



Revisiting the Task Media Fit Model in the era of Web 2.0: Twitter use and interaction in the healthcare sector



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ABSTRACT

Advances in technology have led to the development of social media and subsequently new channels of communication. This paper refines the established Task Media Fit Model in light of such changes, using business marketers' use of Twitter and followers' responses to tweeted messages for this preliminary conceptual development. Results show that business marketers use different embedded media according to the function of a tweet message. Follower responses to those messages do not vary with the task performed by the tweet, while responses differ with the type of embedded link. Findings from this investigation are used to develop a modified version of the Task Media Fit Model specifically for Twitter.

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1. Introduction

Communication is essential in business markets, aiding an organization's market and relationship handling activities (Holden & O'Toole, 2004). As a relatively new means of communication, social media are transforming exchange in the business-to-consumer (B2C) context and have attracted considerable academic and practitioner attention. Such practice and research interest is less readily apparent in the business-to-business (B2B) context and this paper aims to address this.

Social media enable information sharing between multiple users and communication can be initiated and accessed by numerous parties, necessitating the rethinking of communication theory and practice to reflect increasingly interactive means of exchange evident since the advent of Web 2.0 (Wiersema, 2013). We use McGrath and Hollingshead's (1993) Task Media Fit Model to understand the nascent use of social media by the business marketer, focusing on the utilization of Twitter. Our exploration of the various communication behaviors manifested in Twitter activity and more specifically the tasks for which Twitter is used, leads us to revise the Task Media Fit model. The paper starts by introducing social media, connecting this to the Task Media Fit Model before going on to examine the use of Twitter in B2B markets. The method section explains the approaches taken for content analysis and sampling as well as subsequent data analysis. Results cover overall Twitter

functions, types of links and their use, and follower responses to messages. Discussion centers on the applicable tasks that can be performed by Twitter and ways in which the Task Media Fit Model could be revised. The paper concludes with managerial implications and avenues for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. The use of social media in B2B markets

Social media are digital communication platforms and services that allow parties to connect with one another, to share information and engage in dialogue. Information can be made available via content-sharing platforms such as SlideShare and YouTube while short messages are typically sent via networking sites such as Facebook, Google+ and LinkedIn or micro-blogging services such as Twitter. Organizations and individuals post content and messages to engage participants and to interact with others by contributing to their discussions (Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, & Mäläskä, 2015). Industry research shows social media in B2B markets to be increasingly important, moving from 66% in 2011 (Anonymous, 2011) to 93% in 2013 (Anonymous, 2013). The most commonly used platforms and services are Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube. In terms of their purpose, social media are identified as contributing to a number of communication tasks, including corporate reputation and brand management (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012; Bruhn, Schnebelen, & Schäfer, 2014; Jussila, Kärkkäinen, & Leino, 2014), supporting customer acquisition and service provision (Brennan & Croft, 2012; Castronovo & Huang, 2012; Sashi, 2012; Toppi, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, & Mäläskä,

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2011) and enabling different stages in the sales process (Anonamous, 2013; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011). Organizations can also use social media as an educational platform (Schultz, Scwepker, & Good, 2012) as well as for product development and supporting customer participation in research and development (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011, Ylimaula & Ulkuniemi, 2013). When it comes to satisfaction with using social media, industry and academic findings are mixed. For example Ramos (2009) found only 8% and 5% of marketers considered social media to be effective for brand awareness and lead generation respectively. Such assessment might be caused by factors such as a lack of knowledge on how to use social media (Helfenstein & Pentillä, 2008; Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Valvi, 2015) or difficulty in measuring its effect (Siamagka et al., 2015), including its direct contribution to different communication tasks (Schultz et al., 2012). Equally, communications content has to be of interest to stakeholders (Brennan, Canning, & McDowell, 2014) and parties have to feel comfortable in using digital technology for communication purposes (Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015). Irrespective of the challenges that companies face, the central tenet of social media platforms and services is that they should encourage openness and support the sharing, exchange and distribution of information between different interested parties (Bruhn et al., 2014; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Sashi, 2012; Ylimaula & Ulkuniemi, 2013).

2.2. Matching communication task and media

A critical communication task for the business marketer is the signaling of problem-solving ability and expertise via information contained in messages which are transmitted through different media (Aarikka-Stenroos & Kaakkala, 2012; Ford et al., 2002). Using the media most suited for a particular communication task is therefore essential as this can determine satisfaction with the exchange process and outcome and the potential to elicit a response. For some time, two frameworks, namely the Media Richness theory and the Task Media Fit Model, have guided the combining of communication medium and task. Media Richness theory identifies a hierarchy of media arranged from a low level of richness, such as flyers, to a high level of richness, such as face-to-face interactions (Lengel & Daft, 1988). The level of richness is determined by three criteria, the capability of the medium to transmit multiple cues, the availability of instant feedback and the personal focus of the medium (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Lengel & Daft, 1988). This theory suggests that when the task information processing requirements are matched with a communication channel able to convey the richness of information, task performance is enhanced. Media Richness theory was modified by McGrath and Hollingshead (1993), and the resulting Task Media Fit Model is designed to indicate the most appropriate media for different tasks (see Table 1). The diagonal (top-left through bottom-right) represents the best fit between the task and the type of media; task media combinations above the diagonal are too rich whereas ones below are not rich enough. Research testing the Task Media Fit Model found computer text systems to be appropriate for exchanging information for idea generation (Murthy & Kerr, 2003) but less suitable for other tasks such as negotiations (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991; Fortune & Brodt, 2000).

Given the expansion of digital technology and Internet connectivity, the suitability of these frameworks in understanding communication behavior requires re-examination. Social media could simplistically be categorized as a computer text system according to McGrath and Hollingshead's (1993) framework. Yet substantial change has occurred within this category influencing the criteria that determine media richness and so the appropriateness of the tasks performed through different media. With regard to the ability to transmit *multiple* cues, computer text systems have been considered poor in conveying tone and body language compared to other systems such as audio and face-to-face (Walther & Parks, 2002). However, a variety of media sources such as videos and photos can now be seamlessly integrated enhancing the richness of computer text systems, and thus altering their potential use for different tasks. *Feedback* can now be immediate as well as delayed and very brief in the case of tweets or extensive for email. The degree of *personal focus* is similarly variable, as information can now be transmitted to an individual, a selected group or openly to the general public. Such inferences are reflected in Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) conceptualization of the Task Media Fit Model in relation to social media. Considering specifically the consumer context, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest that text-based collaborative projects and blogs are the least rich media, content communities and social networks (such as YouTube and Facebook) demonstrate medium richness (as they enable the sharing of photos, videos and other content), while virtual social worlds are the richest because of their capacity to replicate face-to-face interactions. Clearly such inferences and conceptualizations require empirical investigation to determine the continued suitability of the Task Media Fit Model for communication in business contexts. Therefore,

the overall aim of this paper is to determine the continued relevance of the existing Task Media Fit Model for business markets in light of advances in digital communication and social media use.

The nature of such conceptual exploration leads us to focus our investigation on one medium in particular, namely Twitter. This choice is guided by the fact that while 73% of the Fortune 500 companies reportedly use Twitter (Barnes, Lescault, & Andonian, 2012) and 77% of the Fortune Global 100 have at least one Twitter account (Malhotra, Malhotra, & See, 2012), its function within organizational communication activities varies (Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014). Added to this is our observation that other than Swani et al.'s (2014) investigation of factors likely to affect message strategy and Twitter use, research has not yet developed communication frameworks specifically for social media in business contexts.

2.3. Twitter and Task-Media Fit

As a micro-blogging site, Twitter enables information exchange via short messages (up to 140 characters) and links, for example, to marketing content and company websites. A central feature of Twitter is that it enables different parties to post messages (tweets) and interact with or follow the dialogue of others, thus forming a network of associations. There are 284 million monthly active users and 500 million daily tweets in approximately 35 languages (Twitter, 2015). A user's tweets

Table 1
McGrath and Hollingshead's (1993) Task Media Fit Model.

Task type Increasing richness required for task success	Communication media Increasing richness of information			
	Computer text systems	Audio systems	Video systems	Face to face communication
Generating ideas and plans	Good fit	Marginal fit	Poor fit	Poor fit
Choosing correct answer: intellectual tasks	Marginal fit	Good fit	Good fit	Poor fit
Choosing preferred answer: judgment task	Poor fit	Good fit	Good fit	Marginal fit
Negotiating conflicts of interest	Poor fit	Poor fit	Marginal fit	Good fit

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