Developing an Affordance-based Conceptualization of Social Media Interactions

Emergent Research Forum Paper

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Abstract

Social media platforms allow their users to perform a wide range of tasks and activities. While researchers have examined the benefits of online social media use, these frameworks treat social media as a monolithic instrument with a single functionality. This approach is likely to conceal the differences in functionality between platforms. Hence, this study proposes to focus on features (e.g. messenger on Facebook) that lend functionality to platforms. To our knowledge, no prior research has examined features systematically, as a unit of analysis. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the development of an affordance-based conceptualization of social media interactions. This conceptualization allows us to represent online media at the interaction-level. This research aims to advise companies (through exploring customers' perceptions) about the use of online media in enhancing their customers' interactivity with their brand as well as about building their brand more effectively.

Keywords

Social media interaction, Affordance, Features.

Introduction

Consumers generate and consume significant amount of online content. Social media plays a significant role in our everyday lives, allowing us to perform a wide range of tasks/activities. While researchers have examined the benefits of online social media use, these frameworks are often criticised for treating social media as a monolithic instrument with a single functionality (Smock et al., 2011). This approach is likely to conceal the differences in functionality between online platforms. In order to explore these platforms more effectively, this study proposes to focus on features that lend functionality to social media platforms. This study refers to features as online tools (on platforms) that facilitate expression and interaction amongst users. Similar to platforms, there is a wide range of features some of which offer the exact same functionality although under different names (e.g. messenger on Facebook and 'direct message' on Twitter). Despite the significance of online communication and interaction no prior research has examined features systematically as a unit of analysis. This study aims to fill this gap by focussing on features (over platforms). We develop an affordance-based conceptualization of social media features. This novel conceptualization allows us to represent online media at the interaction-level, which contrasts current macro-level and rather fragmented approaches to online media.

## Approaches to Social Media Use and Interaction

When examining online media use researchers have employed a diverse set of theories, including the uses and gratifications theory (Ruggiero, 2009; Whiting & Williams, 2013), motivation theory (Lin & Lu, 2011),

social capital theory (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), brand community (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), and user-generated content (Muniz & Schau, 2007; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). A common approach that researchers have taken to examine online media use was to examine particular online platforms in conjunction with users' motivations and gratifications when using these platforms. However, the captured benefits that are related to online media use are often criticised for being rather idiosyncratic and medium-specific (Ruggiero, 2009; Severin & Tankard, 1997; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). Hence, this approach prevents generalisations from the findings beyond that particular medium. The underlying notion of this criticism lies in online media platforms. These online media platforms are essentially examined as if they were traditional (monolithic) media with single functionality, which is likely to conceal the differences in functionality across them. In contrast, online media allows their users to perform a wide range of tasks and activities (Pagani, Goldsmith, & Hofacker, 2013; Shim, Lee, & Park, 2008) which satisfies the diverse needs of users. Platforms, such as Facebook, facilitate interactions between users through a number of features (e.g. status updates, chat, review, comment, etc.) (Chan-Olmsted, Cho, & Lee, 2013; Smock et al., 2011), which (features) ultimately lends functionality to platforms (Bazarova and Choi 2014; Taina and Helmond 2017). Thus, platforms should be regarded as a collection of features (Joinson, 2001) where any (perceived or real) differences between them are deeply rooted in the functionality of the features available (Smock et al. 2011). Thus, this research proposes to focus on features (instead of platforms) as the building block of online media. Features are online tools that are embedded in online (firm-owned or third-party) platforms that facilitating expression and interaction (i.e. functionality) amongst users. Similarly to platforms, when focusing on features one quickly realizes that features are called differently across platforms even if they offer the same functionality (e.g. messenger on Facebook and 'direct message' on Twitter). Despite the significance of online communication and interaction (Kissel & Buttgen, 2015), no prior research has examined features systematically as a unit of analysis. This study aims to fill this gap and proposes to examine online features (vs. platforms) as the new online media. This research aims to fill an important gap by examining online media through feature use and developing a conceptualization of features through affordances.

In order to develop our conceptualization of features as the media or vehicle of customers' expression and interaction, we draw on the notion of affordances (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Boyd, 2010; Gibson, 1977; Leonardi, 2011; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). While there are a number of studies that attempted to understand technology and social media through affordances, these studies usually capture a single facet of affordances, such as the technical aspect (e.g. bandwidth) (Gaver, 1996), communication aspect (Hutchby & Barnett, 2005) and structural aspect (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Studies in information systems view affordances as emerging, functional and non-functional components of the communication environment (Leonardi, 2011; Bygstad, Munkvold & Volkoff, 2016; Stendal, Thapa & Lanamaki, 2016). A representative list of affordances linked to social media in the literature is presented in Table 1. Although these studies capture the technological affordance (functional), the user-related social affordance, as well as the socio-technical aspect of affordances (Bygstad et al., 2015) they fail to capture social interactions with other users, the content generated by social media users and the medium that they use for communication. Hence, this study proposes two types of affordances (see Figure 1), the technological and the social where the former represents features as a new unit of analysis whereas the latter is proposed to capture the user's relationship with other users and the (social media) content. Figure 1 also highlights that these two affordances (social and technological) are connected to the user's goal and the technological aspect is likely to influence social affordances. The benefit of the affordance approach allows us to examine communicative action of the user at the intersection of the context and the technology's functionality (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). The affordance approach highlights the overlap of the user's goal when performing an activity online and the media's (i.e. feature) properties that can facilitate the achievement of that goal through a particular activity (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Choi & Toma, 2014; Greeno, 1994; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Considering this overlap, we define affordances as the property of the relationship between the user and the feature. The advantage of this conceptualisation is that it is user-centric and allows us to capture people's perceptions of these features. The affordance-based conceptualization refers to the property of the relationship between the user and the feature, which properties – based on our current understanding – are proposed to capture the content aspect (that the user interacts with through the feature), the social aspect (regarding the audience that the user interacts with) and the platform aspect (through which the user operates the feature). Any research that examines social media interactions need to consider these three aspects concurrently. This conceptualization assumes that when users interact with features they interact with content, an audience and features.

Studies	Research Focus	Affordance Conceptualisation	Proposed Affordances
Treem and Leonardi (2013, p.146)	How use of social media within organization may affect particular organizational processes.	"Affordances are not properties of people or of artifacts – they are constituted in relationships between people and the materiality of the things with they come in contact."	Visibility, Persistence , Editability, and Association
Zhao et al. (2013, p. 297)	Creates a conceptual framework to show how perceived affordances can facilitate the interaction design of social media.	"Perceived affordances address the reciprocity between designed artifacts and actors, and the environment in which interactions happen."	Perceived Physical, Cognitive, Affective, and Control
Ge et al. (2013, p.159)	Analyses of Weibo activities in terms of marketing communication elements and relation to technological affordances.	"...the technological capabilities of social media that support particular MC goals."	Visibility, Message format, Reachable domain, Meta voice, Informed association
Wagner et al. (2014, p.34)	Outlines the potential of social media and their affordances, in supporting knowledge creation within organizations.	"Gibson (1986) argues that physical objects are not perceived free of values. Often, they are associated with certain types of uses which influence perceptions. Essentially, then, the term affordance is about an object's perceived utility."	Association, Authoring, Reviewability, Editability, Recombinability, and Experimentation
DeVito et al. (2017, p.740)	Present an affordance framework to explore self-presentation theory in the context of the social media platform.	"Affordances can allow for higher-level discussion of capabilities provided to users by social media platform, in a manner that transcends specific platforms or technologies while focusing on the relationship between technical features and user perceptions."	Presentation flexibility, Content persistence, Identity persistence, Content association, Feedback directness, Audience transparency, and Visibility control
Fox and McEwan (2017, p.300)	Develop a measure for affordance.	"Adhere to Hogan's (2009) that the 'the perceptual cues that connote aspects of social structure to individuals thereby creating a functional difference for the individual' (p. 27)."	Accessibility, Bandwidth, Social presence, Privacy, Network association, Personalization, Presentence, Editability, Conversation control, and Anonymity

Table 1: Affordances Linked to Social Media
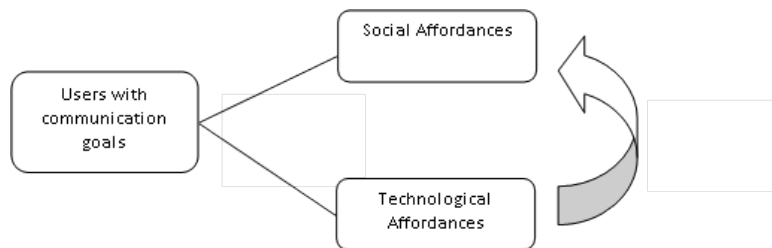
Figure 1: The Relational Properties of Social Media Affordances

Proposed Research

In contrast to previous research, this study proposes a multidimensional concept of social media affordances. The novel conceptualization that focuses on the relationship between the users, the content and features, is argued to help us understand online interactions more effectively. In order to develop our conceptualisation, this study aims to understand online feature affordances in two different phases in this particular order: The first phase aims to examine the cues that signal affordances of features in case of online interactions. For instance, what aspects of features signal (or remind users of) the visibility of their communicated content. We aim to conduct in-depth interviews with customers (users) to understand their feature choices and use, and their perceptions of affordances. Furthermore, we aim to conduct interviews with software designers to understand designers' principles when designing these features. Based on this stage, we aim to develop a construct (Churchill, 1979, Sajtos & Magyar, 2016) of customers' affordance-based conceptualization of online features. This process will draw on the findings of the qualitative in-depth interviews, which will help us create a set of items for our affordances. In this phase, we plan to undertake small-scale surveys to examine the validity of the items and the dimensionality of our proposed multi-dimensional construct using structural equation modelling. Subsequent to the development of our construct, we propose to undertake surveys focussing on users' interaction through particular features. Focusing on features with technological affordances that are similar or the same, will allow us to understand and reveal differences between users' social affordances.

Conclusion

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the conceptualization of online media affordances. Due to the relevance of this topic across marketing and information systems, this conceptualization aims to contribute to both disciplines. This conceptualization aims to capture online media through affordances, that is, the properties of the relationship between users, the features, the content and the audience. Examining affordances as a relational concept that establishes links between the users (goal), the content and features of social media in a single framework is new in the IS and marketing literature. This novel conceptualization allows us to represent online media at the interaction-level, which contrasts current macro-level and rather fragmented approaches to online media. From a managerial perspective, this research aims to advise companies (through exploring customers' perceptions) about the use of online media in enhancing their customers' interactivity with their brand as well as in building their brand more effectively.

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