Linking public sector social media and e-government website use to trust in government

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how citizens' use of e-government websites and public sector social media accounts relates to their satisfaction and perceptions of public sector trustworthiness. Drawing upon data from a 2012 sample of 1100 Seoul citizens, findings reveal that greater use of e-government websites is negatively related to citizens' satisfaction and perceptions of public sector trustworthiness. Conversely, use of public sector social media accounts is positively related to satisfaction and perceptions of public sector trustworthiness. Drawing upon the concept of psychological distance, these findings are interpreted to suggest that forms of e-government conducive to the transmission of less detailed information (social media) may be more effective at improving relationships between citizens and their government than forms of e-government that are more commonly used to transmit detailed information (e-government websites).

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1. Introduction

Due to the rapid evolution of information and communication technology (ICT), the forms of e-government leveraged by government to communicate with citizens are more numerous today than ever before. This growing diversity has had distinct effects on the types of information government transmits to citizens. For example, it is not uncommon for public agencies today to spread information via platforms such as YouTube channels, Twitter feeds, and service-portals in addition to more traditional platforms, such as radio or newspapers.

A key source of motivation underlying the public sector's use of different forms of e-government is a desire to foster higher levels of satisfaction and trust in government among citizens (Bannister & Connolly, 2011). The belief is that using various types of e-government to provide the public with more information on administrative processes and policy outcomes will ground citizen expectations, thereby improving evaluations and perceptions of the public sector (Kelly, 2002; Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Brewer, Neubauer, & Geiselhart, 2006; Morgeson, VanAmburg, & Mithas, 2011). However, a decades' worth of empirical literature assessing the impact of various forms of e-government upon citizen satisfaction and trust in government has turned back mixed results – some have found varying degrees of support, while others have not (West, 2004; Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005; Parent, Vandebeek, & Gemino, 2005; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Morgeson et al., 2011; Im, Porumbescu, Lee, 2013). Therefore, despite the important

contributions made by previous literature, we still lack a substantive understanding of how citizens' exposure to different forms of e-government affects their perceptions of the public sector (Bannister & Connolly, 2011).

This research intends to contribute to the current debate over the relationship between e-government use and citizens' perceptions of their public sector. It does so by explicating the way features of different forms of e-government used by the government to communicate with citizens relate to citizens' evaluations of the public sector. In particular, this study asks whether relationships between citizens' use of different forms of e-government and their levels of satisfaction and levels of trust in government vary according to the form of e-government. In addressing this research question, we focus upon the information provision aspect of e-government, and as such do not attempt to address the service delivery component of e-government (cf. Moon & Norris, 2005).

To examine how citizens' use of different forms of e-government relate to their levels of satisfaction and levels of trust in government this study draws upon literature related to the topic of psychological distance to gauge and compare effects that stem from citizens' use of two different forms of e-government – public sector social media accounts and e-government websites. Psychological distance, defined as " how far a stimulus feels from the self in an abstract psychological space" (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2008: 161; Lewin, 1951), is helpful for pursuing the objectives of this study for the reason that it is often used to explain how different methods of presentation influence the way individuals evaluate an object.

This study intends to provide a comprehensive assessment of the direct and moderating effects stemming from e-government use. To do so,

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this study draws upon research from public management and social psychology in order to piece together a conceptual framework in an effort to uncover general processes that are responsible for linking citizens' use of different forms of e-government to trust in government. This conceptual framework centers upon: evaluations of the quality of life in their city, levels of satisfaction, and trust in government. We then empirical test this framework in order to provide a broad overview of how citizens' use of e-government relates to their levels of trust in government. Results of the analyses suggest that citizens' use of e-government websites for information either lacks a strong relationship to citizens' levels of satisfaction and levels of trust in government, or are negatively related to them. On the other hand, citizens' use of public sector social media possesses a strong positive relationship with levels of satisfaction and levels of trust in government. Implications of these findings for debates over how citizens' use of various forms of e-government relate to their evaluations of the public sector are discussed.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Trust in government

In this study, trust in government refers to citizens' trust in a specific institution, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG). Generally, citizens' trust in government is viewed as a necessary feature of a public sector that is effective and efficient (Van de Walle, 2004; Yang & Holzer, 2006). To this end, when levels of trust in government are low, research has found that citizens tend to be less willing to voluntarily comply with public policy (e.g. pay taxes) (Murphy, 2004), economic growth is impaired (Fukuyama, 1995), and a general climate alienation and disenfranchisement emerges (Abramson, 1983; Berman, 1997).

Within the body of trust literature, one often cited definition is provided by Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer (1998), who define trust as, "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (p. 395). The presence of positive expectations is positively related to perceptions of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is explained elsewhere as, "characteristics of an object of trust as perceived by an individual" (Grimmelikhuijsen, Porumbescu, Hong, & Im, 2013: 577; Kim, 2005). As it relates to government, trustworthiness is generally broken down into three constitutive dimensions of ability, benevolence, and honesty, though the precise wording of dimensions may vary according to author.

The first dimension, ability, refers to citizens' perception that their public sector possesses the skills and capacity necessary to fulfill its various functions (Hetherington, 1998; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998). As such, ability reflects an evaluation of government performance. Citizens' perception of benevolence, the second dimension, corresponds to a view that the public sector acts with citizens' best interests in mind and is committed to their wellbeing (Levi & Stoker, 2000). The third dimension, honesty, is reflects citizens' perception that their public sector is truthful in its dealings and sincere in attempts to live up to public commitments (cf. McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002). Positive evaluations of these three dimensions contribute to citizens positive expectations of public sector intentions and behaviors, thereby making citizens more willing to accept vulnerability to and ultimately trust their government (Kim, 2005).

2.2. Satisfaction with local government

Satisfaction is commonly understood as resulting from the confluence of prior expectations regarding a particular good or service and "post-experience perceptions of the quality" of said good or service (Morgeson, 2013:290; Van Ryzin, 2013; Poister and Thomas 2011). Various forms of satisfaction are associated with citizens' levels of trust in government (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005). This study focuses upon

the role of citizens' levels of satisfaction with the particular administrative district of Seoul that they inhabit. The city of Seoul is divided into 25 administrative districts. Responsibility for the provision of public services within each administrative district is divided between the Seoul Metropolitan Government and administrative districts (Im et al., 2013).

Research by Walker and Boyne (2013) highlight the relevance of satisfaction with local government to trust in government, in general. They argue that local units of government, "in addition to being at the forefront of delivering and providing the public services on which citizens rely, are often also the most public face of the state" (2013:1). This is because local administrative units constitute citizens' primary point of access for numerous public services and goods. To this end, citizens' satisfaction with the performance of their local levels of government has been found to have an important influence upon more generalized evaluations of government (DeHoog, Lowery, & Lyons, 1990). This point has been supported by a range of empirical research coming from a variety of administrative contexts, which has identified a stable and robust positive relationship between citizens' satisfaction with the performance of different aspects of the public sector and their levels of trust in government overall (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005; Weitz-Shapiro, 2008; Kim, 2010).

However, the relationship between satisfaction and trust in government may not be as straightforward as extant literature commonly suggests (see Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003 or Kampen, Van De Walle, & Bouckaert, 2006). Nevertheless, empirical evidence assessing the direction of the relationship between satisfaction and trust in government does consistently offer evidence to suggest that levels of satisfaction do result in higher levels of trust in government (Keele, 2007; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007). Therefore, drawing upon the consistent association uncovered in previous research between satisfaction and trust in government, we hypothesize that:

H1. Higher levels of satisfaction with one's administrative district will be positively associated with perceptions of the SMG's trustworthiness.

2.3. Evaluation of the quality of life in Seoul

Citizens' evaluations of their government can be traced back to a number of baseline dispositions (Gay, 2002; Van de Walle, 2004; Porumbescu, 2013). These baseline dispositions are important in that they not only influence levels of satisfaction and trust in government, but also govern the way in which citizens interpret information (Kampen et al., 2006; Nickerson, 1998). As such, accounting for citizens' baseline dispositions is important when attempting to obtain insight into how different information mediums might relate to citizens' satisfaction and trust in government (for a discussion see Pepitone, 1981).

This study accounts for one specific form of disposition and incorporates citizens' evaluations of the quality of life in Seoul into our analyses. The relevance of citizens' evaluations of the quality of life in Seoul as a type of disposition responsible for framing citizens' evaluations of government is underlined by research on the topic of ego-justification (Kay & Jost, 2003; Watson, Ottati, & Corrigan, 2003). As Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004): 887) explain, individuals interpret new information in a biased manner in a tacit effort to develop and affirm a positive perception of the community they are a part of.

As such, positive evaluations of the quality of life in Seoul are likely to function as a confirmation bias, whereby positive attitudes about the general quality of life in Seoul carry over to frame citizens' perceptions of other aspects of their government (i.e. satisfaction with their administrative district and perceptions of SMG trustworthiness) as well. Therefore, evaluations of the quality of life in Seoul are expected to be positively related to levels of satisfaction with administrative district and trust in government.

H2. Evaluations of the quality of life in Seoul are positively associated with satisfaction with administrative districts.