The Potential of Social Media as a Vehicle for Social Action
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ABSTRACT

Social network services (SNS) are potentially full of social capital, yet it remains unclear how to use SNS to generate productive social behavior. This proposal seeks to study **how SNS users establish and foster a sense of community** online. Identifying those features can be useful in encouraging pro-social participation offline.

PROBLEM

Even though many agree that social networks have value (Putman, 2000), and despite the fact that several studies have begun to explore how SNS affect social behavior—including crowdsourcing, social anxiety, self-esteem, and virtual relationships—**it is unclear what are the expected collective or economic benefits derived from SNS.**

With online social interactions numbered in the millions, it is hoped that behaviors that are beneficial to others (pro-social) might represent a significant part of what ultimately give SNS value.

PURPOSE

The proposed study will use the Social Ecological Model (SEM) to examine if certain aspects of what makes SNS useful to their members can be adapted to encourage participation in pro-social activities, online and offline.

Although the qualitative SEM model has never been used to study a virtual environment before, adopting SEM will allow this study to investigate the perception and influence online friends have on an individual's participation in online as well as offline communities, particularly in terms of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Burke, M., Marlow, C., & Lento, T. (2009) conducted a similar study on new social media member's **contribution to the online community** and its possible effects on offline participation.

Ellison, N., Steinfield, C. & Lampe, C. (2007) studied how members of Facebook **maintaining social ties and create social capital** using the Internet.

Hazari, S. & Richards, A. (2011) provided the only known qualitative study on social communities along with a good summary on social media tools and how it changed the way **individuals and organizations communicate** with each other.

Lin, K.-Y., & Lu, H.-P. (2011) focused specifically in network externalities and how it relates to online member's **motivation to join** social communities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ: What reasons do social media users use to explain their involvement in online communities (e.g. Facebook), and how does it compare to their participation in offline social communities? (Individual)

Sub-Question 1: How much weight do participants give to their online friends for their involvement in online and offline communities? (Relationship)

Sub-Question 2: What are some of the benefits and limitations participants experienced when actively participating in an online community? (Community)

Sub-Question 3: How much influence do social policies have on participants' disposition to carry their online experience into offline social activities, particularly those involving helping others? (Societal)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

PROCEDURES

Four open-ended interview questions on the subject of online/offline participation on a sample size of twelve Facebook users (cf. Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), who are undergraduate and graduate students, a portion of which will also be engaged in offline social activities.

To make a fair representation of the Facebook community, the sample will include both male and female, ages 18-35, from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

DATA ANALYSIS

A preliminary codebook would be developed for this study based on a modified SEM model.

HyperRESEARCH™, where participants' emic responses would be assigned codes and described.

Representation of the data will be display using descriptive information about each individual on a table.

FINDINGS

A qualitative approach should allow the identification of bottom-up effects (how individuals affect social networks by forming alliances or coalitions to accomplish goals), and interactive effects (how interdependent variables, such as technology, at the same time liberate and constrain individual and communal behavior at various levels).

LIMITATIONS

The study does not include other age groups, such as the young and the elderly, or people outside the U.S., whose online experience might differ considerably from the target group.

It remains difficult to verify participants' responses and reported online activity with their actual online behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

This proposed study predicts that online SNS operate and fulfill many of the same needs as do their offline counterparts, but with some remarkable differences; indeed, this study contends that the **key to unlock the social capital** latent in SNS resides in the **strength of relationship ties** among users and their friends.

SOCIAL CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

The results from this study could help highlight ways SNS such as Facebook can be effective fomenting important social endeavors, including: spreading awareness on political issues, help law agencies in locating missing children, garner support for local projects, etc.

This study is of importance to psychologists, social scientists, and policymakers insofar as it would increase our understanding of how people integrate, communicate, and interact with social media in their daily lives, which can later be used to encourage policies aimed at promoting pro-social behavior (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).