



Building relationships within corporate SNS accounts through social presence formation



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 December 2015

Received in revised form 8 June 2016

Accepted 9 June 2016

Keywords:

Corporate SNS account

Social presence formation

Social presence outcomes

Engaging relationships with corporate SNS

ABSTRACT

Although many companies have attempted to use SNS to attract and communicate with current and potential customers, these efforts have not always been fruitful. To provide a deeper understanding of how corporate SNS accounts can effectively engage SNS users, this study examines the social aspects of the corporate SNS context by focusing on social presence. More specifically, we investigate how social presence is formed within corporate SNS accounts by establishing its antecedents in the form and content characteristics of SNS and how it increases utilitarian values and facilitates relationships between SNS users and companies. Through an experiment with 809 Twitter users, the study finds that social presence is formed through machine interactivity, person interactivity, and self-disclosure; that greater social presence increases users' perception of the usefulness of information and their trust in the company; and that increases in those utilitarian values contribute to SNS users' positive engagement in relationships with corporate SNS accounts.

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1. Introduction

The rapid advances in and diffusion of social network sites (SNS) has substantially changed the way people exchange information and develop relationships, including the communication and relationship building between companies and their customers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). SNS users communicate freely about their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with companies on SNS, which they generally perceive as more trustworthy sources of information about products than corporate-sponsored communications transmitted via traditional media (Foux, 2006). Because SNS communications between companies and SNS users are open to public view and diffused rapidly and widely through connected links, particularly through the widespread mobile usage of SNS (Cheng, Liang, & Leung, 2014; Lee et al., 2013), building and managing good relationships with SNS users have become increasingly critical to a business's marketing efforts and sustainability (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010). A company's failure to effectively manage such relationships can lead not only to dissat-

isfaction among specific customers but to a poor reputation among a broader public. For instance, when one unsatisfied customer sent a complaint about lost baggage directly to the followers of the airline company's sponsored tweets, other customers and competitors jumped in to share their own unsatisfactory experiences and created a wave of public resentment toward the company before it could offer an apology (Popken, 2013). In this case, the company's efforts to create positive relationships and word of mouth through SNS ironically became the means of spreading a negative impression. Therefore, operating a corporate SNS account can be in vain or even counterproductive if companies inadequately understand the nature of those relationships and what drives SNS users to voluntarily engage with a corporate SNS account.

Traditionally, companies have conceived of building engaging relationships with consumers in utilitarian terms, such as providing useful information about products (Chien & Moutinho, 2000) and promoting trust (Cyr & Head, 2008). Research taking this perspective has found that customers' expectations of tangible benefits from this engagement drive their satisfaction and continuing relationship with the company (Gronroos, 1990; Shani & Chalasani, 1992). Extending this perspective to SNS, researchers have attributed SNS users' building a relationship with a corporate SNS account to their intention of engaging in communication

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Table 1
Operational definitions of constructs.

Research	Found Antecedents	context	Category
User Characteristics Lim, Hwang, Kim, and Biocca (2015)	Functional engagement, Communication engagement	Social TV (real-time backchannel communication on SNS during a live television broadcast)	Engagement
Siriaraya and Ang (2012)	Prior experience with text messaging in older users and prior experience with 3D games in younger users	3D virtual world as a tool for social interaction	Prior Experience
Ogara, Koh, and Prybutok (2014)	Prior experience with mobile instant messaging	Mobile instant messaging	Personalities
Lee and Shin (2012)	Individual's interpersonal orientation	SNS	
Tang, Wang, and Norman (2013)	Extroversion of personalities	Group communication (MS NetMeeting)	Motivations
Lee, Yejean Park, Kim, Kim, and Moon (2011)	Self-expression motivation	music sharing on SNS	
Hwang and Lim (2015)	Information and excitement motives	Social TV	Usage tendency
Park, Shin, and Ju (2015)	Social surveillance and self-surveillance tendencies	SNS	
Interaction Characteristics Chen, Ho, and Wu (2014)	Social influence of others connected on SNS	SNS	Social influence of others
Ogara et al. (2014)	Perceived social influence in communication	Mobile instant messaging	
Cheikh-Ammar and Barki (2014)	The amount of feedback received from and provided to others	SNS	
Medium Characteristics Choi, Kim, and Qu (2015)	Perceived ubiquitous connectivity of infrastructure	smartphone-based SNS	Infrastructure characteristics
Ogara et al. (2014)	Medium capability to enable a variety of signs, visual cues, and non-word utterances	Mobile instant messaging	Medium capabilities
Tang et al. (2013)	Positive Effect Symbol sets: allowing communicators to use natural symbol sets Rehearsability: enabling senders to rehearse and craft messages before sending Negative Effect Parallelism: assisting users to transmit messages simultaneously Reprocessability: allowing messages to be reexamined	Group communication (MS NetMeeting)	

and receiving information from that company (Group, 2008; Sashi, 2012).

However, as online communications have progressively provided users with a more personalized environment (Cenfetelli, Benbasat, & Al-Natour, 2005), researchers have suggested that companies should focus not only on the utilitarian value of such communications but also on enriching their social ambience through interactive marketing (Maru File, Judd, & Prince, 1992). Such researchers suggest that satisfying relationships through online marketing efforts depend on social as well as economic satisfaction (Dabholkar, van Dolen, & de Ruyter, 2009), which is produced by offering social experiences and interactions that can feel “human” (e.g., Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kwon & Sung, 2011; Nambisan & Watt, 2011; Park & Lee, 2013).

The importance of a social ambience appears a natural aspect of SNS, which are founded on and function through social interactions. The relationship building starts with such social actions as “making friends” with or choosing to “follow” corporate SNS accounts. Communication within these relationships takes such forms as “dialogue” through direct speaking (2013) and eliciting users’ personal stories (Kwak, Choi, & Lee, 2014). If such communication is continuous and repetitive, it can even become intimate (Roberts & Dunbar, 2011). The relationships formed in the SNS context thus are not merely one-directional and utility-driven but also interactive, multi-directional, and socially driven. Therefore, it is important for companies to understand how the characteristics of SNS communications facilitate these social aspects of their corporate SNS accounts and how those characteristics influence the relationships SNS users build with them.

To advance such understanding, we focus on social presence, which has been shown to play an important role in providing satisfying interactions and relationship building in computer-mediated

communication (Han, Min, & Lee, 2015; Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003; Rovai, 2000). In an SNS context, social presence has also been found to be a significant antecedent of increased interaction (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009) and gratification of social connection needs (Han et al., 2015). Although their terms may differ, relationship marketing researchers also consider social presence a key factor in building relationships with consumers (Dabholkar et al., 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kwon & Sung, 2011; Park & Lee, 2013). Despite this agreement, little is yet known about how social presence can be formed through the communication characteristics enabled by SNS. We thus adopt social presence theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and Lombard and Ditton's (1997) integrated view of social presence formation to examine the effect of those communication characteristics on the formation of social presence. Such an approach, we argue, can help us better understand how well-managed communications leveraged by SNS characteristics can lead to engaging and sustained relationships between corporate SNS accounts and SNS users.

To that end, this study attempts to answer two main questions: (1) how social presence within corporate SNS accounts is formed by the communication characteristics enabled by the SNS environment, and (2) how social presence affects other utilitarian values and facilitates SNS users’ relationships with corporate SNS accounts. To answer the first of these questions, we conducted an experiment with 809 Twitter users to investigate how form- and content-based factors may create social presence in corporate SNS account communications. To address the second, we conducted a cross-sectional survey with those participants to examine how social presence affects trust and the perceived usefulness of the information acquisition and how both may induce SNS users to develop relationships with corporate SNS accounts.

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