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ALUMNI

You are here: [SBS Main](#) > [News & events](#) > [News](#) > [People follow the herd on Facebook](#)

[About us](#)[Degree programmes](#)[Executive education](#)[Faculty & research](#)[Centres](#)[News & events](#)[Corporate connections](#)[Alumni](#)

People follow the herd on Facebook

A new study, led by Oxford University researchers, shows that we have a herding instinct when it comes to Facebook apps.

The study looked at the rate at which members of the social networking site added software applications to their pages. Analysing anonymous data relating to 100 million installations of Facebook apps, researchers found people display a herding instinct, making them want to use the same product as others – but only once it has reached a certain level of popularity.

In the two-month project, carried out in 2007, researchers tracked 100 million installations of apps. They found that the popularity of an app soared after it reached a rate of 55 applications a day. At that time, Facebook published a list of the most popular apps on its website, and also notified people when their friends downloaded a new one. This meant that users were open to influence not just from their immediate network, but from the whole community of Facebook members.

The most popular app during the period, Top Friends, was adopted by 12 million people.



Dr Felix Reed-Tsochas, from the Institute for Science, Innovation and Society at Oxford University's Saïd Business School, said: 'Users only appear to be influenced by the choices of other users above a certain level of popularity, and at that point popularity drives future popularity. Below this threshold, the effects of social influence are imperceptible.'

The study has implications for the online world, suggesting that social influence may emerge spontaneously in a wide range of online environments.

Article details

Date : 12/10/2010

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