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Personal branding or employee advocacy - expert's use of social networking site

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with social media in building experts' professional images. In the theoretical part, online communities are discussed in the light of the paper's topic. The study relies on technological adoption models, and in particular, the UTAUT (Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology) 2 model. In the empirical part, the use of LinkedIn was analyzed as the major tool for professional networking.

Our research results suggest that the use of LinkedIn has been initiated mostly by invitation or encouragement of another user. Only in rare occasions, self-branding was reported as the primary motivation to register into LinkedIn. Self-presentation was improved in the process of using the service, as the users became more acquainted with the nature of the service. Experts presented themselves in a minimalistic manner at the beginning. Thus, it would not be accurate to characterize it as strong self-branding. However, they had created personal brands, and they consistently attempted to maintain it. LinkedIn was mainly used to search for professional information and track their friends. The experts could also discuss marketing their own employer company on LinkedIn resulting a shift towards the company's employee advocacy. However, experts wanted to market their employee company only if it is motivating to them and supports their personal expert brand.

Our study indicates that, on a practical level, it could be advisable to encourage employees to use LinkedIn actively. However, as a prerequisite, companies should ensure overall job satisfaction, and check that employer/employee relations are fully operational in order to achieve the best possible results of marketing.

**KEYWORDS:** LinkedIn, Social network service, Social media, Self-presentation, Professional branding, Employee advocacy

**INTRODUCTION**

Social media has become as a part of every-day life activities. We utilize many different devices and applications for communicating and sharing content. When networks expand, both personal information and possible publications expand easily for the wider audience (Pridmore, 2015). This process is also supported by the use of search engines.

One way to use social media is an individual's promoting activities in job markets. On the other hand, companies can promote their product and services sales through social media. LinkedIn

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(LinkedIn, 2016) is the leading service to pursue these activities and thus, in this study we focus on this social media service. According to Statista portal, LinkedIn had 467 million registered members in the world in the third quarter of 2016 (Statista, 2016).

For our research we had the following questions to answer:

- Why online community LinkedIn is used and what goals users have for the use of it?
- Why expertise is emphasized on LinkedIn?
- What factors affect emphasizing expertise?

Before discussing the study itself, we first provide the theoretical background of the study. This includes discussing social media in our research context and technology adoption.

### **SOCIAL MEDIA AND LINKEDIN IN OUR CONTEXT**

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) have defined social media as a set of Internet-based services which are based on Web 2.0 ideology and technologies. These applications enable user-oriented content creation and sharing.

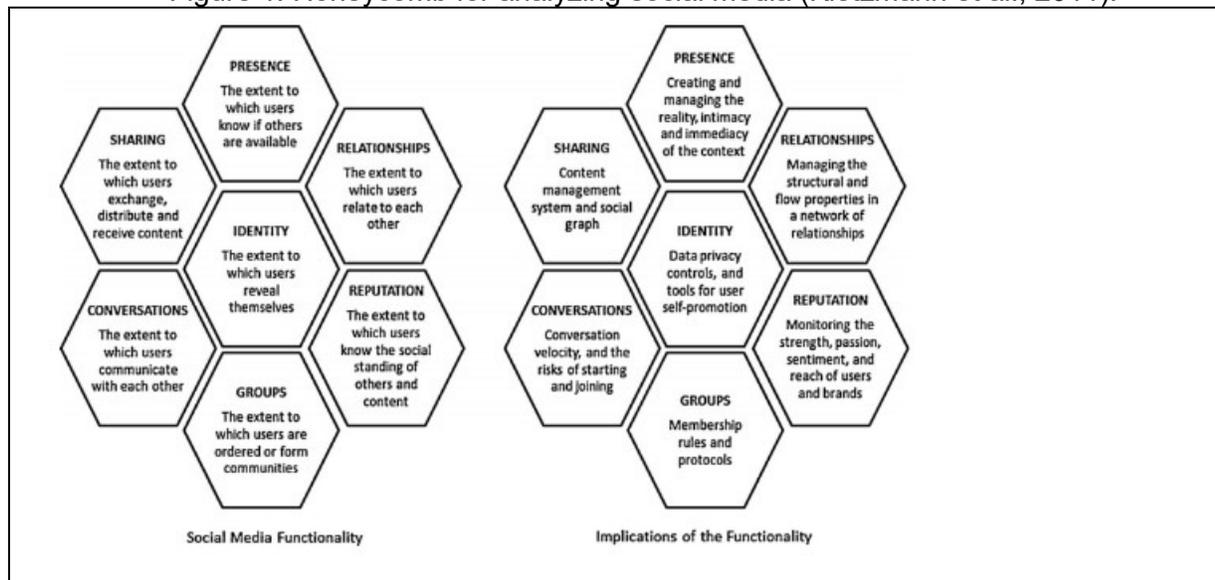
Boyd and Ellison (2007) have defined social network sites. According to them, social network sites include two major components. These are user profiles and presenting users' contacts. Six degrees was the first service including the both.

To define the role of a social media application in one context the honeycomb of social media is a useful tool (Kietzmann et al, 2011). The honeycomb includes the following elements:

- presence,
- sharing,
- relationships,
- conversations,
- reputation,
- groups, and
- identity as the core item

Figure 1 (see next page) demonstrates how the honeycomb can be used in analyzing social media use. First in figure 1 the honeycomb has been applied for the functionality of social media and then for the implications of social media.

Figure 1. Honeycomb for analyzing social media (Kietzmann et al., 2011).



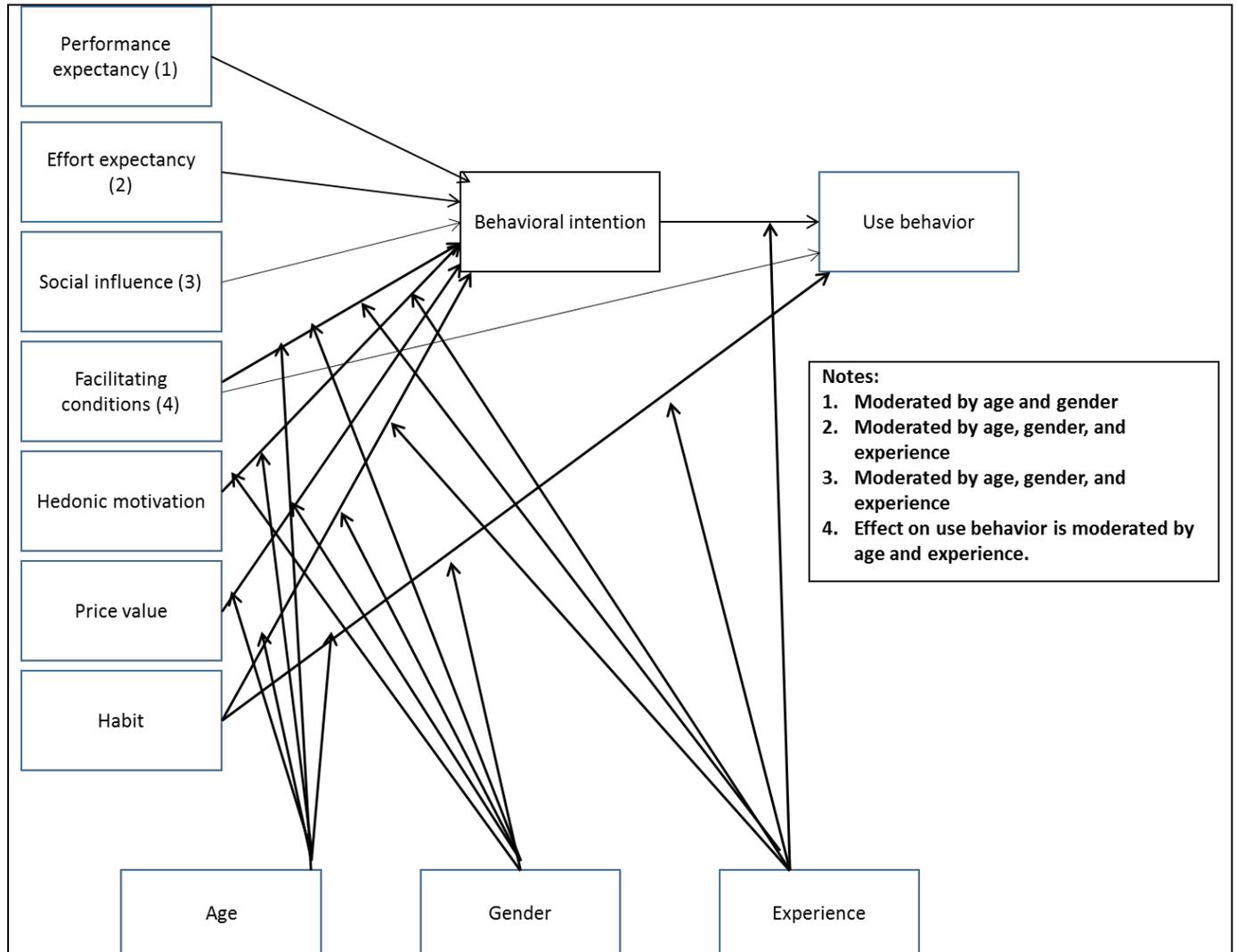
## TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION

Numerous theories deal with technology adoption. Diffusion theories of technology can partially explain the drivers of social media adoption. The first diffusion theory for technology innovations includes the innovation diffusion theory (Rogers, 2003) which derives from the 60s and comprehends the adoption of an innovation as a social process. The next explanation for technology adoption is the TRA Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). TRA has its background in developing technology diffusion and adoption theories (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). According to this model, a person's activity is the result of attitude and personal norms. A person's attitude is based on values and beliefs. The personal norms are based on motivation to act according to accepted norms. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by Davis et al (1989) discusses practical technology use issues. TAM emphasizes usefulness in addition to user friendliness. Afterwards theories have been expanded and modified. Mathieson et al (2001) for example emphasize that the TAM model should be expanded by adding available resources.

Venkatesh and Davis (2000) expanded TAM further to include the concept of perceived usefulness. This model is called TAM2. Subsequently, the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) was presented by Davis et al (2003). The UTA theory deals with the social aspect which is notable fact in the emergence, adoption, and use of social media in various areas including education.

In the era of social media new features have been added to the UTAUT (Venkatesh et al, 2012). These are hedonic motivation, price value, and habit. The UTAUT2 brings a consumer use context to the UTAUT and thus, it is useful in the research of social media. Figure 2 shows the original UTAUT with the extensions by Venkatesh et al (2012).

Figure 2. UTAUT2.



**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study included the following sub-questions

- Why online community LinkedIn is used and what goals users have for the use of it?
- Why expertise is emphasized on LinkedIn?
- What factors affect emphasizing expertise?

From these questions we derived seven exact interview themes. These were

1. Why did you start the use of LinkedIn?

2. How do social factors affect the use of LinkedIn?
3. What is the effortlessness and benefit of LinkedIn?
4. What kind of appearance is the goal of LinkedIn use?
5. How does networking become realized on LinkedIn?
6. When and how do you use LinkedIn and how often?
7. Do you present yourself or your employer on LinkedIn?

## INTERVIEW EXECUTION

Because in our study the aim was to produce knowledge of opinions, we selected the theme interview method to study our social media aspects. In addition, the reason for this was that we were also able to acquire deeper knowledge from interviewees when available.

Eight respondents, 4 females and 4 males, participated in theme interviews. The transcripts of the interviews include 56 text pages or 25439 words. The age range of the respondents was between 31 and 47 years old. The respondents' profiles are shown in table 1.

Gender	Age	Position	Business area
female	34	senior official	Services in business life
female	46	employee	Public administration
male	34	senior official	Services in business life
male	46	senior official	Services in business life
female	31	official	Services in business life
male	37	official	Real estate business
male	46	manager	Services in business life
female	34	senior official	Services in business life

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## RESULTS

The results were as follows concerning each theme

### 1. Why did you start using LinkedIn?

All respondents have used LinkedIn for many years and they used the service regularly. The main reason to use LinkedIn was networking. They wanted to be networked to two types of other users. The first type was those with whom they actually work. The second type included the users of “the outer circle” such as old colleagues, old clients, and schoolmates.

Two respondents had the following answers for this question:

*“It is one forum for social networking – I like to be there for communicating. I am in touch to customers, colleagues and new people I know” (woman, 34)*

*“It is a channel for collecting contacts. When people change jobs, the service can store contact information. From the service you can find information from your old friends and other people with whom you are not in contact actively. You can see where people are and what they do right now” (man, 37)*

### 2. How do social factors affect the use of LinkedIn?

The respondents experienced LinkedIn as a socially appreciated social media service. The start of the service use was occurred by other users’ motivating or invitation.

One respondent had the following answer for this question:

*“I don’t remember when I set up my profile exactly, but I set up it because someone said it is worth of it. May be my husband said that you should join, because he has been there earlier. He probably said that forget Facebook and use LinkedIn. Probably, this was the start for creating my profile and I started to build it step by step” (woman 46)*

Two respondents can be seen as the early adopters of the service. One respondent had the following answer for this question.

*“I was signed up on LinkedIn long time ago. When it was in some year, when I studied. One friend was signed up as well and soon I got an invitation” (man, 37)*

Most respondent did not have a complete view on what the service includes. The motivation of an employer affected the start of the service use. One respondent commented on that as follows:

*“At the beginning it is was a fashion that everybody should be there. Thus, I needed to go there and at the beginning, I did not understand what for LinkedIn is used. Before the real use and understanding about the service there were social pressures to join and sign up” ( Man 37)*

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In the use of the service, the respondents were carefully. They use to include neutral information on themselves on the profiles and the threshold to comment on other users' updates was high.

### 3. What is the effortlessness and benefit of LinkedIn?

The usability of LinkedIn was criticized by three from four female respondents. One respondent commented on the usability as follows:

*"It is mainly difficult to use. I have tried to link the things without any success. I have experienced that it is difficult to follow newsfeeds and other things" (woman, 34)*

The respondents experienced that it is difficult evaluate the acquired value of the service. The main benefit of the service was available from articles on professional topics. However, the respondents would have needed deeper content. In addition, the respondents stated that one benefit is following other colleagues' career.

### 4. What kind of public appearance is the goal of the use of LinkedIn?

The respondents wanted that the created profiles reflect their workmanship. They also hoped that other users would recognize their developing careers.

#### 4.1. What is the role of voluntary working and hobbies on a LinkedIn profile?

The respondents did not recognize the meaning of voluntary working or hobbies on their profiles. For example, one interviewee (man, 46) simply argued *"personal things will be presented in other forums"* and, but on the other hand this interviewee reported that: *"however, this kind of information could be presented shortly on LinkedIn"*.

#### 4.2. What is the role of expertise in the use of LinkedIn?

The respondents did not build strong brands from themselves. Instead of this, they emphasized their expertise.

The respondents showed their expertise by pressing "like" and sharing content when they found significant articles. This is done in selective and critical ways and it is possible and the content of own employer is not shared. The guiding star in this was support for own professional profile.

One interviewee commented on this as follows:

*"It is quite limited content what is shared on the service. It is my work identity which acts there" (woman, 31)*

#### 4.3. What is the role of self-presentation in the use of LinkedIn?

Most respondents recognized the vital role of the service when applying for new jobs. They modified the profiles based on current labor market context. However, they kept the profiles

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relative neutral that current employers would not recognize the willingness to change an employer.

One interviewee stated this as follows:

*"It is recruiting channel 1 -my friends have emphasized this"* (man, 37)

#### 4.4. What is the role of the use of groups and following companies in the use of LinkedIn?

All respondents, except one person, were members at least in one LinkedIn group. They were mostly in the role of followers and did not comment on content actively.

One interviewee stated this as follows:

*"Rarely I comment on something there. I am too lazy for this. I also want to produce deeper writings when I write. I like to avoid superficial text when I write"* (man, 46)

Respondents followed other companies as well. Mostly these companies were their clients/customers, but competitors are also followed, as these are good benchmarks.

#### 4.5. How do you update your LinkedIn profile and what are the reasons for this?

Most respondents thought that updating is a challenging task. They argued that this is a reason that profiles are not updated. They wanted to have more representational profiles and they experienced this goal challenging.

For example, one interviewee had this kind of attitude concerning updating

*"Now I should have some kind of summary about myself - it is so difficult to write, but it will come there by pushing on some day"* (woman, 34)

#### 4.6. What are the challenges in presenting yourself on LinkedIn?

Most respondents argued that presenting her/himself is more challenging on social media. They emphasized that in face-to-face contact it is easier to understand each other. On social media interviewees liked to be neutral without showing their personality too much.

One interviewee comment on this as follows:

*"I think that it is more challenging to present yourself on the web. I believe that in live situations I can show my personality and expertise better"* (man, 37)

Another respondent stressed this in additional way as follows:

*"I don't like to tell deeper things about myself on the web"* (woman, 46)

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#### 4.7. What is the meaning of use activity on LinkedIn?

The respondents argued that accurate information on profiles is more important than the activity of use.

One interviewee stated this as follows:

*“I would prefer that my CV should be there. Of course, other activities are important if you like to maximize the benefit from the service”* (woman, 34)

#### 5. How does networking occur on LinkedIn?

The respondents use to become networked with people who they have met at work. After customer meetings, fairs or other professional events they use to become networked on LinkedIn. In addition, the respondents use to become networked with their colleagues in their own companies. They also monitor users who are suggested by LinkedIn.

The respondents reported that they become networked with other users who they have met earlier in real life or online. With those, who they do not know, they do not become networked. The respondents liked to have as many contacts as possible in their networks. The respondents' plan was inserting high profile professionals and directors to their networks. They emphasized that this kind of contacts are valuable for future businesses.

One interviewee narrated this as follows, which was similar in other comments:

*“If I have customer appointments is natural to ask a customer for a contact, if a customer doesn't do this first”* (man, 34)

#### 6. When do you use LinkedIn and how often?

The respondents experienced that LinkedIn is one forum for searching for relevant information to the needs of a job. In addition, they experienced that the service is also relevant for asking for useful information from colleagues.

The respondents experienced the service appropriate for being recruited. However, they did not browse work announcements actively.

The respondents did not use LinkedIn for communicating. The service is used only when other communication channels are not available.

Three respondents reported that they use LinkedIn daily. However, the most respondents reported to use the service once or twice in a week. The respondents also reported that the use of Linked is spontaneous when they receive an announcement on information on an interesting event.

Six respondents reported that they use the mobile version on LinkedIn. The most respondents reported that they auto-forward LinkedIn messages to email which not a job email account because the number of messages is high.

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No respondent did use the paid services of LinkedIn. However, the most respondent were willing to pay for the basic service if necessary.

Two interviewees comment on the use of LinkedIn as follows:

*“I read conversations only – profession-related issues. Partly it is information searching. If I have some question in my mind, I will search for an answer on this services as well. Of Course, I can also ask from the experts of a topic here!”* (man, 46)

*“The use of LinkedIn is like browsing a newspaper. When interesting story appears, it should be checked and studied”* (woman, 31)

#### 7. Do you represent yourself or your employer on LinkedIn?

The respondents experienced that they represent themselves above all and the meaning of representing employer is less significant. However, the respondents brought out employers in their networks by sharing employer companies' content and pushing “like” while using the service. They experienced that the benefit of this is indirect and real benefits will come later. Most respondents experienced that positive feedback to competitors' content improves the image of their own expertise. In addition, the image of own company will be improved as well because other viewers can experience that a company runs its own business fairly.

The employers of the respondents did not oblige to use LinkedIn. However, the employers encouraged the respondents to use LinkedIn and the respondents had the positive attitude to this when the values of the respondents and the companies were compatible. The most employers of the respondents had published the rules for social media use. The respondents experienced the rules are appropriate and these did not restrict the use of the service too much. According to the interviews, the rules guide from the use of social media toward well-organized marketing which benefits the employer companies.

The respondents experienced that it is possible for them to act as employee advocacy.

The following comment from one interviewee clarifies the mood in all responses:

*“Surely I represent myself, but because I have the professional role in the service, I also represent my employer, because there is job-related information available”* (man, 46)

Table 2 (starting from next page) summarizes our major findings. The table continues on the next pages.

QUESTION	MAJOR ANSWER	FREQUENCY	CRITICISM/REMARKS
1. Why did you start using LinkedIn?	The main reason to use LinkedIn was networking	All respondents	
2. How do social factors affect the use of LinkedIn?	LinkedIn is a socially appreciated social media service	All respondents	
3. What is the effortlessness and benefit of LinkedIn?	The main benefit of the service was available from articles on professional topics	5 respondents evaluated the effortlessness and benefit positively	Difficult to use Deeper content is needed
4. What kind of public appearance is the goal of the use of LinkedIn?	The respondents wanted that the created profiles reflect their workmanship They also hoped that other users would recognize their developing careers	All respondents	
4.1. What is the role of voluntary working and hobbies on a LinkedIn profile?	Personal things should be presented in other forums	No one	
4.2. What is the role of expertise in the use of LinkedIn?	Expertise is important, but not strong branding	All respondents	
4.3. What is the role of self-presentation in the use of LinkedIn?	The vital role of the service when applying for new jobs	Most respondents	The profiles should be neutral, because of current employers
4.4. What is the role of the use of groups and following companies in	The respondents were members at least one LinkedIn group	All respondents except one	Following the news of groups is main reason to attend groups

	the use of LinkedIn?			
4.5.	How do you update your LinkedIn profile and what are the reasons for this?	Updating is a challenging task	Most respondents	Good profile is difficult to create
4.6.	What are the challenges in presenting yourself on LinkedIn?	Presenting her/himself is more challenging on social media	Most respondents	Face-to-face contacts are easier and more convenient
4.7.	What is the meaning of use activity on LinkedIn?	Accurate information on profiles is more important than the activity of use.	All respondents	
5.	How does networking occur on LinkedIn?	The respondents use to become networked with people who they have met at work.	All respondents	
6.	When do you use LinkedIn and how often?	The respondents experienced that LinkedIn is one forum for searching for relevant information to the needs of a job.	All respondents	6 respondents use mobile version
7.	Do you represent yourself or your employer on LinkedIn?	The respondents experienced that they represent themselves above all and the meaning of representing employer is less significant	All respondents	

## DISCUSSION

When discussing the results we emphasize the social factors affecting the use of LinkedIn and the start of the use. According to Kelmann (1958), humans' motivation to start technology use is social. In the same way in our study the reason for signing up the service was social. In the study we found that when the users found that other people use the services, they started to become more motivated to use LinkedIn. In addition, the UTAUT 2 (Venkatesh et al, 2012) clarifies the effect of social factors to technology adoption and our results are compatible with this study.

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Social factors are supported by the organizations' positive attitude for LinkedIn and social media in general. The organizations in our study supported the start of the individuals' LinkedIn use. One notable argument is in the case of one respondent was that only social media he used was LinkedIn and the reason for this was encouragement from the employer.

According to our study, when the respondents had adopted the service, they focused on their behavior on the service and appearance to other users. The respondents' concerns were possible misunderstandings and the expansion of their networks.

Our study shows that networking is the reason for the registration and use of the service. Similar results are found in research done by Kaplanin and Haenlein (2010) ja Krasnova et al (2010). The respondents in our study experienced LinkedIn as a networking service specifically. Networking occurs moderately and new connections are acquired based on real life contacts. Kietzmann et al (2011) and Utz (2016) have argued that the users of social media have intention to upgrade their status in social life. However, this is not supported by our results, because the respondents in our study emphasized the meaning of real professional networks including experts they know. In addition to the colleague and client contacts, the contacts of our respondents included old school/colleges mates, old colleagues, and persons from voluntary activities and hobbies. The respondents prefer to follow these persons from professional perspective, but those individuals are not so closed that they could be connections on Facebook. We can argue that our results are consistent with the results by Venkatesh et al (2012), which claim that hedonistic motivation is one reason for social media use.

The results of study shows that users hope for support from LinkedIn when they apply for a new job. According to our study, the benefit of the service is indirect meaning that through own network it is possible to find useful material for job applying process. On the other hand Utz (2016) claims that the groups on the service is the most notable feature when searching for relevant information.

The users in our study used the free-of-charge services of LinkedIn. However, they were able to pay reasonable fee from the use of the service. This result is consistent with a study by Venkatesh et al (2003) in which the authors argue that the price of the service is the notable factor when starting the use of a social media service.

Our study dealt with the difference between the genders. The female users experienced the usability as the restricting feature in the use of LinkedIn. On the other hand, the male users' concerns were connected to building profiles and personal branding.

The users use to log into the service when they have received an announcement that something has been updated on the service. The users use to use LinkedIn both during work hours and spare time.

Kaplan and Heinlein (2010) argue that the users of social media use to present themselves by pushing "like" or by publishing presentations. In our study the users of LinkedIn prefer to push "like" when they think that publications and updates are positive for building their professional profiles. This conscious profile building is the major difference between our study and a study by Kaplan and Heinlein (2010).

The users of LinkedIn in our study publish major profession and education related information. On the other hand, they do not publish spare time information. Earlier studies by Goffman (1959) and Wood and Smith (2005) show that self-presentation is context-dependent.

In earlier studies show that self-presentation is effortless on the web (Bark et al, 2002; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, we found contradictory results in our study. The users in our study trusted their presentation skills and they did not want to present all facts concerning themselves on Internet.

Our respondents discussed how it is difficult present her/himself on social media. Thus, research on successful self-branding is needed. The perspectives from psychology and sociology can help in this.

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