

Why Discussions In LinkedIn Group Get Read?

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Abstract

This study examines the motivations for why LinkedIn group users read discussion posts and attempts to discover which factors predict motivations for using the discussion board within the LinkedIn group. Information seeking appeared as the strongest motivation for using the discussions, followed by efficiency, and entertainment. Hierarchical regression analysis reveals that perceived credibility of LinkedIn group will predict the motivation for reading the discussions. Based on the findings, this study presents implications and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: *LinkedIn Group; Discussions; Uses and Gratifications (U&G); Blogging; Online Community*

1. Introduction

Given the growing use and popularity of online communities as a new channels for organizations to connect with customers, employees, and business partners (Ren, Harper, Drenner, Terveen, Kiesler, Riedl, & Kraut, 2012). Online communities offer organizations the ability to become directly involved in presenting and releasing information (Sanderson, 2008). Therefore, blogs or discussion boards in online community have become an important way to connect with stakeholders for business (Ma, Clark, & Li, 2006), and they may replace traditional blogging, message/bulletin boards, online video, and podcasting (Barnes & Lescault, 2012).

As an online community, membership in LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) has grown exponentially. The University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth released a study that found 81 percent of Inc. 500 companies use LinkedIn (Barnes & Lescault, 2012). LinkedIn perhaps the most successful and widely used networking platform for professionals, and the world's largest professional network on the Internet (Adams, 2013). As of March 2013, according to LinkedIn, the network had more than 200 million members, and the members are sharing insights and knowledge in more than 2.1 million LinkedIn Groups which offer users the ability to display their experience and qualifications, build a virtual network of contacts and join groups related to various professions. LinkedIn Groups are where individuals with common interests, professions, and university affiliations connect, which allow organizations to pool their prospects in one defined forum, and engage them with content and conversation.

However, the group aspect of this social media website is perhaps one of the most frequently overlooked elements available to practitioners and researchers (Gresing, 2011). The benefits of LinkedIn group include

gaining exposure to potential networking partners, increasing connections and learning about job opportunities and other information relevant to group members. "Discussions" function as a virtual message board or forum is the backbone of active groups and a good source of information, which is similar to microblogging—a broadcast medium in the form of blogging with short messages. The group members are able to share insights, post articles, create poll, link other information, and follow individuals and receive an alert when a new comment is added to the thread (Skotidas, 2012).

Accordingly, with special attention to why LinkedIn group members try to access discussion posts, this study employs the uses and gratification (U&G) approach to examine an HR professional LinkedIn group and their members, and to explore motivations for why their members read discussion posts within the LinkedIn group.

2. Literature review

The theory of uses and gratifications (U&G) suggests that individuals are aware of their social and psychological needs, and seek particular gratifications for media use to fulfill these needs (Katz, 1959). U&G theory is used to explain the types of gratifications that an active audience receives from use of mass media. With respect to people's motive and communicational context, U&G theory suggests that communication research has to pay more attention to "what do people do with the media?" (Katz, 1959) because individuals have particular motives for media use (Ku, Chu, & Tseng, 2013). U&G research can serve as a cutting-edge theoretical approach to gain a better understanding of possible influences of the newly emerging communication media because the real effects of

the new media come from why and how people use them for specific purposes (Kim & Johnson, 2012).

The U&G approach is highly appropriate for studying new communication sources (Kaye, 2010). Many studies have adopted U&G theory to explain the motives for usage of various Computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies. For using online community, for example, socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and Information are four primary needs for participating in group within facebook (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). The interactive nature of CMC technology can generate different levels of user activity, which is vital in a U&G context, and therefore the interactive components of Internet technology may serve different needs and create new dimensions of U&G (Pai & Arnott, 2013).

Creating awareness of online community, such as LinkedIn, can be done with an expensive campaign, but an attractive alternative is the electronic word-of-mouth, amplified by forums and links from popular blogs (Chu & Kim, 2011). Blogs differ from other online sources because they provides a greater array of gratification opportunities to the users who may simply read postings (Savolainen, 2011), but to take advantage of the interactive nature of blogs some activity is required, such as clicking on links provided by others or sending in comments and links (Sanderson, 2008). Also, the blogs users control their own level of participation, which may vary from one blog session to another and from blog to blog (Huang & Leung, 2012).

As the electronic word-of-mouth have increased in popularity, motivations of the blogs users in online community have grown multifaceted (Kesavan, Bernacchi, & Mascarenhas, 2013). Kaye (2010) examined 2,397 blog readers and found 9 motivational factors for using blogs: Convenient Information Seeking, Anti-Traditional Media Sentiment, Expression/Affiliation, Guidance/Opinion Seeking, Blog Ambiance, Personal Fulfillment, Political Debate, Variety of Opinion, and Specific Inquiry.

Moreover, U&G and credibility are conceptually linked. U&G points that media users are aware of the gratifications they seek and obtain from a particular medium. Similarly, media users are also able to assess the credibility of various sources to determine the most appropriate source of information (Sweetser, Porter, Chung, & Kim, 2008). People who are motivated to seek out high-quality information and have the ability to evaluate a message will likely pay more attention to information quality cues and evaluate information more rigorously than less motivated individuals who rely on more surface cues. Thus, credibility is a perception held by the audience, not a characteristic inherent in a message, a source, or a media channel (Metzger, 2007). Kaye and Johnson (2011) found that credibility factors such as

believability, fairness, accuracy, and depth can predict the motivations to read the online information.

Other than credibility, education and gender were associated with motivation for weblog usage (Dylko, 2007 ; Johnson & Kaye, 2004). In conjunction with above findings of the past research on blog motivations indicate that the discussions readers of LinkedIn group can play many different roles on LinkedIn. Based on the literature, this study addresses the following research question: What are the primary motivations for reading discussions among LinkedIn groups' members? Furthermore, this study explores if demographics and LinkedIn group's credibility predict motivations for reading the group's discussions.

3. Research method

4.1. Data Collection

McGeown, Norgate, and Warhurst (2012) argued that group differences, such as interests, language skills, and cognitive abilities are correlated to the reading motivation. Thus, this study recruited selected a typical Human Resources (HR) professional group (90%+ are HR professionals) in LinkedIn because it represented the similar interests, language skills (English), and cognitive abilities, and had willing to sponsor this research project in which we could join and connect their membership.

A sample of 3,000 group members was randomly selected from the LinkedIn group member directory. Their demographics were retrieved from the respondents' profile on LinkedIn. Most of whom work in the greater China region across Mainland China (60%), Taiwan (10%), and Hong Kong (7%), and 71 percent of them were female. Respondents worked for a wide variety of organizations, both in industries (78%) and consulting service sector-free lance included (22%), and held an array of sonority levels.

Prospective participants received an online questionnaire URL through the LinkedIn message or InMail (a private messages service that let us send to any LinkedIn user). 870 provided feedback (29%) before due date, of whom 806 (93%) were valid, generating an overall response rate of 27 percent.

3.2. Measures

Motivations. Drawing upon Park, Ahn, & Kim (2010) study with high construct reliability, motivations for using the discussions consisted of 3 factors (Information-seeking, Efficiency-seeking, and Entertainment-seeking,) with 9 statements asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

Credibility. Using past studies as a guide (e.g., Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, & Wong, 2007), credibility was measured as a multidimensional construct. Believability, fairness, accuracy, and depth of information are four measures that have consistently emerged as variables that best gauge media credibility (e.g., Newhagen & Nass,

1989) and thus were used in this study. Respondents were asked how believable, fair, accurate, and in depth, total 4 statements, they judge discussions of the LinkedIn group, and using a five-point scale, with (1) indicating "not at all" and (5) indicating "very." (Mean=4.02; SD=1.11; $\alpha=.83$)

3.3. Data Analysis

Factor analysis was run to identify the reasons for why the LinkedIn group users read discussions. The 9 statements of motivations were factored by principal component analysis with Varimax rotation, which assigned the statements to a specific factor when the primary loadings were greater than .60. Hierarchical regressions were used to examine if the independent variables predicted motivations for reading the discussions. The predictors were entered as block. Demographics were entered, followed by credibility measure.

We conducted two tests to examine the common method variance (CMV). First, we conducted a Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The results indicated that the largest variance explained by individual factor was 14.08 percent. Thus none of the factors can explain the majority of the variance. Second, we modeled all items as the indicators of a factor representing the common method effect (Malhotra, Kim, & Patil, 2006). The results indicated a poor fitness. With both tests, we believed that CMV is not a significant problem in our research.

4. Results

As shown in Table 1, there are three reasons for the LinkedIn group users reading discussions: Information-seeking, Efficiency-seeking, and Entertainment-seeking which all accounted for 82% of the variance. The top reason for reading discussions within the LinkedIn group is information-seeking, explaining 61% of the variance, which indicated that the LinkedIn group users are motivated to read discussions for keeping an eye on main professional guidance. Efficiency-seeking the second strongest reason for reading the discussions, explaining 17% of the variance, which identified efficiency as one of the main reasons why individuals reading discussions. Lastly, entertainment needs are weakly gratified by discussion posts, which accounts for only 4%.

Insert Table 1 about here

The exploratory research question asked if demographics and LinkedIn group's credibility predict motivations for using discussions. Hierarchical regression (see in Table 2) revealed that the credibility of LinkedIn group is a predictor of information and efficiency seeking motivation for reading discussions within the LinkedIn

group, which indicated that the degree of perceived LinkedIn group's credibility affects the extent of information and efficiency seeking through the discussions within the group. However, no demographic variable predicted the motivations of discussions reading.

Insert Table 2 about here

5. Discussion and conclusion

Uses and gratifications (U&G) research demonstrated that different types of media may generate new types of audience activity and also gratify different audience needs (Ku, Chu, & Tseng, 2013). According to survey, as LinkedIn has become a new tool to replace traditional internet medias (Barnes & Lescault, 2012), it is worth examining the motivations of reading the group discussions, one of the most interactive forms and features on LinkedIn (Gresing, 2011).

This study examines the motivations for why the LinkedIn group users read discussions and attempts to discover which factors predict motivations for accessing the discussions. The results indicate that the LinkedIn group users of this study are motivated to read discussion for seeking information and efficiency. The LinkedIn group users were foremost drawn to the discussion board for professional surveillance and guidance needs (e.g., to search new ideas, surveys, or comments and to keep up with main issues).

As the LinkedIn group became an easy and convenient place for people with similar interests to obtain new information and ask questions (Kube, 2012), the discussions function also gratified similar needs, being considered as an easy and convenience place in which people could find specific professional information they were looking for.

However, respondents who primarily engaged in reading the LinkedIn group discussion board are less likely to seeking entertainment. It stands to reason that internet users treat LinkedIn as a strictly professional site (Chiang, Suen, & Hsiao, 2013), with the benefit of social networking, and to use another site such as Facebook for more personal networking (Gerard, 2011).

This study also attempted to discover how demographics and the LinkedIn group's credibility predict motivations for reading the discussion posts. As expected, respondents evaluated blogs as highly credible for believability, fairness, accuracy, and depth of the discussions, while having high motivation for seeking information with efficient way through the LinkedIn group as well as weblog (Johnson & Kay, 2004; Kaye, 2010). Heavy LinkedIn group users tend to be involved in more

informational and efficiency reasons for reading discussion rather than entertainment needs (Gerard, 2011). Therefore, there is no association between the LinkedIn group's credibility and entertainment seeking for reading the discussion.

Inconsistent with past studies (e.g., Dylko, 2007 ; Johnson & Kaye, 2004), a weak relation between demographics and motivations for using specific blogs as well as the discussions in this study. Kaye (2010) found that educated female internet users link to blogs for convenient information seeking. However, the respondents are almost female with bachelor/Master degree in this study, which could be used to explain the different findings.

The implication is that, LinkedIn group owners or managers should build credibility first, and think about how can add credible value perceived by their group members before promoting the content in discussions. In other word, the members should perceive the LinkedIn group can provide the believability, fairness, accuracy, and depth of information missing from sources (Johnson et al., 2007). The discussions of LinkedIn group was perceived as a convenient way to actively seek up-to-date and in-depth information about professional issues, according to this study. The discussions can offer links to a variety of

information from many different perspectives and sources, and provide access to experts.

The study has some limitations. The data of this study were based on self-selectivity of a real LinkedIn group users, so the results cannot be generalized. This study employed a purposive sampling means to explore how LinkedIn group users are using discussion boards for seeking information. Therefore, it was hoped that this study may contribute to a more thorough understanding of how and why LinkedIn group users reading discussion posts. In addition, by relying on motivations items taken from past uses and gratifications studies, this study is limited to exploring unique motivations for using discussion boards in LinkedIn groups. Open-ended questions could be an alternative for future study.

Note: The sponsor is International Human Resource Certification Institute (IHRCI) which is the official approved provider and alliance partner of the US HR Certification Institute. The IHRCI LinkedIn group was established for Chinese Human Resource (HR) Leaders, as well as HR professors who are interested in building the bridge between HR practices and theories. The LinkedIn group established on July 31, 2011, and it has over 3,200 group member based on March 31, 2013 statistics.

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Table 1. Motivations for Reading Discussions within the LinkedIn Group

	α	Factor Matrix		
<i>Factor 1: Information-seeking</i> (Mean:4.34; SD=1.12)	.82	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
I often seek out information on the discussions		.89	.21	.20
I can find specific information on the discussions		.79	.33	.26
I like to browse the discussion and find out about the updated information		.77	.19	.18
<i>Factor 2: Efficiency-seeking</i> (Mean:4.02; SD=1.30)	.85			
I can access the discussions quickly		.11	.75	.07
I can read discussions at any time		.25	.70	.12
Information is easy to obtain on the discussions		.20	.68	.11
<i>Factor 3: Entertainment-seeking</i> (Mean:2.20; SD=1.38)	.81			
Discussions is truly a joy		.24	.05	.78
Discussions for its own sake, not only information		.18	.18	.75
Discussions is used for entertainment or to have fun		.29	.09	.65
Variance Explained		.61	.17	.04

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors of Motivations for Reading Discussions within the LinkedIn Group

Predictor variables	Information-seeking	Efficiency-seeking	Entertainment-seeking
Gender	.08	.11	-.02
Education	.12	.03	.02
Industry	-.04	-.05	-.01
Seniority	.09	-.08	.01
R^2	.012	.010	.006
Group's Credibility	.54**	.31*	.06
R^2	.312**	.106*	.010

**p<.01; *p<.05