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Social media network behavior: A study of user passion and affect

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ABSTRACT

Social media technologies are described as an ensemble IS artefact composed of technical, informational and relational subsystems that interact distinctly according to the context of use. With an emphasis on these dimensions, we build a conceptual framework to examine the influence of user affect and passion for an activity on social media networks, specifically Facebook and Twitter. The research model is based on Affective Events Theory and tested using the responses of 328 attendees of a National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) event. The results indicate that excitement may not be sufficient to motivate content creation and sharing activities in social media. However, in the context of a meaningful event, excitement interacts with user passion to facilitate social media use. One strategic insight is the knowledge that user (or customer) passion is a condition favorable for social media engagement, representing a lucrative opportunity for organizations to meaningfully engage with consumers.

Introduction

Social media technologies have been characterized as an ensemble or IS artefact consisting of three subsystems – the technological, the informational and the social (Spagnoletti et al., 2015). The technology component may support or hinder social interactions (Faraj et al., 2011), the informational dimension consists of user generated digital content (Culnan et al., 2010), and the social subsystem involves communication and collaboration activities (Chui et al., 2012). These components are incorporated into the structure of popular social technologies (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and interact in distinct ways. For example, the technical component that facilitates social interactions may constrain digital content to a specific amount of text (e.g., Twitter) that limits content creation activities in the informational dimension. Twitter also incorporates asymmetric ties that deter two-way social interaction; one user may 'follow' or have access to another user's shared content (i.e., tweets) without reciprocation. Thus, distinct attributes of the technical component of the various social technologies interact with the informational and social subsystems to create unique social relationships. A Twitter user may have access to the digital content of a celebrity user in a one-way relationship that limits communication and deters collaboration. In contrast, the technical structure of Facebook functions predominately with relational tie reciprocity and supports many types of digital content (e.g., text, video, audio, picture files) to enhance and encourage the communication and collaboration

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activities of the social subsystem. Despite unique attributes that distinguish among social media, the three subsystems typify a class of technologies that facilitate diverse forms of associations in popular culture and business.

The strategic use of social media in organizations enable value creation in business via engagement with internal and external stakeholders that may result in consumer insights, unfiltered feedback, consumer behavior data, crowdsourcing product ideas, co-creation of product features, instant supply chain communication, and the lowering of barriers between functional silos (Chui et al., 2012). It has been estimated that the potential value created when businesses implement social technologies could exceed $1 trillion annually, with major productivity gains (20–25%) attributed to high-skill knowledge workers using this medium (Chui et al., 2012). A McKinsey global survey shows that 82% of responding businesses use at least one social technology tool with videoconferencing (61%) and social networking (58%) leading the way (Bughin et al., 2013). Social technology use in popular culture has experienced tremendous growth with nearly three-quarters of the adult population maintaining a social media profile (Edison Research, 2015) and Facebook boasting more than 1.49 billion monthly active users as of July 2015 (Smith, 2015).

Despite indications that the interrelationships among social media subsystems (technical, informational, social) contribute to a diversity of relationships among users, little research emphasis has been given to the notion of social media as an emergent IS artefact shaped by the context of its use (Spagnoletti et al., 2015). That is, user context is likely to determine how users interact with the dimensional attributes of social media to achieve specific outcomes. For example, in the context of a support network for the elderly, the technical and informational attributes of Facebook were utilized by knowledge workers to assist the elderly in creating videos to teach Italian (Spagnoletti et al., 2015). Creating video content is an activation of the informational component which then interacted with activities of the social component (communication, collaboration) to establish new social relationships that were a positive contribution to the psycho-social needs of elderly participants. When we identify factors important in the activation and interactivity of social media's dimensions, we can begin to understand how context shapes social media use and leads to the diversity of user associations. The overarching question of our study is: What factors related to the user or the context of social media use influences the activities of the technical, informational and social subsystems? To address this question, we position our study within the individual's use of social media in an environment that elicits user emotion (affect) because affect is a significant factor in social interaction (Zajonc, 1980), and thus is likely an important factor influencing social media's subsystems.

Affective components of human–computer interactions have garnered sustained interest in the IS literature. The intersection of user affect and technology has generally been studied in a context where technology is the stimulus of users' feelings, in order to understand the role of user emotion in technology use behavior. For example, interacting with technology may evoke anxiety (Venkatesh et al., 2003), pleasure and arousal (Kim et al., 2007), irritation (McCoy et al., 2008), joy and fear (Li et al., 2008) as well as excitement, happiness, or anger (Beaudry and Pinsonneault, 2010). Research suggests that users anxious about a technology or system are less likely to use it (Beaudry and Pinsonneault, 2010), users who enjoy a website will exhibit greater usage intentions (Wakefield et al., 2011), greater intentions to disclose information (Wakefield, 2013), and users annoyed by online ads will hold negative attitudes toward the website (McCoy et al., 2008). Organizational technology and IT events (e.g., implementation) are often studied as the stimulus of user affect because the emotional reaction to IT in the workplace influences task and tool adaptation behaviors (Stein et al., 2015; Beaudry and Pinsonneault, 2005), attitude toward use (Kim et al., 2007), habit formation (Lankton et al., 2010) and coping behaviors (Beaudry and Pinsonneault, 2010) that have performance-related outcomes. Importantly, these studies emphasize the effects of *technology-derived* affect because the relationships between user feelings and technical factors have implications for the design and use of organizational technology.

However, over time and with continuous technology interactions (e.g., internet, e-mail, social media platforms), we argue that user feelings about the technology (i.e., technology-derived affect) will have little influence on use. For example, a user initially fearful about implementing e-mail is likely to experience little fear as the frequency of e-mail use increases. Social cognitive theory posits reciprocal determinism (Wood and Bandura, 1989) in which the individual's cognitions cause emotion (or behavior) and those emotions (or behavior) make adjustments to cognitions over time, in a cyclical process. Thus, *initial* technology use may be influenced to a greater extent by user affect toward the technology (e.g., fear), in contrast to an oft-used technology for which the user has modified initial feelings. The growth and frequent use of social media suggest that *technology-derived* affect would be less important in explaining user behavior. Moreover, technology users today are increasingly digital natives (Prensky, 2001) born into a digital world and raised using computers, video games and the Internet, suggesting that emotions toward technology (e.g., fear, trepidation) may not influence usage to the extent they may have in the past.

Nonetheless, "Affect dominates social interactions, and it is the major currency in which social intercourse is transacted" (Zajonc, 1980: p. 153). Hence, we expect user affect is an important factor in social media use because social technologies provide a platform for social interactions. However, we posit that the affect influencing social media use is not technology-derived, but is stimulated in the user by the environment. While interactions with social technologies may also induce feelings in the user toward the technology (e.g., pleased, satisfied), we contend that the affect driving use is environmentally-sourced. For example, excitement about the creation of a new app may be the motivation for developers to use social technologies (e.g., social networks, video conferencing, blogs) for collaboration. Similarly, grief over an employee's untimely death might motivate social media use (e.g., posting, tweeting) to express sympathy. In each case, the affect driving use does not result from how the technology makes the user feel.