
The purpose of this study is to delineate and examine gender effects in the evaluation of online social support on social network sites (SNSs) and to test the effects of online social support on commitment and continuance. We develop a comparative theoretical model of SNS continuance across gender by incorporating three key dimension of social support: informational support, emotional support, and network management.

Our results suggest that SNS providers should manage online social support and increase users’ commitment to their SNSs, retaining its high membership. The providers could improve users’ perception of online social support by implementing effective technical designs in providing them informational support, emotional support, and network management. For example, in order to enhance online information support, SNS designers may provide more featured technologies to assist users in searching useful information. They may categorize the information for users to achieve the information more easily. In order to enhance online social support and network management, managers may provide comfortable and convenient channels of communication for their members to interact with others and strengthen their social ties. They may also establish relevant policies and rules to build a safe and comfortable environment for members’ interactions and sociability. Further, driven by the growing number of providers, the competition between different SNS platforms becomes fiercer. Answers that surface from this research could give SNS providers incentives to offer a better environment that makes the users feel more comfortable when seeking or providing support to others. Such effort by SNS providers will be a win-win case, where providers will have more royal users and users will have a better environment to receive/provide support from/to others.

Second, our research findings have implications for supporting groups over SNSs. There are many different groups formed by online users for specific interests or purposes. The identification of three key dimensions of social support in the context of SNS could help such groups better define who they are, what types of support are encouraged in their groups, and even better manage and design their webpages on SNSs. For example, there are many cancer support groups on Facebook today that provide support to people who have cancer as well as their families. Findings from this research could serve as a theoretical support for these groups to more precisely target at the type of support they intend to provide, whether it is mainly informational or emotional, or both.

Third, for enterprises that have presented their business on SNSs, our findings have important implications. For example, online social support can foster close personal relationship and provide commercial information support, which strengthen customers' relationship with enterprises and impact online consumer purchase decision (Liang et al. 2011). By obtaining online social support, consumers may have a high commitment to enterprises' SNS pages, providing good opportunities for managers to transact commercial information to their customers. Enterprises may increase the awareness of their products and branding by increasing such social support via interacting with a huge number of potential customers on SNSs (Wang & Hajli, 2014). Therefore, increasing
customers’ online social support experience is a key issue that business managers should think about while presenting their business on SNS pages. By acknowledging the identified dimensions of online social support and its effect, managers may create a more interactive communication environment to encourage online interactions among their customers and provide various kinds of social support. As a consequence, the commitment of customers to an enterprise’s business increases, proving valuable opportunities for managers to generate business values.

Finally, the underscored gender differences in evaluating online social support provide further insights for both SNS firms and enterprises when trying to improve their customer experience of social support on SNSs. SNS firms and enterprise should consider the impact of customer demographic profile (gender) and better target and interact with their customers. For example, by obtaining insights on how male and female assign different importance to dimensions of online social support, SNS providers will be able to more effectively provide support by managing individuals’ perceptions and favors. As male are more concerned about informational support, SNS providers may focus on providing more friendly environment by designing and implementing more effective technological functions for males to save time and efforts in seeking information. On the other side, for female users, SNS providers may make effort on communicating and providing more social- and people-oriented for them to interact with other members. The finding is also important for enterprises to make a fit between marketing strategies and targeting customers. By learning gender difference results, managers should be able to better increase customers’ experience of social support. For example, greater attention should be paid to the needs of increasing women’s emotional support and network management because they are found to place greater importance in evaluating social support compared to men. On the other side, greater attention should be paid to the needs of increasing men’s informational support because they are found to place greater importance in evaluating social support compared to women. As such, managers should be able to implement marketing strategies to their targeting group (male or female group) of customers by providing more efficient social support.