



# Social media research: Theories, constructs, and conceptual frameworks



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## ABSTRACT

In just one decade, social media have revolutionized the life of many people and thus attracted much attention, not only from industry, but also academia. To understand how researchers have adopted theories, used research constructs, and developed conceptual frameworks in their studies, a systematic and structured literature review based on five leading online academic databases was conducted. A total of 46 articles on social media research were consolidated and analyzed, including empirical studies spanning from 2002 to 2011. A collection of theories/models and constructs/attributes adopted in these articles is summarized and tabulated for easy reference and comprehension of extant research results. A causal-chain framework was developed based on the input-moderator-mediator-output model to illustrate the causality between the research constructs used and the conceptualization of theoretical models/theories proposed by previous researchers. Because social media cover a wide range of research topics, the literature review may not be exhaustive. However, the proposed causal-chain framework and suggested research directions may be regarded as representative references for future research in the subject area. This is believed to be the first comprehensive literature review of social media research, and it contributes to a better understanding of the causes and effects of the adoption and usage of social media.

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## 1. Introduction

The advent of social media has substantially changed the manner in which many people, communities, and/or organizations communicate and interact. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) defined social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content”. Using these applications, people can create, share, and exchange information in a virtual community. The dramatic development of social media has helped shape people’s connections with others via different social media platforms (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Today, the benefits of participating in social media not only involve simple social communication, but also building reputations and bringing in career opportunities, and/or generating direct monetary

revenue (Tang, Gu, & Whinston, 2012). Social media drive a new set of models for various kinds of businesses that challenge traditional business processes and operations (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). The salient difference is that one-to-one mass customization has become the business transaction norm, replacing the one-to-many marketing promotion model (Peters, 1998). Moreover, in this Internet/computer era, online customer reviews have become an important yardstick by which marketers formulate their marketing strategies.

Social media can also serve as tools facilitating intra- and inter-organizational activities among peers, customers, business partners, and organizations; such as collaborative product development (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Porter & Donthu, 2008), creation of knowledge sharing communities (Fernando, 2010; Kasavana, Nusair, & Teodosic, 2010; Yates & Paquette, 2011), implementation of corporate dialog at financial institutions (Bonsón & Flores, 2011), marketing strategies for brand management (Jin, 2012; Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013), and collaborative learning and creativity (Peppler & Solomou, 2011). Individuals and/or organizations therefore must be well prepared to embrace the challenges and opportunities brought about by social media. Notwithstanding, the phenomenon of social media remains new to academia. In terms of using the terminology of social media explicitly, papers on social

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media have, for the most part, only been published in the last few years. Based on the proliferation of social media uses and applications, we anticipate that more studies will be conducted and further results will be available in the coming years.

This present study aims to review social media research in the extant literature and collect data from work conducted thus far to create a framework to understand the causal relationships among different research constructs adopted. The value of this study lies in its systematic review of the articles in this subject area, reporting the dimensions and variables studied by previous researchers as well as their proposed conceptual models and frameworks. Based on these findings, a causal-chain framework was developed to illustrate the inter-relationships among the adopted research constructs. This framework is expected to provide a reference for researchers, to serve as a research roadmap, and to stimulate new ideas in future research in this subject area.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section briefly describes the method in conducting the search process. The third section provides an exhaustive review of the identified academic articles and a detailed discussion of the development of a causal-chain framework. The fourth section further discusses the implications from the findings and suggests four potential research areas. The final section is devoted to the conclusion and a discussion of the contributions and limitations of this study.

## 2. Research methodology

A search for empirical studies in the extant literature was conducted to investigate the work of previous researchers on social media and to develop a causal-chain framework to illustrate the interrelationships of the research constructs adopted. Five dominant business/management academic databases were adopted, including ABI/Inform, Business Source Premier, Emerald Management eJournals, Science Direct, and ISI Web of Knowledge. These databases cover most of all social science and top management literature. Since there are few papers which explicitly used the term “social media”, other keywords with similar meanings related to social media, such as “virtual communities”, “online communities”, “blogs”, “Web 2.0”, “social networking sites”, and “social computing”, were also applied in the search process. The scope of this study is limited to the timeframe of 2002–2011, as this was the major growth period of the social media market.

The search for relevant papers in this process was by no means exhaustive, but the findings nevertheless serve as a representative summary of the research conducted thus far. Forty-six papers were selected for in-depth analysis. Only refereed journal articles were included in our study; conference papers, doctorate and master theses, textbooks, and documentaries were excluded, as we believe refereed journal articles represent state-of-the-art research outputs (Chan & Ngai, 2011; Ngai & Wat, 2002). In addition, this study focused on papers presenting empirical studies, therein the adopted variables and proposed models were reviewed and included in our causal-chain framework.

## 3. Analysis and results

This section begins with a narrative review on the theories and models adopted in the 46 identified empirical studies. The section then continues with the development of a causal-chain framework that is embedded in an analysis of the constructs investigated by previous researchers in the formation of their conceptual models or frameworks.

### 3.1. Theories and models

A large number of theories and models are used in the extant social media research to study the socio-psychological behavior of social media users and other stakeholders, such as marketing people and customers. Table 1 presents the theories and models used in the 46 reviewed articles, from which three groups of theories (i.e., personal behavior, social behavior, and mass communication) are identified and discussed below.

#### 3.1.1. Personal behavior theories

The first group of adopted theories and models in social media research aims to explain the behavior of human beings at the personal/individual level. Table 1 shows that a total of 15 theories included in this group. Some of the most essential theories/models are selected and discussed here.

*Personality Traits* are often taken to be one of the fundamental theories explaining the characteristics affecting users' subsequent behavior. Digman (1990) summarized the Five Factor Model of Personality Traits as openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, which individually or collectively expand the behavioral intentions of social media users in the extant literature. Examples include the works of Correa, Hinsley, and de Zúñiga (2010); Labrecque, Markos, and Milne (2010); Lu and Hsiao (2010); and Zhong, Hardin, and Sun (2011).

*Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)* was developed by Davis (1989) and has been used to study perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness of new technologies in relation to people's attitude toward adoption. TAM has been widely utilized in social media research to investigate similar scenarios with respect to different social media technologies; examples include the studies by Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu (2010); Casaló, Carlos, and Guinalíu (2011); Hossain and de Silva (2009); Hsu and Lin (2008); Kwon and Wen (2010); and Steyn, Salehi-Sangari, Pitt, Parent, and Berthon (2010).

*Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)* is a theory developed by Ajzen and Fishbein (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 1985), which predicted people's volitional behavior based upon a summation of the relative weights of their attitudes and subjective norms. This theory, which resembles the situation where people voluntarily participate and engage in social media activities, is well cited in social media research. Hsu and Lin (2008) provide a typical case.

*Theory of Planned behavior (TPB)* is an extension of TRA, which was subsequently developed by Ajzen (1985). TPB suggests that perceived behavior control is employed to moderate the effects of attitudes and subjective norms on behavior. In social media research, Casaló et al. (2010) and Chang and Zhu (2011) used this theory to predict users' behavior from intention to action.

#### 3.1.2. Social behavior theories

The second group of theories relates to social behavior. Table 1 shows that previous studies adopted 13 theories to explain individuals' behavior toward social media in a social context. We selected several of the most significant theories in this group and briefly discussed them below.

The *Social Aspects Theory* is a collective term comprising all social factors; such as *social influence* (Kelman, 1958), which includes social identity; and *social capital* (Chang & Chuang, 2011; Portes, 1998), which includes social interaction and social ties. As the use of social media relates to socio-psychological and volitional behavior, social factors have been widely utilized to study users' attitudes, intentions, and actions in connection with social media adoption or usage; such as in the works of Cheung and Lee (2010), Blanchard (2008), Chai and Kim (2010), Fischer and Reuber (2011) and Shiue, Chiu, and Chang (2010).

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