
Digital conversion: Social media, engagement, and the 'I am a Mormon' campaign

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Abstract

Religion and social media present a unique context for exploring communication and relationship cultivation. The relationships between religious organisations and their publics (i.e. members, converts) are arguably deeper than, and certainly different from, many other organisation-public relationships. Social media likewise have many additional dimensions that go beyond traditional media channels, facilitating communication towards relationship cultivation through real-time response and digital interactivity.

This study, an analysis of social media efforts by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) via its social platform www.Mormon.org, explores the ways in which members use communication technology to represent their beliefs and values online. Findings demonstrate the ways users assume responsibility for an organisation's communication efforts. Results also suggest drivers of user engagement online may include overlaps in personal values, lifestyles, and needs to communicate personal image.

Introduction

Digital technology and social media have transformed communication practice. Social media have enhanced the connection capacity between groups and organisations through the ease of interactivity and access of the medium, and literature has emphasised the relationship capacity of social media (Kent, 2010; Kelleher, 2009). One arena that holds potential for the development of insights into digital technology-based organisation-public connections is the growing area of religion online.

Relationship cultivation efforts by religious communicators may transcend the

traditional trust and commitment engendering activities of commercial organisations, yielding unique insights into the uses of communication technology in relationship cultivation. The nature and objective of the relational connection between religion and convert is based on an arguably more profound level of commitment than commercial organisation objectives. Conversion, the enduring emotional connection based on religious belief and forged through loyalty and faith, may be considered a particularly intimate relational connection.

The intersection of the intimate connection between religion and convert and social media's relational capacity yields a unique area of study. There have been few studies investigating religious promotion (Shin, 2008), and much less, if any, exploring social media efforts by faith-based organisations. The following study analyses the social media efforts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through its recently launched social media platform (Mormon.org) and corresponding campaign ('I am a Mormon'). This study, an analysis of 48 member profiles on Mormon.org, identifies the relationship cultivation concepts evident in member profile content. Findings suggest that social media platforms, like Mormon.org, may serve to distribute an organisation's communication activities (i.e. public relations and advertising) to social media users, that is, to have those users adopt some of the responsibility for such activities.

Literature review

Social media, two-way media through which users construct personal identities through self-presentation and dialogue (Rettberg, 2009), have received increasing attention in

scholarship, particularly as a “mechanism for an audience to connect, communicate, and interact with each other and their mutual friends” (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuñiga, 2010, pp. 247-248). Social media are considered relational devices through their capacity for real-time interactivity (Sundar, 2007).

Social media users are both connected and conversational (Gurau, 2008). Online behaviour is based on the sociability of the online sphere and its fulfilment of human connection motives; its utility to online publics; cognitive stimulation and involvement, and individual interpretation of and reaction to Internet technology (Johnson & Kulpa, 2007). Social media users are proactive in information consumption, define issues through dialogue, and value collaborative content creation and control in their online media experience (Guillory & Sundar, 2008; Park & Reber, 2008; Perlmutter, 2008). Finally, social media user personality and identity are increasingly present in online behaviour, as users no longer seek anonymity but go online to socialise, meet new people and create a personalised online profile (Correa et al., 2010).

Communication management and social media: Participatory communication

The promise of social media for communicators is interactive, direct access with stakeholders who can influence the online dialogue about the organisation. For this reason, some have considered this communication era the ‘age of engage’, in which communicators can interact with and elicit involvement from online publics. Some of the literature considers the need to partner with publics in communicating online. Christensen, Firat, and Torp (2008) argued that communication should emanate from a diverse set of voices; and Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) maintained the importance of communicative resonance with publics who “collectively co-produce and consume content...that is central to their interest by exchanging informational and social resources” (p. 412).

Groom (2008) argued that online interactivity requires communication integration for consistency, as organisations seek to “to touch the lives of people through the intersection of communication and people’s lives” (p. 9). Thus, engagement is accomplished by building communication around stakeholder needs, rendering communicators’ purpose one of “eliciting a response not just conducting a monologue” (Groom, 2008, p. 10). Mason (2008) applied Gladwell’s tipping point theory to online involvement, arguing that it operates based on select, knowledgeable, and persuasive people who spread an idea, the persuasiveness of the idea, and the power of contextual influences on how the idea is conveyed and accepted. Under this context, publics initiate and control the communication process, and therefore, should be considered a communication partner (Mason, 2008).

Some have considered the involvement of social media users with organisations online as one of self-identity and meaning. Muñiz and Schau (2005) argued that publics communicate about an organisation online whether the organisation has an online presence or not. In this content creation, publics form into communities of interest in which meaning is created, discussed, and negotiated; and “corporate communications become part of the lexicon and ethos of the community” (p. 37). In this process, brand meaning becomes part of individual community members’ self-identity (p. 37).

Relationship cultivation and social media

Several scholars, particularly in the public relations domain, have argued that social media facilitate relationship cultivation between an organisation and groups (Yang & Lim, 2009; Cho & Huh, 2007; Park & Reber, 2008). Most of these considerations have been limited to organisational strategies for relationship cultivation online, rather than the point of view of the individual or group (Porter, Sweetser Trammell, & Chung, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2008; Hong & Kioussis, 2007; Porter, Sweetser, Chung, & Kim, 2007; Porter & Sallot, 2005).

Scholars have considered symmetrical communication strategies most effective in organisation-public relationship cultivation

(Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006; Grunig, 2006; Hon & Grunig, 1999) including positivity, openness, assurances of legitimacy, shared tasks, and shared networking (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Relationship cultivation principles online include web design elements like usefulness of information, feedback loops, and ease of interface (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). Communicative aspects of relationship cultivation online include communicating commitment, legitimacy and openness (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Some have demonstrated the importance of organisations using a conversational human voice to connect with individuals online (Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Searls & Weinberger, 2000).

The viewpoints discussed above demonstrate an organisation-centric focus to relationship cultivation. Few perspectives have considered the perspective of the individual in online relationship cultivation. The current study considers public participation in the context of a religious organisation social media platform.

Religious communication

The relationship between individuals and religious organisations represents a unique relational connection. Individuals look to religion for life improvement and certainty in uncertain times (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2004). This religious affinity has carried over into the Internet—20% of online publics use the Internet for religious information. Some argue the Internet has led to America's third "great awakening" (Tilson, 2001).

Organisation-based communication in religion, including public relations and advertising, has been considered the intersection of communication strategy and conversion. Religious organisations often seek to tap into social and psychological needs for explaining the unknown and establishing standards for dealing with uncertainty (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2004). Professional religious communication activities range from efforts to raise awareness of religious doctrine to government efforts to facilitate tourist attention to pilgrimage sites (Shin, 2008; Badaracco,

2006; Tilson, 2001). Religious communication strategies include building reputation to dispel prejudice, create community, improve quality of life, and increase conversion and membership (Shin, 2008; Badaracco, 2006). Shin (2008) argued that religious communication practitioners may need to show flexibility and "partly take the public's position to a degree" (p. 405) for successful communication efforts.

Scope of this study

The intersection of digital communication technology and religion presents a unique environment in which to analyse online user involvement. This study explores the participation of social media users with an organisation by analysing the content created by those users in the context of a religious organisation. The context chosen for this study is the 'I am a Mormon' campaign and Mormon.org, by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). This campaign was chosen because of the campaign's extensive use of social media and the church's particular focus on online communication. Church authority M. Russell Ballard explained:

"If you follow the history of the Church, our methodology has always been to go to the town square...today the town square is the Internet. The advantage to today's town square is the Internet is self-selecting. On mormon.org, people—at their own pace and interest level—can just get to know Mormons, or can dig deeply into doctrine and official statements" (qtd. in Insert, 2011, p. 85).

Mormon.org and the "I Am a Mormon" Campaign

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose people are also referred to as Mormons, is a religion with over 14 million members worldwide (Insert, 2011). The LDS Church has maintained various levels of Internet presence through www.lds.org and www.mormon.org. In July 2010 the church redesigned mormon.org to better fulfil its objective as "a resource where people seeking to know more about Mormonism find official

information” and to “dispel myths and misperceptions about Mormons” (Insert, 2011). The site now features profiles of church members, which include videos, pictures, and member commentary. At the time of this study, there were over 25,000 profiles on the site, from which communication directors selected 48 to feature with two-to-three-minute videos. In addition to being posted on Mormon.org, these videos have been advertised on sites like Facebook and YouTube.

Mormon.org profiles are written by members of the LDS Church. To build their profile, members sign in using their member record number and fill in information according to the following sections: Short intro, About me, Why I am a Mormon, How I live my faith, Frequently asked questions, Personal stories, and Additional information (including ethnicity, continent, and previous religious background). Though the profile registration form features tips on section content, members are not obligated to use the suggestions. Profiles are reviewed prior to publication.

Research questions

The purpose of this study is not to evaluate the quality of Mormon.org or member profiles but to explore user involvement via digital communication technology. The following questions were used to guide this study:

RQ 1: How do church members communicate their involvement with the LDS Church via Mormon.org?

This question explores the type of content and commentary that Mormons who sign up on Mormon.org provide. Considerations for analysis under this heading included ways in which Mormons communicated about their life as a church member.

RQ 2: How do church members participate in or fulfil relationship cultivation strategies online via Mormon.org?

The literature suggests that social media users may produce content representative of the organisation, thereby fulfilling online

relationship cultivation strategies. Under this question, analysis considered the ways in which member content reflected relationship strategies online.

Method

This study is a qualitative content analysis of member profiles on Mormon.org. In sampling, all profiles featuring a church-produced video at the time of research (48) were collected in their entirety, including video and written-content. Only profiles with church-produced videos were sampled because they represent the most direct interaction between member and the church on Mormon.org. Of the 48 profiles, there were 19 females, 29 males, 31 white, 8 African American, 4 Hispanics, 3 Asian, and 2 Pacific Islanders.

Following data collection, including transcription of each profile video, data were analysed using a mix of structured analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Codes were first developed based on the literature, then, after a review of the transcripts and profile content, additional codes were added from the findings that were not represented in the literature. Codes for research question one included personal feelings, personal philosophy, personal stories, self-promotion, benefits of church membership, communicated uniqueness, and communicated insight into personality (or type of person). Codes for research question two included: conversational human voice, communicated commitment, openness (about life as a Mormon, church policy), shared networks, shared tasks, issues resolution, assurances of legitimacy, diversity, representation of teachings, and education.

Findings

RQ 1: How do church members communicate their involvement with the LDS Church via Mormon.org?

Mormon.org profiles provide an intimate look into member lives and lifestyles, as members contribute personal experiences, feelings and philosophies. Additionally, written

content is more focussed on topics connected with religion than is the video content.

Mormon lifestyle

Members commonly discuss the uniqueness of their lives including experiences that range from life as an astronaut to life as an amputee. These life portraits include personal ambitions and intimate feelings, like the middle-school teacher who shared her wish to have children of her own and the firefighter who lamented losing his job following a heart attack. Others include a 911-survivor who would like to be Superman “because of his invincibility” and a woman who runs a homeless recovery centre because of her own experiences living on the street.

Detailed, personal experiences about struggles and successes tend to make up most member profiles. Examples include a teenager who grew up on the streets but is now attending college, an amputee who built his own prosthetic leg, recovering alcoholics who have turned their lives around, and parents who have sacrificed to have children. In most of these experiences, members discuss their lives outside a religious context, particularly in the profile videos.

Religious belief is more evident in written profile content, where members discuss what it is like to be a Mormon. Common discussions include peer reactions to Mormon standards and beliefs. For example, Jeff, a Harley Davidson enthusiast and president of a motorcycle club, explained his peers’ disbelief that he was allowed to ride a motorcycle. His response: “I haven’t found a scripture that says I can’t!” Jeff also articulated what other members say in their profiles, that though peers are not church members, he helps “break down all of the stereotypes that they think of for Mormons”.

Others comment that Mormon standards in the context of everyday life open up discussions about the religion. For example, Jason, a professional skateboarder, explained, “Usually it comes up because I don’t drink. People are usually like, ‘Why are you not drinkin?’ ‘Well, that’s just not what I do.’ Then we end up talking about the church”. Members also commonly discuss how their

values fit into their everyday lives. Annie said, “Being a Mormon means I live my faith everyday, in everything I do. My spirituality is not a separate room in the house of who I am. My faith is the paint on my walls and the floor underfoot”.

Members also underscore their uniqueness with the sentiment that they are normal people. Rob, a New York fashion designer raising his two sons as a single parent, is one example of a profiler emphasising his life as one of normalcy.

Personal philosophy

Interpretations of life and how to live it are common themes among profiles. These philosophical musings are often communicated without religious allusion or affiliation. For example, Joy, a professional surfer, commented, “The one thing I’ve learned in surfing is you have to position yourself in the right place or you won’t catch any good waves, and I think that’s kind of how you have to be...in life”. Bruce, a professional golfer, said golf is like life, because it requires personal accountability.

Some share their views of parenthood, like Drew, the rodeo cowboy who teaches his children about having a work ethic by giving them responsibilities on the farm, or Nadja, who explained her purpose in motherhood is “not to make sportsmen or musicians out of them...but [to help them] become well-rounded happy beings”. Others share views on relationships and serving others, like Dennis who teaches life skills to troubled youth because “that’s what it’s really all about”, Vance, who comments that “there’s no way to put a price tag” on friends and family, and Colton, a restaurant owner, who muses on the importance of eating a meal together: “You realise, ‘Man, I really do like hanging out with my husband or wife’”. Still others are more general about life:

My view of the cosmos is that there is a significant element of unpredictability of messiness that we then must react to and solve or neglect as the circumstance may require. Some of the mess of our lives seems to show some evidence of a

particular design for our good. Some of it just may be the incidental mess of what happens when you have people. (Brian, an artist.)

Again, subject matter differs between video and written content—the latter is more religious. Alex, a singer, wrote, “I tell people that we need to let go of our E-G-Os (Edge God Out)”, and Jarem, an amputee, wrote, “Never shy from a complement [sic]... anything complementary [sic] about you is a gift from God”. Some confirm teachings of Mormonism, including belief in God, the scriptures, and the purpose of life, and sharing their reasoning for being Mormon. Beatta, a Finnish mother, wrote: “I’m a Mormon because I love the doctrine of eternal families, that I can be with my loved ones forever. I have had trying times in my life, but understanding where I came from...and what is after this life has helped me”. Others share conversion experiences, included declarations of receiving answers to prayers and joining the church, “not because someone convinced me...but because I have inquired of God”, as Paris, an African-American youth recounted.

RQ 2: How do church members participate in or fulfil relationship cultivation strategies online via Mormon.org?

Members openly discuss the viewpoints of the LDS Church, attest to the legitimacy of their connection with the religion, seek to resolve the issues that may deter a connection, and educate publics about the church’s values. In each of these areas, members communicate commitment with a conversational human voice.

Communicating openly

Members provide an in-depth look into what it is like to be Mormon. Common themes include serving in volunteer positions in their congregations, attending church activities, and following Mormon standards. Commentary tends to be educational and candid. Rob, a retired football player, said:

It’s not always easy being a Mormon. We struggle with questions about faith and why things happen the way they do. [My wife] is a great example to

me of what it means to be a Mormon. She has the ability to sense when people are in need, and doesn’t hesitate to offer her help.

Some members are candid about their experience. Jeff, a motorcycle enthusiast said, “I know I’m certainly not the perfect Mormon, and I know the guy teaching the lesson at church isn’t either, and so when he makes a mistake...I go, ‘Oh, I’m not the only one that messes up occasionally!’” Others openly discuss peer reactions to their decision to join the church, including some who reported being criticised by friends and even disowned by family members.

Communicating legitimacy

Members attest to the legitimacy of the LDS Church and their connection to it, through commentary on the ways membership has influenced their lives. Several members echoed the sentiment of Allan, an outdoor enthusiast, that the LDS Church helps them “make sense of a messed up world”. Profile content includes the ways members rely on church teachings to overcome challenges. Some members discussed the hardship of losing a child in an accident, describing the reassurance their faith provided during those hard times.

Members also communicate legitimacy through representation of the religion’s values in their everyday lives. Personal accounts of humanitarian service are common, like Kelly, a dental hygienist, who runs a free clinic in Honduras, and Ryan, a paediatrician, who teaches birthing in countries with high infant mortality rates. Gabe, a retired professional football player, commented that people “know” he’s Mormon by how he lives: “It is a daily commitment to live the life of a Mormon especially because you are expected to be a Mormon no matter where you may be. My faith is my lifestyle.”

Members also communicate legitimacy through accounts of overcoming doubts in the process of conversion. Devin, previously of another faith, recounted his change from antagonism to acceptance and conversion. Sergio, a self-proclaimed “man of science”, considered the contradiction of faith and

science, and explained his experience as proof of the religion's validity. He now considers himself a man of faith and a man of science.

Educating others

Member testimonials on Mormon.org are educational and explain the religion's tenets. Introductions to church history, scripture, and positions that differentiate the church are often relayed. Cassandra, a mother and artist, said, "The Mormons I know come in all shapes and sizes. What we have in common isn't something in the way we dress or even in the way we were raised but in what we believe." Many explain church structure (i.e. how congregations are divided into units) and policies (i.e. the dietary and health guidelines of the church). Signs and images also communicate beliefs, like one member's painting that read, "Love, Family, Home".

Members also publicise the church's humanitarian service and other accomplishments. Ryan, a paediatrician, described the church's healthcare efforts, providing health services, clean water projects, disaster relief, and other services, including his own efforts with neonatal resuscitation. "All of these projects are funded by donations made directly to the church for humanitarian needs," he said. Others, like Aaron and Emily, non-profit Washington lobbyists, talk about the successes of the church's global organisation for women, "one of the largest women's groups in the world". Alex, an African-American musician, wrote about the church's persecution in the mid-1800s for "allowing slaves to live and have membership among the Mormons" for which they were "tarred, feathered, beaten, and even driven out of their homes".

Resolving issues

Members have the opportunity to address issues facing the church in the "frequently asked questions" section. Many choose to address the controversial issues. A few examples include:

African-Americans and the priesthood

I hold the priesthood...For a time, there were restrictions, and it seems

that there were some bad feelings towards the church about it, but consider this: In my own personal studies, there was not a single church or religion...who did not practice some kind of segregation or discrimination. Humans are far from perfect. (Alex, an African-American member.)

The status of women

One of the biggest misconceptions people have about our church is that women are subservient, weak or dominated. I always laugh when I hear someone express this erroneous belief and think they should come hang out with me or my friends for a day! (Rochelle, a mother.)

Mormonism and Christianity

We are not irritated as much as amused when some choose to call us non-Christians. If they mean by that, that we don't agree with them in every particular doctrine, that is correct. We are grateful whenever anybody describes Christ as their Savior and tries to follow him. That is what we are trying to do. (Bruce, a business owner.)

Profiles also represent a diversity of opinions, lifestyles, and peoples. In addition to multiple video profiles of African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and other cultures and ethnicities, Mormons communicate an appreciation of diversity. Yvette, a math teacher, said, "There isn't a cookie cutter way to be a Mormon". Jason, who leads a school of rock music programme, commented, "I find that my beliefs are strengthened the more I expose myself to differing thoughts." Other representations of an appreciation for diversity include videos that profile multiple cultures and ethnicities, and members who indicate they break Mormon stereotypes.

Conversational human voice

Members portray LDS beliefs with candour and emotion. Some of these constitute simple declarations, like Allan's commentary on the LDS doctrine on diet: "It's just darn good advice for good health" or Jarem's rationale for

believing God has called a prophet today: “Why wouldn’t He?” Other examples of human voice are represented in personal invitations to learn more about Mormonism. Sergio said, “The only way to know God is to experiment and have an experience with God, otherwise it’s just something someone else talks about. It isn’t until you experience yourself that you can really know the truth.”

Communicated commitment

Members convey their commitment in personal declarations of loyalty. For example, Annie, said, “I am a Mormon because everything I have learned about Mormon doctrine rings true for me”. Emily said, “I’m not coasting through life based on what my parents ‘told’ me when I was a kid”. Josh put it simply: “This is the bottom line to me. The Mormon Church teaches good principles, I think it makes people better...Man, I don’t think we’re here to be robots...God wants us to be who we are and make the church us.”

Discussion

Member profiles are, admittedly, both spontaneous and contrived. On the one hand, members write their own content, but on the other, the church provides the structure within which content is created. Yet, member profile content is still a representation of user engagement with organisations online. In particular, findings here suggest a framework for understanding online engagement and points of entry for users to engage with an organisation using communication technology.

Deciphering social media engagement

This study’s findings shed light on a growing area of research in digital communication—engagement. While academic and trade press articles throw around the word as a goal of digital communication strategy, very little research has actually sought to define or identify the concept itself. Instead, readers are left to assume that engagement is a form of involvement or response activity that may include following a company online, forwarding a company message or responding to a company message online (Waters &

Williams, 2011; Paine, 2009). Some have even intimated that it represents a relationship (Bruce & Shelley, 2010). While such actions are assumed ‘engagement’, in none of these discussions has the concept of engagement been defined or differentiated from other related concepts (i.e. relationship, loyalty, etc.).

Considering church member behaviour to create a profile on Mormon.org as a form of engagement, this study would suggest that engagement is a form of expressing one’s belief in or connection with an organisation. Of course, describing engagement in this way may be specific to the religious context of this study, but it is not a stretch to classify any attempt by individuals to express belief or connection with an organisation online as a form of engagement. As a case study of engagement, the results here suggest themes and drivers of user-organisation engagement online, particularly for individuals already connected with an organisation outside of the online context. These points of engagement include areas of interest overlap and benefit between user and organisation, as discussed below.

Overlaps in personal philosophy

One of the strongest areas of engagement in this study was overlap in personal philosophy. The main subject of most user profiles and videos was users’ application of religious teachings to their own personal philosophy. Rather than preach the religious organisation’s doctrine, members more commonly discussed how they translated teachings to their own lifestyle and beliefs.

Lifestyle as a reflection of user-organisation connection

In discussing personal philosophy, users were also open about their own diverse lifestyles, and the ways their connection with the organisation changed their own lifestyle. This, of course, may be specific to the religious context, but engaged users in other contexts may also communicate about the ways their connection with a non-profit, their place of employment, or a preferred retailer has changed or improved their lives.

Debate a position, resolve issues

Users also used the Mormon.org forum to debate issues and stand up for their shared

connection with the organisation. This suggests that an engaged user online may feel the need to prove his or her connection with an organisation, religious or not, to online peers. As such, an engaged user may consider the connection a reflection on their personal image and feel the need to justify it.

Education

Perhaps part of the desire to debate a position or resolve issues is the apparent user desire to educate peers. This may be more evident in religious connections, but is also evident in user engagement with commercial organisations. For example, Mac user forums commonly feature instructions and tutorials on using Mac products posted by Mac users.

Personal benefit

Perhaps the most transferrable finding from this study to non-religious contexts is the tendency for engaged users to communicate the effect of their connection. This suggests that opportunities to communicate the personal benefit of an online connection may be a natural point of engagement and also suggests that some online users may be inclined to communicate about life improvements to online peers.

The professional side of engagement: Distributing communication

For professional communication purposes (i.e. public relations and advertising), user engagement through social media represents a promotional opportunity. In this study, users share favourable organisational information through their online profiles, thereby fulfilling online communication needs of, and on behalf of, the organisation. This phenomenon may be referred to as distributed communication, a concept used by Kelleher (2009) to describe the fulfilment of public relations activities by employees not in public relations (i.e. customer service, frontline staff, etc.). This study, however, shows how non-employee users may assume promotional communication responsibilities and help cultivate relationships for the organisation online.

In the current case, church members fulfil symmetrical relationship strategies including assurances of legitimacy, openness and

communicated commitment. Additional ways social media users may contribute to relationship cultivation efforts include educating others and resolving issues in ways that the organisation cannot, through a set of diversified voices that humanise the organisation. In each of these relationship cultivation strategies, the influence of user-generated content transfers the validity of efforts from consideration of organisational spin to the credibility of the individual through peer-to-peer credibility.

The findings from this study advance understanding of relationship cultivation online—particularly through the distribution of cultivation efforts to individuals who may not be communication professionals. Very little recognition has been given to this concept. Previous work by this researcher (Smith, 2010) expanded Kelleher's (2009) concept of distributed communication by identifying variables like interactivity of social media, public-defined legitimacy, and the personal stake a social media user invests by public association with an organisation. The current study adds another component to the understanding of distributed communication, namely: symmetrical communication principles may be distributed to social media users, who help connect an organisation with other individuals by communicating in ways the organisation cannot.

Distributed persona

As users assume communication responsibilities on Mormon.org, they also contribute to the online persona of the church, adding diverse viewpoints and lifestyles. User engagement online is influential on persona because persona is created through the voices of an organisation that represent the organisation as a whole (Stern, 1996). Mormon.org profiles serve as an addition to the voices of the religious organisation's leaders and promotional efforts. As the persona of the LDS Church is created through this multiplicity of voices, it may lead to both a unified and diversified persona, with which non-members may feel comfortable to initiate and build a relationship.

This persona, co-created through the distribution of communication responsibilities to members online, is both distinctive and flexible, fulfilling the facets of persona, as outlined by Stern (1996). First, persona is created based on contributing voices, and member voices create a tangible persona for non-members to relate to. Second, persona is persuasive because it features both human and artistic elements, which in the current study, are represented by the artistic synergy of member-written content and church-produced videos. Finally, member profiles introduce flexibility through the wide array of interests and viewpoints users communicate, adding a human characteristic to the church's persona.

It should be noted that the marketing notion of persona considers it a fictional entity (Stern, 1996). Though member content is autobiographical, the church persona, featuring a composite of multiple voices, may represent a single, imagined individual who embodies the diverse viewpoints of all members.

Future research and practice: Engaging in engagement

Digital media continue to facilitate and redefine the communication environment, and yet, in spite of this rapid advancement spawning an evermore socially connected world, still very little is known about the nature and conditions of online engagement, facilitated by digital communication technology.

Scholarship in related areas of communication technology such as public relations, among others, should focus on identifying the online interactions between individuals, and between individuals and organisations, exploring the evolution of the concepts of connection and engagement. In particular, research that addresses the drivers of concepts like engagement may help to establish beneficial insights for theory building and practice. Based on this study, areas of research importance include levels of engagement (i.e. Are all levels of engagement the same, or are there varying degrees of engagement?). User-based meaning and

motivation processes through digital communication may be of most value, because in the digital media landscape, the user is more empowered than in other media outlets. Research in public relations may also consider more organisation-centric concepts, like how content from engaged users may come together to create organisational persona or identity, or how engaged user content may either counter or contribute to organisational efforts.

Though previous insights on engagement outside the digital communication field may provide insight (i.e. civic engagement), it would be short-sighted to rely on past theories to explain current and future developments of engagement because of the unique nature of the digital and online environment. Concepts uniquely attributable to the online environment like non-directed self-disclosure (Stefanone & Lackaff, 2009), mediated voyeurism (Rice, 2009), and online celebrity (Stefanone & Lackaff, 2009), among others, may render digital engagement distinct from other forms of engagement.

For professional communication fields like public relations, the opportunity lies in the way digital communication technology allows relationship cultivation strategies to be distributed to individuals not expressly associated with an organisation. For example, this effect of an engaged user-base may raise issues of power, risk, and influence. It may also be relevant to consider how digitally empowered users redefine the science of public relations and contribute to organisational persona.

Specific lessons from Mormon.org for practice refer to control over user-generated content. Guidelines and structures may help to both frame and facilitate content creation by social media users, as was the case for this study. In fact, one of the unique elements of the Mormon.org example is that the platform used was sponsored by the church. A majority of social media communication by organisations and publics is conducted on potentially 'equal ground platforms'. That is, communication takes place in third-party owned arenas (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Whereas each social media platform may be effective, there are

specific structural advantages of hosting a dedicated social media platform, like Mormon.org. These include having some say over the type of content communicated as well as reaping the benefits of a central location for interested parties to turn to when looking for insight about the organisation.

Limitations

Conclusions drawn here may primarily represent the efforts of an organisation's proponents, not its opponents. As such, the consideration of the concept of engagement is a positive one. It is entirely plausible that engagement may also be negative—that users who communicate about or interact with an organisation online may do so for reasons damaging to the organisation. Future research in digital communication should also consider that side of the engagement conundrum. Overall, this study may represent limited understanding based on the uncontrolled nature of the data collection. In-depth research with users to ascertain motives, drivers, themes and subsequent satisfaction with the process may certainly add to the insight gleaned from this study.

In spite of the limitations of this study, the need to explore and understand the phenomenon of online user engagement facilitated by digital technology continues to be critical for the fields of both communication technology and promotional communication. Considering engagement as a flexible process of co-creation and involvement may yield new areas of theory and research in communication.

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