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Cyber-volunteering: Social media affordances in fulfilling NGO social missions

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ABSTRACT

Cyber-volunteering behavior through social media is becoming popular among nongovernmental organization (NGO) members. Cyber-volunteering activities have become more aggressive with the availability of social media in recent years. The objective of this paper is to discuss voluntary behavior in fulfilling NGO social missions through social media usage based on affordance theory. There is substantial literature discussing social media affordances in the context of enterprise organization, but there has been less literature discussing the activities of NGOs in social media. Hence, seven key affordances derived from the enterprise organization were used in the context of NGO working behavior, visibility, editability, persistence, virtual collaboration, synthetic representation, individualized, and collective. This research applies a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews with 25 NGO members from seven selected Islamic NGOs in Malaysia that are active in different fields of Islamic education. The interviews focus on social media affordances that have influenced the execution of social missions in the NGOs. Data was analyzed using thematic coding based on the seven identified key social media affordances. The results suggest that the social media affordances related to cyber-volunteering are achieved through promoting, training, fundraising, knowledge sharing, and problem-solving activities. These affordances are highly influenced by cyber-volunteering behavior through work culture and personal privacy. The collective, individualized, and visibility affordances are most associated with cyber-volunteering behavior, followed by persistence, virtual collaboration, and editability, and synthetic representation is found to be the least.

1. Introduction

Cyber-volunteering or online volunteering has become a popular phenomenon with the advent of technology, especially with the mass usage of social media. Cyber-volunteering is defined as an activity performed freely by an individual to work for an organization that is conducted remotely via the Internet (virtually) rather than being onsite to complete a task (Klotz, 2007; Waters, 2009). The spread of new media has also significantly increased nongovernmental organization's (NGO) ability to communicate with clients (Waters, 2007). As a result, NGO interactions have become more effective, widespread, and multifaceted and have become critical to organizational performance (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Today, NGOs have leveraged social media to reach the desired audience. Many NGOs are currently active in Facebook and other social media such as Twitter and Instagram to promote, disseminate, and share information and news about their activities and missions.

Our exploratory aim of this study is not particularly focusing on the features of social media but rather its usage afforded by those features within social media (Majchrzak, Markus, & Wareham, 2012). Currently, there is substantial literature discussing NGO usage of social media related to features (Klotz, 2007; Waters, 2009) and affordances of social media in the context of enterprise organization (Leonardi, 2013; Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty, & Faraj, 2007). Therefore, it is considered a significant contribution to address affordance issues related to social media in the context of

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NGO settings and how these affordances influence cyber-volunteering activities and behavior. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the applicability of enterprise organization social media affordances in the context of Islamic NGOs addressing education in Malaysia. This paper begins with the discussion of the NGO working behavior, how social media help their cyber-volunteering activities, and the relationship of affordance in cyber-volunteering in the introduction section. These preliminary discussions will support the development of the research questions. Subsequently, the research methodology section is discussed followed by the results and discussion section. This paper also discusses the research implications and future research before concluding it with conclusion and future work of the research in the final section.

1.1. NGO working behavior

An NGO is an organization that is established to provide benefit to the general public through advocacy and services (Bendaña, 2006; United Nation, 2004). The term *NGO* is also associated with other terms, such as *nonprofit organizations*, *social movements*, and *civil society organizations*. In this paper, an NGO is considered a voluntary association of a group of individuals bound together to pursue shared missions and goals (Waters, 2009). Its working behavior relates to the characteristics, work customs, and actions associated with the functional purpose of establishing the organization (Bendaña, 2006; Earle, 2004; Lawry, 2009; Nah & Saxton, 2012; Waters, 2009). An NGO activity usually falls within one of the following four categories: (i) development of project concepts, (ii) project preparation, (iii) project execution, and (iv) feedback or monitoring. Although the setting is similar to an enterprise organization, there is one major difference that relates to intention and expectations. For example, a manager in an enterprise organization would stress completion of a project to the employees involved. Employees can be expected to take the task seriously since their jobs may be at stake if they do not act in accordance with their manager's expectations. However, in an NGO setting, a manager must behave in the most diplomatic manner, inviting volunteers within the organization to work together to achieve completion of a social project. Volunteers are not bound to the task if they think that they cannot commit to the job because of other personal priorities.

Additionally, NGO activities across the world can vary in response to multiple cultural contexts, as cross-cultural social psychological studies have shown (Cinnirella & Green, 2007). Western societies might be more concerned with environmental, women's, and human rights issues (Diani, 2000), while in middle and south eastern societies, activities might be related to religious beliefs, for example, Islamic faith related to solving social problems including poverty, debt, a lack of liberty, faith, or morality (Ali & Hatta, 2014; Petersen, 2012; Yasmin, Haniffa, & Hudaib, 2013).

1.2. Social media within cyber-volunteering activities

The terms *social media*, *social networking application*, and *mobile messenger* have been in circulation for a number of years. Inconsistencies in the usage of *social media* as social network such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and YouTube (Gao, Barbier, & Goolsby, 2011; Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013) and as mobile messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Tweetbots, Hangouts, and Vine (Gil, 2013) within the context of smartphones, lead us to adopt the term *social media* in this paper as the general terminology for all social software applications including not only the sites mentioned but also all related sites in the context of Web 2.0

technology. There are many tasks that can be performed via social media, including educational activities (Mao, 2014), buying and selling products or services (Andzulis, Panagopoulos, & Rapp, 2012; Dewan & Ramaprasad, 2014), and consultation and information sharing (Alberghini, Cricelli, & Grimaldi, 2014; Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015).

Social media allow users to create and participate in virtual communities where they provide functions of sharing, communicating, publishing, managing, collaborating, and interacting with a click of a button among NGO members or the general public (Nah & Saxton, 2012). They have the ability to connect people and disseminate information interactively (Carrera et al., 2008; Crawford, 2009). They afford individualized and collective groups to communicative through virtual interaction to create visibility (Leonardi, 2013). Social media usage also saves NGOs operating cost, another important reason for NGOs to adopt the technology given their often limited monetary resources (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Waters (2009) and Nah and Saxton (2012) also found that NGOs adopt social media for activities related to fundraising and volunteering efforts. As a result of these advantages, social media such as Facebook and Twitter have become popular within and outside the NGO context. Facebook and Twitter have surpassed one billion and 284 million registered user accounts, respectively (Kemp, 2015). In contrast, short message service has shown usage decline in the global market (Chavin, Ginwala, & Spear, 2012; Tyson & Cooper, 2001).

1.3. Affordances in social media and its relationship with cyber-volunteering of NGO

Affordance can be defined as the perceived and actual properties of objects that determine how they could be used (Norman, 2002). Norman (2002) definition of affordance was based on Gibson (1977) theory of how animals perceive their environment. In the context of humans and technology, he categorized affordances as physical, logical, cultural, and semantic, relating to physical properties, functional properties, allowable actions in social situations, and meanings of actions, respectively. However, it is useful to further elaborate these affordances according to contemporary views such as those of Zammuto et al. (2007), Leonardi (2013), Treem and Leonardi (2012), and Cabiddu, Carlo, and Picolli (2014).

In the context of enterprise organization, Zammuto et al. (2007) elaborate five types of affordance that can lead to different types of organization These include visualizing entire work processes (Foverskov & Binder, 2011), real-time/flexible product and service innovation (Lewis, 2005), virtual collaboration (Foster, Kesselman, & Tuecke, 2001; Zhang, Du, Yinong, Ji, & Wang, 2011), mass collaboration (Joyce, Pike, & Butler, 2012; Pettersen, 2014), and simulation/synthetic reality (Lopez-Rojas & Axelsson, 2012; Pohanka, Hrabovský, & Fiedler, 2011). Leonardi (2013) adds to the list affordances that relate to users of technology in enterprises as being individualized, collective, and shared, i.e., individual involvement in enacting a task (Rasia, Hautakangas, & Väyrynen, 2015), collective involvement to achieve an objective through similar technology by performing specialized tasks, and sharing nonindependent task using different technology to achieve an objective (Cram, Kuswara, & Richards, 2008). Although these affordances are based on the enterprise context, the extendibility of some of these affordances in the context of NGO cyber-volunteering through social media might also be relevant. For example, virtual collaboration in terms of sharing and integrating knowledge virtually; mass collaboration of many-to-many interactions; synthetic representation ability to conduct what-if scenarios (Zammuto et al., 2007); and individualized, shared, and collective