Chapter 7
Managing Social Reputation in Twitter

Annabell Preussler
Universität Duisburg-Essen, Germany

Michael Kerres
Universität Duisburg-Essen, Germany

ABSTRACT

Online communities, like Twitter, attract thousands of users worldwide spending hours communicating with others via the Internet. Most platforms offer mechanisms that show the ‘rank’ or ‘social reputation’ users have gained within the social community the platform establishes. This chapter analyses the motivation of users to engage intensively from a social psychological perspective and follows the hypotheses that these status information function as a highly effective reward mechanism. The chapter describes the results of a survey that has been conducted with users of Twitter in order to find out how important it is for users to gain ‘followers’. The chapter outlines a theoretical construct that explains why users try to gain social reputation in different virtual worlds. For this, a typology of virtual worlds has been developed based on possible spill-over effects of social reputation that can be gained in virtual and real worlds.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of online communities has been growing noticeably over the past years. Within only a few months, services like Twitter, Facebook or XING have gained several million of users. It is, however, not quite obvious what makes these platforms attractive to so many users and what factors motivate them to engage very intensively in these environments. In our opinion, the possibility of building social relationships with others might be one aspect: Most systems offer mechanisms that show the ‘rank’ or ‘social reputation’ users have earned. The question is, how important is this...
‘reputation’ for users, how actively do users they try to gain social reputation in virtual worlds and to what extent can this be described as a reward mechanism that influences a user’s behaviour?

In the following we will illustrate the users activities in gaining social reputation and its management by regarding the microblogging network Twitter. The objectives of this chapter are on the one hand to give an overview about the various scenarios of Twitter use and on the other hand to outline a theoretical construct dealing with reputation in social networks. This includes the definition of reputation in these networks and introduces the findings of a study which was conducted in order to find out to what extent Twitter users undertake activities for gaining online reputation. We will also deal with the question, whether this reputation mechanism influences users’ behaviour in relation to learning.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 What is Twitter?

Twitter is one of the most popular services for microblogging and thus belongs to the category ‘social software’ that can be found in ‘Web 2.0’ applications4. According to Bächle (2006) software systems that support human communication and collaboration are called ‘social software’ (cf. Bächle, 2006, p. 121). These can be blogs and wikis, social bookmarking applications as well as microblogging services.

Microblogs can be compared to weblogs with the distinction that the posts are much shorter and do not contain additional information or headlines (cf. Barnes & Böhringer, 2009, p. 2). These messages can be addressed to everybody or to a specific person, but they are usually public. Like in a weblog, the posts appear in reversed chronological order on a user’s main page. Twitter limits the number of characters used in a posting – the so called ‘tweet’ – to 140 or similar, so it can be compared with an SMS that is sent to the Internet. Almost everybody can read it and it stays stored online on the user’s main page until it is deleted. The goal of this limitation is to motivate users to often post short messages in their microblogs (cf. ibid.). Access to the microblogging service is also possible by using mobile text messages, desktop clients or several third party applications. It becomes obvious that Twitter is extremely flexible. By logging into Twitter the users are asked to type into a text box what they are currently doing (See Figure 1). The answers are quite different: Java, Song, Finin & Tseng (2007) and also Simon & Bernhardt (2008) revealed that most people use Twitter in order to publish links, report news or simply to chat with others – but some people even document their whole day with almost no exception.

As in most applications ‘Web 2.0’ has carried out, no specific technical knowledge is necessary for using Twitter. It is possible to make individual adaptations like creating user lists or arrange third party software after personal criteria, but the access to Twitter and posting regular tweets is very simple.

An important factor of Twitter is the possibility of networking. Users can add one another to their social network and thus ‘follow’ each other (cf. Kerres & Preussler, 2009, p. 6). To follow a user means that the recent posts of a member’s followers appear in a chronologically ordered view on their starting page (cf. Barnes & Böhringer, 2009, p. 2.)5. However, just following a person does not necessarily mean a virtual friendship; it is just an easier way to access someone’s postings.

Twitter is used as well by private persons as by companies, politicians, organisations, newspapers etc. Our expectation is that Twitter has such popularity, because users can become part of a network consisting of people with similar interests that can exchange information with each other (cf. Kerres & Preussler, 2009, p. 6). Furthermore, it is a tool for self-promotion and it focuses on curiosity about other people. Twitter is a social network according to the human need for social acceptance. People can be heard, maybe even because of the...
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