatments and medicines that have helped them to feel better, having a positive effect on network participation (Kim et al. 2011, Shen 2015, Hajli et al. 2015, Ridings and Gefen 2004, Wong 2012, Bae 2018). Chung et al (2017) argue that the more people interact with each other, the more they start creating this attachment to others, which allows them to extend and ask for help given the situation, which in turn strengthens the ties between them.

Based on the above we propose that:

H: (5) interpersonal utility, (6) self-status seeking, and (7) seeking social support have a positive and significant effect on the intensity of participation in niche SNS.

2.1.2. Information Exchange

Information exchange is a key motivation for participating in social networking sites, as studied by Chung et al. (2017), considering the number of members in the network, social interaction helping and self-image as predictors of this factor and Crawford et al. (2017), who focused on the self-status motivation of the user. This information could be about the user (i.e. personal information such as photos, list of contacts, movies, bands, among others) or information about specific interests or purposes, for example photography, astronomy, etc. Information exchange gratifications are related to the second type of information, considering the SNS as a repository of information about specific topics. For the *information exchange*, the user comes to the network either looking for information and the opinions of the members of the networks about topics of interest to them, or looking to acquire deeper knowledge of the topics discussed in the network (Cha 2010, Foregger 2008, Kim et al. 2011, Papacharissi and Rubin 2000, Huang 2008, Chung et al. 2012, Park et al. 2014, Chang and Chen 2014, Hsu et al. 2015, Park et al. 2015, Syn and Oh 2015, Yen 2016, Chung et al. 2015). This *information seeking* and exchange results in a new alternative type of web search known as “*social search*” (Lampe et al. 2006), as well as in a “*social shopping*” process (Kang and Johnson 2015), which is based on the opinions of the network members about specific topics.

Attached to the *information seeking* are the *learning and knowledge gratifications*, whereby it is expected that people will access better or specialised resources that are not usually shared in the general SNS groups, this being an attractive motivation to use the SNS (Cha 2010, Huang 2008, Kim et al. 2011, Papacharissi and Rubin 2000, Park et al. 2009, Chunngam et al. 2014, Lingreen et al. 2013, Syn and Oh 2015, Yen 2016). *Innovativeness* is a popular gratification in SNS (Huang 2008, Sangwan 2005, Park et al. 2015), which is related to the openness to new ideas (Cha 2010, Rogers 2003). The next factor is related to the convenience of the SNS as a tool to conduct specific activities. A representative example is the use of the SNS as a *communication tool*, making it possible to be in touch with other members of the network at a fraction of the cost paid when compared to other means. In addition to the money savings, there are some time and effort savings (Cha 2010, Dimmick et al. 2007, Foregger 2008, Kim et al. 2011, Papacharissi and Rubin 2000, Ramirez Jr et al. 2008, Dimmick et al. 2000, Huang 2008, Nyland 2007, Sangwan 2005).

Given the above, we put forward the following hypotheses:

H: (8) information seeking, (9) learning, (10) innovativeness and (11) communication gratifications have a positive and significant effect on the participation in niche SNS.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Questionnaire design

Studies grounded on U&G are typically based on questionnaires using Likert scales to collect data from primary sources (Lee et al. 2010, Cheung et al. 2011, Kim et al. 2010, Papacharissi and Rubin 2000). Following the example of previous research, a survey was adopted as the instrument for data collection using a Likert scale of five points. Due to the lack of research on niche SNS, this research adopted the constructs identified as influential in general purpose networks, when it came to networking and information seeking to develop the data collection instrument. Using these constructs was considered to be a good first approach to understanding niche SNS. Further research could potentially include new constructs or exclude constructs among those examined by this paper. The model implemented tested the relationship of each item with the user's participation in SNS. The questionnaire was tested in a pilot study and feedback was received about the length of the questionnaire and items with similar wording, with minor adjustments made before finalising the questionnaire. Given the nature of the research, a web-based survey was deemed appropriate for collecting data. Tables 1 and 2 present the constructs and items used in the questionnaire to collect data.

3.2. Sampling

Based on the gap and the research question for this study, the initial population framework was users of niche SNS. Following the definition of Boyd and Ellison (2008), a niche SNS is a network with a specific purpose and/or oriented to a specific target of the population. Thus, niche SNS could be networks from LinkedIn, which, despite its size, is oriented to professional purposes, to networks like Little Monsters, oriented to the fans of Lady Gaga. However, the very niche nature of these networks makes it difficult to map the population, as many of them are only known among the group of people who share the same interest. Looking for statistics to define a population framework, it was found that there is a lack of information about how many networks there are or how many users are registered in each of these networks. There are some private initiatives trying to generate network directories, but they are not reliable enough to create a full map of the population. Based on the above, it was deemed appropriate to use a non-probabilistic sampling method. Since the sampling framework was unknown, volunteer opportunity sampling was the most suitable alternative to reach niche network users. The sample was narrowed down to UK residents to ensure a minimum of experiential consistency. The invitations to participate in this research project were posted on different social media accounts as recommended by Hewson and Laurent (2012). In addition, a second strategy to collect data was based on identifying the main niche SNS platforms. From this search, Ning, SocialGo and Elgg were found to be popular options. The first group approached was the developers' community on these platforms, as they are usually the administrators of their own networks. The invitation to complete the questionnaire, including the link, was posted on these forums. Likewise, network administrators were contacted via email, requesting permission to post the invitation on their networks. Posting the invitation on an open forum was found to be a more effective strategy, compared to the option of the administrators, as they were reluctant to promote the questionnaire in their networks.

Of the 203 questionnaires completed over four months in Q3/2012, we filtered out those indicated using an SNS that was not a niche one or were outliers. The final samples used for the analysis had responses from 152 participants. 44% were from women and 56% were from men, so there was a relatively balanced composition of the sample regarding gender. The average age of participants was 29.53 years old (std. dev.=11.01). When it came to the occupation of the participants, 55.26% were students, 23.03% were full time employees, 10.53% were part-time employees and finally 9.21% were self-employed. From the results, LinkedIn was the most popular niche SNS, with 25 cases. This network is followed by QQ from China, with 14 respondents, academia with 10 and VKontakte with 7. These four networks represent 36.84% of the total respondents. Given the nature of niche

Table 1. Niche SNS participation construct sources

Gratifications	Acronym	Definition	Source	Items	Niche Mean	Niche Std. Dev.
Socialising	SOC	Is based on the need for and interest in meeting and talking with other people	(Park et al. 2009)	4	3.572	0.997
Interconnectedness	IC	Finding connections and information through existing contacts	(Foregger 2008)	7	2.809	0.996
Maintaining old ties	MAT	Keeping the connection online with friends known from before	(Foregger 2008)	5	2.845	1.174
Seeking friends	SFRIE	Finding new friends to exchange information with	(Kim et al. 2011)	2	3.552	0.955
Interpersonal utility	IPU	The utility sought in the interaction with other people at a relational level	(Cha 2010, Papacharissi and Rubin 2000)	8	3.580	0.853
Self-status seeking	STA	Seeking and maintaining the user's personal status through online group participation	(Park et al. 2009)	3	3.747	1.053
Seeking social support	SUP	Obtaining emotional support from their group of contact	(Kim et al. 2011)	3	2.477	1.183
Information seeking	INSK	Searching for information that is of interest to the users, such as activities carried out by their group of contacts	(Papacharissi and Rubin 2000, Park et al. 2009, Kim et al. 2011)	5	3.570	0.898
Learning	LEARN	Obtain information and being educated about a topic, and learning new things	(Cha, 2010)	4	2.618	1.076
Innovativeness	INNOV	Individual's tendency to be more receptive to new ideas	(Cha, 2010)	4	3.281	1.021
Communication convenience	COM-CON	How SNS facilitates the communication process with other people	(Cha 2010)	4	3.290	0.853
Intensity of use	INT-USE	Measures the engagement of the user with the SNS based on the integration of the SNS with the user's routine	(Ellison et al. 2007)	5	3.411	0.915

Table 2. Items used for each construct

Gratification	Acronym	Items
Socialising	soc1	To stay in touch with people I know
	soc2	To meet interesting people
	soc3	To talk about something with others
	soc4	To get peer support from others
Interconnectedness	ic1	To network with others
	ic2	To see who knows who
	ic3	To look at pictures of my "friends' friends"
	ic4	To see who my contacts and I have in common
	ic5	To see if my contacts and I know the same people
	ic6	To see how everyone is connected
	ic7	To see where people know each other from
Maintain/Establish old ties	mat1	To keep in touch with old friends
	mat2	To contact out-of-state friends
	mat3	To track down old friends
	mat4	To see where people are at now
	mat5	To maintain old friendships
Seeking Friends	sfrie1	To hang out with people I enjoy
	sfrie2	To talk with people with the same interests
Interpersonal utility motive	ipu1	To meet new people
	ipu2	To belong to a group
	ipu3	To express myself freely
	ipu4	Because I wonder what other people said
	ipu5	To keep contact with my contacts
	ipu6	To feel involved with what's going on with other people
	ipu7	To keep my contacts up-to-date
	ipu8	To strengthen my relationships with my contacts
Self-status seeking	sta1	Because it makes myself look cool
	sta2	To develop my career through group participation
	sta3	Because I feel peer pressure to participate
Seeking Social Support	sup1	To let out my emotions easily to others who will understand me
	sup2	To talk out my problems and get advice
	sup3	To let others know I care about their feelings
Information seeking	insk1	To look for information
	insk2	To get information for free
	insk3	Because it is easier to search for information
	insk4	To see what is out there
	insk5	Because it is a new way to do research
Learning motive	learn1	Because it lets me explore new things
	learn2	Because it extends my mind
	learn3	Because it advances my knowledge
	learn4	Because it opens me up to new ideas
Innovativeness	innov1	Because I am very curious about how things work
	innov2	Because I like to experiment with new ways of doing things
	innov3	Because I like to take a chance
	innov4	Because I like to be around unconventional people who dare to try new things
Communication convenience	com-con1	Using SNS makes me more efficient
	com-con 2	Using SNS helps me accomplish things more quickly
	com-con 3	Using SNS makes my life easier
	com-con 4	Using SNS would be useful in my life
Intensity of use	Int-use1	This niche network is part of my everyday activity
	Int-use2	I am proud to tell people I'm on this niche network
	Int-use3	I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto this niche network for a while
	Int-use4	I feel I am part of the this niche network community
	Int-use5	I would be sorry if this niche network shut down

SNS, there is a wide variety of networks with few cases. Examples of these niche SNS used by the respondents are DevianArt, Path, Naijapals, and Tony Arts. More details about the demographic variables are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Sample demographics

Characteristic	Frequency	%	Characteristic	Frequency	%
Gender			Age		
Male	85	55.92%	Blank	1	0.66%
Female	67	44.08%	< 19	6	3.95%
Total	152	100%	20-29	89	58.55%
Employment Status			30-39	37	24.34%
Paid full-time employment	35	23.03%	40-49	5	3.29%
Paid part-time employment	16	10.53%	> 50	14	9.21%
Self-employment	14	9.21%	Total	152	100%
Unemployed	3	1.97%	Educational attainment		
Student	84	55.26%	Primary School	0	0.00%
Total	152	100%	High School	13	8.55%
Annual household income			Technical Education	5	3.29%
Less than £10,000	50	32.89%	Undergraduate	53	34.87%
£10,000 to £19,999	21	13.82%	Postgraduate	68	44.74%
£20,000 to £29,999	16	10.53%	Doctorate degree	13	8.55%
£30,000 to £39,999	24	15.79%	Total	152	100%
£40,000 to £49,999	12	7.89%			
£50,000 to £59,999	10	6.58%			
£60,000 or more	19	12.50%			
Total	152	100%			

3.3. Analysis

The information was cleaned and the constructs were tested regarding validity. The diagonal of Table 3 lists the Cronbach's Alpha for each construct. A Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Test and a factor analysis were also conducted (Table 4 & 5). A multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the data. The regression model was run in SPSS, starting with all the variables proposed above using the stepwise method. The Durbin-Watson coefficient was 2, meaning that there were no autocorrelation issues, and the VIF values for all the significant variables were below 1.55, suggesting that there were no collinearity issues. The residuals showed no evident patterns. All these considerations suggested that the model complied with the assumptions of the regression model.

4. RESULTS

Table 6 presents the correlation coefficients of the variables included in the model, as well as its reliability coefficients.

The value of R^2 for the regression was 41.2%. Based on the results obtained, the significant factors were found to be the socialising, self-status seeking, seeking social support and learning and innovativeness gratifications (Figure 1). These results show that users prefer to use the niche SNS for specific purposes and interact with like-minded people, which is the purpose of the niche SNS. Likewise, the results show that gratifications related with creating/maintaining the network of

Table 4. KMO and Bartlett's test

KMO and Bartlett's test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.865
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	7802.795
	df	1431
	Sig.	.000

contacts are not significant for niche SNS, suggesting that these gratifications apply only to general purpose networks.

5. DISCUSSION

The model proposed for testing the motivations for participating in niche SNS aimed to study the direct relationship of each construct with the intensity of use. Out of the 11 gratifications tested, five were found to be significant. Keeping in mind that the model aimed to test whether the gratifications identified for general purpose networks applied to niche ones, it was no surprise that only a few variables were not as relevant and were eventually rejected. This suggests that there is indeed a difference in the motivations to participate in general purpose networks and niche SNS, contrary to the current practice that treats all networks as the same (Wilson et al. 2012) Further research on niche SNS is needed if we are to understand user behaviour in these networks better and more reliably.

More specifically, the socialising hypothesis related to the social nature of the SNS, which regardless of the type, niche or general purpose, is still a key factor explaining why a user participates in an SNS as Bulut and Doğan (2017) show in their research. This is reflected in the value of its coefficient, which is the largest among the factors tested. Users participate in niche SNS for social reasons, but not the typical reasons such as people looking to connect with old contacts or to meet new people for the sake of it. This argument is supported by the rejection of the interconnectedness and maintaining old ties, which are factors associated with these behaviours. Considering these results, it can be argued that socialising, as presented by Park (2009), is more about sharing time and opinions with like-minded people on topics that they are interested in, which fits with the purpose of a niche SNS.

The second significant factor was support sought and/or provided by people sharing the same issues, interest, goals or tastes (Cha 2010, Foregger 2008, Kim et al. 2011, Li et al. 2015, Hajli et al. 2015, Shen 2015, Wong 2012). As an example, one may consider a health-related network called *tud diabetes.org*, which is a network oriented to people dealing with diabetes, also providing a platform to share experiences with other people with the same condition. Kim et al. (2011) argue that the social support is rooted in the need to belong to a community of people with similar characteristics to the user created by a sense of identification, and this is supported by Kwon et al (2017), Shen (2015), and by Wong (2012). This identification with the group is reflected in the search for encouragement and companionship from the people in the network (either previous contacts or new contacts made in the network). This identification enables them to express themselves more openly, as people in the group can understand what the person is looking for more easily. Also, sharing the same interest/condition makes it possible for them to be less concerned about being judged or misinterpreted by other people (Chung et al. 2015). A common practice in general purpose networks is to put together all the contacts, mixing family, friends, colleagues, etc. Still, when people need support, they prefer to appeal to those who can understand them better. A niche SNS could potentially be a safe place in which the users can express themselves freely, as these networks consist of people with similar characteristics to the user (from physical condition, to similar interests, etc.).

Table 5. Factor analysis

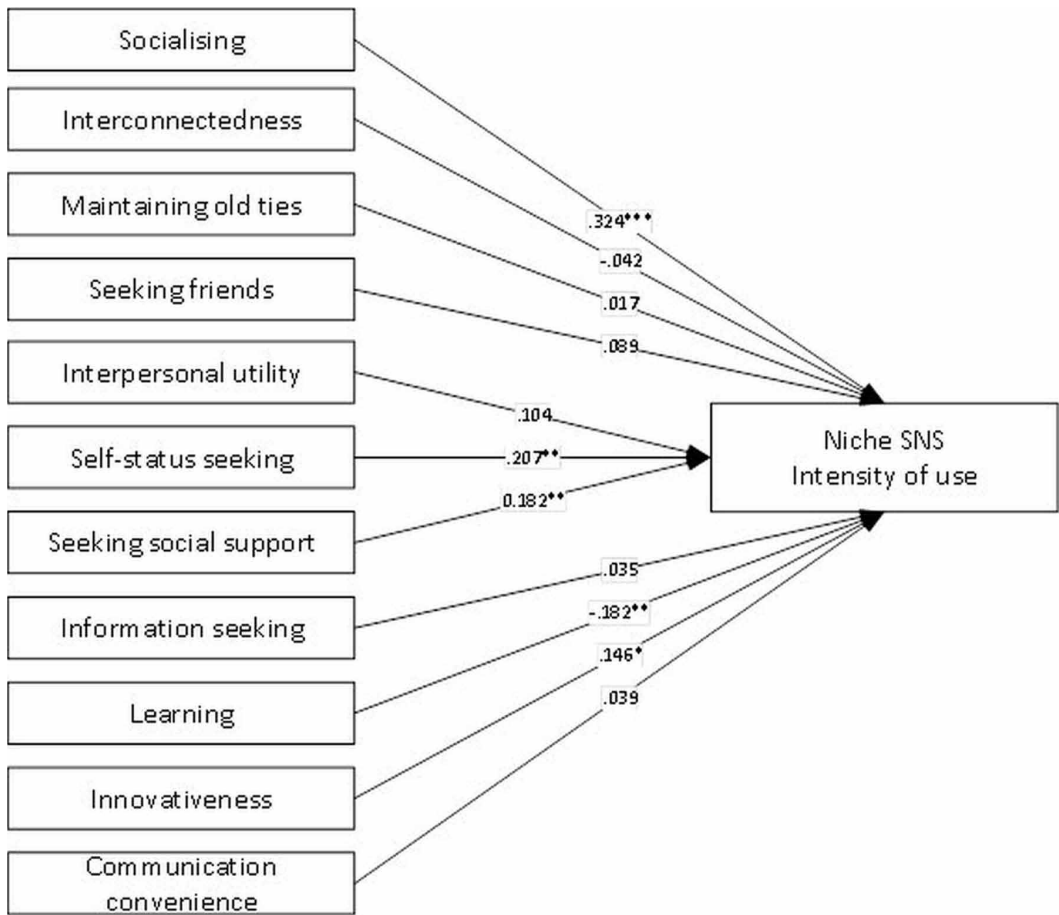
	Component									
	ipu	mat	ic	int use	sta	learn	com-con	sup	innov	soc
Int_use1				0.765						
Int_use2				0.710						
Int_use3				0.769						
Int_use4				0.814						
Int_use5				0.754						
soc1										
soc2										0.724
soc3										
soc4										0.339
ic1			0.261							
ic2			0.769							
ic3			0.322							
ic4			0.797							
ic5			0.819							
ic6			0.785							
ic7			0.746							
mat1		0.866								
mat2		0.784								
mat3		0.783								
mat4		0.588								
mat5		0.858								
sfrie1										
sfrie2										
ipu1	0.410									
ipu2	0.734									
ipu3	0.778									
ipu4	0.779									
ipu5	0.755									
ipu6	0.656									
ipu7	0.792									
ipu8	0.755									
sta1					0.718					
sta2					0.803					
sta3					0.580					
sup1								0.786		
sup2								0.748		
sup3								0.739		
insk1										
insk2										
insk3										
insk4										
insk5										
learn1						0.837				
learn2						0.904				
learn3						0.906				
learn4						0.716				
innov1									0.739	
innov2									0.556	
innov3									0.720	
innov4									0.738	
pu1							0.826			
pu2							0.800			
pu3							0.798			
pu4							0.782			

Table 6. Correlation matrix and Cronbach's alpha (diagonal)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Socialising	0.739											
Interconnectedness	.288**	0.914										
Maintaining old ties	.082	.476**	0.914									
Seeking friends	.165*	.042	-.106	0.608								
Interpersonal utility	.229**	.186*	-.117	.588**	0.900							
Self-status seeking	.429**	.010	-.142	.517**	.422**	0.808						
Seek. social support	.380**	.227**	.375**	-.122	-.063	.001	0.857					
Information seeking	.420**	.104	-.155	.435**	.405**	.504**	-.013	0.760				
Learning	.031	.273**	.259**	.139	.101	.094	.295**	.126	0.934			
Innovativeness	.156	.353**	.415**	-.006	.038	.096	.146	.223**	.363**	0.871		
Com. convenience	.205*	.251**	.197*	.128	.284**	.121	.085	.246**	.158	.332**	0.867	
Intensity of use	.563**	.124	.108	.184*	.234**	.385**	.331**	.297**	-.052	.198*	.175*	0.871

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Figure 1. The model and results



The third gratification was self-status seeking, which is related to building and maintaining an image through the continuous participation in a group. This participation is based on the identification with the group and the desire to be acknowledged as part of the group (Nadkarni and Hofmann 2011, Kilian et al, 2012). Sangwan (2005) argues that the self-status seeking gratification looks to reaffirm the self-identity by being recognised as the image the user is projecting, as well as interacting with (influential) people in the group that otherwise would be difficult to meet. The identity is reaffirmed by the acknowledgement of one's status as a member of the group, feeding the self-satisfaction need. In this regard, Bulut and Doğan (2017) stressed the importance of status seeking as part of the reinforcement of personal values and the creation of a social identity, which is part of the identification process. This identification process points to belongingness as one of the needs that people look for when participating in SNS (Krasnova et al. 2008, Pai and Arnott 2012, Smock et al. 2011, Zolkepli and Kamarulzaman 2015, Hsu et al. 2015, Nadkarni and Hofmann 2011, Wong 2012). The belongingness is fostered by the interaction with people that otherwise it would be difficult to be in contact with, due to geographical distance, different social circles, etc. The belongingness has been studied by Chung et al (2016) by the attachment that the person has to a group, which makes them share information that they will not share with everybody. This finding is in line with Tan's (Tan et al. 2015) argument about the importance of weak ties over the strong ones regarding trust and identification with a specialised group. It is important to highlight that the identity projected in

the network does not necessarily match the identity of the person in real life (Zhao et al. 2008, Wong 2012, Tosun 2012). In fact, a user can have accounts on different networks for different purposes (Mital and Sarkar 2011), having the chance to create a different identity on each one of them, or even create several users in the same network. Each can have a different identity, as in the case of people with different Facebook accounts or the current trend of fake Instagram accounts (finstagram) used by people to post their private photos (Carman 2018, The Guardian 2017). This point is important, as when users join due to peer or superior pressure, they may not necessarily project their real self (Tosun 2012). The same may apply to those users participating in niche networks for operational reasons, e.g. trying to get some benefit from the network, such as information, contacts or knowledge. These users will participate in the network just to get what they are looking for. There may exist conditions for admitting new users, like the case of aSmallworld, which is an SNS for millionaires, and the people are accepted only if they are invited by a current member of the network.

The fourth gratification emerging as an important factor for understanding participation in a niche SNS was learning. Contrary to prior research (Cha, 2010, Foregger 2008), the coefficient for this variable was negative. Considering that self-status seeking was found to be a significant factor, one may interpret this as evidence that users on niche networks are more interested in sharing in order to be recognised as experts by their peers, rather than learning. Those who participate in niche SNS may want to position themselves as experts on the topic more than on the learner role. This situation can be seen on LinkedIn, on which users demonstrate their expertise not only using the information presented on their profiles, but also by drawing kudos from the recommendations of other users. Users participate in niche SNS as these networks provide information about a specific topic, as well as access to people who know about the topic (Cha 2010, Huang 2008, Kim et al. 2011, Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000 Park et al. 2009). The resources (people and information) that people perceive they will find in the niche SNS are something that they will rarely find in the general-purpose networks. Posting specialised views on niche networks may have been more appreciated compared to general purpose networks, while the highly focused discussion would help engage more members, encouraging them not only to read, but also to contribute to the conversation.

Finally, innovativeness follows the use of niche SNS for specific purposes, in this case as a source of innovative ideas, alternative points of view, or information that can lead to new developments. Cha (2010) portrays innovativeness as the tendency of the person to be more open or receptive to new ideas. Niche SNS contain information that is interesting for their members, and that users can post and where they can find information that is not easy to find elsewhere. Users participating in these networks are looking for new ideas, to enrich and receive feedback about their ideas, or to propose initiatives that can be found to be interesting for the other members of the network. The information sharing was found important by Baek et al. (2011) to explain the SNS usage, as it allowed information exchange and ideas that could be useful. Niche SNS can offer more opportunities to find specific information, ideas and projects to be noticed by the right audience than when posted on general purpose networks, where they could go under the radar and be ignored along with the other sea of posts presented on the timeline.

6. CONCLUSION

This research has provided evidence that there may be potentially different factors influencing the participation in general purpose networks and niche SNS. In turn, this suggests that general purpose and niche SNS cannot be assumed to be similar in nature or treated in the same manner.

The literature review suggested that socialisation and information exchange gratifications played an important role in user participation. A number of factors related to these gratifications were tested on niche SNS users. Socialising, social support, self-status seeking, learning and innovativeness were the main factors that motivated users to participate in niche SNS. Socialising, social support and self-status seeking gratifications suggested that belongingness was an underlying factor in participating,

following the findings of Park et al (2009) about SNS usage and Chung et al (2016) about attachment. Users want to be with people who share the same interest; they want to be part of the groups of like-minded people, which aligns with the concept of homophily (Leskovec et al. 2008, Goggins et al. 2011). In niche SNS, Identity plays an important role as people participate in the SNS as a way of reaffirming their own identity (real or desired) through the participation in the network, which is related with research on self-status seeking (Park et al. 2009, Chung et al 2009) This triggers the identification process, which enables users to share the situation they are going through more easily, looking for support from others in the network. In the same vein, users reaffirm their identity through group validation. The results are related to the self-status seeking and learning gratifications. They suggest that users may participate in niche SNS as an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge about a specific topic (self-status seeking). Niche SNS present a good opportunity for users not only to access specialised information, but also to interact with other similarly-minded users interested in the same topics, integrating the self-status seeking and social support characteristics in this gratification. These gratifications are complemented by innovativeness. Users may utilise niche SNS as a source for new ideas or as an outlet to present their ideas or projects to a public that has a higher chance of being interested in it or hearing about it, following Baek et al.'s (2011) results.

As it is becoming more frequent for business or interest groups to establish their own social networks, the managerial implications of this research are oriented towards potential ways of designing such SNS and promoting user participation in them. People are present in niche SNS not only because of the socialisation gratifications, but because they want to create links with like-minded people, following the homophily concept, wherein the degree of specialisation of the network, the topics, and/or its members, becomes a differential of the network. In other words, they are networks that are not for everybody, creating a sense of exclusivity. This sense of exclusivity is supported by the self-status seeking gratification, as people search actively to be recognised by the people they try to identify with. A niche SNS makes it possible for users to showcase their expertise, offering users a platform on which to propose new ideas that can be improved by others. Thus, a niche SNS allows the user to establish a reputation among people related to their interest, which could be difficult to reach in general purpose SNS. In the same vein, learning and innovativeness gratifications can be used by niche SNS managers to encourage participation among users, as these networks are places where they can be inspired to do new things or to go for innovative ideas and learn how to do it, which can be exemplified with academic SNS such as academia or research gate, who are niche SNS for academics.

6.1. Research Implications and Further Research

This proposed approach to adopt general purpose constructs and test them in a niche SNS context was able to explain 41.2% of the variance of the dependent variable. Although such a result could be considered as a good starting point, shedding light on the motivations to participate in niche SNS, it also calls for more research to be undertaken in this area. Future efforts can help increase the predictive power of the model by including new variables that could be relevant to niche SNS. Another stream of research is the type of users in niche SNS, which is guided by the research of Constantinides et al, (2010), Constantinides and Stagno (2011), Kilian et al, (2012), Brandtzæg (2012) and Bulut and Dogan (2017), who found that different types of users have different motivations to use SNS. Consequently, it would be interesting to study the type of users and their proportion in niche SNS. Due to the difficulties of accessing primary sources, it is recommended that qualitative research approaches be used in order to gain a deeper understanding of these networks. Such an approach could potentially help identify a wider list of influential factors to test in a quantitative manner, within models like the one adopted for this research. A case study approach may also be useful for gaining insights into specific niche networks considering different types of networks, e.g. based on objectives, audiences, geographical attributes etc.

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