



The role of social media on positive youth development: An analysis of 4-H Facebook page and 4-H'ers' positive development



Ah Ram Lee^{a,*}, J. Suzanne Horsley^b

^a University of Florida, College of Journalism and Communications, Gainesville, FL 32611, United States

^b University of Alabama, College of Communication and Information Services, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, United States

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ABSTRACT

With the hope of raising children to become responsible and active citizens with upstanding values, many youth-related organizations have focused their efforts on providing quality opportunities to encourage early participation in civic engagements. Many organizations actively engage in social media to fulfill their goals most effectively. Social media offer the potential to promote those opportunities, communicate with youth, and eventually facilitate positive youth development. Considering the importance of social media among youth, it is critical to understand how to use it as a tool to foster youth development. Therefore, utilizing the positive youth development (PYD) framework, this study examines the role of Facebook communications in developing six traits—competence, confidence, connection, character, compassion, and contribution—and their effects on youth civic engagement by analyzing a 4-H club case. Mixed methods are used to conduct a two-step study. The first step analyzes communication patterns of the national 4-H Facebook page through content analysis of posts from 2009 to early 2015. For the second step, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with recent 4-H alumni, who used the official 4-H Facebook page during their period of membership. The findings emphasized the critical role of social media in fostering positive development of youth and future civic engagement, and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Youth, persons who are between the ages of 15–24 (UNESCO, n.d.), is a critical period in terms of physical and mental development and a time for learning important qualities and values necessary to become a responsible citizen or future leader (Fraley, Roisman, & Haltigan, 2013; Lee & Cole, 2009). People who establish a good set of virtues during this period often demonstrate active civic engagement, sustain positive attitudes, and undertake responsibilities that indicate their possibilities as future leaders in society (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007). Researchers and educators have explored diverse media to effectively foster positive development and proper values. Social media, which are ingrained communication tools among youth, have received tremendous attention (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Given young people's technical capacities and exploratory spirit, social media are particularly imperative tools for youth. In this era of fast-changing technology, youth naturally develop the ability to learn and absorb new technologies and become the primary consumers of social media (Liang, Commins, & Duffy, 2010; Lusk, 2010). Additionally, geared up with various smart technologies, youth are enabled to

constantly tap into social media through various applications, making it an essential part of their daily lives (Basat, 2010; Kushin, 2009). According to the Pew Research Center's Teens Relationship Survey (Pew Research Center, 2015), 71% of online teenagers were already engaged in more than one social media channel, ranked from Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, and more than half (56%) of teens between 13 and 17 reported that they go online at least several times a day or almost constantly. The reliance on and popularity of social media among youth continue to increase, leaving it as the most convenient way to communicate and interact with children and adolescents.

Social media have also demonstrated significant potential as effective tools to facilitate positive youth development and encourage civic engagement. Prior research revealed social media as helpful tools to build closer relationships with publics (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), educate about environmental or philanthropic concerns, and foster engagement and dialogue regarding campaigns and issues (Bresciani & Schmeil, 2012; Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Catala Jin, 2011; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Smith, 2010; Waters & Lo, 2012). The positive functions of social media indicate their

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: rami1003@ufl.edu (A.R. Lee), horsley@apr.ua.edu (J. Suzanne Horsley).

potential to be a channel to foster positive youth development (PYD), which emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities and services to youth in order to draw positive outcomes and developments for youth (Park, Rodgers, & Stemmler, 2011). According to the framework, six traits are critical for positive development of youth—competence, confidence, connection, character, caring or compassion, and contribution (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). Considering the critical role of social media among youth, these 6Cs can be facilitated through educational messages, interactions, and empowerment via social media.

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of a youth-related organization's social media communications in positive youth development. Despite the increasing role of social media and popularity of its use among youth-serving organizations, little has been established regarding how youth-related organizations are using social media and how those communications affect youth development. Therefore, this study investigates social media communication practices of a youth-related organization, the 4-H Club. The 4-H club is one of the oldest and largest youth organizations in the United States, which provides diverse educational programs to facilitate positive youth development and civic engagement (USDA, 2014). The study employed two methods to examine the role of social media in promoting positive youth development. First, a content analysis was conducted as to explore what and how 4-H communicates through Facebook by analyzing the posts of the national 4-H Facebook page from 2009 through the first quarter of 2015. Then in-depth interviews were conducted with recent 4-H alumni who had used the 4-H Facebook page during their membership. Through investigations of social media usage patterns by the youth-serving organization and its possible impact, the research is expected to provide insights for public relations practitioners of other nonprofit organizations, and for-profit sectors as well, in terms of valuable and practical ways to use social media for youth civic engagement.

2. Literature review

2.1. Youth and leverage of social media

Today's youth are naturally “active, experiential learners, natural multitaskers, using a range of digital devices and platforms simultaneously to drive their own informal learning agendas” (Bittman, Rutherford, Brown, & Unsworth, 2011, p.161). These special attributes of youth have bestowed a unique identity, extending their leverage as early-adopters and influencers in the fast-changing digital world. By quickly adopting and learning new environments, millennials have formed inextricable connections to social media and become the primary user (Ahn, 2011; Boyd, 2007; Koh, 2009; Livingstone, 2002; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Prensky, 2001). Considering their leverage in online platforms and future society, the importance of educating youth through social media for positive development and further societal development drew the attention of educators as well as nonprofit organizations (NPO).

A great deal of research has examined the role of social media as central vehicles for communication, education, civic and political engagement, and consequently, social change (Bresciani & Schmeil, 2012; Damodar, 2012; Gladarev & Lonkila, 2012; Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009; Mansfield, 2011; Murthy & Longwell, 2013). First, social media functions as a communication tool, which allows creative and affordable avenues for information dissemination and public participation. Many NPOs have utilized social media offering more opportunities of communication and information sharing (Curtis et al., 2010; Nelson, 2012), and the active interactions with various publics positively contribute to organizational branding and relationship management. For example, YouTube video clips of nonprofit organizations can play an important role in constructing organizational identities (Waters & Jones, 2011). Additionally, social media play an important role in encouraging civic engagement in a democratic society by promoting political expression of individuals, subsequently influencing

social change (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Kent, 2013; Warren, Sulaiman, & Jaafar, 2014).

In addition, even though most social media were not originally designed for educational purposes (McEwan, 2012), several social media platforms receive credit for educational application and potential (Crews & Stitt-Gohdes, 2012). Social media have been adopted by more and more faculty members at universities to build relationships with students, share information and class materials, and provide diverse learning opportunities and engagement (Blumberg, Blades, & Oates, 2013; Wang, Lin, Yu, & Wu, 2013). Facebook can be an effective pedagogical tool considering its three dimensions, which are communication, collaboration, and resource and material sharing (Aydin, 2012; Mazman & Usluel, 2010). Online games can benefit child development (Blumberg et al., 2013), and blogs can be helpful for improving writing skills and fostering feedback among peers and faculty (Grosbeck, 2009). The integration of digital technologies and education connotes innovative and influential ways to impact youths' personal improvement and their contribution to society (Bers, 2010).

The potential functions of social media and characteristics of youth have led youth-related organizations to utilize social media as the main media of youth interactions and education. Youth-serving organizations have exhibited relatively quick adaptation since social media are deeply ingrained in the daily lives of youths, who are the main stakeholders of the organizations. For example, the 4-H program, Future Farmers of America (FFA), and the Girl and Boy Scouts have developed prominence in online presence through active use of social media. Online platforms allow the organizations to provide their youth members sound information about social issues, enable them to share the information and related news with their peers, expose them to positive values, and offer them opportunities to address social issues through online interactions (Carpini & Michael, 2000). The unique characteristics of online media platforms such as Facebook facilitate organizational communications as well as interactions with and among young members. This is likely to increase the influence of the organizations' efforts with youth in significant ways, subsequently leading to facilitate organizational goals such as positive youth development (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009).

2.2. Promoting positive youth development via social media

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a framework that emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities and services to facilitate positive outcomes and developments for youth (Park et al., 2011). PYD presumes a promising view of youth, focusing on developing the capabilities of youth including social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competence. Previous literature in child development and educational psychology revealed that PYD promotes bonding, resilience, self-determination, spirituality, self-efficacy, and positive identity (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). These positive outcomes allow children to thrive in their schools, communities and societies as well as to grow into upright citizens who have responsibility, value diversity and empathy, and exhibit resilience, gratitude, and leadership (Lerner et al., 2003).

PYD occurs when the six Cs are fostered: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Compassion, and Contribution. Little (1993) initially proposed the first four Cs, and the following concepts were chronologically added by subsequent researchers (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The first five Cs are considered as indicators of reflective, constructive, and healthy developmental behaviors in childhood and youth. That is, when a child manifests those Cs, he or she will be on a life trajectory toward an “idealized adulthood” and less likely to participate in risky behavior (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Bowers et al., 2010; Bruyere, 2010; Lerner et al., 2005). Young people who possess the five PYD characteristics are believed to contribute to society ideologically and behaviorally by fulfilling their civic duties out of their own moral beliefs (Lerner et al., 2013), and

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