What makes users share content on Facebook? Compatibility among psychological incentive, social capital focus, and content type

Pei-Wen Fu*, Chi-Cheng Wu, Yung-Jan Cho

Department of Business Management, National Sun Yat-sen University, 70 Lienhai Rd., Kaohsiung, 80424, Taiwan

Abstract

Even though a large amount of content is shared on Facebook, what makes Facebook users share content has not been thoroughly addressed in previous studies. Rather than treating Facebook as just another online social media, this study focused on Facebook users’ psychological incentives for content sharing and examined how users’ social capital focus and content types influenced the effect of incentives. Using both qualitative (focus group interview) and quantitative (online survey) methods, we obtained several findings. Both self-interest and communal incentive could drive Facebook users’ content-sharing intention, but their effects depended on the content types. Further, the effects of self-interest incentives were found only among the users who focus on their close friends (bonding-focus), but not among those who focus on the distant friends (bridging-focus). Brand marketers can utilize these results to post content on Facebook effectively.

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1. Introduction

Since the phenomenal success of Facebook, a large amount of content is shared on Facebook. The Facebook statistics indicates that, as of August 2016, the average number of items shared by Facebook users daily is 4.75 billion. And, the number of potential of content Facebook users are exposed to every login is more than 1500. Though the statistics reveal that the average number of page likes per Facebook user, the estimated percentage of brand Facebook posts considered spam is up to 7%. This implies that brands should put more efforts on providing “attractive” contents. Otherwise, the brand posts are difficult to be shared on Facebook.

Contrasting with traditional websites that are filled with pre-edited materials, Facebook is primarily composed of user-generated and company-posted content. Rather than pushing messages toward the audience, marketers nowadays strive to elicit word of mouth (WoM) from Facebook users. The marketing literature has documented that WoM, especially from significant others, has a decisive influence on consumers’ purchasing decisions (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Godes & Mayzlin, 2009). Facebook users have exactly this distinctive feature for provoking WoM and distributing information within their social networks. When companies create their fan pages on Facebook, they strive to provoke positive WoM from their fans, and this objective is primarily achieved by the sharing mechanism on Facebook. Therefore, users’ sharing behavior is critical to the success of social network marketing.

Generally speaking, individuals may engage in WoM behaviors for self-interest or social motives (Alexandrov, Lilly, & Babakus, 2013). The social network sites (SNSs) literature also suggests that self-presentation (Ong et al., 2011) and social connection (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) are fundamental functions of SNSs. Although these studies do not directly discuss sharing behaviors, they nonetheless assert the importance of these psychological incentives in media use. According to media uses and gratification theory, media use is goal directed (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Users intentionally select specific media and look for content that fulfills their needs (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; Zhang, Tang, & Leung, 2011). Content sharing is obviously a specific use of SNS media. Literature has documented that people share contents for psychological incentives, such as reputation (Tennie, Frith, & Frith, 2010), self-promotion (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Ryan & Xenos, 2011), helping the company, or concerning other consumers (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Besides, extant research also suggests that individuals’ behaviors on media can be influenced by personality (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Wang, 2013), social environment (Zhang et al., 2011),
information types (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Berger, 2014), and brand characteristics (Lovett, Peres, & Shachar, 2013).

These extant studies mainly focused on anonymous platforms (e.g., an online forum), where users often hide their identities using pseudonyms. In contrast, most users present their identity on Facebook, and they know that their behaviors on Facebook are closely tied to their social capital in the real world (Ellison et al., 2007). Therefore, users' behavior patterns on Facebook should be different from those on the anonymous platforms. The existing studies for Facebook (Joinson, 2008; Zhang et al., 2011) mostly follow media uses and gratification theory (Katz et al., 1974). Treating Facebook just like another type of media, they essentially focus on users' media adoption patterns. However, what attracts individuals to adopt Facebook may not motivate them to share content. In the virtual world, there are many so-called “lurkers,” who listen passively but rarely talk (Bishop, 2007). People who use Facebook may not join fan clubs; those who join fan clubs may barely share. Therefore, these extant findings of media adoption might not directly apply to the sharing behavior on Facebook. Moreover, every online media has its unique features. They collect different types of user-generated content (UGC) in many different ways. Some forms of content on Facebook have rarely been seen in the other media. For instance, on Facebook's news feeds, commercial messages are blended and mixed together with chatting, gossip, and personal opinions. In this novel media environment, some previously undiscovered content might be driven by some previously undocumented psychological incentives. Those constructs address media use in previous virtual communities and thus might not apply to sharing behaviors on Facebook properly.

In order to facilitate the marketing practices on Facebook, here we aim to answer the following questions: How psychological incentives may influence SNS users' intention to share content and how such relations may be moderated when users focus on different social capital? Rather than relying on the known constructs from previous studies, we first explored the antecedents of content sharing through focus group interviews. The results of the interviews indicated two types of psychological incentives (self-interest versus communal), two types of social capital focuses (bonding versus bridging), and three types of Facebook contents (commercial messages, lifestyle affairs, and personal opinions). We then conducted quantitative research to validate the relationship among these constructs with linear regression models.

This paper contributes to the literature of psychological incentive social media use. Rather than exploring the antecedents of social media use (e.g., Joinson, 2008; Zhang et al., 2011), we focused on the incentives of content-sharing. We stated that users who use social media might not talk on social media, so the constructs from media use literature might not apply well to our research topics. Furthermore, we treated social capital as a cause (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007) rather than an outcome of social media use. Our statement was, users who focused on different social capital would have distinct content-sharing patterns on Facebook. In addition to literature contribution, this paper also provides implications for marketing practice. We proposed a psychological incentive & social capital focus matrix for marketers to manage better social media marketing via Facebook. In short, marketers should design the contents that are compatible with users' psychological incentive and social capital focus.

The subsequent sections are organized as follows. We first reviewed three relevant streams of literature. Then, the procedure and results of the focus group interview were presented. Third, based on the results of interviews, we proposed two hypotheses and design a quantitative research with an online survey. We also reported the instruments, participants, data analysis strategy, and the results. Finally, we discussed the findings generally, indicated the literature contributions, practice implication, limitations and further research, and a brief conclusion.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Psychological incentives of social media use

Uses and gratifications theory implies that media users are goal directed (Katz et al., 1974). I.e., media users usually seek out appropriate media and content to fulfill their needs (Ko et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2011). Involvement in an online activity (e.g., sharing information) produces several psychological benefits, such as reputation (Tennie et al., 2010), self-promoting (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Ryan & Xenos, 2011) and social capital (Ellison et al., 2007), which are intrinsic benefits (Cheshire, 2007) that may affect users' online behavior. The effects of psychological incentives on social media use were addressed in several research studies. For example, studies on online information pools (e.g., Wikipedia, Napster, and YouTube) indicated that the feedback mechanism could provide incentives (e.g., to gain online reputation) for users to repeatedly contribute to the online platform (Cheshire, 2007; Cheshire & Antin, 2008; Ling, Beenen, and Ludford et al., 2005). Ling, Beenen, Ludford, and et al (2005) also found that users tended to contribute more information when their contributions were recognized as unique or when they knew their behaviors were under observation.

In the context of SNS use, the effects of psychological benefits were also observed. Ellison et al. (2007) found a strong association between Facebook use and college students' perceived social capital. Frequent users of Facebook may perceive the creation and maintenance of their social capital over time. Burke, Kraut, and Marlow (2011) further indicated that distinct activities on Facebook affect users' perceived social capital in different ways. Specifically, receiving a one-to-one message from a friend increased Facebook users' perceived bonding social capital, whereas passive news consumption lowered the value of social fluency that was gained from the online connection. In addition, Tamir and Mitchell (2012) identified the association between online activity involvement and the activation of various brain regions with an approach based on neuroscience. The result implied that individuals' tendency to convey self-experiences on SNSs was indeed a result of the intrinsic value of self-disclosure.

Taking the above literature together, we have reason to believe that psychological incentives have significant impacts on users' behaviors on Facebook and that the incentives for passive viewing may not apply to content sharing. In fact, there are “lurkers” (Bishop, 2007) who passively observe and barely participate in the virtual world. While previous studies mainly focus on the adoption and use of Facebook (e.g., Joinson, 2008; Zhang et al., 2011), for marketers, it is more important to understand why consumers share. Thus, this current study aims to explore the psychological incentives that drive users to share content on Facebook.

2.2. Social ties and social capital

SNSs facilitate formation, maintenance, and expansion of social networks. Boyd and Ellison (2008) defined SNSs as “web-based services that allow individuals 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.” Owing to the unique features, SNSs allow users to communicate with their friends and make their latent ties visible.
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