Evaluating individual level antecedents and consequences of social media use in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Social media use has increased tremendously over the last few years, generating immense interest in the phenomenon in both research and practice. Hence, this study takes a quantitative (survey design) approach to empirically examine the user (consumer) level factors that influence social media use, their consequences, and the moderating effects of consumer demographic variables (age and gender). The findings suggest that while external pressure from a consumer's referent group influence their social media use, the consumer's personal values does not. Moreover, social media use generates bridging social capital and subjective wellbeing among consumers. The empirical analysis also shows that consumer demographic variables (age and gender) do not have any significant differences in their use of social media. We shed light on the relative effects of these antecedents on social media use from a holistic perspective employing the social presence theory. This study also contributes to the augmentation and displacement hypotheses of computer-mediated communication and tends to support the augmentation hypothesis. The results will also be useful for firms by employing techniques that would arouse interest and curiosity to attract the attention of social media users.

1. Introduction

Social media use has increased exponentially in recent years taking into account the buzz surrounding the use of social networks at the individual level as well as the firm's media mix (Koo et al., 2014; Peters et al., 2013). Recent statistics on social media use (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.) have registered over a billion users in the last decade (Kent, 2015). These social network sites have transformed information acquisition, communication, usage and lifestyles (C.-C. Chang et al., 2015; Kim, 2016) and have generated enormous interest in both research and practice. To this end, many firms now incorporate social media metrics into their marketing communications and customer relationship management activities in the quest of reaching and engaging with customers (Malthouse et al., 2013). Given the growing popularity of social media, it is especially important to examine the key antecedents (e.g., personal values and external pressures) and consequences (e.g., subjective wellbeing and bridging social capital) of different patterns of social media use.

Globally, social media has created inconceivable social interactions whereby online, a consumer can join communities, share updates, as well as randomly "friend" or "de-friend" a contact (Curras-Perez et al., 2014). This multi-interactivity created by social media sites and the ease of the process promotes some behavioural engagement among

users (C.-C. Chang et al., 2015). Consequently, the power of social media cannot be underrated, and this is anticipated to continue to transform not only personal, but also organizational interactions globally (Ngai et al., 2015). Certain antecedents drive consumers' use of social media, which in turn generates consequences (Bolton et al., 2013). Most studies on social media use adopt the theory of reasoned action (TRA), theory of planned behaviour (TPB) or technology acceptance model (TAM) approaches (e.g., Ajjan and Hartshorne, 2008; C.-C. Chang et al., 2015; Rauniar et al., 2014) to shed light on consumer adoption or intention to use social media. However, studies that examine the antecedents and consequences of social media use from the perspective of social presence theory are scarce. Social presence theory asserts that the social presence of a medium influences the recipients' understanding of contents generated from senders (Cui et al., 2013). This in turn enhances the user's feelings in participating in social interactions (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009), which is likely to be influenced by his/her personal values and external pressures from referent groups.

In an attempt to address this gap, Bolton et al. (2013) developed a model conceptualizing the antecedents and consequences of Generation Y's social media use. Their model provides relevant insights to understand these antecedents and consequences (e.g., social capital and wellbeing) of social media use, however the individual-level component

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is not exhaustive, which calls for a need for further research. Although, a myriad of factors may influence social media use at the consumer level, we use Bolton et al.'s (2013) model as our starting point. Therefore, we derive the following from their model: personal values, age, social capital and subjective wellbeing. We respond to this call by extending the individual-level component of Bolton et al.'s (2013) conceptual model, and integrating external pressure and personal values as antecedents of social media use using social presence theory. However, instead of focusing on Generation Y as did Bolton et al. (2013), we extend our study across generations to examine whether or not there are some inter-generational differences, with our focus being social media users.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of peer relationships among social media users. Although, the literature seems fragmented, some scholars have noted the importance of social capital and psychosocial developments including subjective wellbeing as some pertinent outcomes of social media use (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008). While these consequences are important in the social world of the individual, it becomes imperative to examine the underlying antecedents influencing social media use. Consequently, the selection of these peculiar antecedents (i.e., external pressure and personal values) to social media use is considered critical taking into account their relevance in explaining the individual's behaviours and beliefs (Sagiv and Schwartz, 1995). It is argued that the gratification of having values and social norms consistent with an individual's actions and perceptions (regarding social capital and subjective wellbeing) projects a person's conviction of social presence (Liker and Sindi, 1997; Schiffman et al., 2003; Walther, 1992).

Further, most studies on social media use focus on specific social media platforms such as Facebook (Ellison et al., 2007; Kim and Lee, 2011; Rauniar et al., 2014), Twitter (Lim et al., 2014) and WhatsApp (Aharony, 2015). This study departs from this norm as it does not select a particular social media platform, but rather focuses on social media as a holistic phenomenon (thus, preference was not given to one particular social media site or platform, but rather considered all platforms as one to encompass social media use) (e.g., VanMeter et al., 2015). This was deemed necessary considering the fact that most social media users do not limit themselves to just one platform and therefore, firms can use multiple platforms concurrently to reach out to potential customers. Further, while most research on social media use's antecedents and consequences have focused on specific contexts such as education (Cao et al., 2013) and generational cohort (Bolton et al., 2013), we take a wider perspective by examining social media use at the individual or consumer level, which will be beneficial to several firms irrespective of their industry.

In contributing to the extant literature on social media, we take a quantitative approach to critically examine the individual level factors that influence social media use and their consequences. In light of this, the objectives of this study are two-fold. First the study examines the influence of the postulated antecedents on social media use and the relative consequences. Secondly, this study investigates the moderating effects of age and gender on the relationships between the antecedents and social media use. Our work contributes to the extant literature on social media. We extend the conceptual work of Bolton et al. (2013) by empirically evaluating some pertinent antecedents of social media use (personal values and external pressure) that have received little attention in research. Not only does external pressure encompass both individual and referent group readiness to use social media, but also its significant relationship with social media use has been empirically proven (Cao et al., 2013). Similarly, personal values are a key antecedent of social media use since a consumer's use of social media must align with his or her personal values (Tu, 2000).

We shed light on the relative effects of these antecedents employing the social presence theory, which ensures that our study departs from the norm of using TRA or TAM (e.g., C.-C. Chang et al., 2015; Rauniar et al., 2014). We also contribute to the very few studies that adopt a holistic approach to the study of social media (e.g., VanMeter et al., 2015). This holistic approach involved concentrating on social media as a universal phenomenon instead of singling out a particular platform. This was necessitated by the constant evolution that social media undergo: emergence of new platforms and phasing out of existing platforms (e.g., VanMeter et al., 2015). It is hoped that this will ensure the relevance of our study, even in the face of evolution. From this holistic approach, our work is the first to empirically examine the antecedents and consequences of social media use from the individual consumer level, and how these are moderated by their demographic variables. Finally, we contribute to the augmentation and displacement hypotheses of computer-mediated communication and tend to support the augmentation hypothesis.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: first, we provide a review of the theory related to social media use, its antecedents and consequences. This comprises the research model and hypotheses. Next, we describe the research methodology and discuss the statistical results. Finally, we summarize the findings and discuss the implications for theory and practice, and conclude with limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Social presence theory

From a social presence theory (SPT) perspective, individuals engage in the use of social media as they see it as a form, behaviour, or sensory experience that projects some form of intelligence and social acceptance (Tu, 2000). Tracing its roots in the "social psychological theories of interpersonal communication and symbolic interactionism", the theory has been applied in the "context of mediated communication" (Cui et al., 2013, p. 662), which is also extended to social media research (Chang and Hsu, 2016). SPT originally used to assess how social context affects media choice, is defined as "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (Short et al., 1976, p. 65). Social presence effectively promotes social interactions, frequency of use and time spent in these virtual communities (Zhan and Mei, 2013). Although, there could be some degree of variation regarding the level of interactions between individuals (Gunawardena, 1995; Short et al., 1976), this could be influenced by the social media platform used. Thus, the richness of information and quality of communication is largely influenced by social presence (Chang and Hsu, 2016), which is also affirmed by Gunawardena (1995) who points out the significant contribution of social presence ensuring the capacity of the medium to transmit information. To this end, Short et al. (1976) considered social presence as a subjective quality of the medium, which is determined by the perceptions of the social participants of the medium.

Proponents of social presence theory assert that perceptions of social presence are subjective at the individual level, which depends on the medium's objective quality (technological social presence) (Gunawardena, 1995; Tu, 2000; Walther, 1992). Short et al. (1976) highlight two concepts associated with social presence to include: concept of "intimacy;" and concept of "immediacy". While "intimacy is a function of eye contact, proximity, topic of conversation …immediacy is the psychological distance between communicator and recipient" which is "generated verbally and nonverbally" (Tu, 2000, p. 28). This suggests that social presence contributes to the level of intimacy as a result of the social interactions, which allows consumers to convey immediacy or non-immediacy nonverbally (physical proximity, pictures, and facial expression) as well as verbally (Gunawardena, 1995). The intimacy resulting from interactions propagated by social presence enhance individual's feelings and also provide a platform for learning (Dunlap and Lowenthal, 2009). Hence, social presence encourage on-line social interactions fundamental to person-to-person communication (Tu, 2000). Further, the intimacy enshrined in social presence