

# **Social Media, Organisation-Community Relationships and Co-creation: A Case of Nonprofit Organizations**

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## **Abstract**

Despite the strategic role of social media for nonprofit organizations (NPOs), these organisations continue to struggle for enduring and productive organization-community interactions on social media. This paper operationalizes organization-community interactions into two aspects – i.e. organization-community relationships (OCR) and co-creation the associated outcome. This paper suggests that NPOs' interaction with the community on social media enable the organization and the community to jointly assess, develop and deliver social services and value through the process co-creation. Hypothetically, the paper suggests that social media affordances for NPOs, its symbolic expressions to NPOs and the organization's privacy concerns on social media influence OCR and multiple forms of co-creation that occur in a social media environment. Particularly, the type and structure of OCR are significant underlying factors that explain the relationship between social media use in a NPO and the associated forms of co-creation.

## **Keywords**

Social Media, Organisation-Community Relationships, Co-creation, Nonprofit Organisations.

## **Introduction**

Despite the popularity of social media among organisations, it is important to note that, the model of social media use differs significantly between business organisations and nonprofit organisations (NPOs). For example, 90% - 91% of business organisations in the US use social media as a marketing strategy in 2017 to 2019 respectively (Statista 2018). On the other hand, social media, especially, Facebook and Twitter are used by NPOs to enhance community interaction, communication, collective action, advocacy and crowdsourcing towards enhanced social services (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al. 2016; Gao et al. 2011; Li et al. 2018; Lovejoy and Saxton 2012; Young 2017). Unlike successful use of social media among business organizations, NPOs are struggling to connect, engage and cultivate productive and enduring relationships with intended communities through social media (Cho et al. 2014; Davis et al. 2016; Ramanadhan et al. 2013). Moreover, NPOs have not yet recognised the potential value of social media most relevant to their context (Campbell et al. 2014; Madden et al. 2016). One of such is co-creation, as both a process and an outcome, which emerges due to interaction, collaboration and joint effort between NPOs and the community on social media.

Although existing literature recognises that NPOs interact with community to build relationships for collaboration and collective action, these studies rarely, articulate the extent of collaboration and the nature of relations that NPOs cultivate with the community. This paper argues that organization-community interactions on social media as an interactive process towards co-creation of social services. Further still, organization-community interactions, through social media relational models like post, comment, like, share etc. c.f. (Cho et al. 2014), supports to formation of organization-community relationships (OCR). To achieve co-creation through social media, NPOs should consider cultivating certain types of relationships with the community. Co-creation, in the context discussed here, is a social and interactive process through which the organisation and the community collaborate for joint service creation and delivery. This paper

suggest three factors influencing the formation of OCR and co-creation among NPOs on social media – i.e. social media affordances for NPOs, the symbolic expressions communicated (Faraj and Azad 2012; Grgecic et al. 2015; Markus and Silver 2008) to NPOs during organisation-community interaction and the organisation’s privacy concerns during these interactions (Palen and Dourish 2003; Wisniewski et al. 2016).

## Social Media Affordances, Symbolic Expressions and Privacy Concerns

Social media “allows users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present [themselves] in real-time or asynchronously with both broad and narrow audiences” (Carr and Hayes 2015, p. 50). This opportunistic use of a technology can be expressed in terms of its affordances for a specific group of users and its symbolic expressions to that group of users (Faraj and Azad 2012; Grgecic et al. 2015; Markus and Silver 2008). Social media affordances “are action possibilities and opportunities that emerge from actors engaging with a focal technology [social media]” (Faraj and Azad 2012). From existing literature (Kietzmann et al. 2011; Treem and Leonardi 2013; Vaast et al. 2017; Zheng and Yu 2016), one can identify the following affordances. (1) *Sociability and relationship management* (2) *Communication* (3) *Collaboration and collective action* (4) *Reputation management* (5) *Knowledge sharing*.

Symbolic expressions represent the aspects of social media that ‘enable users to perceive, interpret, and interact with [social media]’ (Markus and Silver 2008, p. 622). Symbolic expressions relate to the meaning that users associated with a given technology and they thus facilitate the formation of beliefs about that technology (Grgecic et al. 2015). Exploring symbolic expressions of social media is a useful way to investigate the incoherence of this technology across different users (Markus and Silver 2008). Grgecic et al. (2015) operationalize symbolic expressions of a technology into two aspects. First, *communication of meaning* – the extent to which social media conveys symbols and function that make sense in relation to users’ real life experiences or expectations. Second, *communication of value*, which is how social media improves the user’s perceptions of its functionalities and understanding of its value.

Privacy concerns emerge because the organization considers the prospects of altering its degree of openness when interacting with the community on social media. In fact a number of NPOs consider openness and transparency as a way to improving community interaction on social media (Attouni and Mustaffa 2014; Madden et al. 2016). Privacy is “an interpersonal boundary process by which a person or group regulates interaction with others” (Altman 1975, p. 6). Four privacy boundaries may be significant in understanding organization-community engagement on social media (Palen and Dourish 2003; Wisniewski et al. 2016). (1) *Information disclosure*, (2) *Identity*, (3) *Interaction and relationships*, and (4) *Network*.

## Organization-Community Relationships (OCR)

Organization-community relationship (OCR) is the connection between the organization and the community for a defined function. Interpersonal relationships involves friends, colleagues, or relatives, while OCR involves “organizations building networks with the same groups as their publics, such as environmentalists, unions, or community groups” (Grunig and Huang 2000, p. 37). We can explore social relationships, OCR in particular, through several measures. This study identifies two aspects of OCR – i.e. the *type of OCR* and the *structure of OCR*. Hung (2005) operationalized organization-public relationship into six types – communal, exchange, covenantal, symbiotic, exploitive and manipulative relationships. On the other hand, the structure of such relationships from a social networks perspective, shows that, relationship strength, symmetry, cohesiveness and social similarity can depict the quality online relationships (Mesch and Talmud 2006).

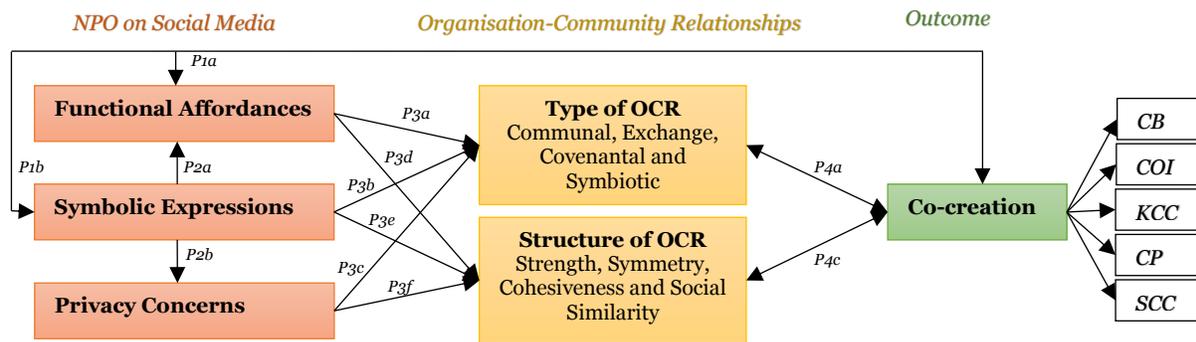
## Co-creation through Social Media: A Nonprofits Perspective

Co-creation is “an interactive process, involving at least two willing resource-integrating actors, which are engaged in specific form(s) of mutually beneficial collaboration, resulting in value creation for those actors” (Frow et al. 2011, p. 1). Co-creation can occur in varying forms depending on the organisation’s business mode (Frow et al. 2011; Russo-Spena and Mele 2012). In the context of NPOs, there is evidence of co-creation of knowledge (Bagayogo et al. 2014) and co-production of services (Wimmer and Scherer 2018). A review of social media use by NPO points towards some forms of co-creation, such as community building

(CB), co-created organizational image (COI), knowledge co-creation (KCC), co-promotion (CP) through electronic word of mouth and service co-creation (SCC).

## A Theoretical Model on Social Media, OCR and Co-creation

Markus and Silver (2008) argue that technology offers affordances for a group of users and symbolic expressions to those users. From Markus and Silver (2008) theoretical stance, (Grgecic et al. 2015) offer empirical evidence on the role of affordances and symbolic expressions in information system use. Actions and beliefs associated with a technology in turn affect the technology affordances and symbolic expressions to a group of users (Grgecic et al. 2015; Markus and Silver 2008). This theoretical lens inspires the framework provided in Figure 1 below. Organization interactions with the community on social media involves three factors – social media affordances for NPOs, the symbolic expressions of social media to NPOs and the organization’s privacy concerns on social media. These factors will influence organization-community relationships (OCR) and co-creation outcome.



CB – community building: COI – co-create organization image: KCC – knowledge co-creation: CP – co-promotion: SCC – service co-creation

Figure 1. A Theoretical Model on Social Media, OCR and Co-creation

## Propositions for Emerging Research

The propositions provided in this paper aim at unveiling social media factors that may facilitate organization-community relationships on social media, with particular emphasis to the operations of nonprofit organisations.

**Social media and Co-creation.** Technologies offer action possibilities for specific groups of users (Faraj and Azad 2012). Social media offers affordances for NPOs to reach their collective and connective action goals (such as co-creation) (Vaast et al. 2017; Zheng and Yu 2016). Technology affordances are influenced by the symbolic expressions (i.e. the meaning and interpretation that NPOs associate with social media) (Faraj and Azad 2012; Grgecic et al. 2015; Markus and Silver 2008). To facilitate collective action, social media offer a rich platform for NPOs to building relationships with the community (Lai et al. 2017). Social relationships are significant in shaping behavior and collective action (Kramer 2009; Ostrom and Ahn 2009). It is important to note that affordances, symbolic expressions and actions/behavior shape one another in a socio-technical system (Grgecic et al. 2015). However, privacy concerns remain a daunting issue in online social interactions (Palen and Dourish 2003; Wisniewski et al. 2016). Therefore, **Proposition 1 (a-b):** there is a reciprocal relationship between social media affordances for NPOs, symbolic expressions to NPOs and co-creation outcomes. **Proposition 2 (a-b):** the symbolic expressions of social media to NPOs influence social media affordances for NPOs and their privacy concerns on social media. **Proposition 3 (a-c):** the organization’s social media affordances, symbolic expressions and privacy concerns influence the formation of communal exchange, covenantal and symbiotic OCR. **Proposition 3 (d-f):** the organization’s social media affordances, symbolic expressions and privacy concerns influence the strength, symmetry, cohesiveness and social similarity of OCR.

**OCR and Co-creation.** Social structure shapes people’s actions, as actions also shape social structure (Faraj and Azad 2012; Grgecic et al. 2015; Markus and Silver 2008). Co-creation spaces are socio-technical spheres that present both technical and relational factors to foster co-creation outcomes such as knowledge

co-creation (Namisango and Kang 2017). Online relationships shape online behavior (Mesch and Talmud 2006). Communal, exchange and covenantal relationships are characterized as strong relationships that foster formation of communities and enduring interaction (Hung 2005). Additionally, relationship structure such as tie strength, symmetry, cohesion and social similarity are associated with community formation and collaborative activity – c.f. (Mesch and Talmud 2006). **Proposition 4a:** Communal exchange, covenantal and symbiotic OCR supports co-creation outcome through social media. **Proposition 4b:** The strength, symmetry, cohesiveness and social similarity of OCR supports co-creation outcomes through social media. The relationship between OCR and co-creation outcomes is reciprocal.

## A Note on Methodology and Conclusion

The propositions presented in Figure 1 can be explored through a concurrent mixed methods research design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011) – i.e. cross-sectional survey and multiple case study design. The survey enables the researcher to explore the prevalence of OCR and co-creation practices across NPOs. The researcher would generate specific hypotheses for each proposition. These hypotheses are testable using quantitative data gathered through surveys. A multiple-case study design, on the other hand, “allows researchers to systematically compare variation between cases” (Bleijenbergh 2010, p. 65). By replicating the study in multiple cases, a researcher is able to use within case pattern matching and cross case synthesis to match the stated propositions to the empirical evidence emerging from the data (Yin 2018). Researchers and practitioners should seek to understand how the organization use social media towards achieving co-creation, how the organization uses social media to build and maintain productive OCR, and how OCR influence co-creation process and outcomes. Findings from the study will depict the feasible actions that NPOs should adopt to enable productive OCR for co-creation on social media platforms.

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