Just Friends, Good Acquaintances Or Soul Mates? an Exploration of Website Connectedness

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This study aims to understand the meaning of website connectedness from the website visitors’ point of view. It uncovers the underlying meaning of emotional ties between visitor and website. Connectedness is assumed to be of the utmost importance for positive word-of-mouth communication. The triangulated data gathered in this interpretive study reveals thematic patterns that help to explain website connectedness. Website connectedness constitutes three factors: relatability, dependency and sense-of-community. To transform the relationship from ‘just friends’ to ‘soul mates’, website owners should focus on improving one or all of the connectedness components.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As connectedness is assumed to be of the utmost importance for positive word of mouth communication, we need an empirical, emic understanding of what constitutes connectedness between visitor and the website. This study aims to understand more deeply the meaning of connectedness from the consumer’s point of view, and uncover the underlying meaning of emotional ties between visitor and the website.

Interestingly, in the information technology and telecommunication literatures, connectedness is mostly interpreted as a ‘physical’ connection, either among users or between users and the virtual world (Dholakia et al. 2001; Townsend 2001) or in a website context, where Ha and James (1998) categorised connectedness as one of the physical interactivity dimensions. The intensity of relationships between brand and individual visitors through the interaction between members of brand communities have been discussed at length (Kozinets 2002; McAlexander et al. 2002). However, only recently have many researchers begun to explore the ‘emotional connection’ between visitor and the website as a media. Jung et al. (2004) introduced the Internet Connectedness Index (ICI), which includes the measurement of the emotional dependency of a person to Internet.

This study aims to extend the knowledge of emotional connectedness created in the digital environment. We suggest that the ‘customer-brand relationship’ concept and ‘program connectedness’ are appropriate to be applied in the context of website use. The relationship between website and visitors will grow over time, and the stronger the connection between visitor and the site, spreading the positive WOM about the website will likely to happen. We label this relationship construct as ‘website connectedness’.

Deriving from Hagerty et al. (1993), our broad definition for website connectedness is: the intensity of emotional ties and relational proximity between a visitor and a website.

In this study, we use three qualitative research methods: (1) Online interviews, (2) Diary analysis, and (3) Observation of website usage and behavior. These three types of data collection aim for triangulation across sources and methods, which enhance the trustworthiness of the information gathered. By utilising these qualitative methods, we contribute to the development of the website connectedness construct from an emic perspective, whereby interpretation identifies emerging themes from the data gathered, and we can better understand the nature of connectedness. The analysis focused on identifying themes that emerged from the transcripts, diaries and observational data.

The findings revealed various ways consumers can become intimate with websites and the reasons why. The different type of relationships between a website and its visitors are naturally analogous to the relationship between two individuals or between customer and a brand. It is classified into three primary relationship types: just friends, good acquaintances, and soul mates.

Surprisingly, frequency of visit did not determine the depth of the relationship between websites and their visitors, as is the common assumption in the literature. The ‘just friend’ websites were visited for around 10-15 minutes duration for each visit, while the ‘soul mate’ websites could hold the interest of visitors from between 20 minutes and three hours duration per visit.

The emic perspective that we have illuminated here shows us that website connectedness consists of three major themes: (1) relatability, (2) dependency, and (3) sense of community. These correspond to many of the etic perspectives discussed in the psychology literature. These include the degree of liking an environment (Eisenberg et al. 2003), the quality of the emotional bond between one person and another (Lezin et al. 2004), or relatedness (Townsend and McWhirter 2005). Beyers et al. (2003) describe close parent-adolescent relationships as having elements of mutual reciprocity, trust and dependency. Zeldin and Topitzes (2002) explain the existence of sense of community in neighborhood connectedness. Ijsselstein et al. (2003) suggests that connectedness includes affective benefits such as a feeling of staying in touch, and a sense of belonging and intimacy.

Connectedness in a website context needs to be seen from different perspectives. We consider that it is not merely a physical connection between the visitor and the virtual world as suggested by Dholakia et al. (2001). Further, connectedness is not only about the virtual connection between people in the mobile phone or telecommunication environment (Townsend 2001). We argue that the connectedness concept in this context corresponds to the psychology and education literatures, which place greater emphasis on emotional bonding developed over time. As claimed by Russell et al. (2004), this type of connectedness reveals the intensity of emotional ties as well as the proximity between audience/visitor and the media. The stronger the emotional connection, the more likely the visitor will stay tuned in a longer period of time, and positive word-of-mouth about the website/company who owned it, can be spread. We build on Russell et al.’s (2004) conceptualization in that we outline three ways in which the emotional connection is built in the online environment.

To build an emotional connection between the visitor and the website (captured by website connectedness), these three ways are by increasing the relatability factor, increasing the dependency factor and/or to increase the community feelings. In other words, in order to transform the relationship between visitor and website from ‘just friends’ to ‘soul mate’, website owners should focus on improving one or all of the relatability, dependency and sense of community components.

The goal of maintaining a website is all about building an emotional connection between the visitors and the website. The connected visitors could be the most important group of customers in the referral process, and to create positive word-of-mouth communication. This research study gives a different and new perspective to non-metric website performance measurements, providing a means of detecting whether a transformation from ‘just friends’ to ‘soul mates’ has been made in the relationship.
between visitors and website.

REFERENCES