# Sustainability of a College Social Network Site: Role of Autonomy, Engagement, and Relatedness

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## Abstract

Increasingly, universities are trying, with limited success, to use social network sites (SNSs) as a way of retaining students. This study presents the case of Ewhaian.com, a 10-year old SNS for a large university in South Korea. Success factors are explained from the perspective of self-determination theory.

## Keywords

Online community, social media, education, college adjustment

## ACM Classification Keywords

H5.3. Group and organization interfaces: Web-based interaction

## General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Management, Theory

## Introduction

With 83% of young adult Internet users between 18 and 29 using social network sites (SNSs) [4], educators are increasingly interested in how social media can be utilized for positive educational outcomes. Social media systems can provide tools for helping students adjust to college—research has shown that certain uses of the technology can increase social capital [2] and facilitate

collaborative learning [3]. Recent investments, such as that of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, aim to support development of social media applications that can help build connectedness among students and prevent them from dropping out [1].

Some universities have tried to create their own SNSs to help students smoothly transition into college, but there has been very little evidence of success of these systems. One of the biggest problems of these sites is, as with any online community, the difficulty of retaining users on the site, which is somewhat ironic, because the goal of the site is to prevent them from leaving the college.

## About Ewhaian

The year 2011 marked the 10th anniversary of Ewhaian.com, a SNS for students of Ewha Womans University. Ewha Womans University is located in Seoul, South Korea, and was founded in 1886. Although there is no empirical evidence that Ewhaian.com has helped with student satisfaction or retention of students at the college level, the site itself has been successful at steadily increasing active users and engaging participation of current students. As of spring 2011, there was an average of 7,000 users logged into the site on a daily basis (the undergraduate student population of the university was about 15,000 as of 2010 according to the university's website).

Given that there are very few online communities have lasted so long without dwindling in participation, the success factors of this site may provide some insight to the design and administration of sustainable college-specific social network sites.

*History of Ewhaian.com*

Ewhaian was founded in May, 2001, by three friends—Hye-kyung Han, Eun-kyung Na, and Donghee Wohn. Han was mainly involved in the technology and administration, Wohn mainly developed the concept and content, and Na mainly worked on promotion to attract new users.

The site has technical features similar to other social network sites—users are able to create a profile, make groups, participate in BBS-type forums, post classified ads, share information on classes and professors, blog, and send private messages to other users. Initially, the service provided personal emails, but this service was taken away after three years due to lack of utilization. Two years after launching, a "content" section was added to the site where student reporters write feature-style articles, interviews, and op-eds.

The site was launched one week before the university launched its own social network site, Ewhain.net. (Ewhaian is an Anglo translation of "Ewha person" or "person of Ewha" while Ewhain is a Korean translation, as "-*in*" means "person" in Korean.) Ironically, parties of both sites were ignorant of the development of the other's site—the university site took two years to prepare, while the student-led site took less than four months. Although the site created by the university was superior in graphic design and almost identical in terms of features (e.g., groups, forums, messaging), it was unable to attract a large number of users and closed after a few years of low student involvement. The domain has since been repurposed and currently leads to the website for the university's School of Continuing Education.

Why was one site successful and the other not? One explanation could be a "rich get richer" hypothesis; if there are competing sites with the same function targeting the same audience, it could be that the more popular site becomes even more popular. However, these two sites were launched within a week of each other: initially, both sites had a similar number of users, but the user rate for the site created by the university quickly dropped off in a matter of months, suggesting that factors other than technical features were at play. The following section identifies factors that were unique to the student-driven Ewhaian that presumably led to its success.

## Success Factors

*Establishing autonomy through user-governance*
Ewhaian has an administrative structure similar to that seen in newsrooms or fraternities, where new recruits spend a "rookie" year learning from senior members. The spirit and ideals of the community are passed on to a new generation every year, and within the admin circle, there is a range of students who are in varying states of academic completion. Unlike newsrooms, however, administrators are not hierarchically superior to other users but seen more as civil servants who carry out the wishes of the users. Users are encouraged to provide suggestions and discuss the governance of the site. Students in charge of administrative duties are part of a non-profit organization and are transparent about the financial status of the site.

This self-governing structure is very different from the university-led social network site and most apparent in the user terms of agreement. One of the most popular features on Ewhaian is the anonymous forums, where students often post very personal things or seek advice on sensitive topics. Although the university's SNS used pseudonyms, it retained the right to trace posts back to the individual student, whereas Ewhaian was very clear about protecting users' privacy. Ewhaian also allows users to keep the intellectual property of the content that they post. (Although this may not seem unique, major blogging services or forums in South Korea did not allow users to retain copyright of their content until recently.)

*Building a sense of community*
A major event each semester and smaller, weekly/monthly events that take place both online and offline get users involved and build a sense of fellowship. To help freshmen get integrated into the college experience as quickly as possible, one of the most important events is the day of freshman orientation, where administrators pass out free gifts (sponsored by local businesses) with a sticker of the site name. This feeling of community is continuously reinforced through online and offline events. One of my favorites is the "ice cream event" where an alumni or senior student donates $30-40 to buy one class ice cream on a hot day. The ice cream is delivered with a message that "someone in Ewhaian cares about you." These events serve as promotion through word-of-mouth but also help students get that sense of belonging. Themed parties, charity events, and other offline activities also emphasize that the site is a representation of a larger community that has both an online and offline presence.

*Nurturing a feeling of competence*
Users of Ewhaian are able to feel like they are contributing to the community not only through the more general user-governance, but also individual

efforts in reporting "bad" or "inappropriate" posts. Administrators quickly learned that it was impossible to monitor all the content on the site, so a flagging system was incorporated such that exceeding a certain number of flags alerts the admin.

Competence also helps micro-funding for the operation of the site. Initially, the site was running on rented servers, which, with the high traffic, cost several thousand dollars a month, far beyond the income of banner advertisements. Buying servers would substantially lower monthly costs, so in 2002, the admins turned to the users and asked them to donate. Although crowd-sourced funding is a popular now with services such as Kickstarter, it was a novel idea at the time. Enough money was raised to purchase three servers. Currently, monthly maintenance fees are only a couple hundred dollars, which is covered through banner ads, Google ad words, and income through large-scale offline events, such as the annual Halloween party.

## A theoretical explanation

Although theory was not used to inform analysis of the major differences between the successful Ewhaian and the now-defunct Ewhain, the factors unique to the student-driven Ewhaian are congruent with self-determination theory [5]. Self-determination theory is a psychological framework that argues that individuals have three psychological needs: autonomy (desire to be self-governing), competence, and relatedness (need to interact and connect with others). If these three conditions are met, the theory suggests that individuals are become more motivated and engaged in activities,

including enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity. The consistency of the success factors of Ewhaian with factors of self-determination theory may be useful to designers of future systems as they make results applicable beyond this unique case. Although the findings from this case study may be more applicable to hyperlocal SNSs, there is no reason to think that it would not apply to SNSs covering wider geographical regions and peer-production online communities in general. Although it is unlikely that all three factors equally contributed to the success of the site, self-determination theory may provide insight to designers of future systems and explanation of those systems that have failed.

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