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Navigating Value Co-Creation in Entertainment: A Netnography Study on the Wang Hong Ecosystem

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Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

This research-in-progress paper investigates how emergent social technologies and platforms enable value co-creation in the creative content ecosystem. Co-creation is significant in Information Systems literature, as it embeds the entrepreneurial, business and economic values of digital businesses such as the creative content ecosystem. While existing literature exploring value co-creation from a marketing and managerial perspective is not uncommon, they do not explore how value co-creation is enabled by emerging creative content ecosystem. In this study, we utilise a mixed method of case study and netnography within the digital context of Wang Hong to explore how value is generated through co-creation by consumer-turned creators. The proposed study aims to fill the gap in literature by using a qualitative study to investigate how creative content industries enable value co-creation.

Keywords: value co-creation, user generated content, social media technologies, Case Study, netnography

Introduction

Growth of the creative content ecosystem is creating value both culturally and economically in the various sectors of advertising, music, films, media, gaming, architecture and performing arts. Digital content contributes significantly to the growth of the creative content ecosystem as sales of digital cultural goods and services are estimated to have reached US$66 billion (Lhermitte et al. 2015) while digital growth represents 86% of the creative market growth from 2011 to 2015 in the Asia Pacific markets of South Korea, Australia and Japan (Bhargava and Klat 2017).

The proliferation of the Internet in recent times has caused value co-creation to become increasingly critical for an organisation to remain competitive (Saarijärvi et al. 2013) as is the case for the creative content ecosystem. Co-creation is significant Information Systems (IS) literature as it underscores the entrepreneurial, business and economical values of emerging digital businesses, such as content industries including media and entertainment. In terms of the creative content ecosystem, social media use has increased in recent years and have become one of the most important platforms for communication. For example, the average number of active users per month on Twitter and Facebook has reached 0.27 and 1.28 billion, respectively (Statista 2017). The traditional view of value co-creation from a marketing perspective has been that customer knowledge is one of the most important knowledge bases for an organisation (Bennett and Gabriel 1999; Chase 1997) and through 'co-creation' in either an individual or in community context can enhance innovation and business performance (Schiele et al. 2012). Over the last century the consumer

behaviour has fundamentally changed from isolated to connected, from unaware to informed, from passive to active, and a shift from goods to services, all having a crucial digital component (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000).

In particular, rapid technological development has empowered consumers of digital contents including users of social media by enabling connection and sharing of information letting them connect and disperse information and experiences never seen before. Social technologies have disrupted conventional content creation and productions, where consumers are turning into creators and transforming into social media influencers also known as internet celebrities (Hua et al. 2017). Internet celebrities are persons who become famous by means of being broadcasted online. Some entertainment organisations work with internet celebrities to share their expertise and recommend products, to their fans. In previous studies, Internet celebrities' promote their content through IT-mediated social platforms such as live streaming to demonstrate their consumption experience to their viewers through analogy - an example being Wanghong in Chinese e-commerce websites These changing technological environment and consumer behaviour have led to a new phenomenon characterised by co-creation of content between consumers and consumer-turned-creators, which is becoming an emerging research priority in IS. Notably, consumers in social media spaces are constantly engaging in service exchanges both amongst themselves, to firms and to creators is the result of creators creating and or maintaining a strong social media presence (Day 2011).

Yet, despite the increased awareness into value co-creation, how these actors enable creation of value through social media technologies remains unclear. Existing studies have introduced the shift in power from consumer to creator; those who make various use of content produced as a result of the proliferation of the Internet (Halliday 2016). There is a lack of research into how technologies are being used to enable creative contents on digital platforms. This is particularly important, as without such guidance it will be significantly more difficult to facilitate value co-creation, and in turn, creators and consumers will be unable to maximise opportunities to create value. We found in our research that specific value co-creation mechanisms enabled by technology is the key in building complex relationships between key value co-creation constructs (Srivastava and Shainesh 2015).

This study, therefore, addresses the research question: How does emergent social technologies and platforms enable value co-creation in the creative content ecosystem? Adopting value co-creation as the theoretical lens, a case study and netnography techniques is conducted into China's digital celebrity, or Wanghong industry.

Literature Review

Creative Contents and Social Media

The creative ecosystem can be defined as the set of agents in a market characterised by adoption of novel ideas within social networks for production and consumption (Potts et al. 2008). This creative ecosystem has experienced the prevalence of creative activity and distribution of creative content as the barriers to disseminating material have been considerably lowered (Hargittai and Walejko 2008) with the emergence of the Internet and social media. TED for example is a set of global conferences that distributes its creative contents through the medium of social media successfully by interacting with 9.2 million subscribers within its YouTube Channel. These digital platforms like YouTube has grown to be an online community (Rotman and Preece 2010); enabling space for communication and interaction between users rather than existing as a static broadcasting application.

The emergence of social media in a Web 2.0 environment has enabled global distribution of contents; blurring the line between production and consumption; with users beginning to assume not only the role of a consumer but also the creator, producing and sharing contents online (Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson 2013), known as User Generated Contents (UGC). Therefore, UGC may be classified as operand resources (Halliday 2016) that can be used and re-used by consumers, transforming the traditional provider-consumer dichotomy to an actor-to-actor network within the digital community (Lusch and Nambisan 2015). A user's experience of digital content requires customers to participate in learning and co-creating the experience (Rowley 2008) thereby reconfiguring the role of a consumer to contributor and creator (Tapscott 2008). This phenomenon of consumer-turned creator and UGC is likely to continue to be a future-oriented service with significant impacts on both individuals and society due to its global distribution (Kim et al. 2012).

The shared vision and capabilities for communication enabled by social technologies and platforms are the major motivation for actors to create value in creative content ecosystems. Humans are social beings and

have a typical need for self-esteem and the need to belong to a group with shared goals and motivations. These inherent needs lead individuals to join social technologies to fulfill their desire and need to connect with those who have shared norms, values and interests (Ahuja and Alavi 2018). As they start participating in online spaces, interactivity is generated and leads to certain benefits for the participants, which include an increase in their sense of community, social support, and satisfaction. At the same time these social technologies and platforms can be used by organisations for the purpose of improving their business strategy and offerings, and as a result of attracting consumers with content - beyond selling a tangible product. The users' interactions are subject to network effects where the value of platform affiliation for any given user depends upon the number of other users with whom they can interact (Farrell and Saloner 1985). This creation of value through the network effect is created by the interactive relationships that is simultaneous and parallel between the users (Pagani 2013).

A substantial amount of studies has been conducted to identify variances for co-creation of consumer-turned content creators within the content ecosystem. While they've made significant contributions, the utilized methodologies are predominantly quantitative. Li et al. (2014) adopted a quantitative four-item measure to assess the extent to which social capital and community support dynamically influences a users' intention to create UGC within online communities. Daugherty et al. (2008) identified attitudinal factors that contribute to consumer consumption and creation of UGC by similarly implementing a quantitative research through surveys. A gap in knowledge can be identified due to the heavy focus on quantitative research as the knowledge produced may be too abstract for direct application to specific local situations and contexts (Onwuegbuzie 2004) such as social media. While the universal phenomenon was recognised, it may be difficult to apply creative content for specific digital platforms. Whilst addressing this gap in value co-creation literature, the advantages of netnography allows us to study communities which only exist in the virtual world and where normal access would prove to be difficult (Beckmann and Langer 2005).

Value creation and Role of Technology

As technology platforms for supporting value co-creation have improved and become cheaper and easier to use, and as opportunities for using social media have proliferated (Haefliger et al. 2011), we witness a dramatic increase in online engagement and communication between consumers and creators. In this perspective, value co-creation is extended as specifically firms and customers inventing new and innovative ways to support each other's value creating processes (Vargo and Lusch 2008). For example, many researchers define co-creation as the process which consumers take an active role and co-create value together with the company (Kohler et al. 2011). These studies have tended to assume that value co-creation included customers interacting amongst themselves within a community (Haefliger et al. 2011). Such an inclusion, however, may no longer be relevant as value co-creation become increasingly integrated into new and shifting industries and ecosystems, involving multiple different stakeholders.

The nature of value co-creation has undergone a transition from the core intention focusing on firm's output and economic exchange (Vargo et al. 2008) to the view that the consumer's interactions can themselves be an important source of value (Kohler et al. 2011). The theoretical notion of value co-creation has been derived from the service dominant (S-D) logic proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004). The S-D logic suggests that service instead of goods should be the fundamental units of exchange; where goods are only transmitters of service and consumers are required to continue the marketing, consumption and value creation process to actualize the value of the goods. Value is created jointly and reciprocally through mutual interactions, facilitating the integration of resources among the producers and consumers (Vargo et al. 2008) in which the roles of producers and consumers in the value chain process are intertwined rather than distinct.

The last decade has observed a remarkable change in relationship realities in consumer culture, through the emergence of social technologies and media. These mechanisms shift the focus beyond the traditional exchange and onto the redefinition of a creator and consumer and their role and identity. This evolution was facilitated by the dramatic increase in online engagement digitised user-generated content through social media platforms (Dellarocas 2003). Early efforts focused on investigating how service exchange and value co-creation are influenced by social forces. For instance, researchers studied social construction theories (Edvardsson et al. 2011), collaborative competence (Lambe et al. 2002). They all argued that the best way to achieve value co-creation is for a creator to adapt to dynamic and complex environment by absorbing knowledge from the environment, customers and value networks (Lusch et al. 2007). However, this view limits the creator to be dependent on a path for absorptive capacity, and become more reactive to the opportunities presented in the current environment (Van den Bosch et al 1999) and less prepared at anticipating the emergence of valuable developments. Hence our study proposes the opportunities for

organisations to recognise the importance and influence of consumer-turned-creators in developing their organisation's foresight. The Internet and its attendant social media are making possible new and more effective ways for creators and consumers to collaborate and for consumer groups to coordinate their activities (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Sawhney et al. 2005). Examples of this include virtual worlds (Kohler et al. 2011), development of brand communities (Schau et al. 2009) and online gaming communities (Barrett et al. 2016; Kjærsgaard and Smith 2014).

Despite the relevant work on collaborative arrangements and value co-creation, there has been little research on how value co-creation is generated in the content ecosystem (Choi and Burnes 2013). Content industries are distinct in that their value is bringing forth an emotional response from consumers (O'Connor and O'keefe 2000). It also offers an opportunity for consumer to turn into creators and unite with a community to pursue a value they seek - whether it be economic or symbolic. These consumer-turned-creators often have knowledge, skills and experience that allows them to gain the flexibility needed to adapt to the rapidly changing business environment (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000). Therefore, not surprisingly, co-creation has grown in parallel with, and depend on, the development of the internet (Choi and Burnes 2013).

Until recently, social media platforms (including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) have been seen as contexts rather than actors in their own right (Zach et al. 2010), hence the paucity in academic literature concerning the resources that might exist in social media platforms and its value contribution to service exchanges. Nevertheless, there is an incipient literature recognizing technological platforms such as social media platforms as "an arrangement of resources connected to other systems [i.e. actors] by value propositions" (Vargo and Lusch 2008). Social media platforms, increasingly recognized as technology based engagement platforms, in themselves are seen to afford other actors in the network (i.e. firms and customers) the combinatorial potential (Yoo et al. 2012) of integrating different sets of resources for value co-creation.

Pilot Study/Research Setting

Our research will center around the phenomenon of value co-creation, which is currently gaining traction as an emerging topic within the IS domain. As this concept is comprised of multiple facets, researching utilising an objective approach may not highlight the complexity of value co-creation. As such adopting an interpretive approach can afford the flexibility for bridging the gap between new knowledge and reality through the sense-making analysis of researchers (Walsham 1995). The lack of existing research on value co-creation ecosystem within the IS disciplines inherently limits the ability to verify pre-emptive parameters to investigate a phenomenon. The rapidly changing landscape of UGC, expedited by technology, demonstrates a clear literature gap that needs to be addressed. In conducting this research, a case study research methodology will appropriately highlight stakeholder's usage of the value co-creation phenomenon (Walsham 1995). Currently, there is no theoretical model that demonstrates how social technologies (in particular social media platforms) facilitates the value co-creation between creator and consumer, and hence we will employ an interpretive approach towards our research (Klein and Myers 1999). In addition, by utilising netnography towards our research, our study will open us to not only applying existing theories to our data, but also discover new unforeseen, in-depth findings from other sources which are not evident in existing literature.

Selecting Wanghong as the case study is rationalized through three key arguments. First, disintermediated by technology especially the social computing, the rise of Wanghong ecosystem in China exemplifies how digital content is expedited by technological progresses (Xinhua 2016). Secondly, the Wanghong's case embodies numerous actors and resources based on the participation of multiple prerequisite actors for the ecosystem's exponential growth; the estimated market value of the Wanghong economy is $8.4 billion (Xinhua 2016). It holds recognised value in particular economic value. Lastly, due to the pace of social technology advancements, the Wanghong ecosystem has rapidly matured, germinating a propitious condition for our exploratory research.

The direct translation of "Wang Hong" is "digital or internet celebrities" which draws parallels to Western Youtubers and live-streamers. Due to China's Internet firewall, the digitization of China's social economy is currently being hosted on an Internet environment parallel to the rest of the world, resulting in the development of a content ecosystem with unique and differentiating characteristics (Hua et al. 2017). The increasing consumption and wealth from China's middle class fuels the growth of the Wanghong economy. China's content ecosystem is being driven by Wanghong as key opinion leaders and influencers. The evolution of UGC in China follows the trend in technology as demonstrated by the advancement in digital capabilities from posting simple text for entertainment to video commentaries. The Wanghong ecosystem is

a testament to how focal points of thought leadership and creativity can be transformed into viable business models. An iconic example is Papi Jiang, a postgraduate student who recently accepted $1.8 million in investment from venture capital firms to help further her production of comical yet short video skits on controversial societal topics (Xinhua 2016).

Data Collection & Analysis

The data was collected across multiple semi-structured interviews. Each interview increased the scope of knowledge, thus providing us with new defined leads and interview subjects. Initial contact was made with an expert who had extensive practitioner understanding and oversight of the Wanghong ecosystem. Subsequent meetings/calls with him over a span of two months have helped us to identify an initial list of interviewees which included the critical stakeholders required to consolidate the fundamentals of the creative content ecosystem. Here, the case study has been used as a basis for grounded theory development, in which the theory emerges through data collection and analysis (Rowley 2002). While there is scope for strengthening this contribution after examining multiple case studies, the utilisation of netnography can justify the results of the study.

In our pilot study we have collected 16 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders from Wanghong Economy. These interviewees included 3 Wanghong celebrities, operation managers of 4 streaming platforms, top management/founders of 5 agencies, manager of an e-commerce giant, and secretaries of 2 digital content association. Our research design intentionally focused on a wide cross-section of perspectives to frame a more holistic interpretation of the Wanghong Economy and examine the notion of an underlying ecosystem of actors. Guided by our literature review, our interviews focused primarily on two main factors: (1) the co-creation of value between consumers and creators, through Wanghong's social media technologies and platform, (2) the digitally enabled social technological features which Wanghong employs to serve its co-creation ecosystem.

Furthermore, the research will incorporate data sources gathered from online communities and studies of the Wanghong environment. Netnography is a qualitative, interpretive research methodology that uses Internet-optimised ethnographic research techniques to study virtual communities and networks (Adhuja and Alavi 2018). Netnography allows the capture of actual interactions within the community, in comparison from in-depth interviews where community members are more separated from the spontaneous daily interactions on the platform (Kozinets 2002). We will be following Kozinets' (2010) netnography method of five steps: planning, entree, data collection, analysis and reporting.

In the planning stage, we are looking for social media-based cause brand communities meeting the following criteria: (1) community needs to be active (i.e. participants frequently posted and interacted) and be heterogeneous (i.e. participants varied in age, gender and opinions), (2) and offered descriptive content to provide information that was relevant to the research question. During the data collection period, we will concurrently perform data analysis to improve nimbleness of our case study (Eisenhardt 1989). During the analysis phase, we have contrasted our preliminary findings against our three criteria of value co-creation capabilities, to develop more knowledge about our theoretical notion (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). As we are conducting our research in progress, additional interviews will be performed at a later date to enable our findings to be further supported by our empirical data (Walsham 1995). During our data analysis phase, to effectively organise our empirical data, we will incorporate temporal bracketing, narrative and visual mapping strategies (Langley 1999). We are currently engaged in designing our empirical research that would allow us to study in depth value co-creation in the content ecosystem context. The case data collected is mapped to Wanghong's ecosystem, digital platforms and value co-creation processes that occur during each phase of Wanghong's development. This empirical mapping clarifies our theoretical notion of this phenomenon and assists in developing a process model which satisfied our research question. Data collection in netnography is basically the downloading of online content that will be analyzed for theorizing purposes. This online content may contain text, videos, photos, chats, etc. For data collection and analysis purposes of the Wanghong study, 20 active threads with at least 50 postings will be selected from a variety of community forums. The limit of 50 postings is applied in order to be able to observe interactions among members.

As content creation continue to develop and encouraged by organisations, it is vital to continually analyse and extract relevant information in order to support their decision making and overall business strategy (Adhuja and Alavi 2018). Equally important is for the organisations to study the content to understand the consumer sentiment (Mostafa 2013). This is where netnography can be utilised for a qualitative analysis over a huge number of consumer statements. Netnography helps researchers in coming to a communicative

and cultural comprehension of the embedded understanding of the consumer thought process by mapping the consumer comments posted on social technologies (Sandlin 2007).

Implications and Future Work

The empirical research will offer theoretical contributions, including bridging the current state of literature in understanding how value co-creation is generated in the content ecosystem (Choi and Burnes 2013). Previous literature bounded value co-creation to specifically between a firm and their customers (Chen et al. 2009), and consumer interactions (Habibi et al. 2014), the role of consumer-turned-creators, have received little attention. The emergence of these consumer-turned-creator offers a ubiquitous approach at understanding the value co-creation relationship, thus empowering researchers to challenge and redefine the actors that are involved, and the value that is generated. In addition, the current state of literature falls short in exploring value co-creation, facilitated by social technologies. At the outset of this paper, we noted how there was a lack of research on value co-creation even though there has been a dramatic increase in online engagement digitised user-generated content through social media platforms (Dellarocas 2003). The findings from the case study will unveil the complexities embedded in value co-creation. Supporting previous literature, social technologies that offer the potential for content formation will be more successful in developing new ideas and fine-tuning their business strategy (Seraj 2012). New mechanisms in the content ecosystem outlining how consumers work with creators to develop more knowledge and value to both parties. Lastly, this study also contributes to the research of utilising both a netnography and a case-study approach. Our research provides one of the earliest known theoretical and empirical scrutiny of value co-creation by leveraging on netnography to gather a much richer and varied forms of data collection in IS research. It overcomes the limitations of pure exploratory case research. Case studies are contextualised based on the parameters of the case study and this is apparent in the Wanghong Economy where the UGC is hosted on the Internet environment censored by the Chinese state government (Shenton 2004). Specifically, the advantage of netnography is how the data remains available for investigation and analysis throughout the entire period of research and can be revisited for further analysis (Beckmann and Langer 2005).

Beyond its theoretical implications, this study provides a number of important guidelines on the development and subsequent leverage of social technologies for current and aspiring content creators. The study aims to provide a process model for creators as well as consumers to proactively take part in the production of UGC in order to deliver better value for themselves, and by extension to the community. This study, eliciting the primary actors and the permutation of actor relationships provides the structural blueprint, empowering new consumer-turned-creators with the fundamental knowledge to push themselves to a new career into the UGC ecosystem. Given the pace of innovation in today's multimedia rich society, the quality of UGC has reached unprecedented levels and hence leveraging capabilities off other actors is a critical success factor for meeting higher levels of production quality. From this study, we hope to contribute nascent knowledge for sharing the influence of social technologies platforms and value co-creation with information management disciplines scholarly, and provide fruitful insights to the design of an effective value-creating ecosystem through our study for practitioners.

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