INVESTIGATING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

In the field of Information Systems, scholars have empirically investigated the use of social media as an IT artifact and its influences, offering various understandings of online human behaviour, particularly for business, psychology and sociology implications. Very often, research on social media usage can be classified into internal (e.g. entertainment and satisfaction) and external factors (e.g. connections benefits). While these studies on motivations generated a clear link between internal and external factors for social media usage, it did not relate these motivations to the contributions made in terms of civic engagement behaviour. Even though there is promising evidence that people are adopting social media for civic engagement, research on civic behaviours using social media remains limited. Moreover, there are future research calls to examine the factors that promote online civic engagement and its use for positive outcomes. This research introduces a new insight on how social media is shaping the landscape of civic engagement in the modes suggested by Denning (2000): collection of information, publication of information, dialogue, coordinating activities and lobbying for decision makers and its impact on life satisfaction and virtual social skills.

Keywords: social media, civic engagement, trust, satisfaction in life.
1 INTRODUCTION

In Information Systems, research on social media usage can be classified into internal (e.g. entertainment) and external factors (e.g. connections benefits). While these studies on motivations generated a clear link between internal and external factors for social media usage, it did not relate these motivations to the contributions made in terms of civic engagement behaviour. Even though there is promising evidence that people are adopting social media for civic engagement (Chourdary et al. 2012; Ali, 2011; Hochheiser & Shneiderman, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009; Raynes-Goldie and Walker 2008), research on civic behaviours using social media remains limited (Ellison et al., 2007; Pasek, et al. 2009; Valenzuela, et al., 2009; Mandarano et al., 2010). Moreover, there are future research calls to examine the factors that promote online civic engagement (Young, 2011; Shneiderman et al., 2011; Gil de Zúñiga, 2012) and its use for positive outcomes (Peluchtte & Karl, 2008).

This research introduces three new insights on how social media is shaping the landscape of civic engagement by:

i. Examining previously un-researched or under-researched factors that motivate online civic engagement behaviour.

ii. Developing an online civic engagement behaviour construct based on Denning’s (2000) definition, in order to determine the level of civic engagement behaviour among social media users.

iii. Investigating the impact of online civic engagement behaviour on life satisfaction and virtual social skills.

Understanding online civic engagement behaviour is important because it includes the communication process that influences people’s civic attitudes and behaviours by “allowing them to exchange information, elaborate on problems facing the community and learn about opportunities to participate in civic activities” (Gastil & Dillard, 1999; McLeod et al., 1999; Klofstad, 2007; Rojas et al., 2005 cited in Gil de Zúñiga 2012). The current problem is that, based on the reviewed literature, there is a lack of understanding of what motivates online civic engagement and how new forms of civic communication might be being utilized by social media users. Without a clear comprehension of online civic behaviours, practitioners such as activists and policy makers would lose the opportunity to tap into the social media’s ability to foster civic behaviours and address social issues through its networks.

1.1 Research Questions

This study covers civic engagement in terms of citizen efforts in addressing the prevalent social problems in the country using social media, and will proceed in 3 phases. As there is no current research on the prevalent social issues in the country and the ways by which activists deploy civic efforts using social media, Phases 1 and 2 of this study will therefore address this area. Phase 3 will cover the main thesis research questions.

The 2 qualitative research questions for Phases 1 and 2 are:

a) What are the prevalent social problems in the country?

b) How are activists addressing social problems using social media?

In particular, this study attempts to address the following research questions (Phase 3):

1. What are the factors that influence online civic engagement behaviour?
2. To what extent are social media users engaging in online civic behaviour?
3. What is the impact of civic engagement in social media on life satisfaction?
4. What is the impact of civic engagement in social media on virtual social skills?
5. What is the impact of virtual social skills on life satisfaction?

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The main concept underpinning the research is the social capital theory and its role in fostering social interactions of civic engagement behaviours in the social media sphere. Drawing from popular definitions of civic engagement (Putnam, 2000; Shah et al., 2001; Hay, 2007, Raynolles & Walker 2008), this study refers to civic engagement as participation in any activities, individually or collectively, that is aimed at addressing social problems through the use of social media. Common forms of civic engagement are making donations, participating in community work like cleaning the environment, voting, attending community meetings or functions, contributing ideas to social causes, contacting public officials, attending protests, and speeches, signing petitions, serving local organizations, and so on.

Putnam’s (1995) “Bowling Alone” popularized the concept by highlighting the erosion of social capital – community engagement - over the last three decades. Putnam’s (2000) study raised concerns about the nature of civil society per se, as it inquired: “are we a less caring society now than before?” Whilst the debate on this is complex and broad, it is possible to identify two camps in relation to technology. The first claims there is behavioural change toward individualism due to the diffusion of technology such as television and the internet. This is supported by scholars such as Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1980), Putnam (2000), Whang (2001) and Kim, Scheufele and Shanahan (2005), who have laid the blame on technology in general for the decline in community engagement. The second camp begs to differ and enumerates the positive contributions of technological innovation which are related to traditional forms of civic engagement such as engendering community activity, voting, signing petitions and attending public meetings (Kern, 1997; Bimber, 1998; Nie & Erbing, 2000; Kim & Han, 2005; Moy, et al., 2005, Kim, 2007). Recent works have shown that social media is the new and promising avenue for civic engagement (Raynes-Goldie & Walker, 2008; Smith et al. 2009; Hochheiser & Shneiderman 2010; Thackeray & Hunter, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010). Based on the literature of the second camp and the studies of social capital researchers (Putnam, 1995; Kwak et al. 2004; Kim 2007; Perkins & Chow 2010), all which have noted that trust and social interactions to be the “virtuous circle” of social capital that can create the context for problem resolution. This study argues that social capital as a theory can be coupled with the diffusion of social media for civic engagement.

3 RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Our research model is illustrated in Figure 1. The model draws upon prior work in social capital theory. It proposes two categories of antecedents that impact on the extent of social media use for civic engagement behaviour: trust (trust propensity, trust in social media and trust in institutions) and incentives (group incentives and personal incentives i.e. reputation). It also examines the impact of online civic engagement behaviour on satisfaction in life and their virtual social skills at work.

Following the tradition in IS research (Pavlou and Gefan 2004; Gefen 2000; McKnight et al. 1998. 2000), we define trust as an individual’s extent of willingness to depend on others or a system, with a tendency to either believe or not to believe in them, and so trust them. We address three types of trust: trust propensity (a general kind of trust towards people), trust in social media (an IS related trust), and trust in institutions (trust in a system). The other independent variables in the model are incentives, i.e. group incentives and reputation (a personal incentive). These antecedents are based on the general incentives’ rational choice approach in social capital studies (Pattie et al. 2003; Whiteley 1995), where incentives are believed to play a role in civic participation, particularly in politics. This study refers to group incentives as the group benefits related to the results of participation, while reputation refers to the social benefit one
receives from others such as status or approval. We investigate the impact of these three trusts and two types of incentives on the different modes of civic behaviour in the context of social media drawing on Denning’s (2000) definition. The two dependent variables are satisfaction in life and virtual social skills. We develop the specific hypotheses below.

![The Research Model](image)

3.1 **Online Civic Engagement Behaviour**

Information system scholars in the field of civic engagement have empirically investigated online civic efforts in rigorous ways, offering new findings for social capital developments. Very often, these scholars also tend to oversimplify the social media for activism by focusing on a general use of Facebook opposed to frequency usage on the different modes of communication used for civic engagement (Glynn et al. 2012; Correa et al. 2010; Steinfield et al. 2008; Ellison et al. 2007; Valkenbrug et al. 2006). Moreover, there is yet a measurement that represents these different civic behaviours in its respective modes in social media. This research will fill this gap by developing a measurement for online civic engagement behaviour based on the definition and explanation of Denning’s (2000) of Internet activism (this study uses the term Internet activism, online civic participation and online civic engagement interchangeably).

3.2 **Trust and Online Civic Engagement Behaviour**

In the field of information systems, researchers have consistently argued that trust is an important factor that can outweigh risk perceptions such as privacy concerns, and that can build confidence in the decision to use either the Internet for e-commerce or any IT adoption (Pennington et al. 2004; McKnight et al. 2004; Nicolaou & McKnight 2006; Dinev & Hart 2006). In civic engagement studies, scholars have suggested that trust is a necessity for civic involvement (Coleman, 1988; Knack & Keefer, 1997; Inglehart, 1997; Falk & Guenther, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Cox & Cadwell, 2000; Jennings & Zeitner 2003, Kwak et al., 2004). In 2003, Pattie and Syed found that trust had a negative influence on activism; the opposite of the relationship posited by these scholars. Similar results in the political context works have also supported this revelation (Valenzuela et al., 2012; Ali, 2011; Chourdary et al. 2012; Visvanathan,
These findings are a surprise, since positive trust has been noted to be a key variable in the social capital literature. With the gray impact of trust on civic behaviours and the importance of trust in IS and civic research, we found that there has been very few studies on trust that combines both IS and civic studies, and none that explains how different types of trusts (propensity, social media and institution) encourage online civic engagement in its different modes (i.e. collection of information; publication of information, dialogues, coordination of activities and lobbying for decision makers). Our research intends to fill this gap.

Following trust-transference logic (Doney and Cannon 1997, Stewart 2003), we argue that trust in a platform (somewhat like an intermediary) for civic communications could increase online civic participation. This is because if social media users feel that the owners of the platform is competent, has integrity, and has a secure and reliable platform, then positive perceptions will manifest in their minds as a willingness to accept the new technology (e.g. Facebook) as a way of addressing social issues. Mapped to technology trust such as trust in social media, trust propensity involves the degree of predictability, reliability and usefulness that one individual places on another (Lippert and Davis 2006). Groups of individuals develop trust over time, which may reduce uncertainties and bolsters initial judgments before an expression or action. Such examples are seen as perceived risks in e-commerce studies (Nicolaou et al. 2013; Gefan et al. 2003; Pavlou and Gefan 2004). In this context, trust appears to determine the nature of many businesses and the social order (Blau 1964; Fukuyama 1995; Luhmann 1979). Therefore, this study holds the belief that where there is trust in others, civic expressions and actions occur more frequently.

Overall, this study holds that different types of trusts is able to maintain its standing as a significant predictor of civic engagement behaviour in a different context, i.e. the various modes of civic engagement using social media. We offer the following hypotheses:

H1: Trust propensity has a direct positive influence on online civic engagement behaviour.

H2: Trust in social media has a direct positive influence on online civic engagement behaviour.

H3: Trust in institutions has a direct positive influence on online civic engagement behaviour.

### 3.3 Incentives, Reputation and Social Media

Incentives appears to play an important role in facilitating politically inclined civic actions by individuals using social media - although not explicitly discussed - for advocating justice and democracy (Kumar & Vragov, 2009; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Ali, 2011, Chourdary et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012) against corruption (Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012). Some researchers, based on the social capital theory, suggests that when people perceived that there is a benefit to enhance their professional reputations in structurally embedded in the network, they are more likely to share knowledge without expectations of reciprocity (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Another group of social media researchers argue that it is gratification that influences the use of social media for entertainment, information seeking, social interaction (Taejin et al., 2007; Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010; Raacke & Raacke 2008; Lee & Ma 2012) as forms of personal incentives.

In line with Blau’s (1964) social exchange theory and Wasko and Faraj’s (2005) electronic network based social capital study, reputation seems to encourage participation. This antecedent reflects the social reward, such as approval, status and respect that an individual will receive from network participation. The diversity of reputation studies is seen in IS research particularly increased since the birth of e-commerce and social media. Such research includes user-generated reputation feedback, seller, and website reputation in businesses (Ghose, 2009; Pavlou & Dimoka, 2006; Resnick, et al., 2006. Wolf & Muhanna, 2005). From an individual perspective, this suggests that one potential way an individual can
benefit from active participation such as online interaction using social media, is the perception that participation could enhance his or her personal reputation in their social circle. Drawing from the study of Pattie et al. (2003) on incentives and civic engagement, we hold the same belief that one’s attachments (those who feel strongly attached to a group are more likely to act on them than those who are less attached), a sense of duty, and outcome benefits (e.g. to get benefits for oneself and one’s family), can encourage people to individually or collectively address social issues. Thus,

H4: The belief of gaining group incentives will be positively related to online civic engagement behaviour.

H5: The belief of improving users’ reputation will be positively related to their online civic engagement behaviour.

3.4 Social Media and Life Satisfaction, and Virtual Social Skills (VSS)

As social media usage continues to expand its technological capabilities and global penetration, one pressing question emerges: Does online civic engagement imply a more satisfied life? Calls for future research in social media, in relation to their subject well-being, emphasize the need to look into this matter (Kim & Lee, 2011), as these studies are insufficient in the literature (Lee et al., 2011). Current researches have argued that participating in civic activities such as social movement or community work enhances positive developmental outcomes in one’s self (Gamson 1992; Wandersman & Florin, 2000; Prilleltensky et al., 2001; Smetana et al., 2006). Similarly, so has social media in social capital studies (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al.; 2010 & Manago et al. 2012). We posit that in a combined context, civic social interactions using social media will enhance one’s well-being. Thus,

H5: The extent of online civic engagement behaviour will be positively related to satisfaction in life.

The impact of social media has also changed the nature of how we communicate in a virtual context. VSS describes a user’s ability to build social relationships with others in the Internet. It is about the knowledge (“know what”) and the skill (“how to”) components of competence in online settings (Wang & Haggerty 2011). For example, one needs to have the knowledge and skill to comprehend and interpret a series of text expressions ( : -) and emoticons ( e.g. 😃) or the use of upper case letters and exclamation marks (!!!) in order to grasp emotions that people convey. These social protocols constitute an essential part of an individual’s capability to interpret them in order perform well in virtual settings. Following the literature of (Wang & Haggerty,2011; Wan et al. 2012) which has indicated that individuals develop competence as a key learning outcome of coping with changes in environments, we believe that the extent of social media use for civic expressions and actions will also allow individuals to develop virtual social skills. We one step further is to say that those who virtually more equipped in their socializing skills are more likely to be happier, due to less frustration from the need for reiteration. Thus,

H6: Individuals who are more involved in online civic engagement will develop greater VSS.

H7: Individuals with greater VSS will be more satisfied in life.

4 PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

This study will be adopting a mixed method approach in its attempt to address the study’s research questions. The sequential method (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Cresswell, 2007), from qualitative research feeding into quantitative research will be used. The data collection methods include interviews, web analysis and surveys as shown in Table 1.
Study Phase | Levels of Understanding | Research Method  
---|---|---  
Phase 1: Interviewing users regarding social problems and their online civic engagement efforts. | 1st level: Interpretive understanding | Individual interviews  
Phase 2: Observing the civic activities on Phase 1’s participants’ organization websites (if any), blogs (if any) and Facebook. | 2nd level: Subjective understanding | Web analysis  
Phase 3: Collecting quantitative data regarding the motivators for online civic engagement; the level of online civic engagement behaviour and the perceived satisfaction in life and virtual social skills among social media users. | 3rd level: Positivist understanding | Questionnaire survey  

Table 1: Study Phases, Levels of Understanding and Research Methods

4.1 Sample

The unit of analysis for this study is the social media user, the individual. Since Facebook is the most popular social media, participants will be Facebook users. This research utilizes the criterion based sampling in order to obtain qualified candidates that will provide credible information to the study (Cresswell, 2007). To qualify to be a subject, the individual must be a working Facebook user adult, at least 18 years of age. Survey participants will be those from industries with very large number of employees located at areas which has the highest number of Internet subscribers. This includes some of the organizations of activists interviewed in Phase 1. The resulting sample from this cluster sampling method can be justifiable because there is no readily available list of all activists who are Facebook users in the studied country (Harlow & Harp 2011). The research therefore utilizes the existing statistic reports on Internet subscribers to identify the selected areas for sampling which would most likely have Internet users who are Facebook users as well. For the survey, a sample size is estimated by multiplying by five, the item count of the largest instrument in the survey; which will be an approximately 50-item values instrument (Hair Jr. et al., 2006). Thus, 250 respondents would be a minimum sample.

Participants for Phases 1 and 2 of this study were 12 activists (10 men, 2 women), in a Malaysian township aged between 23 and 66. Semi-structured interviews using open ended questions were carried out at the 12 activists’ organizations or selected venue. The study conducted face-to-face interviews with the activists, relying on a snowball method (Lindlof & Taylor 2002). Of the participants, four are renowned national activists, one of whom has over 30 years civic work engaging with the government, police, non-for-profit organizations, foundations, and various organizations, while another has over 15 years such experience in community issues. Their efforts and societal contributions are renowned to the public. The details of the interviewees are available upon request. Though the study had initially planned on more interviews, the researcher realized that the twelve activists coupled with the archival information observed from web analysis, had led to a point of data saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A thirteenth activist was added for confirmation, resulting in negligible new information.

4.2 Instrument

Three main themes emerged from the coded data of social problems from Phase 1: crime, disengagement from social and civic matters and quality of education. The 5 modes of Denning’s (2000) Internet activism were also present in social media usage on the mentioned social problems. For phase 3, a survey will be used and will refer prevalent social issues to the following three categories: (1) crime (e.g. property and violent crimes, corruption, drugs, scams etc.) (2) disengagement from social and civic matters (including lacking of moral values) and (3) quality of education. Further details on the findings of
Phases 1 and 2 are available upon request. To the greatest extent possible, questions are drawn from existing survey instruments (Pavlou & Gefan 2004; Dinev & Hart, 2006; Pattie, C., et al. 2003; Marshall et al., 2009; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Brown & Venkatesh 2005; Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Dinner et al. 1985; Wang & Haggerty 2011). The online civic engagement behaviour construct is developed based on Denning’s (2000) definition and explanation. The quantitative analysis section will be using Statistical Package for Social Sciences and Structural Equation Modeling.

5 CONTRIBUTIONS

This study contributes to the theory of social capital by extending the body of literature on civic engagement and social media. It is posited that this aspect (social capital, in particular civic engagement) in social media is under-researched in general (Pasek et al., 2009; Mandarano et al., 2010) and needs to be explored further, particularly on the effect it has on the audience’s conceptions of social reality (Rheingold, 2008), such as addressing social issues. Moreover, the phenomenon of social media in the virtual world appears to have the power to draw people together which “calls out for examination from a social capital point of view” (Cohen & Prusak 2001). This study also has a contribution on research methodology, as it develops a new measure for online civic engagement behaviour based on Denning’s (2000) definitions and content domain. Moreover, uncovering the influencing factors for online civic engagement provides an opportunity for practitioners to harness the effect of social media in contributing to a positive change for the community. For managers, the results could also highlight the importance of the significant factors to elicit participation from employees for the successful adoption and usage of social media as a problem solving and awareness mechanism. Thus, this work would lay the foundation for future explorations of social media on issues in different areas such as the workplace.

6 CURRENT STAGE OF THE RESEARCH

Currently in data collection stage.

7 REFERENCES

References are available upon request.