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What motivates the public? The power of social norms in driving public participation with organizations

Fan Yang[a], Holly K. Ott[b,*]

[a] The Pennsylvania State University, United States
[b] University of South Carolina, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study examines motivating factors that impact public participation with organizations. A between-subjects lab experiment was conducted to examine the role of different types of norms (social norm vs. market norm) in initiating participation. Results suggest that when people feel recognized by an organization, their motivations are as strong as those who receive monetary rewards for participation. Three distinct underlying psychological mechanisms that drive participation are identified. Theoretical and practical implications for public relations and organizational communication are discussed.

The concept of participation has increasingly become a core focus in public relations. The degree to which an organization is able to engage key publics and obtain participation from them has proven to be crucial to its long-term survival and success (Chung, Lee, & Heath, 2013; Kiousis & Dimitrova, 2006; McKeever, 2013; Men & Tsai, 2013). For example, companies are encouraged to consult with key stakeholders and prospective publics during decision-making processes. Furthermore, public relations theories such as Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, relationship management theory (Ferguson, 1984) and Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles emphasize the key role of company-public relationships and how effective communication and relationship management can contribute to outcomes such as enhanced consumer trust, commitment, involvement, and engagement.

Companies and organizations have found numerous ways to invite public participation. However, a central question to be answered is: What motivates publics to participate? While the amount of individualized information and specialized products have already made it hard to involve people in any event collaboratively (Putnam, 1995), demanding consumer schedules and other logistical restrictions can decrease the amount of public participation in many capacities. Therefore, it can be argued that participation comes with a cost and that publics are becoming less inclined to participate in organizational initiatives.

Prior studies have documented the effectiveness of monetary incentives in increasing public participation (e.g., Files, 1984; Tamer Cavusgil & Elvey-Kirk, 1998). It is, however, not always possible for organizations and companies with limited resources, such as non-profit organizations. Furthermore, the growing success of several organizations calls into question the necessity of monetary rewards in motivating public participation. For instance, the popularity of Wikipedia is, by and

* Corresponding author at: School of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of South Carolina, 800 Sumter St., Room 334, Columbia, SC 29208, United States.
E-mail address: hott7@mailbox.sc.edu (H.K. Ott).

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large, based on voluntary public participation and contributions anonymously over the past few decades (Shirky, 2008). Why would people so actively participate in and contribute to something that seemingly delivers no direct reward like money?

Two types of norms emerge as the governing rules for participation and contribution: the social norm and the market norm. The social norm refers to the situation under which people contribute not for payment, but for certain social rules (e.g., altruism, politeness and reciprocity) that are essential to maintaining communal relationships with others (Heyman & Ariely, 2004). While individuals governed by the social norm take actions with no expectations for monetary compensation in return, researchers have suggested that recognition and appreciation are the keys for people to get involved in such communal relations (Clark & Mills, 1979; Mills & Clark, 1982). Alternatively, the market norm can motivate individuals to contribute, as it represents the most common economic rule for labor exchange – to get paid for the work done (e.g., a salary). No research so far has systematically examined how public participation with organizations might vary as a result of social norm vs. market norm incentives, which provides little guidance for corporations to develop effective and efficient strategies in this regard.

This study conducted an experiment to analyze the role that the social norm and the market norm play in promoting individuals' contribution and intent to participate again with organizations. This study examines the following questions: Would individuals be motivated to contribute to an organization when they are appreciated (social norm) vs. when they are paid (market norm)? More importantly, what are the underlying psychological mechanisms explaining such contributions in the social norm as opposed to the market norm?

1. Theoretical framework

The decline of public engagement and participation has been documented by many scholars in diverse disciplines of social science (Postman, 1985; Putnam, 1995). For companies and organizations, particularly those whose existence primarily relies on public participation like Facebook and Wikipedia, contributions from publics are indispensable in creating organizational loyalty (Holland & Stacey, 2001) and commitment (Lines, 2004; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Mayer & Schoorman, 1998). Therefore, developing effective strategies to engage the public and to initiate participation has become a focal point for both public relations practitioners and scholars.

For example, in reviewing public participation on Wikipedia, Rafaeli and Ariel (2008) proposed that individual contributions could be driven by motivations like receiving rewards (Snyder & Cantor, 1998), self-fulfillment (Ciffolilli, 2003), sense of community (Rafaeli, Ariel et al., 2005), or simply altruism (Kollock, 1999).

1.1. An interpersonal approach: the social norm and the market norm

In an effort to analyze individual motivations in a systematic way, public relations scholars have argued the value of an interpersonal approach as it humanizes the relationship between an organization and the public with a personal touch (Men & Hung, 2012; Men & Tsai, 2015). According to Fiske's (1992) relational theory, there are four basic types of social relationships: communal sharing, authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing. These four relationships were later re-classified as the market norm and the social norm to specifically examine individual participation (Ariely, 2009).

Individuals in the market norm generally offer contributions or involvement due to market pricing – to get paid. Therefore, participation under market norm hinges upon cost-benefit analysis of individuals. The amount of financial compensation determines the level of an individual's contribution in the market norm. The more people get paid, the more contributions they choose to make (Clark & Mills, 1993; Fehr & Falk, 2002; Rabin, 1993).

Conversely, no known correlation exists between the level of contribution and reward in the social norm, because people contribute with no intent to get payment back in exchange for participation. Therefore, they tend to ignore compensation amount, as individual effort is shaped by social rules like altruism (Batson, Sager, Garst, & Kang, 1997; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Harman, 2015; Trivers, 1971). This concept is representative of the dimensions of stewardship, which focus on behaviors that underline the norms of maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship with an organization's stakeholders (Kelly, 2001). As the concept suggests, stewardship is focused on reciprocity between an organization and its stakeholders (Kelly, 2001). That is, people and organizations alike work together to benefit the common good. As such, organizations are then encouraged to recognize stakeholders who choose to become involved with the organization by demonstrating gratitude toward them to nurture relationships with publics. Organizations should strive to be good stewards to all of its stakeholders to demonstrate acknowledgement of and commitment to those who contribute to a greater goal.

1.2. Psychological outcomes of the social norm and the market norm

Certain psychological outcomes could further explain the drivers of the two norms in participation. For example, the social norm is most likely to come into play when individuals perceive their efforts as being needed, valued, and appreciated (Fisher & Ackerman, 1998; Trivers, 1971; Unger, 1991). Hence, perceived recognition, the extent to which individuals feel their contributions are appreciated, serves as the major psychological gratification in the social norm, where individuals are essentially making contributions voluntarily as a favor to organizations instead of getting paid (Kollock, 1999). However, monetary payment could also serve as another form of recognition, as receiving payment may elicit positive feelings like self-sufficiency (Furnham & Argyle, 1998; Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006).

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