



But not all social media are the same: Analyzing organizations' social media usage patterns



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ABSTRACT

The present study explores how organizations use diverse social media applications for consumer relationship management. Based on a cluster analysis, the social media usage patterns of 317 organizations were analyzed. Six groups of organizations were identified in accordance with the social media applications predominantly used by each organization. The first three groups primarily used a single social media application (blogs, social networking sites, or widgets) to communicate with customers, whereas the second three groups employed multiple social media applications, often with an emphasis on visualization, virtualization, or interactive collaboration. In addition, this study found that organizations tend to use social media applications with two-way communication capabilities. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed in this paper.

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1. Introduction

With the growing significance of new media technologies in business, organizations are now using new media tools strategically in order to meet their various customers' needs. The growing number of capabilities afforded by new media technologies enables organizations to provide many new services to their customers. Recognizing the advantages of using new media technologies, most organizations have begun to implement new media technologies in areas such as internal structure, management systems, and advertising and public relations (Pavlik, 2007). In particular, organizations have adopted social media at a remarkable speed (Barnes, 2008), because social media enables customers to easily communicate back-and-forth with an organization to keep up to date on its news, to make complaints and inquiries, and to access chat functions.

In response to this industry trend researchers have conducted studies about social media applications. First, one stream of research (e.g., Grunig, 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Lietsala and Sirkkunen, 2008; Phillips, 2009) has sought to define what social media applications are and classify types of social media applications based on their unique characteristics. Another stream of research (e.g., Briones et al., 2011; Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010; Waters et al., 2009) has made a considerable effort to establish which kinds of social media applications organizations are currently using and how specific types of social media contribute to creating and maintaining the relationship between an organization and its customers.

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However, such research is limited insofar as it does not offer a picture of organizations' overall social media usage patterns, especially, how organizations employ diverse social media applications in a combinatory manner in order to maximize synergistic effects. Furthermore, it does not properly answer questions regarding how the characteristics of each social media application are associated with its usage patterns. To address this gap in the literature, the present study aims: (1) to outline an empirically-based typology of organizations' current social media usage patterns through the technique of cluster analysis, and (2) to identify the multichannel strategies that govern how organizations are currently using social media applications given the increased options for communicating with customers via social media organizations. Ultimately, the study seeks to provide a clearer picture of organizations' current social media usage as well as insight into the organizations' social media strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Typology of social media

Researchers (e.g., [Cook and Hopkins, 2008](#); [Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010](#)) have defined social media as comprising online communication tools that stimulate opinion-sharing and information exchange, as well as Internet-based applications that allow for the production and circulation of user-generated content (UGC). Within the boundaries of this definition, diverse types of social media exist. Perhaps the most well-known type of social media is the social networking site (e.g., Facebook). Another type of social media are those sites that are designed to allow users to upload and share content in multiple formats, including text, image, audio, and video (e.g., Flickr, YouTube, and podcasts). Finally, there are some advanced types of social media; these include widgets, virtual worlds, and crowdsourcing.

Given the diverse social media available to organizations, researchers have sought to create a typology of social media. [Kaplan and Haenlein \(2010\)](#), for example, have provided a list of six types of social media applications: blogs, collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), content communities (e.g., YouTube), virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life), and virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft). These types are distinguished from one another by the degree of self-presentation and the degree of social presence they enable. [Kaplan and Haenlein \(2010\)](#) have argued that the use of social media facilitates self-disclosure of personal information, including users' thoughts and feelings, which vary in expression according to "the degree of self-disclosure the system requires" and "the type of self-presentation" the social media applications render possible (p. 61).

Yet given that a high level of social presence may be achieved through the reciprocal exchange of messages, social media may also be categorized on the basis of "the degree of salience of the other person in a mediated communication and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interactions" ([Short et al., 1976, p. 65](#)). Using the concept of social presence, [Kaplan and Haenlein \(2010\)](#) have suggested that blogs and collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia) allow the lowest levels of social presence, while virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds promote the highest levels of social presence. In these latter types of social media, users are able to interact synchronously, just as they might in face-to-face interactions.

[Kietzmann et al. \(2011\)](#) has also classified types of social media applications; unlike [Kaplan and Haenlein \(2010\)](#), however, Kietzmann and his colleagues use the seven major functionalities afforded by social media as the means for classification. These functionalities include identity ("the extent to which users reveal themselves"), conversation ("the extent to which users communicate with each other"), sharing ("the extent to which users exchange, distribute and receive content"), presence ("the extent to which users know if others are available"), relationships ("the extent to which users relate to each other"), reputation ("the extent to which users know the social standing of others and content"), and groups ("the extent to which users are ordered or form communities") (p. 243). They then exemplified the best fitting social media applications for each category. For instance, LinkedIn and Facebook fall into the identity function-oriented social media type, since they allow users to reveal their identities by setting up profiles. Yet LinkedIn and Facebook, may also be regarded as among relationship-oriented social media applications, as they emphasize the maintenance of social connections. Twitter, on the other hand, may be considered as fitting within both the conversation and sharing types of social media. Most location-based applications, such as Foursquare, fall into the presence category, because they show users' physical proximity to one another via a "check-in" function. Finally, social media applications in the reputation category include those platforms wherein endorsement cues (such as rating or voting systems) are available (e.g., the "like" button on Facebook; the number of followers on Twitter), while group social media applications are those that allow users to build online communities (e.g., Flickr; Facebook).

Communications researchers have also sought to classify social media applications; in this case, classification often hinges on the ability of a given application to facilitate two-way symmetrical communications between an organization and its public in cyberspace. This two-way communication is considered a key component in organizations' building and maintaining good relationships with their publics (e.g., [Grunig, 2009](#); [Phillips, 2009](#)). Using this concept of two-way symmetrical communication, [Phillips \(2009\)](#) has shown that new media tools vary in regard to their respective two-way communication capabilities. For example, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter might be considered highly symmetric, given that they allow high levels of interactions. Blogs, Wikipedia entries, and content-sharing sites, conversely, are often regarded as facilitating one-way asymmetrical communication, given that they do not allow high levels of feedback or back-and-forth exchanges with their publics. In adopting such an approach towards the classification of social media applications,

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