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Jim Burroughs, University of Virginia
Aric Rindfleisch, University of Illinois
SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Lauren Louie, University of California, Irvine
Alladi Venkatesh, University of California, Irvine

ABSTRACT

No other cultural movement in recent years has taken the world by storm, so to speak, as the emergence of social media. Social media is prominent not only as part of today’s technological landscape, but as a socio-cultural phenomenon that cuts across national boundaries. In addition to remaining persistently popular among teens and young adults it has been embraced by different demographic and social groups across different population segments. Thus it has become the focus of attention of communities of practice who share similar experiences and interests. These communities are subject to analysis by different disciplinary systems which provide theoretical knowledge and insights concerning social media practices. In sum, social media has begun to define the contemporary digital culture. In this paper we provide an interdisciplinary perspective with implications to the cultural contours of marketing and consumption.

INTRODUCTION

No other cultural movement in recent years has taken the world by storm, so to speak, as the emergence of social media (Chen, Fay, and Wang 2011). Social media is prominent not only as part of today’s technological landscape, but as a socio-cultural phenomenon that cuts across national boundaries. In sum, it has begun to define the current digital culture which is the focus of this paper.

Typically, one important goal of different writings on “social media” has been to study the characteristics of various “platforms” which are growing in number and diversity and seem to have a global reach. Specific well-known examples include but are not limited to Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Wikipedia. The number and types of social media continue to grow. There are also many others which are less well known or regional (e.g., Chinese, Indian, etc.). Thus, it is now an opportune time to provide a socio-cultural interpretation of social media in the context of marketing and consumption.

BACKGROUND

In addition to remaining persistently popular among teens and young adults (Lenhart et al. 2010) social media has been embraced by different demographic and socio-cultural groups across different population segments (Madden 2010). Thus it has become the focus of attention of communities of practice who share similar experiences and interests. These communities are subject to analysis by different disciplinary systems which provide theoretical knowledge and insights concerning social media practices. Those disciplines include but are not limited to communication and media studies, human computer interaction, cultural anthropology, social networks, business, and marketing. In this paper we provide an interdisciplinary perspective with implications to the cultural contours of marketing and consumption. That is, the article attempts to address the question of what are the cultural underpinnings of social media and what new developments emerge from such positioning within the context of marketing?

OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA

A simple but practical definition of social media by Hansen, Shneiderman, and Smith (2010, p. 12) states that it is “a set of online tools that supports social interaction between users.” A more inclusive definition will allow greater flexibility and be comprehensive resulting from a more extensive “social media” literature. Thus we can go beyond the instrumental definition and argue that social media represents a cultural framework that is inclusive of many segments of global population and their discourses. Social media has been conceptualized in many different ways – as a communication platform based on digital technology as well as a culturally constituted communication medium shaping human behaviors and member exchanges, and also as a strategic tool for commercial firms and actors as well as politically motivated organizations. Clearly, as a communication medium, it has the instantaneity and immediacy of messaging and global reach. As an instrument of democratic and populist discourse, social media has had a transformational impact on the multi-cultural global scene and even as a new formalism to push the boundaries for how researchers can collect data.

STUDY FOCUS

While technological aspects of social media are gaining attention (Kozinets et al. 2010; Schau and Gilly 2003; Scholz 2008), our focus is to analyze its culturally and sociologically with implications to marketing practice and consumption ethos. At the very micro level, the personal user of social media is the private person,
citizen, or consumer. Marketers tend to view social media as a potential member of the consumption culture and an active agent in the consumption scene (Kunz and Hackworth 2011; Mangold and Faulds 2009). Expanding on the individual consumer is the notion of positioning the individual as a member belonging to a social network. Other actors and contexts are factored into this collective consumption framework in relation to specific situational discourses of the individual. Thus, one primary element of this is the “ego” focus as the basis of culturally constituted network (Hansen, Schneiderman, and Smith 2010). As a consequence, the researcher is interested in studying consumer network employing relational data, and the cultural links between social groups constituted by individual members. For example, using relational data, Boyd and Ellison (2007) have elaborated the role of Social Network Sites in studying social media (SNSs). Parenthetically, they caution against calling them Social Networking Sites, but prefer the term, social network sites. Agichtein et al. (2008) interest is in studying social network portals is another example of the cultural framework for studying relational data.

Related Socio/Cultural Phenomena

At the micro behavioral level, research focus has ranged from word of mouth (Kozinets et al. 2010), to mobilizing social support and building social/cultural capital (Sanderson 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007), on to brand discourses (Cova and White 2010). These and other studies provide a framework that includes social media as a communication form, a technological framework, a socially constituted communities of practice, and a source/repertoire of research “tools” for conducting digital field research. Social media use as a “research tool” focuses on different “spheres” that people inhabit in their engagement with social media. Here the attention is not only on the private social sphere, but expands into group behaviors and norms and on to more macro commercial and political spheres.

APPROACHES

Marketing approaches to social media include “viral marketing and guerilla marketing” (Kozinets et al. 2010), computer mediated communication (CMC) (Hoffman and Novak 1996), new media (Winer 2009), personal media (Lidbetter 2008), participatory culture (Jenkins 1992), and interactive media (Cover 2006). Generally speaking, the researchers’ preferred theoretical traditions determine which social media characteristics are most worthy of study. For example, a field studying the diffusion of information may emphasize social media as a collection of social networks that allow information sharing (McAlister et al. 2011). Similarly, research in Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) emerges from a relationship foundation, which leads to an emphasis on the “social” aspects of social media in order to better explain it as a people connector (Spiller et al. 2011). Meanwhile, an approach that emerges from the psychological orientation may instead emphasize social media as a perceptual tool to be used by a human user made up of different neural characteristics (Wilson et al. 2010; Steinfeld et al. 2008).

Two elements that are most associated with social media are the phenomenon of web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UGC). When Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) sought to define “social media” they conceptualized web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UGC) as two separate but related attributes of social media. On the one hand, web 2.0 provides the platform that allows continual modification of a product through multiple actors’ participation and collaboration. This is an aspect of social media’s culturally constituted world. Web 2.0 acts both as a technological apparatus with affordances that allow member participation, as well channel users through culturally constituted ideologies that drive –technical and non-technical – users’ participation. User Generated Content (UGC) represents the “various forms of media content” that are made available on a publicly accessible site and created through end users assuming non-professional roles. Social media extends its influence both by offering a repertoire or a shopping cart of internet-based tools and applications which provide a set of foundations within web 2.0, and allow users to more easily interact with UGC while creating the own content.

As an example of UGC, we provide the following excerpt from digital field work conducted by one of the authors:

“For the purpose of the article, we examine Facebook postings over a period of four weeks. Members of the Facebook represented different countries from North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. Many of them are active members of CCT and display common but a wide set of interests. Facebook discussion topics include special social occasions (birthdays), photo sharing, family gatherings/occasions (childre/parental activities), current politics, leisure pursuits (bike riding, mountain climbing), professional interests (conferences, papers), food and culinary details as well as life style issues, and various social concerns (poverty etc.). The messages were spontaneous and engaging. Some members were more prominent than the others in the discourse. The conversations were rather polite and no offense was shown against any members—except some teasing, etc.”
Although the above is a rather short extract, it does reveal the cultural contours of the Facebook groups, if somewhat partially and their daily concerns and discourses.

Overall, studies grouped under the “social media” category usually concentrate on either one particular platform like SNSs, micro blogs, or virtual communities or on an overarching aspect that social media can inform, such as online WOM, the attributes of its typical users, etc. While these articles advance our knowledge for related phenomenon, it is equally important to ensure that we can properly differentiate our overarching concepts. In this context, it is imperative that our conceptions are able to differentiate “social media” from other types of media, which may share elements of interactivity and also do allow consumer to consumer relationships. In this context, is also important to create a typology for social media. For example, some previous work has begun to analyze the specifics of individual social media “types” (i.e., collaborative media, content sharers, SNS) and “platforms” (i.e., sites MySpace, Facebook). However, a consistent process will allow a more rigorous comparison of the different social media manifestations. Not only will we be able to compare social media forms and sites that are currently popular, but compare them with more established forms and sites. This will help account for the imbalance in situations where some social media platforms garner more attention than others. Ultimately there is some consensus regarding major social media prototypes like Facebook or blogs. However, there are no “killer apps” that are included in all social media forms (Hogan and Quan-Haase 2010, p. 310), and the boundaries blur as we further investigate characteristics and effects of social media.

How Does the Cultural Context Influence Social Media Practices?

The “contexts” that people use in social media can be categorized in different ways. They can be considered in terms of the “reach” or “setting.” While the “reach” explains the extent of socio-cultural influence, the “setting” refers to a patterned set of circumstances.

One of the first ways the context seeks to explain is through “use” patterns of cultural groups and members. Uses of social media can range in importance. The uses can be routine, extraordinary, or transitory. They may also range in “reach,” such as whether the effects of social media use may influence portraying identity within a limited network or whether the effects are more far reaching (Hargittai and Litt 2011; Lenhart et al. 2010). There are also issues of social media types (Collander and Dahlen 2011; Sanderson and Cheong 2010; Steinfield et al. 2008). Other related issues include a wide range of personal or everyday motivations, from social connection and circulation of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007), to acquiring information as a member of a cultural group (Freedon 2011) and to mobilize social support (Sanderson 2010). More extraordinary uses of social media have also gained greater attention from the literature. These extraordinary situations include natural disasters or highly charged political situations, such as the Arab Spring (Lotan et al. 2011). Many of the ways social media is used in everyday conditions may also be found during extraordinary situations such as the need to gain or disseminate global news and happenings, or to find social and cultural support (Shklovski et al. 2008). Transitions tend to refer to more “routine” times of change or flux. These situations differ from extraordinary situations by usually referring to socially sanctioned rituals or norms already in place. They may include planned activities such as going to college, marriage, or moving etc. (Ellison et al. 2007).

Another type of context of the user(s) is the “site.” This refers to the place (i.e., physical location, network site, etc.) and roles taken during the spatial/temporal / cultural “context.” Treem and Leonardi (forthcoming) write that the social media literature has been primarily concerned with personal use in personal settings, but that other use contexts also need attention. For example, a person can do business in the middle of the grocery store, shop online at home, or wish someone a happy birthday from a sidewalk. A cultural analysis should be able to examine such diverse practices.

A final way that context can be considered is the extent to which stakeholders are involved. While many studies concentrate on an individual’s uses, there are often many more people involved in the situation and the effects of use may be far reaching. Even if the study limits the scope of effects or the actors involved, the research must still consider the context which may influence the roles, the extent to which roles may overlap, and the types of actors involved, (Smith et al. (2008) define two types of context, the immediate network and a broader cultural context. While the local “personal social context” is determined by ego’s immediate network, the larger “community social context” is reflected through the roles and norms ego may take that originate in the larger society. For example, a person may seek to act as a consumer and an activist by using their smart phone at a rally, but may also play the role of an institutional member in a different setting—all within the cultural framework offered by the social media. Thus the socio-cultural context is important to study given how much it can influence what actors participate in, how actors can participate, and the synergistic effects of their participation and practices. By
doing so we can more fully understand not only what practices exist, but how these practices are shaped, framed, perpetuated, and encouraged.

How Is Social Media Influencing Human Communication?

Social media studies have studied many elements of the communication process including such questions as who are the communicators (Lenhart et al. 2010; Kunz and Hackworth 2011; Madden 2010; Brown et al. 2007), what methods do they use (Ames and Naaman 2007; Brown et al. 2007; Burton and Khammass 2010; Schlosser 2005), the types of messages and content sent (Berger and Milkman 2012; Kozinets et al. 2010; Schlosser 2005). For example, the social network site architecture not only allows for users’ ability to view and add to the conversation, but it also can allow many different ways to view and augment these previous communication exchanges. The users do not have the same requirements or structural impediments as in “offline” collaboration or communication engagements. Direct bonds with other users are not always necessary if the communication can be mediated through the digital site, and the architecture of the site sets up a system that allows for new types of communication norms even among strangers. For example, for “crowdsourcing” type collaboration projects, users do not need to have any bonds and direct interaction with other users to work together on a shared project. Blogs and their histories are another example that reflects how the content persistence on social media sites can influence communication. As another example, blogs and other social media forms often allow a user to search and access past content. This allows the users to develop perceptions of the content producer or medium itself based on past “behavior” such as discussed by Kozinets et al. (2010).

A final contribution to communication is social media’s interactivity, which allows multidirectional communication beyond the typical one-way sender process (Hansen et al. 2010; Quiring 2009). Social media technology allows for users to easily generate their own content, known as user generated content where the content production shifts from the sender to the receiver (Cover 2006; Gatarski and Lundkvist 1998).

Role of Technology in Shaping Social Media Practices

It is customary sometimes in our intellectual discourse to treat technology as distinct from culture. But it is generally acknowledged that technology is an essential ingredient of our cultural framework — and hence the phrase, *technological culture*. The issue here is in sequencing role of technology in shaping social media practices. For example, Treem and Leonardi (forthcoming) use Gibson’s theory of affordances and offer “visibility, persistence, editability, and association” as main ingredients of social media technology culture. Hogan and Quan-Haase (2010) emphasize the social affordances of social media. For example, they refer to social media as “affording “two-way interaction with an audience, beyond any specific recipient.” Others refer to the technological features of different platforms (Hansen et al. 2010). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe forms according to self-presentation and media richness (2010). Hansen et al. divide the types by key affordances, such as conversation synchronicity, collaborative authoring, blogs, social sharing, social networking services, virtual world, etc. (2010, p. 18). Other set of articles refers to self-disclosure and privacy, as for example, in Facebook allowing the “friend” designation.

In sum, that details the technological characteristics of social media not only help explain what humans can possibly do and think about these technologies, but also how they are more likely to be employed in actual cultural discourse.

Social Networks and Social Media

Another element of social media research is to investigate how social media and social networks influence each other. Network research examines the relations among different entities, such as people, firms, and websites. These relations or “ties” indicate a connection between the entities and by finding the underlying patterns; we can better predict how they influence each other (Butts 2008, p. 13). Social network analysis examines the creation, destruction or maintenance of social networks, information transmission, group dynamics, social capital, social influence, and resource mobilization (Brown et al. 2007; Galley and Lampe 2009; Gatarski and Lundkvist 1998; Hansen et al. 2010, p. 48; Smith et al. 2008). A major social media contribution to this line of research is that it provides new types of relational data not possible before (Lewis et al. 2008).

Social Media and Marketing Practices

An important direction for social media research is to examine how it influences the sphere of commerce — the practices of marketers, consumers, and markets. First, there are new ways to advertise as “non-intrusively” as possible (Spiller et al. 2011). We have already stated that consumers can and do participate by creating their own content such as reviews or fan stories (Mangold and Faulds 2009). Many issues that concern marketers are similar to those in other disciplines such as sociology, media studies, human computer interaction, etc. but in a different context. Such questions may include who uses social media and why, what behaviors can be predicted,
or to discern the potential for consumers to mobilize or engage in co-creation (Cova and White 2010; Sanderson 2010). Another major element of interest has been the firm’s participation in social media that includes twitter accounts, blog posting (Kozinets et al. 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

User participation and interactivity are key elements of social media culture. Social media allows consumers to participate freely and in new ways. The social media literature has only begun to parse out the implications of these new developments. Social media not only allows the technological means to interact, but also gives people a new perspective. We may wish to study the effects that come with users’ greater reflexivity to their participation and role as a user, both as a potential audience member and contributor.

In this paper we provided an interdisciplinary perspective on social media with implications to the cultural contours of marketing and consumption. More work needs to be done to ensure that we continue to explore the specifics of social media. This is just a beginning.

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For further information contact:
Alladi Venkatesh
The Paul Merage School of Business
University of California, Irvine
Irvine CA 92697
Phone: 949.413.2887
E-Mail: avenkate@uci.edu