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Towards a theory of SocioCitizenry: Quality anticipation, trust configuration, and approved adaptation of governmental social media

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ABSTRACT

The past few years have witnessed growing governmental interest in engaging citizens through social media. With this interest comes a genuine need to understand the process and outcomes of government–citizen interactions. Therefore, this article seeks to address this important issue by proposing and validating a SocioCitizenry theory that depicts government–citizen interaction through social media. The present study uses data gathered through two field surveys and analyses the relationships among three main SocioCitizenry constructs: quality anticipation, trust configuration, and approved adaptation. The following factors are examined with respect to the aforementioned three constructs: differential influences of familiarity with social media and government services; perceived importance of interactions with government services; social media quality reputation; and family members' and friends' perceptions of social media quality. Overall, results show that anticipated governmental social media quality influences configured trust, which in turn influences the extent of approved adaptation. The implications of these results in research and practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

Recent advances in social technologies are transforming government–citizen interactions (Alryalat, Rana, Sahu, Dwivedi, & Tajvidi, 2017; Rana, Dwivedi, & Williams, 2015). With a current base of more than 2 billion users, social media platforms have become major catalysts in changing how the government interacts with its constituents. Many governments worldwide are beginning to exploit social media to shift their operational model from a centralized service to a networked model that favors many-to-many interactions with citizens. This transformation has created opportunities for governments to engage closely with the general public by providing citizens information about governmental operations while government personnel receive feedback regarding various public issues. The present study seeks to model this important government–citizen interaction through social media.

Several research efforts related to social media have sought to examine government–citizen interactions. However, diverse obstacles have hindered such attempts. Some recent reviews (Alryalat et al., 2017) have declared that published research on this topic is problematic due to "a lack of theory-based research in the area" (p. 55). Other reviews (Boulianne, 2015; Estevez & Janowski, 2013; Kapoor et al., 2018; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016) have indicated that most relevant studies merely present broad discussions on interactions between the government and the general public. More specifically, studies discussing this subject tend to provide a general overview of government–citizen interactions without adequately theorizing and empirically verifying why and how citizens are driven to engage with a government's social media within a particular social context (Agostino, 2013; Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015; Cheng, Fu, & de Vreede, 2017; Chung, Andreev, Benyoucef, Duane, & O'Reilly, 2018; Fakhoury & Aubert, 2015; Mergel, 2013; Steenkamp & Hyde-Clarke, 2014). To address these challenges, scholars interested in understanding government–citizen interactions must pay greater attention to theorization (Alryalat et al., 2017; Chung, Andreev, Benyoucef, Duane, & O'Reilly, 2017), measurement (Chung et al., 2018), and relevant social contexts (Kapoor et al., 2018; Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). Thus far, no attempt has been made to examine these issues collectively. The current study seeks to fill this gap by enhancing topical knowledge in four major ways. First, this work develops and tests a new research-driven theory depicting the process of government–citizen interaction. Second, it measures the main constructs in the model using a citizen-focused, experientially founded view rather than simply counting usage frequencies or tapping general beliefs about technology usage as has been done in prior research. Third, it differentiates between the content and engagement-style dimensions of social media. Fourth, it considers the social context within which these interactions take place. Overall, the

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present investigation aims to situate government–citizen interaction in a theory-driven, robust research framework.

Given that scholarship on citizens' interactions with governmental social media is continually evolving, the present article gathered valuable ideas from related disciplines interested in understanding human interactions. Two useful sources included uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and social information processing theory (Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Walther, 1992),each of which highlights the importance of socialized information ineffective human interactions. Another important perspective relevant to cooperative exchange is principal–agent theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), which describes a relationship in which the principal (e.g., citizens) delegates work to the agent (e.g., government) who performs work according to a pre-contract (Eisenhardt, 1989). These well-established theories informed the current paper and may prove valuable in research regarding governmental social media.

The current study applies information from the above theories as a foundation to develop SocioCitizenry theory. This theory hypothesizes connections among three core constructs involving government–citizen interactions through social media: anticipated quality, configured trust, and approved adaptation. *Approved adaptation* is defined as one's interaction with social media services to improve his or her knowledge of governmental operations and to communicate his or he reviews to the government. *Configured trust* represents one's perceptions of the congruence between the content and engagement attributes of governmental social media services and one's trust needs. *Anticipated quality* refers to one's perceptions of content meaningfulness and interactive engagement on a government's social media. The authors theorize that governments must be able to reduce uncertainty by aligning social media attributes with citizens' quality needs to engender trust and favorable interactions. Moreover, the authors argue these connections are shaped by information citizens receive from the surrounding social environment. This view supplements existing knowledge by presenting theoretically grounded components of social media adaptation in a governmental setting.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. The second section introduces SocioCitizenry theory. The third section details the selected hypotheses and supporting evidence from relevant research. The fourth and fifth sections describe the methodologies followed by two empirical studies, the first of which focuses on scale development with the second focusing on model testing. The sixth section discusses the findings of this paper and its implications, and the seventh and last section offers closing remarks.

2. SocioCitizenry: bases & components

2.1. The bases of SocioCitizenry

The current study builds upon uncertainty reduction theory, social information processing theory, and principal–agent theory to shed more light on government–citizen interactions through social media or SocioCitizenry. One important aspect of these theories is their emphasis on the idea that knowledge is experientially founded and based on one's interpretation of the information (s)he receives from the surrounding social environment; such information pertains to people as well as people-made artifacts. Knowledge assimilation in this social context can be viewed as a process driven by experiences gained from extended interactions between an individual and his or her largely uncertain social milieu. In this sense, these theories underscore the importance of an individual's active participation in the social process and in constructing his or her own understanding through various mechanisms (e.g., persuasion and learning by example). Moreover, individuals' active participation in this process may help to fulfill some of their internal needs. Phye (1997) asserted that the social view encompasses issues relevant to understanding cognitive development as well as motivation and needs in a specific social context. Similarly, meeting

individuals' internal needs is a prelude to certain overt social behaviors. For example, the work of Asch (1955), Deutsch and Gerard (1955), Sherif (1936) in social psychology has suggested that social contexts play an essential role in guiding individuals' attitudes and social actions.

Increasingly, users of modern digital artifacts such as social media face high levels of information uncertainty regarding the content and/or sender of a message. Individuals may attempt to cope with these ambiguities by increasing communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Berger and Calabrese (1975) built upon this idea in their uncertainty reduction theory, arguing that individuals seek additional information in situations where they lack an adequate sense of other parties' behaviors and intentions during the interaction process. Once an individual's information needs are satisfied, information certainty and social relationships should each improve. A close examination of the eight basic axioms of this theory reveals that the content of a message is important for decoding, and the style in which a message is presented is similarly crucial for effective communication.

Relatedly, individual users must recognize that social media use is socially constructed as users are inherently embedded in a social context that shapes their interactions with the media. According to the social information processing model (Fulk et al., 1987; Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield, 1990), understanding situated or socialized media use is critical for productive human interactions. This model postulates that media characteristics and communication processes are important for securing effective communication. These suppositions are closely related to those of Salancik and Pfeffer (1978), who proposed several social information processing mechanisms in the context of job and task design. Walther (1992) extended the viewpoint of Fulk et al. by arguing for a temporal factor; that is, given sufficient time, computer-mediated communication media could become as personal as face-to-face interaction. In the case of the present study, citizens' reactions to governmental social media services depend on their experiences and interactions with the social environment as well as the extent of their interactions with the government.

Principal–agent theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) addresses situations in which the relationship between two parties, namely the principal and the agent, is cooperative and asymmetrical. In the context of digital government, although the government performs work according to a pre-contract with citizens, civilian individuals possess limited information about the operations and practices of the government. Accordingly, citizens' trust in the government can create and maintain a positive rapport between the two. An important mechanism in cultivating relationships between principal and agent entities involves reducing information uncertainty, which can be governed through trust building and information quality improvement (Pavlou, Huigang, & Yajiong, 2007).

Based on the above discussion, a citizen's interaction with governmental social media can be considered an adaptation process. It starts with citizens' interactions with governmental social media where citizens seek to reduce information uncertainty and then transforms into a purposeful quest by citizens to foster predictability by aligning media characteristics with their interaction needs. Finally, the process culminates with citizens' social media approval. This process is influenced by the information citizens receive from the surrounding social environment within which they construct their reality of the adaptation process. More specifically, this process argues that social media quality can serve as an anticipation mechanism to reduce citizens' information uncertainty. In this sense, citizens co-create content by adding meaning to control expectations. Although this predictability is necessary to encourage government–citizen interaction, it may not be sufficient to ensure the desired impact. Therefore, uncertainty reduction efforts can be reinforced by configuring trust in governmental social media to suit citizens' interaction needs. Citizens can be considered co-creators of trust in social media (Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta, & Dwivedi, 2018) because they can accept or reject its fit with the use context. The