Social media, social causes, giving behavior and money contributions

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The Internet plays a pivotal role in accommodating and often shaping communication to fit changing economic and socially hectic circumstances in our lives (Das & Sahoo, 2012). In the present study we examine the effect of online social networks on voluntary engagement, giving behavior and online money contributions. We seek to test whether the internet and social media are effective platforms for promoting online donations and whether individuals choosing online voluntary engagement and money contributions differ from those who prefer offline voluntary engagement and money contributions.

Social causes, previously attended within "physical" boundaries and expressed with physical attendance such as protests, petitions and demonstrations are replaced by virtual/remote participation. Access and use of the internet and social media opened the possibilities for individuals to be involved without leaving their "physical" space and various expressions of ethical behavior and social presence have become possible (Shen et al., 2010). Some examples for the multiple forms of engagement are tele-mentoring, tele-tutoring, cyber services, blogs, and journals (Guadagno et al. 2008; Song & Kim, 2006). Another form of interest to this study is online money contributions (Cnnan et al., 2011, Bekkers, 2010). Online monetary contributions are expression of ethical consumption using the Internet to support a social cause (Bryant et al. 2003, Lu & Li, 2009).

Indeed, social media and social networking greatly affect interaction and connection between people with similar interests. Social media help also to create, transfer, retrieve and apply knowledge and provide an effective means for increasing awareness of social causes and encouraging online money donations ((Fang et al. 2012; Gandia, 2011; Bekkers, 2010). Recent studies indicate that social networking facilitates communication both at the formal and informal level, and increases the propensity to share (Hsu et al., 2012), thereby increasing satisfaction and enhancing loyalty to online communities (Pai & Tsai, 2011). Such expressions can also take the form of ethical engagement when social causes are pursued via the internet, appealing to a wide range of individuals (Banaji & Buckingham, 2009). In these cases of “ethical” engagement, pro-social behavior and the concept of reciprocity are important because they guide offline as well as online communication and define individuals’ interest in being voluntarily engaged (Molm, 2010; Molm et al., 2007) and money contributions (Cnaan et al, 2011). The Internet is certainly the medium that “encourages acts of reciprocity, negotiation and cooperation” (Cheshire et al., 2010, p.177).

We draw upon two areas of research: (a) social exchange and pro-social behavior (Cheshire, Gibes & Cook, 2010) to tap into variations in voluntary engagement motivation and outcomes and (b) social diversification hypothesis (Mesch, 2007; Mesch & Talmud, 2010; Mesch et al. 2012) suggesting that Internet adds to and expands, but does not replace, existing social arrangements and behaviors. Combining these two streams of knowledge, we seek to show
that social media promote online volunteer engagement (Griffith et al. 2012) and influence both online and offline donations (Cnaan et al., 2011). The study is a secondary analysis based on the PEW data set (2008). It is shown that (a) participation in social media and networking -blogging, Face book and journaling- significantly increase both online, and offline money contributions; (b) social causes moderate the link between socio-demographic characteristics and money contributions.

We conclude that social media and networking are an effective means to increase “ethical consumption” both online and offline enhancing voluntary engagement and money contributions. These results assess the social diversification hypothesis suggesting that online behavior complements, and in some cases reinforces offline behavior. Differences in the type of affiliated social cause moderate the effects of social media on online pro-social behavior and giving behavior.

Key words: Internet communication, money contributions, social media, social causes

Introduction

interests is now an accepted global practice.