



# Psychological empowerment on social media: Who are the empowered users?



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## ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the psychological empowerment framework from community psychology to the social media context. Intrapersonal empowerment and interactional empowerment are tested as two focal components of the empowerment process at the individual level. This paper aims to assess the connections between active and passive social media use and psychological empowerment. An online survey was conducted through an online panel (MTurk) with 371 effective responses. Results showed that active use was positively related to both intrapersonal and interactional empowerment, while only a weak association was found between passive use and interactional empowerment.

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## 1. Introduction

In spring 2013, Hertz, the car rental company, began formally accepting complaints through the micro-blogging site Twitter. Hertz's program is an example of a move by corporations to actively manage their brands in the online conversations enabled by social media. This activity is particularly targeted at consumers who are seen to be driving a shift in marketplace power structures. Social media are quietly, but rapidly, changing the ecosystem of influence in the virtual sphere (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011).

Social media have enabled users to exert their power to virally affect organizational decisions. Consumers were found to be highly aware of their influence over others online and the collective power that they may exert over companies (Li & Stacks, 2014). Through the social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, communicating more freely, and building stronger rapport through various online groups. The connectivity established through social media can enhance users' abilities to take collective actions and demand for social change (Shirky, 2011). This empowered action could spread to a large population with rapid speed, thus making a considerable impact. The most active users groups, who are often the opinion leaders on the virtual sphere, can influence the organizational decision-making in, sometimes, a rather dramatic manner, such as crisis situations.

Investigation of public empowerment has been a popular topic in community psychology and marketing research. In public relations research, social media empowerment has received nothing more than passing mentions. Involving direct public engagement, empowerment falls under the realm of the public relations discipline, but has received little empirical attention other than in organizations' internal communication setting, such as employee empowerment (Chiles & Zorn, 1995; Men, 2011; Men & Stacks, 2013) and empowering the public relations function as organization's dominant coalition

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(Berger, 2005; Grunig, 2006; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). In the external context, the role of the public relations endeavor in the power dynamics certainly deserves attention. It is a much-needed investigation in our field to understand the underlying psychological mechanism of the rising power of external audiences. From a practical perspective, one of the key challenges for the organization's social media monitoring team is to identify the opinion leaders in these social networks. These are usually empowered social media users who are actively engaged with content creation.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce psychological empowerment construct into the public relations literature. Specifically, this paper integrates past theoretical development of the empowerment construct from community psychology literature, and tests and validates the intrapersonal and interactional empowerment measurement scales in the social media context. This paper also seeks to empirically test the connections between active and passive social media use and various aspects of psychological empowerment.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Intrapersonal and interactional empowerment

Empowerment is a multi-level, open-ended construct that includes the individual level (Leung, 2009; Mo & Coulson, 2010; Schneider, Von Krogh, & Jäger, 2013), organizational level (Berger, 2005; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004), and community level (Hur, 2006; Zimmerman, 2000; Zimmerman & Rapport, 1988; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). Empowerment can be viewed as a process (Mo & Coulson, 2010) or an outcome (Hur, 2006; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Meanwhile, empowerment could refer to the act of empowering (Thorlakson & Murray, 1996) and the internal mental process of the individual being empowered (Menon, 1999). Menon (1999) defined psychological empowerment from the employee perspective as a cognitive state characterized by a sense of perceived control, perceptions of competence, and goal internalization. Studies of empowerment can be found in a variety of disciplines, including political science, social welfare, education, health, management, and community psychology (see Hur, 2006 for a summary).

This study adopts the psychological empowerment construct from community psychology research. Psychological empowerment in this study refers to the expression of the empowerment construct at the individual level. It is described as “the connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for, and a willingness to take action in the public domain” (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988, p. 725). There are three underlining assumptions for psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995). First, empowerment takes different forms for different people. Individual characteristics such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status affect how empowerment is perceived and acted upon. Second, empowerment takes different forms in different contexts. This indicates that empowerment varies based on context. For example, in an authoritarian organizational context, collective action may be a more salient trait for empowered individuals, while in a participatory organization, perceived competence or desire for control would be more relevant. Third, psychological empowerment is not a static trait; rather, it fluctuates over time. This suggests that individuals may become more empowered over time and that some people may be more empowered than others.

The empowerment theory (Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, & Checkoway, 1992; Zimmerman, 1995, 2000) holds that psychological empowerment includes intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components. The *intrapersonal empowerment* component refers to how individuals think about themselves and their capability to influence others as well as the social and political systems (Menon, 1999; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Literature from various disciplines has used different terminologies in describing the intrapersonal aspects of psychological empowerment (Petrovčič & Petrič, 2014), but all strongly relies on the conceptual model proposed by Zimmerman (1995). The Zimmerman (1995) model suggests that intrapersonal empowerment includes three sub dimensions of *control*, *self-efficacy* and *perceived competence* (Leung, 2009; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zahniser, 1991). Further, the control aspect refers to beliefs about one's ability to exert influence in various contexts; the self-efficacy aspect refers to self-assessment of one's abilities to carry out certain tasks; the perceived competence aspect refers to perceptions of one's capability to perform a job or task well (Hur, 2006; Petrovčič & Petrič, 2014; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Rapport, 1988 Zimmerman, 1995).

The *interactional empowerment* component refers to one's intellectual understanding of the social environment around them and the knowledge and resources required to produce change (Zimmerman, 1995). The interactional component addresses the belief or awareness of the options available to achieve goals and an understanding of the norms and values of a particular context. This cognitive understanding and learning about the social environment leads to the development of decision-making and problem-solving skills necessary to actively engage one's environment (Zimmerman, 2005; Zimmerman et al., 1992 Zimmerman et al., 1992). Finally, the *behavioral* component of psychological empowerment refers to the empowered actions that may exert influence on outcomes (Zimmerman, 1995). This is achieved through participation in activities and community organizations such as political groups, self-help groups, religious groups, or service organizations, or helping others to cope with problems (Zimmerman et al., 1992).

Early theoretical investigations of empowerment have largely focused on the intrapersonal empowerment aspect. However, scholars have raised the importance to investigate the interactional aspect of psychological empowerment. Speer's (2000) study offers insights and empirical evidence that individual's personal sense of control and efficacy (intrapersonal empowerment) differs from one's intellectual understanding of power and social change (interactional empowerment). This is in response to the critique by Riger (1993) that the traditional empowerment theory may overly emphasize on the individual mastery and control rather than the cooperation or community elements. In other words, “can an emphasis on

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