Social Media Engagement Theory: Exploring the Influence of User Engagement on Social Media Usage

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ABSTRACT

Business models that rely on social media and user-generated content have shifted from the more traditional business model, where value for the organization is derived from the one-way delivery of products and/or services, to the provision of intangible value based on user engagement. This research builds a model that hypothesizes that the user experiences from social interactions among users, operationalized as personalization, transparency, access to social resources, critical mass of social acquaintances, and risk, as well as with the technical features of the social media platform, operationalized as the completeness, flexibility, integration, and evolvability, influence user engagement and subsequent usage behavior. Using survey responses from 408 social media users, findings suggest that both social and technical factors impact user engagement and ultimately usage with additional direct impacts on usage by perceptions of the critical mass of social acquaintances and risk.

KEYWORDS

Social Interactions, Social Media, Social Networking, Technical Features, Use, User Engagement, User Experience

INTRODUCTION

Under the traditional business model, an organization’s primary goal is to create a tangible product or service and protect the organization from competitors by creating an organizational boundary. Pine and Gilmore (1999) challenged this belief by changing the value proposition to include the user experience for deriving value. Through social media, users modify, share, and reuse content, regardless of the creators’ original meaning or purpose. Lessig (2008) suggests that remixing content is a generational shift in how users communicate. Now users can provide unique perspectives on what they consider personally meaningful. Social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media is valuable because it not only satisfies the needs and interests of users, but also supports an interactive audience for advertising and market intelligence to an organization.

Alexa.com, a web analytics company, found eight of the 10 most visited websites rely on user-generated content (UGC). For instance, Facebook boasts over 829 million daily users. Social media represents a new business model where value is co-created by users contributing, retrieving, and exploring content with other users via a social media platform developed by an organization. Co-created value is defined as the mutual benefits that both an organization and users derive from sharing in joint
activities. Organizations benefit when they leverage UGC to develop marketing insights, to realize cost savings, to grow brand awareness, and ultimately to generate new innovations. Users benefit from the ability to socially interact within the social media platform to fulfill personal needs and interests.

However, co-creating value with users is risky. Organizations must focus on the user experience or negative consequences can occur, such as loss of user participation. For example, Chevrolet created a social media platform for users to create commercials for the Chevy Tahoe. Chevrolet provided video clips of the Tahoe being driven through beautiful countryside and navigating rough terrain. Chevrolet also allowed users to overlay text to create their own brand messages that users subsequently used to create negative messages about Chevrolet. The end result was a prominent position on CNNMoney.com’s 101 Dumbest Moments in Business (2007).

This research seeks to answer the following two questions: what factors shape user engagement in social media and to what extent does user engagement affect an individual’s social media usage behavior? This research makes two contributions to the field of IS. First, a theory of Social Media Engagement (SME) is developed which predicts that the user experience, encompassing both the social interactions among users and the technical features of the social media platform, will influence user engagement. User engagement will, in turn, positively affect usage. Second, this theory is operationalized and tested using survey, interview, and user-log data to empirically assess the experiential factors that predict high levels of user engagement, and the impact of user engagement on the frequency of use of the social media platform.

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT THEORY

This research builds upon Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s (2004) model of co-creation in the service sector and adapts this model to create a parsimonious theoretical framework to explain SME. Originally built as a model of interaction between a user and organization, we extend this model to focus on the social interactions among users that are supported by the social media platform provided by an organization. We build upon Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s (2004) work by applying a socio-technical systems perspective to first address why the user experience influences engagement and subsequently usage.

Central to this model is the concept of user engagement. Within the context of IS research, the term engagement is applied inconsistently and results in many different conceptual models that lack clear definition and measurement (Hwang & Thorn, 1999; O’Brien & Toms, 2008; Ray, Kim, & Morris, 2014). Although researchers implicitly agree that user engagement matters, exactly how to define engagement and clearly delineate engagement from similar concepts such as the user experience and actual usage is needed to advance research in this area. To accomplish this, the SME theoretical model outlines distinctions separating the factors that form the user experience, user engagement, and usage.

First, SME theory accounts for the role of technology as the underlying platform needed to facilitate social interactions among users that are globally and temporally distributed. Clearly, the rise of social media comes in large part from the evolution of technology to provide a unique user experience that enables users to connect in new ways that were never before possible. The user experience referred to in this research applies the definition of experience as the content of direct observation or participation in an event. When experience is defined as a noun, referring to the content stemming from direct participation, there are two critical factors that form the user experience in social media: the experience derived from the social interactions and the experience derived from the technical features. Social interactions are defined as the communication among users through social media (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Social interactions form the user experience by fostering a personalized relationship among users, by serving as a transparent means of communication, by providing access to social resources including friends, acquaintances, and family members, and by defining the potential benefits and costs to engaging within social media (Jensen & Aanestad, 2007; Kettinger & Lee, 1994; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Wixom & Todd, 2005). Social interactions among the users are what provide meaning and guide the user in evaluating how intensely involved
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