Leaders and Followers in Social Networking Environments: A Conceptual Model

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper focuses on understanding the characteristics and behaviors of leaders and followers in social networking communities. The study differentiates between four groups of actors: “Established Leaders”, “Emergent Leaders”, “Newbies”, and “Supporters”. Based on a review of the literature on leaders and followers in virtual groups, the Leader/Follower Behavior in Social Networking Environments model is presented. The model assumes that the characteristics of actors determine the type of leader or follower they are likely to become. Building on this assumption, the model considers leader/follower characteristics and behaviors as independent variables that lead to a range of outcomes for actors. The outcomes can range from the leader/follower increasing his/her power, maintaining the same level of power, decreasing his/her power, or leaving the community altogether. The discussion and conclusions section develops the theoretical implications from the model and offers suggestions on how the model can be tested and expanded.

Keywords: Emergent Leaders, Established Leaders, Network Environments, Paper, Study

INTRODUCTION

Given that this paper focuses on social networking communities, a definition of these communities is in order. We define social networking communities (based on Romm, Pliskin and Clarke, 1997) as “on-line communities that focus on the building and verifying of social networks for any purpose.” This definition accounts for the fact that social networking services and the communities that they support do, indeed, offer a wide range of services. Thus, while some social networking communities offer merely blog hosting, others provide the option of joining groups temporarily (through chat rooms) or for longer periods of time (through electronic bulletin boards, newsgroups or on-line virtual communities). Some social networking services focus on medical advice and support (e.g., DailyStrength), some offer

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opportunities for professional networking (e.g., LinkedIn), some facilitate sharing of music and video clips (e.g., UTube), and other match their members for social and marital purposes (e.g., Match.com).

Social networking communities grew out of networks of professionals (mostly in the information technology area). However, they eventually evolved to offer a social space for people who were not necessarily members of such communities. Also, even though the early social networking communities consisted primarily of members of the “elite”, the past two decades have seen the entry of females, the young, the old, the less educated, those with lower income, non-English speaking, and non-white members of the community (Feenberg and Bakardjieva, 2004).

As social networking communities became larger and more numerous, they also became more attractive business enterprises. One of the most notable examples of this phenomenon is the case of YouTube, which was acquired by Google for 1.6 billion dollars in 2006 (Delaney, Buckman and Guth, 2006). The company, developed by its young founders in their garage in 2005, increased its hit rate from zero to over 100 million visitors per month in just a few years.

A similar but more recent example of the same phenomenon is the story of Twitter, a social networking service, offering the ability to send short 140 character messages to anyone who is interested in reading them (not just members of one’s friends group). The company, which had 4.3 million users in 2008, increased its membership by late 2009 to 54.7 millions, and even though by late 2009, it has not yet made any profit, a group of investors led by T. Rowe Price Group, Inc. and Insight Venture Partners, two mutual funds giants, valued it at $1 billion dollars (Vascellaro and Corkery, 2009).

Despite the proliferation of social networking services and the exponential growth in their membership, there is a relative paucity of research on the social dynamics of these communities, including the behavior of leaders and followers, the emergence of leaders, the development of leaders, and the relationship between different types of leaders (such as established versus emergent leaders) of social networking communities. In the following sections of this paper we explore the extant literature on these topics with special emphasis on the characteristics of leaders in social networking communities and how leaders of such communities emerge, change and decline. As part of the discussion, we introduce the “Leader/Follower Behavior in Social Networking Environments” model. We conclude with a discussion of the implications from this conceptual paper for future empirical research on the behavior of leaders and followers in social networking environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the main distinction in our conceptualization is between leaders and followers, we define leadership as “influence exerted...over other people to guide, structure and facilitate relationships in a group...” (Yukl, 1998, p. 3). Furthermore, following Yoo and Alavi (2004, p. 29), and in addition to the static approach to leadership offered by Yukl (1998), we treat leadership as “spontaneously accorded by fellow team members and as an emergent phenomenon that develops over time through group processes”. As our understanding of leadership has a strong emphasis on changes over time, we perceive leaders as individuals who earn their status through “incremental influences and contributions to the team” (Hol-lander, 1960). By implication, the definition of
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