Online Information Sharing: A Planned Behavior for

Building Social Capital

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Participation in social networks has become the norm in personal and professional circles. Organizations and stakeholders alike are now connected and actively professing the limitless, yet all too often intangible capabilities of social media. According to Kent and Taylor (2010), public relations students (i.e. future communication professionals) are taught to view social media use as a powerful and important aspect of the public relations practice despite research that merely supports social media's ability to serve as another means of disseminating information. The information-sharing process that occurs on social media, which involves openly voicing views and opinions in an unrestricted manner, is frequently touted as one of social media's most notable characteristics with little to no evidence that these behaviors can lead to measurable outcomes or be explained with a theoretical framework. Kent (2013) claimed that public relations should be viewed and practiced as a means of developing communities and facilitating the successful functioning of democracy. His argument, when applied to the idea that social media are important tactics in the public relations discipline, suggests that research should be conducted that examines whether the information sharing that occurs on social media is a strategic attempt to acquire social capital on behalf of its users. The current study, through the use of the theory of planned behavior framework, uses a mixed-methods approach to examine the roles that personal and normative factors play in influencing future communication professionals' information-sharing behaviors on Twitter and how those actions can strengthen networks.

Literature Review

Twitter continues to receive the attention of public relations scholars due to its increasing popularity among its users and its ability to serve as a communication tool that "transcend[s] geographic distances" (Takhteyev, Gruzd, & Wellman, 2012, p. 81). Its many features (e.g.140-character messages, retweets, hashtags, mentions, and modified tweets) are now viewed as tools of expression that allow marginalized voices to be heard by those in the larger community (Smith & Brenner, 2012). Twitter's capabilities have also been recognized in the professional realm as it has been labeled as a beneficial tool

for public relations practitioners who continue to adopt it as an important tactic in their company's social media strategy (Wright & Hinson, 2011).

A strong foundation has been established for researchers examining social media in the realm of public relations. Several descriptive studies have used methods such as content analysis (e.g. Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Smith, 2010; Xifra & Grau, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011) and in-depth interviews (e.g. DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Evans, Twomey, & Talan, 2011) to produce a descriptive benchmark regarding *how* organizations and practitioners are using social media. Conversely, a smaller number of scholars have examined *why* social media are used by organizations and stakeholders within various theoretical frameworks (e.g. Brummette & Fussell Sisco, 2014; Hwang, 2012; McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014; Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011; Waters & Jamal, 2011).

Kent (2013) further suggested that the fading enchantment toward social media and their ability to serve as publicity and marketing tools should be redirected toward establishing a strong theoretical foundation for social media research and identifying how social media can serve more significant purposes for society. He argued, "in the academy and professional world, many spend their time encouraging students to tweet, but spend virtually no time talking about the strategic communication potential of our established technologies and what the possibilities are" (p. 339). Similarly, McCorkindale and DiStaso (2014) suggested that social media research that demonstrates an acceptable level of rigor must recognize and test the applicability of traditional public relations theories to the realm of social media.

As a social medium, the *social* aspect of Twitter is represented by the behaviors of its users, all of whom combine to comprise an active, online community that generates Web content for its members (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). This information-sharing process entails creating new content through the use of 140-character messages, or retweeting original or modified content of others and forwarding it to their own followers (Nagarajan, Purohit, & Sheth, 2010; O'Conner, Jackson, Goldsmith, & Skirton,

2014). This process results in an exponential and sometimes uncontrollable transmission of information that has both positive and negative consequences for social media users (Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2013).

According to Helsloot and Groenendaal (2013), the unpredictable information-sharing process that occurs on social media is capable of providing factual information that answers questions from external constituents and, at the same time, often overshadows an organization's attempts to participate in online conversations. Similarly, in the realm of crisis communication, this process is capable of producing information that establishes "a coalition of credible sources" during a crisis (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011, p. 119). Yet, in other circumstances, it is often inaccurate and full of inconsistencies that Twitter users then tweet and/or retweet without corroborating the claims made in the tweet (Whitehouse, 2012). These positive and negative aspects of online information sharing combine to represent what the authors label as *the double-edged sword of social media* that continues to plague practitioners and researchers attempting to empirically examine their true benefit for organizations and society.

Social Capital

Social capital is defined as "the investment in social relations by individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns of instrumental or expressive actions" (Lin, 1999, p. 39); or "any aspect of social structure that creates value and facilitates the actions of the individuals within that social structure (Coleman, 1990). According to He, Qiao, and Wei (2009), social capital is a well-developed area of research that serves as a beneficial framework for examining the possible benefits of online technology use. Additionally, social capital has also been identified as a beneficial outcome of online information sharing (Antoci, Sabatini, & Sodini, 2011; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Hofer & Aubert, 2013; Pénard & Poussing, 2009).

From a relationship management perspective, social capital represents one of the tangible and intangible benefits one can obtain from their relationships and interactions with others (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2010; Williams, 2006). When applied to the realm of social media, the social capital framework suggests that participation in social networks allows for more than being merely *social*.

Consequently, time spent on social media should, in fact, be viewed as a strategic investment of time and effort to obtain valuable resources that are personally and professionally valuable to the social media user.

Putnam (2000), one of the founding fathers of social capital, introduced the interrelated concepts of *bridging,* a type of social capital represented by non-emotional connections established by individuals from varying backgrounds through their involvement in social networks, and *bonding*, another form of social capital characterized by closer, more emotional connections with friends and family. Putnam's conceptualization of bridging and bonding relied heavily on research by Granovetter (1973) who claimed that the strength of any tie or connection between two or more individuals "is a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (p. 1361). Relationships characterized by weak ties result in bridging social capital and those characterized by strong ties result in bonding social capital (Williams, 2006). Granovetter's (1973) research emphasized the relational importance of bridging social capital, despite its inability to establish the emotional connections afforded by bonding social capital. Put simply, the true benefit of bridging social capital is it allows individuals to make new connections, obtain new information, and expand their views of the world.

When applied to the realm of online social networking, Lin's (1999) social resources theory suggests that online social networks can be used for status attainment, a "process by which individuals mobilize and invest resources for returns in socioeconomic standing" (p. 467). Lin claimed that social resources, which are accessed through weak and strong ties in social networks, are "temporary and borrowed," which implies that individuals can briefly use the status of a network friend as a resource to achieve personal gain (p. 467). Lin's research highlights the potential benefits of various types of social media as they allow individuals to build large, online networks of friends and business contacts, all of whom may, at some point in time, provide them with resources when needed.

According to Stefanone, Kwon and Lackaff (2012), online social networking has enhanced the relationship management process by allowing users to maintain "a broader spectrum of relationships

ranging from the most intimate to extremely superficial" (p. 461). The relationship management process is further improved as social media afford opportunities to keep relationships from dissolving or becoming stagnant (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2011; Pénard & Poussing, 2010).

Researchers have highlighted how different types of social media can be used to attain social capital. For example, Steinfield, Ellison, Lampe, and Vitak (2010) found that Facebook serves as an efficient means of establishing weak ties and bridging capital as it is often used to maintain relationships with close friends and intensify relationships with offline acquaintances. Similarly, Twitter also allows its users to generate social capital by increasing their number of followers, which, in turn, leads to feelings of stronger emotional support (Hofer & Aubert, 2013). Hofer and Aubert also found that Twitter users who feel as though they have more offline social capital are also perceived to have more social capital online.

Researchers have identified several important connections that exist between social capital, social norms and the attitudes of social media users. For example, Newton (1997) argued, "social capital may be understood and defined in terms of (a) norms and values, (b) networks, (c) or consequences – voluntarily produced collective facilities and resources" (p. 575). He claimed that "social capital focuses on those cultural values and attitudes that predispose citizens to cooperate, trust, understand, and empathize with each other – to treat each other as fellow citizens, rather than as strangers, competitors or potential enemies" (p. 576). Similarly, Fukuyama (1999) defined social capital as "an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals" (p. 1). These norms and attitudes help to build connections among individuals and between an organization and its publics. Similarly, norms and attitudes serve as a guiding framework for an individual's decision-making processes, specifically as they apply to specific behaviors.

Theoretical Framework

Ajzen's (1985) theory of planned behavior (TPB) was developed in response to the shortcomings of his theory of reasoned action, specifically those related to the original model's ability to account for non-volitional behaviors. According to the TPB, volitional human behaviors are typically preceded by

behavioral intention, which is regarded as "the motivation necessary to engage in a particular behavior" (Armitage & Conner, 1999, p. 35) or "indications of how hard people are willing to try [and] how much of an effort they are planning to exert in order to perform a behavior" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 181). According to the TPB, the strength of behavioral intention ultimately influences an individual's attempts to perform the behavior in question (Ajzen & Madden, 1986).

The TPB posits that behavioral intentions are motivational in nature and guided by three variables – attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control – all of which are comprised of various behavioral, normative and control beliefs, respectively (Ajzen, 1975). Attitudes are defined as the "overall positive and negative evaluations of behavior" and subjective norms are defined as "perceptions of general social pressure from important others to perform or not perform a given behavior" (Armitage & Conner, 1999, p. 35). Perceived behavioral control is synonymous to Bandura's (1982) notion of self efficacy, which he defined as "judgments of how well one will execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations (p. 122). Francis et al. (2004) defined perceived behavioral control as "perceptions about how easy or difficult it is to perform [a specific] behavior" (p. 33).

According to Ajzen and Madden (1986), *behavioral beliefs* "combine to form or "influence attitudes toward the behavior"; *normative beliefs* "constitute the underlying determinants of subjective norms;" and *control beliefs,* "provide the basis for perceptions of perceived behavioral control" (p. 189). Ajzen (2002) argued, "As a general rule, the more favorable the attitude and subjective norm, and the greater the perceived control, the stronger should be the person's intention to perform the behavior in question [and] given a sufficient degree of actual control over the behavior, people are expected to carry out their intentions when the opportunity arises" (p. 191).

The researchers conducted a two-part, mixed methods approach to investigate the following. In part one, a series of in-depth interviews addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do participants feel about information sharing through social media?

RQ2: What are the subjective norms that guide an individual's information-sharing activities on social media?

RQ3: What factors enable or impede an individual's ability to share information online?

In part two, the researchers used a quantitative survey to address the following research questions:

RQ4: How do attitudes impact information sharing on Twitter?

RQ5: How do subjective norms impact information sharing on Twitter?

RQ6: How do descriptive norms impact information sharing on Twitter?

RQ7: What is the perceived behavioral control of information sharing on Twitter?

Methods

This study uses a two-part, mixed methods process adopted from Francis et al. (2004) to produce a questionnaire that measures the constructs that comprise the TPB as they apply to the realm of social media and online information sharing. The first phase, which required the use of qualitative methods, involved conducting 25 open-ended interviews with undergraduate communication students to elicit their commonly held behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs related to online information sharing. Next, the second phase of this study involved the use of a quantitative survey comprised of items that assessed the strength of the beliefs identified in the qualitative component of the study, as well as additional components needed to create indirect measures of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

Qualitative Results

Attitudes: Positive and negative outcomes of online information sharing.

One of the dominant themes that emerged from the data was participants share information to express themselves, specifically by using Twitter's multiple functions to indicate their viewpoints to others. Additionally, participants also discussed how they shared online information in order to be viewed as an active social media user by their followers – a status that most felt is befitting to members of the millennial generation and, more importantly, future communication professionals. Participants also

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discussed how sharing information online allows them to support their followers' viewpoints. According to most participants, the importance of these outcomes, when viewed collectively, is they involve influencing the individuals and organizations that comprise their online community. One participant stated, "I view my followers as being part of my own online community. It is my duty to be an active member of that community and to make sure I'm viewed in a positive way by my followers. This status could end up benefiting me in some way in the future."

Subjective norms: Important referents that influence online information sharing.

Despite participants' need to be independent, parents were frequently described as one of the most important referents that influenced the type of information the participants shared online. Of their most active followers, participants' parents read and responded to their information-sharing activities. Other important referent groups that were frequently mentioned were peers and colleagues. Finally, prospective employers were also mentioned as an important referent as well. One participant stated, "Being in the communication field means our employers will want to see how we conduct ourselves on social media. If you can't represent yourself well on Twitter, why would they hire you to represent their company."

Perceived behavioral control: Obstacles involved with sharing information online

Participants discussed how the frequency of their Twitter use was determined by the amount of available time they had in their schedules. According to one participant, "It is important to have an active social media presence, especially someone who is going into public relations." Another important theme that was identified in this category is most participants were reluctant to share information that they could not confirm or check for accuracy. One participant stated, "We've learned in all of our classes how sharing the wrong information can get you or your organization in trouble. I always try to make sure the information I'm sharing is accurate to keep from having any issues." Another participant stated, "To me, when you share information, it almost implies that you agree with it. If the information is wrong or offensive, it can hurt your own credibility. This makes me think twice about anything I share on Twitter."

Descriptive Norms: representing the behaviors of others

One of the additional themes of the interviews was the connectivity of the participants to their peer networks and other online connections. In the interviews, participants discussed the behaviors of others in their networks as a point of comparison for their own decisions and behaviors.   Therefore, we suggest an additional variable of descriptive norms. Descriptive norms are the "description" or representation of the behavior of others as an influence on one's own behavior. In other words, participants not only want to share information because of the expectations placed on them by the referents; they also want to behave, or in this case, share information, to mirror the behaviors of their referents.

Part 2: Quantitative component of study

Participants

The participants in the second part of this study were divided among males and females (N = 110 males and 210 females). Participants included those from 18 to 26 years of age, with a breakdown of 18 to 20 years (57%, $n = 183$), 21 to 22 years (36%, $n = 114$), 23 to 25 years (6%, $n = 19$) and 26 years and over (1%, $n = 4$). Participants were asked how many hours per day they actively use Twitter and 47% ($n = 151$) were active less than one hour per day, 36% ($n = 115$) were active 1-2 hours per day, 15% ($n = 47$) were active 3-5 hours per day and 2% ($n = 7$) were active from 6-8 hours per day.

Procedures and Instrumentation

Using the detailed process described by Francis et al. (2004) and the qualitative findings obtained from the elicitation phase of the study, the researchers developed a questionnaire that assessed: (1) the strength of the behavioral beliefs and outcome evaluations related to each belief; (2) the strength of normative beliefs related to each reference group – and – the motivation to comply with pressure from each reference group; and (3) the strength of each control belief – and – the power of each control factor to influence respondents' behaviors. The two researchers administered hard copies of a 35-item survey to undergraduate students attending one medium-sized university in the Southeast and another medium-

sized university in the Northeast. The final sample used in this study was obtained from a randomized selection of the upper-level, communication courses that were currently being taught at both universities. This process resulted in a final sample of 320 participants.

Behavioral Intentions. Three items were used to assess respondents' generalized intention to share information on Twitter. Two of the items that represented this variable were: "When I use Twitter, I intend to share information" and "When I use Twitter, I try to share information," both of which used 7-point semantic differential scales from 1, *extremely unlikely,* to 7, *extremely likely.* The third item, "How regularly do you intend to share information when you are using Twitter," used a 7-point semantic differential scale from 1, *rarely*, to 7, *every time.*

Attitude. Attitude was assessed using indirect measures that calculated the strength of behavioral beliefs and outcome evaluations related to sharing information online. First, the following five 7-point semantic differential items from 1, *strongly agree,* to 7, s*trongly disagree,* measured outcomes of sharing information on Twitter: (a) "When I share information on Twitter I'm doing so to indicate my viewpoints;" (b) "When I share information on Twitter, I'm doing so to be viewed by others as an active social media user;" (c) When I share information on Twitter, I'm demonstrating my support of the views and opinions of others;" and (d) "When I share information on Twitter, I'm doing so to influence my followers' opinions and attitudes."

Next, five items were created to evaluate how participants viewed each of the outcomes in the above mentioned items on a 7-point semantic differential scale from 1, *bad*, to 7, *good*. For example, (e) "Indicating my viewpoints is;" (f) "Being viewed as an active social media user is:" (g) "Influencing my followers' opinions and viewpoints is:" and (h) "Influencing my followers' opinions and attitudes is:" The score from each behavioral belief was multiplied by its corresponding evaluation score and summed to create an overall attitude score using the following equation: A = (a x e) + (b x f) + (c x g) + (d x h).

Subjective Norms. Subjective norms were assessed using indirect measures that calculated the strength of the normative beliefs related to each referent and the respondent's motivation to comply with

each referent. The following five 7-point semantic differential items from 1, *unlikely* to 7, *likely*

measured how likely the referents discussed in the in-depth interview expected them to share online

information: (a) "My parents think I should share information on Twitter;" (b) "My peers think I should

share information on Twitter;" and (c) "Prospective employers expect me to share information on

Twitter."

Next, semantic differential items from 1, *not at all,* to 7, *very much,* were used to assess how

much respondents were motivated to comply with the expectations of each referent: (d) "Generally

speaking, how much do you follow what your parents want you to do?" (e) "Generally speaking, how

much do you follow what your peers want you to do?;" (f) "Generally speaking, how much do you follow

what your prospective employers want you to do?"). The score from each normative belief was multiplied

by its motivation to comply score and summed to create an overall subjective norm score using the

following equation: SN = (a x d) + (b x e) + (c x f).

Descriptive norms. Descriptive norms were assessed using indirect measures and the following

five 7-point semantic differential items from 1, *disagree*, to 7, *agree,* to assess the online information

sharing behaviors of the participants' referents: (a) "My parents share information on Twitter;" (b) "My

peers share information on Twitter;" and (c) "Prospective employers share information on Twitter."

Next, semantic differential items from 1, *not at all*, to 7, *very much,* were used to assess how

much respondents wanted to enact similar online information-sharing behaviors as those displayed by

their referents: (d) "When it comes to social media use, how much do you want to be like your parents?;"

(e) "When it comes to social media use, how much do you want to be like your peers?;" and (f) "When it

comes to social media use, how much do you want to be like your prospective employers?" The score

from each descriptive normative belief was multiplied by its corresponding evaluation score and summed

to create an overall descriptive norm score using the following equation: DN = (a x d) + (b x e) + (c x f)

Perceived behavioral control. This variable was measured using six seven-point, semantic

differential items from 1, *never,* to 7, *frequently,* to measure the strength of the control beliefs identified

in the in-depth interviews: (a) "My busy schedule gets in the way of my time to share information on Twitter;" (b) "I carefully choose the information I want to share on Twitter;" and (c) "My inability to fact-check informational content keeps me from sharing information." Three corresponding seven-point, semantic differential items assessed the power of influence these control factors have over respondents information sharing behaviors: (d) "If I don't have enough time, I won't share information on Twitter;" (1, *less likely*, to 7, *more likely*); (e) "How much control do you have over your decision to share information on Twitter?" (1, *little control*, to 7, *complete control*); and (f) "Conducting a fact-check before sharing another person's (or organization's) information is" (1, *difficult*, to 7, *easy*). The score from each control belief was multiplied by its corresponding power to control each of the control factors and summed to create an overall perceived behavioral control score using the following equation: PBC = (a x d) + (b x e) + (c x f).

Results

The research questions presented in this study were focused on identifying how individuals' attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control influence their intentions to share information on Twitter. To answer these questions, the researchers used simple multiple regression analyses to test (1) participants' attitudes toward online information sharing, (2) subjective norms toward information sharing, and (3) perceived behavioral control toward information sharing as independent (i.e. predictor) variables for the dependent variable of behavioral intention.

The three independent variables were first analyzed for multicollinearity by examining the tolerance statistics (TS) and variance inflation factors (VIF). The highest TS was .96 and the highest VIF was 1.36, which ruled out multicollinearity based on recommendations that TS.$\geq$.10 and VIF statistics $\leq$10 (Mertler & Vannatta, 2002). The multiple regression analysis revealed a significant model [$R2$ = .31, $F(4, 148.5)$ = 37.13, p < .001]. Additionally, attitudes toward information sharing (ß = .308, t = 6.68, p < .001), subjective norms (ß = .194, t = 3.40, p < .001) and descriptive norms (ß = .111, t = 1.94, p < .054)

were significant predictors of behavioral intention. Perceived behavioral control was the only variable that showed insignificant effects on behavioral intention.

Discussion

The present study evaluated the social media use of future communication professionals with a theory of planned behavior framework. The mixed methods procedures used in this study revealed some important information that may, in part, explain the allure of social media for aspiring communication professionals. The application of the TPB allowed the authors to focus their efforts on identifying the behavioral beliefs that comprise participants' attitudes toward information sharing, as well as the subjective norms and referents who ultimately influence their social media behaviors. This study suggests that young professionals attempts to be *social* are calculated efforts to obtain social capital.

Approximately 80% of the participants in this study reported using Twitter 1 to 2 hours per day. This finding serves as an example of their intentions to invest time and effort to become active social media users. This argument was further supported by the finding that the most significant predictors of information sharing were participants' own personal attitudes toward information sharing. Their attitudes, according to the qualitative component of this study, were comprised of various personal beliefs that Twitter is an efficient means of representing oneself as an active social media user and a way to contribute to the participants' online communities.

When analyzed from a social capital perspective, the participants' desires to represent themselves to their communities and provide meaningful dialogue through 140-character thoughts and messages is synonymous with the norms of cooperation, trust and understanding described in the social capital literature (Fukuyama, 1999; Newton, 1997). Put simply, social capital is, as Fukuyama (1999) argued, viewed as an instantiated norm of cooperation, which the authors argue is exemplified in this study by participants' intentions to cooperate and share information with their online community members.

This study revealed that subjective norms played the second strongest role in influencing participants' online information-sharing behaviors. In the qualitative component of this study, several

important referents, all of whom were combined to make up the normative component of the TPB used in this study, were identified based on the roles they serve in influencing participants' online information sharing behaviors. The aspiring communication professionals examined in this study share information through the use of tweets and retweets to provide their parents, peers, colleagues and prospective employers with insight into their own personal and political views and, more importantly, to influence the topics and tone of discussion. The participants' desires to meet the expectations of their parents and peers (i.e. close friends) represent their efforts to build and maintain *bonding social capital*, while their intentions to behave in ways that meet the expectations of their peers (i.e. professional colleagues) and prospective employers are examples of *bridging social capital.*

The argument that Twitter has the ability to establish bridging social capital, which was also supported by Hofer and Aubert (2013), was demonstrated in this study as young professionals reported using social media to gain an advantage in their professional careers. It should not be surprising that young communication professionals who have been trained to understand the organizational benefits of establishing relationships with others would apply this technique in their own lives. When coupled with Kent and Taylor's (2010) argument that young professionals are socialized to view social media as an important part of their future careers, it is also fitting that they would attempt to use social media to establish relationships with others since it will be a fundamental component of their job as a professional.

This study also revealed that the exponential rate of information sharing that occurs on Twitter, as suggested by Helsloot and Groenendaal (2013), is also influential in terms of representing descriptive norms. In other words, the collective behaviors of referents serve as an example of what Cialdini (2009) labeled as social proof, a situation that occurs when an individual faced with uncertainty looks to the behaviors of others for cues to determine their own behaviors. Future research should be conducted to determine the role of descriptive norms and social proof in the dissemination of viral messages and videos.

Perceived behavioral control (PBC), a construct comprised of various perceived obstacles for participants' online information-sharing behaviors (e.g. lack of time, lack of ability to properly fact-check information to be shared on Twitter, the possibility of offending their followers), did not play important roles in determining whether participants shared information on Twitter. Previous research has shown that the effect of PBC decreases as the level of volition increases. Thus, this finding may be an indication of people's high volitional control in using Twitter given their accessibility.

Participants' desires to fact-check the information they share on Twitter suggest that their view of social media use is characterized by some level of ethical consideration, which, in turn, relates back to Kent's (2013) suggestion that social media can and should be used to serve a greater good for society. Social media, when used strategically, have the ability to serve as efficient means of building and maintaining social capital. In this context, the greater good is best served through the establishment of weak and strong ties and the development of bridging and bonding social capital, all of which allow multiple voices to be heard in the public forum. The numerous types of communication exchanges that occur through social media allow users to maintain close personal ties; develop extensive networks; gain access to various viewpoints and arguments; and develop reputations within various online communities.

Future research should be conducted that examines how practitioners develop social capital in both online and face-to-face networks and, more importantly, identifies the specific tangible and intangible outcomes achieved through these interactions. Such research could extend the theoretical understanding of relationship management as a defining characteristic of the public relations discipline, as well as provide measureable objectives for strategic social media use by practitioners and organizations. Additionally, scholars need to conduct research that move social capital from an abstract concept to a dominant and measurable framework for examining strategic social media use.

This study's findings have several implications for public relations education. Public relations educators must continue teaching students about the double-edged sword of social media use, which implies that social media are extremely useful, yet sometimes perplexing tactics to use in the discipline.

They provide the ability for instantaneous dissemination of information to multiple outlets; however, the nature of this information can be both positive and negative for the organization. Furthermore, social media strategy must be viewed as more than the random dissemination of information. Educators must continue to argue that social media use should be strategic – which implies that it is focused on achieving measurable outcomes that include the creation of social capital, meaningful engagement with stakeholders, significant participation in public debate of matters relevant to their organizations, and the improvement of society as a whole.

Conclusion

When applied to the context of using social media to attain social capital, the theory of planned behavior provides researchers with a theoretical framework that can be used to explain and predict the behaviors of social media users. As indicated by the findings of this study, people have positive attitudes that reinforce their personal beliefs and values, which in turn builds credibility within their networks. This kind of predictive understanding helps to improve the strategic use of social media so future communication professionals are able to understand how their information-sharing decisions impact themselves and their networks. This study answers the call to provide more theoretical understanding to the tools of social media. Future research should continue to provide predictive elements that can better understand the integration of theory and tactics to provide predictive outcomes for the practices of public relations.

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Figure 1

Theory of Planned Behavior

Theory of planned behaviour