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Editorial

Toward a Deeper Understanding of Social Media

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As social media continue to gain in popularity, marketers are searching for a firm foundation on which to base their strategic decisions regarding how to employ social media to engage and influence their customers. Such a foundation is becoming increasingly important as online social networking and “social sharing” behaviors increase and as “always-on” Internet use becomes more personal, being accessed as much or more on mobile devices than it is on the PC. By 2011, over half of all traffic to Pandora and Twitter was from mobile devices, with mobile representing one third of all traffic to Facebook, and with all of these trends rising (Meeker 2011).

Global usage of the main social networking sites, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, has grown to a scale that can only be described as ubiquitous. Facebook’s S-1 filing with the SEC¹ reveals that Facebook has 845 million users who are interconnected by 100 billion friendships. Every day, Facebook users generate 2.7 billion likes or comments and upload 250 million photos. YouTube’s most recently released statistics indicate a similar magnitude of user engagement. More than 800 million unique users visit YouTube each month, 4 billion videos are viewed each day, and “more video is uploaded to YouTube in one month than the three major US networks created in 60 years.”² While Twitter officially has 100 million active users³ generating over 200 million Tweets per day,⁴ third party estimates range as high as 500 million registered accounts.⁵

Against this backdrop, one might assume that the social media space is saturated, with no room for new entrants to squeeze in. However, this is far from the case. ComScore reported that Pinterest, billed as a “virtual pinboard” for organizing

and sharing images, reached over 10 million unique viewers in January 2012 at a faster pace than any other website in web history.⁶ Tumblr, a rapidly growing social blogging platform, has nearly 50 million individual blogs⁷ generating 500 million daily page views. And Zynga’s social game “CityVille” became the fastest growing game of all time going from zero to 100 million users in the space of only 43 days.⁸

Beyond sheer volume, the breadth of different types of social media types is increasing as well. New social search applications like Quora, which facilitate answers to questions from one’s online friends in real-time, suggest that social media are likely to change the dynamics of organic search. The genetic testing site 23andMe goes beyond sharing status updates and photos to sharing genetic profiles, allowing members of its community to receive alerts when new relatives are found on the site, based upon shared genetic data. Social “check-in” applications, pioneered by Foursquare with Facebook Places and Google Latitude in fast pursuit, have expanded to check-ins to things beyond physical locations. Shopkick allows its users to specifically check-in to retail stores and accumulate virtual “Kickbucks” in the process. Forecast can be used to check-in to future events, GetGlue to check-in to TV shows, movies, music, and books, Meebo to check-in to Web content, and Hashable to check-in to other people.

Social commerce applications like Beautylish and Lockerz, along with social coupon sites like Groupon and Living Social are becoming increasingly popular as they incorporate user-generated content and group interaction supporting shopping activities. Social networking continues to evolve with “personal networks” like Path, Gravity, Aro and GroupMe, distributed social browsing applications like Meebo and social sharing organized around photos with applications like Instagram, Picplz, Twitpic and Dailybooth. While Facebook’s 845 million users have, on average 130 friends,⁹ the new personal social

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¹ <http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1326801/000119312512034517/d287954ds1.htm>.

² http://www.youtube.com/t/press_statistics.

³ <http://blog.twitter.com/2011/09/one-hundred-million-voices.html>.

⁴ <http://blog.twitter.com/2011/06/200-million-tweets-per-day.html>.

⁵ <http://twopcharts.com/twitter500million.php>.

⁶ <http://techcrunch.com/2012/02/07/pinterest-monthly-unique/>.

⁷ <http://www.tumblr.com/about>.

⁸ <http://venturebeat.com/2011/01/14/zyngas-cityville-grows-to-100-million-users-in-43-days/>.

⁹ <http://blog.kissmetrics.com/facebook-statistics/>.

network Ourspot limits the maximum size of its social networks to two people — you and one friend. As social media applications continue to proliferate and the dynamics of online social interaction continue to evolve, researchers are answering the call to develop a deeper understanding of social media use to advance knowledge and further practice.

The four articles in this special issue address these challenges in distinct ways. *Liu-Thompkins and Rogerson (2012)* are interested in why some consumer-generated YouTube videos go viral while others are destined to generate only a few downloads. They employ a network analysis to analyze a sample of user-generated YouTube videos and examine how the influence of network properties, content characteristics and user characteristics affect diffusion. A key finding is that a user with a large subscriber base with fewer connections positively affects diffusion with the highest diffusion rate occurring for moderate connectivity. Although the judged entertainment and educational values possessed by the video positively impact diffusion, it is not the actual production quality of the user-generated content that matters as much as the quality as manifested by users' ratings of those videos. The more videos a user posted and the more views those videos received also positively related to diffusion. These findings are important because they can help marketers target brand-related user-generated videos likely to go viral as soon as possible. Once such videos have been identified, marketers have more opportunities for incorporating these user-generated efforts in their integrated marketing communications program.

In the second article, *De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang (2012)* model a number of factors that are hypothesized to impact the degree to which consumers will "like" and comment on brand posts at brand fan pages on a social networking site. Using posts from a set of international brands in diverse product categories, the authors find that vividness, interactivity and the position of the post are the key drivers of a brand post's popularity. Among their findings are that more vivid posts are liked more, while more interactive posts, and those in the top position, generate more comments. The valence of brand posts also impacts brand post popularity, since both negative and positive comments, but not neutral comments, increase the number of comments and subsequently, popularity. The results have clear implications for managing brand posts on social networking sites.

Next, *Feng and Papatla (2012)* investigate the degree to which product innovativeness leads to higher online word of mouth. Using data on automobile discussions from the *Consumer Reports's* online site as well as Edmunds.com, the authors' modeling effort incorporates sales, product quality, customer satisfaction, and expert opinion to examine whether launching new models or improving products through redesign leads to higher online word of mouth. The results show that online WOM is likely to be higher for redesigned rather than new models. This research has relevance to managers interested in those factors most likely to stimulate online conversations about their brands.

In the final paper, *Smith, Fischer and Yongjian (2012)* utilize qualitative content analysis techniques followed up by empirical testing to analyze brand-related posts for two popular apparel brands appearing on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, three of the most popular forms of social media. The authors' proposed that brand-related UGC varies across these different social media applications and developed a multidimensional framework to assess the content. Using similar brands with different social media strategies, their analysis revealed significant differences across forms and brands on a number of content dimensions. As one example, interesting patterns of differences in brand sentiment emerged that appear tied to the brands' strategic approaches to user-generated content appearing on different forms of social media. Results suggest that brands with proactive social media strategies are in the best position to reap rewards from user-generated content.

Taken together, these articles increase our knowledge and provide real recommendations to practitioners. We hope this special issue meets the needs of researchers and practitioners and will serve to generate additional research on the topic.

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