

# Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture

## Social Networks

Contributors: Francesca Forno  
Editors: Dale Southerton  
Book Title: Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture  
Chapter Title: "Social Networks"  
Pub. Date: 2011  
Access Date: May 15, 2014  
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.  
City: Thousand Oaks  
Print ISBN: 9780872896017  
Online ISBN: 9781412994248  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412994248.n499>  
Print pages: 1330-1332

©2011 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412994248.n499>

A social network may be defined as a set of actors (generally individuals or organizations) linked by social relations or ties of a specified type, such as friendship, kinship, flow of resources, shared interests, or group membership, to name but a few. Research carried out in various fields has shown that social networks play a central role in determining the way problems are solved, innovations are diffused, and organizations are run; social networks also play a role in the degree to which individuals succeed in achieving their goals.

A social network may be represented as a map of all of the relevant social relationships linking a group of actors. Nodes and ties are often displayed in a social network diagram, in which nodes represent the actors and ties are the lines representing a particular social relation. To study any social network, it is essential to examine the structure of the relationships between the nodes analyzed. The measurement of relationships between actors is called social network analysis (SNA).

SNA has been used to describe networks of relationships and to trace the flow of information between individuals and groups. This approach stands in sharp contrast to other areas of social sciences, which, in order to study attitudes, opinions, and behaviors, have tended to focus on actors' attributes—that is, the characteristics of people, groups, and organizations—rather than on actors' relations.

Those interested in social networks have developed several tools and concepts—many adapted from graph theory—to help reveal and characterize network linkages. Through sociograms, researchers are able to visualize structures, identify leaders, and isolate individuals in groups to show asymmetry and reciprocity. When looking at the map of relations between nodes (or actors), the focus is usually on (a) the overall network properties, (b) the nature of links, and (c) actors' positions.

Research has demonstrated the importance of bridging contacts between groups. In this regard, many studies have demonstrated that whereas strong ties may be central to maintaining or reproducing a group's position and identity, weaker or bridging ties have in fact proved more significant for spreading information across group boundaries by facilitating the linking of actors that would otherwise be isolated from each other. As has frequently been shown by [p. 1330 ↓ ] Mark Granovetter and Nan Lin, without

weak ties, information does not flow to outside the single group or network. Network analysis can also be used to study change within a group or among groups over time. For example, economic transactions between nations or specific economic groups could be measured at several points in time, thereby using the network perspective to study longitudinal changes.

The historical roots of SNA are to be found in the work of German sociologist Georg Simmel, who, at the turn of the twentieth century, sought to construct a theory that explained how various social phenomena come about. Simmel's famous writing on the fundamental difference between the interactions in dyads (two people) and triads (three people), as well as his notion of urban systems being composed of intersecting networks and circles, was the basis for his "formal sociology," which is often considered a precursor to SNA.

Pioneers of SNA came from sociology and social psychology (e.g., Jacob Moreno and Dorwin Cartwright) and anthropology (e.g., John Barnes and Clyde Mitchell). The first operationalization of a social network was made by Jacob Moreno, who also coined the term *sociometrics* to describe the quantitative study of interpersonal relationships. Although rooted in the social sciences, SNA is an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor, and the concepts of SNA developed out of a favorable interplay of social theory and application, with its own formal mathematical, statistical, and computing methodology.

With the development of information technologies and computer-mediated communication, SNA has taken on new directions. In particular, researchers, such as Han Park, have begun to analyze networks created by hyperlinks that webpages establish between one another (so-called hyperlink network analysis). From this perspective, an actor is a website belonging to a person, private company, public organization, city, or nation-state, and hyperlinks are relationships between the nodes. This line of research is based on the assumption that websites represent permanent settings of representation for groups, individuals, and organizations. As people make greater use of computer networks to search for information, organizations and individuals offering services, content, or an alternative forum for discussion tend to put an increasing amount of effort and resources into the construction of their websites. Links between websites are able to facilitate a range of significant new and old communicative functions, such as information provision, organizational alliance-

building, and message amplification. Moreover, the “relational” quality of hyperlinks may allow actors to build or “reinforce” alliances by connecting previously disparate groups and their potential audiences.

Studying networks (both virtual and real) has helped to uncover specific dynamics and mechanisms regarding patterns of influence, as well as of certain important human and organizational activities, including the adoption of new ideas, recruitment, framing group interests, tactical adaptation of action repertoires, and so on. Particularly noticeable are the studies that aim to determine which mechanisms make the diffusion of innovation possible, as was the case of the research conducted by Everett Rogers and others in three different countries (Nigeria, India, and Brazil), in order to determine what influenced the adoption of new agricultural practices among farmers. To understand how new practices spread, farmers were asked to name their three best friends, the three most influential people in their community, the three most influential people regarding various farm innovations, and the best person with whom to organize a cooperative project.

Social network analysis has also offered a set of new analytic techniques for the exploration of the determinants of taste and their expression in consumption patterns. Given that cultural goods and performances serve as a bridge not only to sustain current network connections but also to gain and cement new ones, as Paul DiMaggio found, a network approach may be able to empirically study the influence of social relationships on consumption. Moreover, if consumption styles are a means of drawing social boundaries, including some and excluding others, the formal aspects of networks may serve to illustrate patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Adopting a network approach, for example, has shed light on the mechanisms that translate the mastery of different types of cultural knowledge into integration across distant social positions or even closure around strong group boundaries.

FrancescaForno

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412994248.n499>

See also:

- [Collective Identity](#)

- [Families](#)
- [Information Society](#)
- [Network Society](#)
- [Sociability](#)
- [Social Movements](#)
- [Social Network Analysis](#)
- [Virtual Communities](#)

### Further Readings

DiMaggio, Paul "Classification in Art." *American Sociological Review* 52(1987):440–55.

Granovetter, Mark S. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78(1973):1360–1380.

Granovetter, Mark S. "The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited." In *Social Structure and Network Analysis*, edited by P. V. Marsden, ed., and N. Lin, ed., 105–130. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982.

Lin, Nan "Social Networks and Status Attainment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 25(1999):467–487.

Lizardo, Omar "How Cultural Tastes Shape Personal Networks." *American Sociological Review* 71(2006):778–807.

Monge, Peter R., and Noshir S. Contractor *Theories of Communication Networks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Park, Han W. "What Is Hyperlink Network Analysis? New Method for the Study of Social Structure on the Web." *Connections* 25,no. 1(2003):49–61.

Park, Han W., MikeThelwall, and RandolphKluver "Political Hyperlinking in South Korea: Technical Indicators of Ideology and Content." *Sociological Research Online* 10,no. 3(2005)

Rogers, Everett M., and F.Floyd Shoemaker Communication of Innovations: A Cross-Cultural Approach . New York: Free Press, 1971.

Scott, John Social Network Analysis . London: Sage, 2000.

Wasserman, Stanley, and Katherine Faust Social Network Analysis: Methods and Application . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.