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Social Network Sites and Digital Word of Mouth: A Social Capital Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This research-in-progress paper investigates the relationship among the use of social networking sites (SNSs), users' social capital and knowledge sharing through digital Word of Mouth (WOM). The rise of SNSs has changed the way people interact and network. SNSs make it possible for users to keep track of their existing relationships and to build new ones. The SNSs have potential to build social capital which could be utilized for organizational use. However, few studies have examined the relationship among SNSs, social capital, and digital WOM. Specifically, this research examines whether the intensity of use of social network sites is positively related to users' relational social capital and knowledge sharing through digital WOM. This study provides a theoretical model for researchers to study the utilization of SNSs; and provides rationale for practitioners to utilize SNSs internally for organizational inter-networking and organizational learning, and externally as a marketing tool.

Keywords

Social capital, social network sites, word of mouth, knowledge sharing.

INTRODUCTION

We have entered a period of socio-economic change that will be as monumental as the industrial revolution. The Internet has been the most influential factor for this change. From the inception of the Internet to the early 2000s, Web 1.0 focused on a relatively small number of companies and advertisers producing content for users to access (Deitel, Deitel, Deitel, and Fredholm, 2008). The concept of Web 2.0 began with a conference brainstorming session between O'Reilly and MediaLive International. According to O'Reilly (2009), Web 2.0 involves the user. "Not only is the content often created by users, but users help organize it, share it, remix it, and critique it" (O'Reilly, 2009, p.1). One of Web 2.0's most utilized services is social networking or the social web.

The rise of social networking sites (SNSs) has changed the way people interact and network. SNSs make it possible for users to keep track of their existing relationships and to build new ones. SNSs also make it possible to overcome the traditional richness-reach trade-off. Richness means "the quality of information," and reach means "the number of people who participate in the sharing of that information" (Evans and Wurster, 2000, p.23). In addition, according to Prescott (2006), SNSs have attracted millions of users since their introduction; and many of these users have integrated these sites into their daily practices. She also argues that a large portion of the traffic on online shopping sites and other Web 2.0 sites comes from SNSs. These facts suggest that SNSs have the potential to create social capital and to be utilized for organizational use. In fact, SNSs have been utilized for organizational inter-networking and organizational collaboration in organizations. For example, IBM has used social networking tools for keeping members of a huge company connected, bridging the generation gaps, and innovating through collaboration (Majchrzak, Cherbakov, and Ives, 2009). Social networking tools have strengthened weak ties among colleagues at IBM and Microsoft (Horowitz and Huang, 2010). In addition, firms aim to integrate customers into their innovation processes (Leimeister, Huber, Bretschneider, and Krcmar, 2009). Social networking tools also allow organizations to increase interactions with their customers for crowdsourcing. At Starbucks, SNSs have been used for connecting with customers, notifying them of promotions, receiving product suggestions and monitoring consumer-to-consumer conversation (Gallaugher and Ransbotham 2010).

Researchers from various disciplines have examined SNSs, their meaning and usage, within cultural differences, and their practical usage. However, few studies have examined the relationship between SNSs, social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007), and knowledge sharing through word-of-mouth (WOM). Although prior studies have found that WOM quality has a positive effect on online trust (Awad and Ragowsky, 2008), the context has not been SNSs. Furthermore, there are few studies, which have examined the effects of creation of social capital knowledge sharing through digital WOM in the context of SNSs. Thus, this paper begins to close these research gaps by exploring the relationship between the use of SNSs and users' social capital and the relationship with digital WOM knowledge sharing. Specifically, this research examines whether the intensity of use of social network sites is positively related to users' relational social capital and knowledge sharing through digital WOM. It will provide a theoretical model for researchers to study the utilization of SNSs; and provide rationale for practitioners to utilize SNSs internally for organizational inter-networking and organizational learning such as enhancing organizational loyalty, and externally for marketing purposes such as increasing customers' loyalty and spreading information about products.

This paper is organized as follows. The review of the research of SNSs, social capital and knowledge sharing through digital WOM is presented followed by the model and the hypotheses that are developed to investigate the research questions. The research questions are (1) Does the use of SNSs build social capital? and (2) Does social capital facilitate knowledge sharing through digital WOM in SNSs. The methodology designed to test the hypotheses is discussed. Finally, the limitations and implications of this study are presented.

SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

SNSs are defined as web-based services that allow users to "(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, p.211). There have been many SNSs supporting various interests and practices since the first generally accepted social network site, SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997. While their basic technologies are similar, the features of SNSs are varied. Most of the SNSs support the existing social networks, and some allow strangers to connect to new networks based on interests. Even though some SNSs organize communities by interests, the majority are primarily organized based on people, not on interests. SNSs are unique in that they enable social networks to be visible to people, and enable people to articulate their social networks (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

One theoretical concept of SNSs is to approach SNSs through the lens of social ties. Social ties are "the links that bind individuals to other individuals, as manifested in the frequency and kinds of communications among individuals" (Pickering and King, 1995, p.480). A social tie "exists between communicators wherever they exchange or share resources such as goods, services, social support or information" (Haythornthwaite, 2002, p.386). One can distinguish between strong and weak social ties by four dimensions: time, emotional intensity, mutual confidence and reciprocity (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties are maintained by frequent and emotional communication, shared confidences, and reciprocity between individuals over time. On the contrary, weak ties are maintained by less frequent and less emotional communication, and it does not require shared confidences or reciprocity (Granovetter, 1973). Computer networks draw on weak ties linking people across time and distance, and make it "physically easy to reach large numbers of people and make weak-tie contacts and they also make it relatively easy to respond to information requests" (Constant, Sproull, and Kielser, 1996, p.132).

Researchers of SNSs are from various disciplines and have studied a wide range of topics. Previous research focused on the usage (Borgatti and Cross, 2003; Donath and Boyd, 2004), security and privacy (Gross and Acquisti, 2005; Jagatic, Johnson, Jakobsson, and Menczer., 2007), social ties (Constant et al., 1996; Ellison et al., 2007; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield, 2007), cultural differences (Hjorth and Kim, 2005), and natural disaster management (Sutton, Palen, and Shklovski, 2008). Although, Ellison et al. (2007) examined the relationship between the use of SNSs and social capital, and found that there was a strong association between the use of SNSs and social capital; their study focused on bridging and bonding rather than the theoretical relational dimension.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital has various definitions in different disciplines (Adler and Kwon, 2002). It is considered both as a cause and an effect (Williams, 2006). Social capital refers to the resources accumulated through the relationships among people (Coleman, 1988). Social capital cannot be separated from the relationships among people (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Furthermore,

social capital is developed through interactions when the parties in the relationship facilitate those interactions. Social capital increases the quality and quantity of knowledge transfer through constant social interaction (Horowitz and Huang, 2010).

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) define three dimensions of social capital. The structural dimension includes network ties (access, timing, and referrals), network configuration, and appropriable organization. The cognitive dimension includes shared codes and language, and shared narratives. Finally, the relational dimension includes trust, norms, obligations and identification. The organizational enabling conditions stated for supporting social capital creation are four fold: (1) creating opportunities for exchange, (2) creating an expectation that such combinations and exchanges will have value, (3) creating motivation for both sides to participate and (4) creating structural norms and symmetries to support combination capability (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). The components of the organizational enablers construct are: (1) Bridging, where individuals are brought together purposely for collective work, (2) Bonding, where cognitive norms and implicit understanding is developed by personnel on both sides, and (3) Linking, where structural connections are established for jointly owning ongoing activities (DeLone, Espinosa, Lee, and Carmel, 2005).

The resources from relationships can differ in form and function. Social capital may induce negative influences, but in general social capital is seen as a positive effect of interaction among participants in a social network (Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2000) explores bridging social capital which is linked to weak ties. In this perspective, weak ties are loose connections between individuals who may provide information or new perspectives for each other without emotional connection (Granovetter, 1973). The importance of Internet-based linkages for weak ties has been emphasized, which can serve as the foundation of bridging social capital (Wellman, Haase, Witte, and Hampton, 2001). Social capital and relationship building can occur in SNSs (Donath and Boyd, 2004). Bridging social capital may be increased by SNSs (Donath and Boyd, 2004; Wellman et al., 2001). SNSs can increase the weak ties because technology enables such ties cheaply and enables them to be easily maintained (Donath and Boyd, 2004).

However, "not all dimensions of social capital are mutually reinforcing" (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, p.251). One of the barriers to the transfer of best practice within organizations is the existence of constant relations between the source and the recipient (Szulanski, 1996). Key aspects of social capital, which are related to the context for knowledge exchange, belong to the relational dimension (Kankanhalli, Tan, and Wei, 2005). Furthermore, the relational dimension of knowledge sharing has not been fully understood, with many fragmentary results (Boer and Berends, 2003). Thus, this study focuses on the relational dimension of social capital. The relational dimension of social capital consists of trust, norms, obligations, and identification.

Trust has been defined as (1) "an expectation that others one chooses to trust will not behave opportunistically by taking advantage of the situation" (Gefen, Karahanna, and Straub, 2003, p.54), and (2) behavioral intentions that result from specific beliefs in competence, integrity, and benevolence (McKnight, Choudhry, and Kacmar, 2002) According to Putnam (2000), people are more willing to engage in social interaction, when trust is high in relationships. SNSs allow social networks to be visible to people, and enable people to articulate their social networks (Haythornthwaite, 2005). E-commerce-based systems have been used to build trust (Awad and Ragowsky, 2008; McWilliams, 2000). Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

H1a: The SNS usage intensity increases the creation of trust in SNSs.

A norm exists when others, not an actor, hold the socially defined right to control an action (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). According to Coleman (1988), a norm constitutes a form of social capital when it exists and is effective. Collaborative norms facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000). A norm is an accepted way in a community which is facilitated by SNSs beyond shared geography. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H1b: The SNS usage intensity increases the creation of norms in SNSs.

Obligations are like credit and represent "a commitment or duty to undertake some activity in the future" (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, p.255). Users feel "… durable obligations arising from feelings of gratitude, respect, and friendship or from the institutionally guaranteed rights derived from membership in a family, a class, or a school" (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, p.253). Obligations are differentiated from norms by relating to more personal relationships. SNSs offer users their own unique space (Gangadharbatla, 2008), which can be oriented towards obligations in personal relationships such as connecting those with common interests (Ellison et al., 2007). Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

H1c: The SNS usage intensity increases the creation of obligations in SNSs.

Finally, identification is "the process whereby individuals see themselves as one with another person or group of people" (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, p.256). Identification influences the expectation of value to be achieved (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). People join SNSs for feelings of affiliation, belonging, and goal achievement (Ridings and Gefen, 2004). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H1d: The SNS usage intensity increases the creation of identification in SNSs.

In the next section, we discuss knowledge sharing through digital WOM as it relates to social capital and SNSs.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING THROUGH DIGITAL WOM

It is said that our society has been turning into a knowledge society (Nonaka, 1994). Knowledge is defined as "a justified belief that increases an entity's capacity for effective action" (Alavi and Leidner, 2001, p.109, Huber, 1991; Nonaka, 1994). Knowledge sharing is defined as "the combination of one or both parties seeking knowledge in response to the request, such that one or both parties are affected by the experience" (Huang and DeSanctis, 2005; Scott and Ghosh, 2007, p4; Szulanski, 1996).

In this study, we explore knowledge sharing through digital WOM. WOM is informal, person-to-person communication between an individual and another in regard of a product, brand, organization, or service (Anderson, 1998; Arndt, 1968; Harrison-Walker, 2001). WOM communication transfers information from an individual to another either in person or through other media (Brown, Barry, Dacin, and Gunst, 2005). WOM is one of the most important interpersonal communication methods among varied channels for receiving information (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004).

Individuals need to be willing to share knowledge, since it cannot be forced effectively (Bock, Zmud, Kim, and Lee, 2005). Social capital provides the conditions that facilitate knowledge sharing (Gulati, Nohria, and Zaheer, 2000; Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Kankanhalli et al., 2005). People are more likely to share knowledge when social relationships are strong (Szulanski, 1996).

According to Szulanski (2000), trust influences the effectiveness of knowledge sharing and organizational learning. Mutual trust among the members of an organization is a critical factor for knowledge sharing (Chow and Chan, 2008). E-commerce-based WOM systems have been used to build trust (Awad and Ragowsky, 2008; McWilliams, 2000). Moreover, trust has a positive effect on WOM (Ranaweera and Prabhu, 2003). Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

H2a: The creation of trust increases knowledge sharing through digital WOM in SNSs.

Norms are suggested to have a moderating role in knowledge exchange (Constant, Kiesler, and Sproull, 1994). Collaborative norms have played a critical role in facilitating knowledge seeking (Bock, Kankanhalli, and Sharma, 2006). Social structure and cooperation are effective for WOM in information transfers (Frenzen and Nakamoto, 1993). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H2b: The creation of norms increases knowledge sharing through digital WOM in SNSs.

Weak ties, which are maintained by less frequent and less emotional communication, do not require shared confidences or reciprocity (Granovetter, 1973). However, a newcomer in an organization feels an obligation to reciprocate when she/he receives knowledge (Gouldner, 1960). WOM activity may address the need to give something to the receiver (Dichter, 1966). Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

H2c: The creation of obligations increases knowledge sharing through digital WOM in SNSs.

According to Van der Vegt and Bunderson (2005), there is a positive relationship between social identification and knowledge sharing. Customers may engage in WOM communication for reasons of identification and social integration. They perceive these benefits when they participate in and belong to online communities (McWilliams, 2000). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2d: The creation of identification increases knowledge sharing through digital WOM in SNSs.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model.

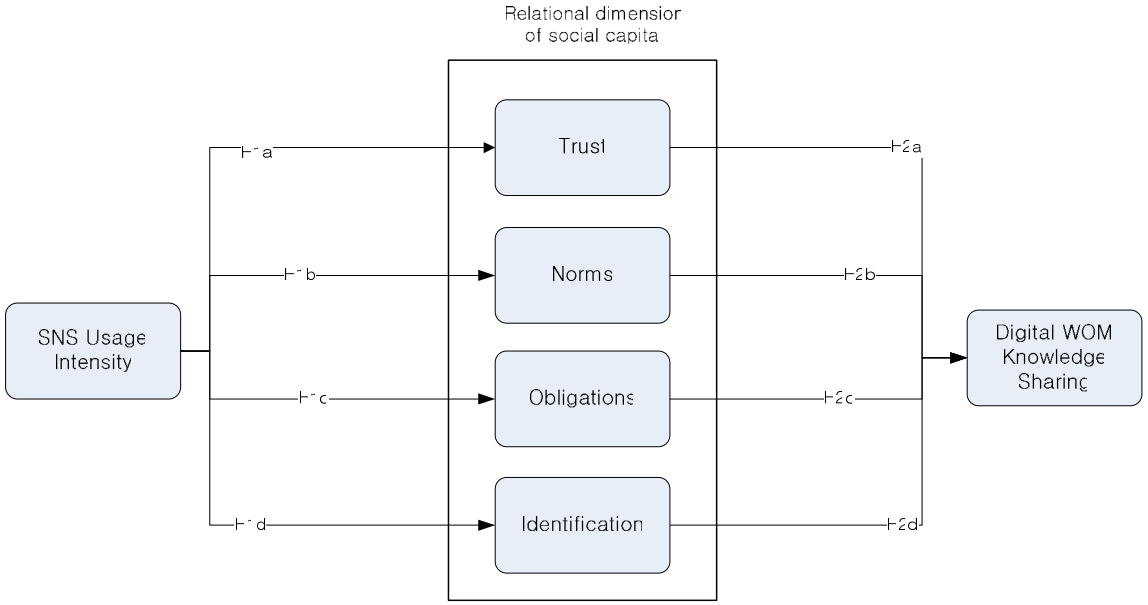

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

METHODOLOGY

The measures used to operationalize the six constructs, which are SNS Usage Intensity, Trust, Norms, Obligations, Identification, and Digital WOM Knowledge Sharing, will be adapted from previous research. Modifications will be made when needed for relevance. Researchers will collect demographic information as well as data related to the constructs.

The study sample will be taken from faculty members, staff members, and university students who use Facebook. A survey will be administered on a university campus by researchers. The partial least squares (PLS) method will be used to examine the construct reliability and the construct validity of the models as well as the hypotheses. PLS is appropriate since it focuses on prediction of the constructs rather than explanation of the relationships between items (Hair Jr., Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Researchers are currently developing the survey instrument and plan to conduct a pilot test before the survey. Data collection will be completed by June, and researchers plan to finalize this research by July.

Figure 2 shows the flowchart of current research status.

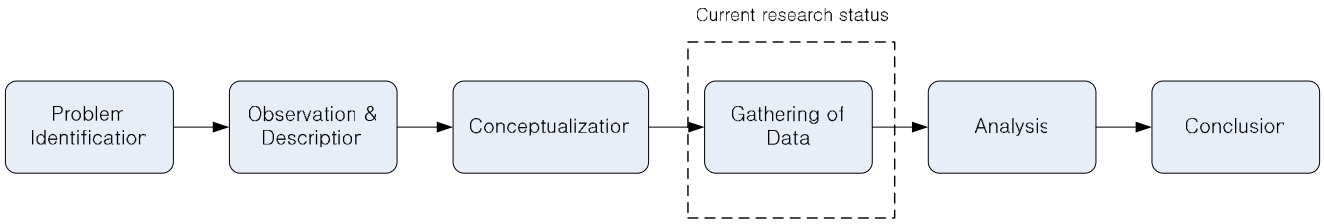

Figure 2. The flowchart of current research status

EXPECTED IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS AND PRACTICE

This research will examine whether the intensity of use of social network sites is positively related to users' relational social capital and Knowledge sharing through digital WOM. The results of this study will provide a theoretical model for researchers to study the utilization of SNSs. Further research on this topic using the model would enable a theoretical understanding of the potential to leverage SNSs for business, education and society. In addition, further research using the model would enable a theoretical understanding of the issues that need to be resolved.

This study will provide rationale for practitioners to utilize SNSs internally for organizational inter-networking and organizational learning, and externally as a marketing tool. There are two implications for practitioners. The first is an implication for employees. If an organization facilitates use of SNSs amongst its employees, then it could encourage organizational loyalty and enhance the need to belong to the organization. It could have similar effects as corporate social networking has, which "help employees identify, in the interest of furthering the business of the firm" (Majchrzak et al., 2009, p.103). In addition, research finds that there is a positive relationship between the need to belong and attitudes toward SNSs (Gangadharbatla, 2008). Furthermore, it could enhance the organizational culture, increase job satisfaction, and reduce employee turn-over. Finally, employees may use SNSs for knowledge sharing through digital WOM related to problem solving their tasks, such as software coding and technical support. Proprietary versions of social networking software are becoming available, such as Chatter from Salesforce.com.

This study's results will also provide implications for external customers. An organization could utilize SNSs to increase customers' loyalty to its brand by communicating through SNSs. People want to try a product or service that their friends or family recommend. SNS use could also facilitate knowledge sharing through digital WOM among customers, since "online consumer reviews are important in making purchase decisions and for product sales" (Park, Lee, and Han, 2007, p.125). Managers are interested in knowledge sharing through digital WOM, since it affects consumer behavior (Banerjee, 1992; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). Some organizations are taking notice of feedback by customers. The feedback might influence correction of product flaws or provide inspiration for new product development or new services. On the other hand, many challenges need to be faced. For example, organizations should recognize that they are engaging in interactions, not controlling the customers' opinions (Gallaugher and Ransbotham, 2010).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A research framework of social capital to study knowledge sharing through digital WOM in SNSs will be provided. The framework is important, since it will provide the theoretical basis of the relationship between SNSs and digital WOM from the perspective of social capital.

However, there are limitations on this study. First, this study will focus on SNS use in private non-corporate environments. Future research should find out whether there are similar results in corporate and other working environments. Second, this study will also focus on the relational dimension of social capital, leaving future research to investigate the structural dimension (network ties, network configuration, and appropriable organization) and cognitive dimension (shared codes and languages, and shared narratives) of social capital in the context of SNSs. Third, this study will focus on collaborative norms. Future research needs to explore other norms such as reciprocity. Fourth, this study will focus on WOM knowledge. Future research needs to investigate the different types of knowledge used in SNSs. Finally, future research needs to examine the relationships between the relational dimension constructs of social capital.

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