

What “Uses and Gratifications” Theory Can Tell Us About Using Professional Networking Sites (E.G. LinkedIn, Viadeo, Xing, SkilledAfricans, Plaxo...)

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Abstract. Social media continues to gain enormous popularity. Therefore, it is not surprising that this attracts the interest of researchers to study this cyber-social phenomenon particularly motivation issues as one of the most important axis in the social media literature. However, an analysis of literature concerning the motivations for using social media reveals a lack of studying professional networking sites compared to friendship-oriented social media (i.e. online social networks) and most particularly Facebook, despite the obvious interest that they present. Particularly as in the B2B context, interest in them exceeds that of online social networks (OSN) including even Facebook. Currently, a few number of researches who have become interested in studying the category of professional networking sites, but they did so from only the individual’s point of view. However, it is also necessary to consider the motivations for using them from a company’s point of view. To our knowledge, no research has been undertaken to study the motivations for using professional networking sites for both individuals and companies. For this purpose, we conduct a research by applying the ‘Uses & Gratifications’ Theory to explain the user behaviour in the field of professional networking sites. To collect data, 8 face-to-face interviews with companies and 5 focus groups with individuals were conducted.

The results permit to identify two types of motivations: contextual motivations and generic motivations in which a comparison with those previously found in the field of OSNs can be done.

Keywords: Uses & gratifications theory · Professional networking sites · LinkedIn · Viadeo · Uses companies motivations · Business networks

1 Introduction

In the last decade, social media has shown unprecedented growth and rapidly increased its popularity. This can be seen clearly from the rapid increase of their users and the advertising revenue generated. Facebook, Instagram, Myspace, Cyworld, Hi5, Google+, Twitter, LinkedIn, Viadeo, and Xing are all examples of the success of what could be considered nowadays, as an unprecedented cyber social phenomenon. It is not surprising therefore that this success has sparked researchers’ enthusiasm to study this phenomenon and that the fields of research into this phenomenon are many and varied. These research studies focus mainly on uses and behaviours [7], disclosure and private data [8], social interaction and

socialization [9] and the study of motivations [10–12]. This last research topic of motivations is without doubt one of the most important in social media literature and the reason that research specific to motivations for using social media has developed so quickly.

In fact, in the same way that research was previously made into the Internet context [13], and later into that of virtual communities [14, 15], by studying the motivations of usage, in their turn, investigations started into social networks. Thus, several researchers [1, 10] became interested in studying why Internet and mobile users use these web 2.0 platforms. However, these researches, focusing on the motivations for using social media, were made in general for all social networks. This, despite the fact that social media is characterized by a high intrinsic heterogeneity, thereby made their investigations together less consistent and irrelevant.

Consequently, this intrinsic heterogeneity of social media encouraged researchers [17, 18] to establish a cartography in order to present social media in homogeneous categories to facilitate their later studies. The most recent of these classifications is of particular interest because it is based on a major three-year study carried out by 28 researchers under the direction of the Mizuko Ito [19] (Digital youth project). This study reveals that for the goals of using social media are based essentially on two theories: Friendship and Interest (Fig. 1).

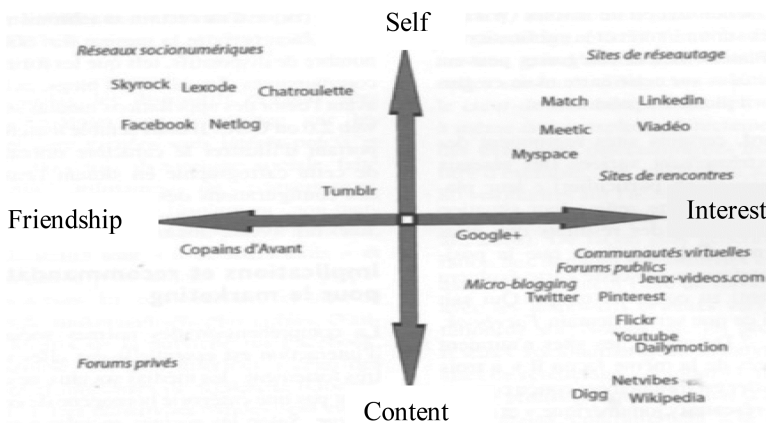


Fig. 1. Social Media Typology (Stenger and Coutant 2013)

In fact, this typology of social media highlights four categories, in which 2 typically are opposites: Friendship/sociability-oriented social media and Interest-oriented social media. However, analysis of the studies into the motivations for using social media reveals that they are largely dominated by the study of friendship-oriented social media (i.e. Online Social Networks) and more precisely Facebook for most of the research [1, 2]. Whilst the benefit of studying Facebook is undisputed professional networking sites in their turn are of no less importance, especially in B2B context:

- Huge audience size and high purchasing power: the audience for professional networking sites is also large (e.g. LinkedIn 470 million members...). In addition, the particularity of its audience is that it is composed of the most valuable target, as

it belongs to a richer social class compared with other social networks (i.e. an audience that is older, more educated and belonging mostly to the professional world).

- Truth of the indicated digital identity: On virtual communities, members often use pseudonyms and on online social networks, members often prefer anonymity, however on professional networking sites a member’s enrollment and participation is obliged to be done with their real offline identity.
- Lead conversion: professional networking sites clearly have the highest lead conversion rate in the B2B context. For this purpose, we can turn to the important study in 2015 made by HubSpot (international inbound marketing agency) which reveals that the conversion rate on LinkedIn is 2.74%, followed by Facebook 0.77% and Twitter 0.69%. This positions LinkedIn at the top of the list in terms of advertising efficiency in the B2B context, with a rate three times higher than that of Facebook and four times higher than that of Twitter.

Therefore, by considering the interest they present, the motivations determining the use of professional networking sites (i.e. Interest-oriented Social Media) deserve to be studied in the same way as it was the case for online social networks (i.e. Friendship-oriented Social Media). Particularly as, this interest exceeds that of the online social networks, including Facebook in the B2B and B2G context.

Thus, for all of the above reasons, professional networking sites (PNS) also deserve to be studied separately as it was the case for online social networks (OSN) particularly Facebook; especially as the many differences that characterize the two contexts (e.g. Goal/vocation of use, nature of published information, type of connected relationship, typical profile audience...) are likely to alter significantly the overall motivations hierarchy found in the context of ONS.

On the other hand, even the limited research studies that have been carried out recently on professional networking sites [4–6] have done so from only *the individual’s point of view*. However, considering the particular interest of professional networking sites in the B2B context, it is also necessary to consider the study of the motivations of usage from a *company’s point of view*. To our knowledge, no research has been carried out into the usage motivations of professional networking sites for both individuals and companies.

2 Literature Review

Since the exponential growth of social network sites, the focus of research into its motivations is among the most investigated in social media literature. Thus, [11, 12, 16] were among the first researchers to carry out an inter-social networks analysis¹ in order to investigate their motivations for use.

From this viewpoint, by mobilizing the theory of uses and gratifications (U&G), the research [12] analyzed the motivations for using the most popular local social networks in Norway (Underskog, Netby, Hamrungan and Biip). They identified the following as the main motivations for using social networks: access to information, entertainment, social interaction and the management of one’s personal identity. Always by using the

¹ In the sense that these researches include several social media at the same time in their samples.

same theoretical foundations (U&G), the research [11] demonstrates that researching information and making new friends are the most salient motivations for using Facebook and Myspace platforms. Similarly, concerning the analysis of research studies into inter-social networks, [20] studied the reasons why individuals refuse to use such platforms. He proposes that the major reasons for the decision not to subscribe or to unsubscribe an account are social grooming and gossip.

However, the contribution of these inter-social networks analysis research should be taken carefully because social networks are extremely diverse and heterogeneous. Thus, generalizing motivations to any type of social networks seems to be less significant and inconsistent. Because this can contain serious methodological risks, which probably would lead to some controversial results. Aware of such difficulties, some researchers have chosen to focus their research on studying just one social network. Consequently, online social networks belonging to the friendship-oriented social media category were preferred [10, 12] and in particular Facebook [2, 3, 13]. The domination of studies of Facebook within social media literature could be explained by various reasons: the huge audience (1,8 billion users), the possibility to make more precise commercial targeting, the high level of (in)voluntary disclosures of members and their data traceability, the high average member connection time, the massive presence of brands on this platform. These reasons to some extent explain why researchers focused particularly on Facebook.

To summarize, we note that the majority of researchers strongly agree that keeping up with existing relationships, making new friends, socializing and communicating with friends, searching for pleasure and leisure activities, passing time and avoiding boredom moreover searching and accessing to information, are the main motivations for using Facebook. Evidently, depending on the context and the nature of the research conducted, other more specific motivations are likely to appear, such as looking for romantic relationships [21] or contact surveillance or monitoring [22] and even research into promoting social events and festivities [3]. More recently a few researchers have begun to be interested in exploring which factors encourage the use of professional networking sites as an individual [4–6].

To summarize, Table 1 shows advances in research focusing on motivations in social media networks.

Table 1. Summarizing the literature review of using motivations

Internet	Virtual community	Social networks (Inter social networks analysis)	Online Social Networks (One social network analysis, mainly Facebook)	Professional networking sites
Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) Ferguson and Perse (2000) Kraut et al. (1998)	Ridings and Gefen (2004) Hiltz and Wellman (1997) Lamp, Velasquez and Ozkaya (2010)	Raacke and Bond-Raacke (2008) Brandtzoeg and Heim (2009) Tufecki (2008) Barker (2009)	Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011) Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) Dunne, Lowler and Rowley (2010) Special and Li-Barker (2012)	Grissa (2016) Florenthat (2015) Moeser (2013)

Finally, we note that different theories have been used to explain the user behaviour of these platforms from a socio-psychological perspective. The ‘*Uses and Gratification*’ theory clearly appears to be the most utilized and also the most significant in social media literature to explain this behaviour.

2.1 Uses and Gratification Theory

The ‘Uses and Gratifications’ (U&G) theory is a socio-psychological approach which is epistemologically considered as positivistic. It assumes that individuals are active, rational and objective in their choices (in the sense of goal-oriented). As its name indicates, it seeks to answer the question of why these active and rational individuals use the various aspects and features of social media by the identification of gratification/rewards they seek. This is why historically the U&G theory was regularly used to explain the use of traditional media (i.e. Television, Magazine, radio, video games, Manga...). In the digital age, from the early 2000s, the use of this theory has been extended to explain the internet use phenomena [13], and then virtual communities [14, 15], and more recently social networks [1, 10, 11].

It is still worth noting however that the U&G theory is not exempt from criticism particularly in the context of traditional media [23]. These criticisms can be summarized in two broad categories:

- On the one hand it has a very optimistic and positive vision of media, owing to the belief that social media exists simply to satisfy the needs, desires and interests of people. Moreover, it also considers that individuals are completely free to select media that provides them with the most satisfaction. But the reality is sometimes totally the opposite to this simple assumption of the actor-audience. In fact, in some cases individuals found themselves forced to be followers and exposed to the power of media influence and its socio-political content such as TV and Press.
- On the other hand, a very utilitarian perspective of individual behaviour concerning the choice of media. In fact, the assumption that media selection is simply the result of purely instrumental behaviour leads to the possibility of forgetting that sometimes the use of media could be the result of ritual behaviour. This could also lead to ignore the importance of the sociocultural environment and its ability to influence the media selection.

However, these limits remain relativized in the digital context because unlike traditional media, the Internet gives back more power to individuals. Thus, owing to its interactive features and its many tools, individuals have freer choice and become more active. This corresponds to one of the fundamental hypotheses on which the U&G theory is based. In addition, even the limit of its conceptualization of an individual characterized by too much instrumental behaviour (i.e. goal-oriented choice), becomes relativized because our context is professional networking sites, which are interest-oriented social media. That is why the use of U&G theory seems to be highly justified in helping us explaining the usage behaviour in the context of professional networking sites for both individuals and companies.

3 Methodology

This research aims to understand on the one hand, the motivations of usage adapted to professional networking sites (e.g. LinkedIn, Viadeo, Xing, Youpeek, SkilledAfricans...) and on the other hand, to understand these motivations for both individuals and companies (as the latter are still neglected in social media literature). Given the exploratory nature of our research objectives, a qualitative survey appeared to be the most appropriate tool. Thus, two qualitative data collection methods were conducted with companies and individuals:

- **Companies:** Eight face-to-face interviews were conducted, lasting between 30–45 min, mostly made in Paris, over a 5 months period, with company managers (e.g. a Digital Strategist, Social Media Managers, Senior Community Managers, a Digital Transformation Manager, Brand Managers). The object was to ask them about the motives and objectives of their company when creating and using an enterprise page on a professional networking site. To ensure the diversity of participating companies within our sample, 3 levels of enterprise page activity were chosen with the help of the Klout score measuring programme: 2 companies with a very active enterprise page use (Klout score > 70); 4 companies with a medium enterprise page use (Klout score [40, 60]) and 1 company with a light company page use (Klout score < 35). It should be noted that one company, not present on professional networking sites but very active on the online social networks (Facebook, Instagram, and especially Pinterest) was included in our sample group to gain a better understanding of the apparently reasons for not becoming a member of this social media category.
- **Individuals:** Five focus groups conducted in two specially equipped rooms properties of two academic research centers (the CEPE in Angoulême and the MSHS in Poitiers). Each focus group lasted between 1 h 30 min–2 h, and was constituted about 5 to 6 participants. The condition for participation in the study was simply to have a profile on a professional networking site. This condition was not satisfied for just one person in each focus group, in order to identify the perceived reasons that hamper the use of these professional networking sites. After completing our data collection, the contents were analyzed separately for each profile, by applying the thematic analysis method. Initially, the contents were fully transcribed. Then we extracted passages and after several readings, ‘units of meaning’ progressively began to be revealed. By using qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo 11), all the units of meaning were automatically associated with their verbatim. This coding work enabled themes to emerge that we carefully unified those that were sufficiently similar. This enabled us finally to identify patterns that corresponded to motivational factors. These motivational factors for both individuals and companies will be presented in a subsequent section.

4 Results

4.1 Company Motivations for Using Professional Networking Sites

Information diffusion and advertisement

The content analysis indicates that the use of enterprise page is motivated by the desire to create a brand community in order to apply afterward the marketing content of the company by creating as much possible commitment regarding the publications: “Our enterprise page has a dual goal: firstly, to build a community potentially interested in our services. Secondly, to animate it to increase the commitment to our content... Consequently this potential community becomes loyal to what we publish”. For some companies running a business in the B2B context, it is sometimes their main channel for diffusing information: “It was a strategic choice for us if we really want to communicate effectively about our company, and particularly because we have a specific clientele that is difficult to reach via Facebook”

Increasing the e-reputation and online visibility of the company

The creation and use of a company page on this type of social network could be explained by the desire to provide a modern company image for the audience as well as optimizing the online visibility by the diversification of its social media presence. All of this, appears to be done within a coordinated strategy that intends to increase the e-reputation of the company. “Our decision to use Viadeo is part of a global vision for our online company awareness. That is why, we are also present on Twitter, Facebook and we have also a chain on YouTube. This allows us to consolidate our efforts in SMO and additionally enhance the search engine position of our website and blog.”

Doing business and prospecting its own market

Professional networking sites present many advantages to companies. In this context, companies indicate that these platforms presents a space that enables them to find partners as well as develop different ways of prospecting their market: “For us as a firm selling vigilance and surveillance equipment to companies and local communities, LinkedIn became our main tool for prospecting the potential market, besides our commercial team,...In fact, with LinkedIn Pulse, we can reach exactly the right customers we are looking for...”

Human resource solutions

Recruitment solutions are one of the motivations that particularly encourage a company to use this category of social media, whether with the aim of diversifying their recruitment channels: “One of the reasons why we created our company page is to be able to diffuse directly our internship and job offers”, or with the intention of making it a main and unique recruitment channel for some technical jobs: “For some key jobs, we usually use the premium offer *Talent solutions* to find the best candidates and that works pretty well.”

E-customer relation management and monitoring the market

The company use of professional networking sites is also explained by the desire to establish a relationship strategy with its customers in a B2B context, or simply by the

need to be in the right place to control negative comments and moderate some of the positions taken against the brand. Furthermore, it makes it easier for a company to monitor its sector by checking competitors' pages and identifying the influential persons in their field of business activity (Table 2).

Table 2. Summarizing companies' motivations to use professional networking sites

Information diffusion and advertisement
Creating and animating a community around the brand
Communicating about the current news of the company and creating the buzz
Increase the e-reputation & online visibility of the company
Giving a modern image of the company
Improving the online visibility and its search engine optimization (SEO)
Doing business and prospecting its own market
Find partners and set up collaboration
Create another sales channel
Develop/expand the marketing actions
Human resource solutions
Recruit employees
Diversify the recruitment process
Being a strong employer branding
e-CRM and monitoring the market:
Optimize customer relationship experience and engaging him more
Moderate the shared negative comments and publications against the brand
Participate in groups relating to the business activity of the company
Surveillance the others enterprise competitor pages and their published contents
Identify and follow the influential experts in the firm business sector

4.2 Using Motivations of the Professional Networking Sites for Individuals

- Looking for a job/internship and performing its career management

This motivation quickly emerged in our content analysis. It may be manifested at different levels, whether in the search for a job/internship, or even in career management by searching for more interesting opportunities: "LinkedIn is very useful to me currently and even at the beginning of my professional life... By the way, it was thanks to LinkedIn that I found my internship. Now I like to be more 'on standby' to discuss other interesting experiences and new challenges by looking out for better opportunities for me as a software development engineer". Furthermore, they present an opportunity for members to promote around their professional identity.

- Building his personal branding and highlighting his skills

Professional networking sites are also used by individuals to confirm their expertise in their business activities through the continuous publication of content relating to their

skills, as well as to try and optimize their online visibility: “when you are in a liberal profession such as a Freelancer, it is here that the business networks become more important to you than many others...because clients are not likely contact you before checking your expertise online... That is why you have to be active on this type of social network to achieve more self-exposure and expertise on the internet.”

- Developing of his own professional network

Use of these social networks is also explained by the desire to develop one’s own professional network composed mainly of classmates, working colleagues and people with whom the member shares the same skills. Thus, they are used to follow the recognized experts in one’s business activity: “One of the reasons I was advised to focus on the use of Viadeo rather than LinkedIn is the facility to locate my professional network. As Viadeo is a local French business network, it was easier for me to find other students from my graduation year at university and also my work colleagues”.

- Learning and exchange of information

Individuals also use these platforms to exchange views and debate with other professionals about issues of common interest. Thus, they have the opportunity to learn mutually from each other, besides the fact that they can benefit by following leaders in their field of specialization (e.g. the e-influencers programme on LinkedIn or webinars training courses) (Table 3).

Table 3. Summarizing Individuals’ motivations to use professional networking sites

Looking for a job/internship and performing its career management
Searching for job/internship
Listening to opportunities (mission, freelance...)
Career development
Building personal branding and highlighting his skills
Confirming his expertise in the business sector
Enhancing his online visibility
Publish content related to his own skills
Developing of his own professional network
Find similarly profiles
Find old relationships (colleagues, students, classmates...)
Identify specialists/experts in his activity domain
Learning and exchange of information
Communicate and learn mutually from each other contacts
Participate in specializing groups related to his domain
Debate and exchange of their personal feedback experience
Follow the industry influencers

5 Discussion

Our research aims to study the motivations for using professional networking sites (i.e. interest-oriented social media), for both individuals and companies. The revealed results enable us to make some comparisons with those found in the field of online social networks. In fact, the results show two types of motivations:

- On the one hand, the generic/common motivations appear approximatively as the same in several contexts. Thus, they are resistible to the intrinsic heterogeneity of social media.
- On the other hand, the contextual motivations are entirely specific to the context being studied (i.e. professional networking sites).

Concerning the general common motivations, even though they are approximatively the same, when comparing the two contexts, their interpretation is likely to change relatively according to each context. For example, the information diffusion & advertisement; the improvement e-reputation & online visibility of the company are almost the same motivations of what an enterprise page on Facebook looks for. However, the way of achieving these motivations is not necessarily the same for each social network category. Certainly, unlike Facebook on which the tone of the diffused messages and content is rather more playful, pleasant and friendly, on Viadeo and LinkedIn the community manager in his editorial strategy will prefer a more serious and professional tone to disseminate his marketing content. It is the same, regarding frequency, periodicity and timing of diffusing marketing content in the professional networking sites context, which will be made with a light rhythm compared with Facebook, and more likely during working days (ideally at the beginning or end of the working day: 9–10 am or 4–5 pm). These differences also influence the features of the content marketing to adopt by the community manager in each type of social network, for example: the vividness of the content (e.g. video, photo, text...) and the degree of interactivity [24].

As much as it is for companies, the interpretation of the common motivations for individuals to use professional networking sites can vary partially according to the type of social network. For example, regarding development of one's own network motivation: on Facebook adding contacts to one's network is done between individuals belonging to the family circle and those in one's private life (friends, classmates...). While on LinkedIn the extension of the member's network concerns the professional world (work colleagues, people with whom one shares skills and professional issues...).

The same for exchange of information and learning motivation: For example, on online social networks (Facebook, Cyworld, Hi5, Friendster...) members usually publish general or self-expressive information (e.g. date of birth, home city, hobbies, likes, holiday photos...) [3, 10] whereas on professional networking sites the published information is more about self-promotion.

On the other hand, the contextual motivations are totally different because they are specific and directly related to the study context. Thus, building one's personal e-branding and highlighting one's skills in addition to looking for a job or career development for individuals [3, 4], as well as recruitment and prospecting the market for companies are all contextual motivations because they are dependent on study context.

Concerning the influence of the importance of these motivations, the following figure may give a better explanation (Fig. 2):

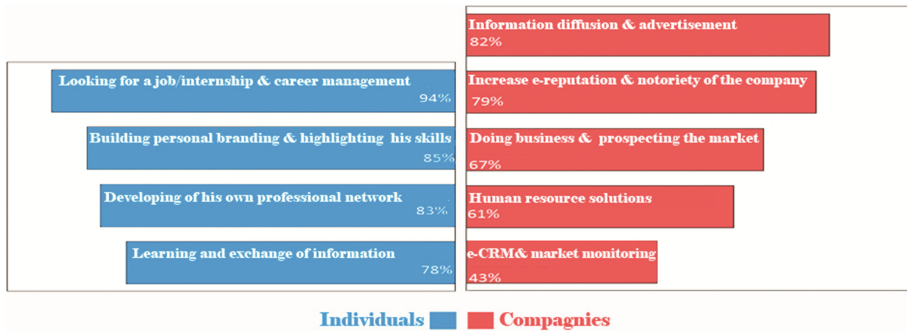


Fig. 2. Comparison between the motivations of Individuals members and Companies members

It is worth noting that all motivations display a significant effect for both individuals and companies. It remains however to note a lesser effect for e-CRM² and market monitoring motivations in using professional networking sites for companies. Nevertheless, all the motivations appear, in general, to be of purely instrumental/utilitarian nature, unlike the online social networks [1]³. That is why for individuals, looking for a job and career development motivation is particularly salient [4]. However, this effect is reduced for companies, concerning human resources solutions motivation, at the level of being ranked in fourth position. This could be explained by the fact that recruitment and career development is a constant concern for individuals, whereas for companies this usually constitute a punctual and limited action in time.

To conclude, the instrumental and utilitarian nature of usage motivations is high with professional networking sites unlike online social networks, particularly Facebook [1]. In this context, we remind ourselves of the cartography of [17] that demonstrates that professional networking sites are mainly focused on ‘interest’. Such findings enable us to relativize the limits formulated to the “U&G” theory, mainly in the context of traditional media (TV, press...), and more precisely, regarding its conceptualization of a very goal oriented individual whilst ignoring the media ritualistic use. However, given that our study context deals with professional networking sites that are nothing else interest oriented media, it is normal that these plat-forms are mainly instrumental.

It is similar to the limit of its conceptualization of an individual totally free of choice. This limit also becomes relativized in our study context because the internet in general and social media in particular, owing to their interactive features and the many tools made available for an individual’s use, give back more power and freedom to individuals to make their choices. For all of these reasons, the “U&G” theory is proving to be relevant in explaining the user behaviour on professional networking sites.

² e-Customer Relation Management.

³ We remind that Papacharissi & Mendelson results (2011) demonstrate that the use of the Facebook is mainly ritualistic.

6 Limits and Future Directions

Taking into account the qualitative and exploratory nature of our research, it is subject to certain limitations. On the one hand, because the sample size was small we should be careful when looking at the results. Therefore, it is recommended that the results would be validated through a larger scale quantitative sample using a probabilistic method, or at least the quota method, in order to ensure that the results are theoretical representative of both the composition of individuals and of companies in these platforms. On the other hand, this research was conducted regarding the French context, which is a country with rather an individualistic cultural dimension in the sense of Hofstede. Therefore, to strengthen the external validity, it is recommended that the results be compared with those from other countries that are sufficiently culturally different, such as China and India (i.e. from a rather more collectivist culture).

In addition to these two limits, we suggest other future research avenues:

Firstly, a quantitative survey appears to be the logical continuation of this research that would permit to determine empirically the most salient motivations of usage behaviour of professional networking sites besides to verify in what way some variables⁴ are likely to modify the general hierarchy of these motivations. For example, by introducing the variable of the nature hierarchical position within the company, it would be legitimate to think that if we are investigating rather human resources managers, it is likely that the recruitment motivation will be the most relevant at the place of information diffusion and advertisement motivation which will be rather privileged by digital marketers and community managers.

Secondly, after revealing the motivations for using professional networking sites for both companies and individuals, it would be rather interesting now to focus on studying the factors that would encourage a rather more active, continuous and regular use of these platforms. In this context, we remind ourselves that the average time of an individual's daily connection on LinkedIn remains significantly lower than on Facebook which is evaluated to 46 min (Source: Facebook Business).

Thirdly, based on the results of [15] demonstrating that motivations for using virtual communities are not stable but progress through time, it would be reasonable to think that it is the same for social networks. Thus, a longitudinal research over 4 to 5 years would be the most suitable to highlight the evolution of these motivations based on the life-cycle of the member on the platform (i.e. Student in his last year at university, graduated student, junior manager and if possible senior manager).

Fourthly, though this research has focused on the study of the usage motivations of a member from a psychological perspective, it is no less important to extend the study to consider a sociotechnical perspective (technological factors) by studying the impact of the incentive mechanisms (e.g. platform email invitation, automated sponsorship...) as well as the attractiveness, originality of web design in the desire to use these platforms, as an example by studying the influence of interactivity, clarity and responsive design in the member intention to test these platforms or continue using them actively.

⁴ e.g. for individuals: gender, professional status.../ for companies: company size, nature of the hierarchical position....

Acknowledgement. The author gratefully thanks his doctoral supervisors respectively Inés De La Ville and André Leroux.

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Digital Economy. Emerging Technologies and Business
Innovation

Second International Conference, ICDEc 2017, Sidi Bou
Said, Tunisia, May 4-6, 2017, Proceedings

Jallouli, R.; Zaïane, O.R.; Bach Tobji, M.A.; Srarfi

Tabbane, R.; Nijholt, A. (Eds.)

2017, XVI, 219 p. 58 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-62736-6