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Exploring Theoretical Concepts for Explaining Sharing in the Social Media Environment

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Abstract. The concept of sharing has been amplified with the development of various social media platforms that enable consumers to share knowledge with each other and subsequently influence their attitudes and purchase intentions. However, recent studies have tended to utilise social psychological theories to explore sharing on social media and have concentrated on the behaviour of those that share rather than the underlying individual motivations that lead them to share. This paper outlines some of the theories used within the current sharing literature and suggests that combining uses and gratifications theory and self-construal theory is better suited to examining the underlying motivations of sharing.

Keywords: Uses and Gratifications · Sharing · Motivations · Social Media · Self-Construal

1 Introduction

People have an inherent predisposition to share information with other people [1]. The evolution of social media has given consumers a variety of new platforms to share their consumption choices and has extended the reach of what they share. These technologies are truly becoming a steadfast tool to target audiences in a fast and efficient way [2]. The documented importance of sharing on consumers' purchase decision [3] makes understanding motivations to share on social media theoretically and practically important. Research that has examined sharing in a marketing or social media context has failed to identify a common theory to explain the phenomena, with many drawing from multiple theoretical underpinnings for example Hennig-Thurau et al [4] who draw upon equity theory and balance theory, and Chiu et al [5] who draw upon social cognitive theory and social capital theory. Therefore, this paper reviews the few dominant theoretical paradigms, paying particular attention to the motivations underlying social media sharing behaviour, to find out where their strengths and weaknesses lie to identify the most appropriate theory to explore sharing on social media. The remainder of the paper is as follows. The following section discusses theoretical concepts used in relation to sharing. This is followed by a brief discussion, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the current literature, forming the basis of future research suggestions. The paper is then briefly concluded.

2 Theoretical Concepts Used in Relation to Sharing

Theories commonly used to explore sharing on social media are those from the social psychology discipline such as social cognitive theory, the need to belong concept, and social exchange theory. Social cognitive theory, which states that individuals observe others' behaviour and the ensuing consequences as a guide to inform their future behaviour, has been used to underpin the motivations of information sharing in social media [6], knowledge sharing intention in virtual communities [7], and sharing of tourism experiences on social media [8]. The need to belong concept, which suggests the innate human need of a sense of belonging [9], has been used to look at sharing behaviour in virtual communities [10] and positive WOM behaviour [11]. Highlighting the cost versus benefit self-interest of people, social exchange theory emphasises the importance of value in the exchange process [12], which has been used to underpin some sharing on social media studies [2], specifically in the context of online community [13] and content [14] sharing behaviour. It is normally combined with social cognitive theory as a way to provide theoretical underpinning to selected motivations for sharing in many studies [6, 7].

Both social exchange theory and social cognitive theory recognise the expectation of outcomes or reward, yet in the social media environment individuals do not necessarily expect to receive anything in return, rather relying on the hope that they will get help at another point in time due to its communal nature [6]. The need to belong concept focuses on the group aspect of sharing, thus failing to recognise the increasing heterogeneous nature of social media activities [15]. Despite their utility, these perspectives do not recognise the intrinsic satisfaction that an individual can get from sharing, failing to acknowledge more than just the consequences of the act itself [16]. In order to understand the appeal of using social media for sharing it is important to identify their motivations for using social media for this purpose and thus understand the individual user rather than just the communicator, establishing how and why they use this medium for sharing [17].

2.1 Uses and Gratification Theory

Uses and gratifications theory, which acknowledges the gratifications an individual seeks and receives from using particular media [18], is a more effective way to understand the mechanisms of sharing on social media. Focusing on how individuals use different types of media to meet their needs and the behavioural outcomes of this, it is considered one of the most effective theories at identifying the antecedents and consequences of media use [19], and is extremely useful to apply to new types of media, such as social media, to provide a more in-depth analysis of the motivations to use these platforms [20]. Individuals that use particular media are argued to have particular goals from doing so, thus make an active choice rather than a subconscious decision. This theory has been widely utilised to understand why and how people use social media sites in general [21] as well as sharing behaviours, such as Karnik et al [22] who identified contribution, discovery, social interaction and entertainment as Facebook media sharing uses and gratifications.

Motivations are believed to be the influencing force that guides behaviour. The continuing evolution of media means that the list of motivations that have been identified by uses and gratifications theorists continues to expand, thus there are various classifications and ways of categorising them [23]. One of the most popular classifications includes entertainment, information, identity and social interaction [24], all of which are broad categories and cover varying sub-motivations. However, increasing use of the theory is bringing many more motivations to light, for example Oh and Syn [6] identify 10 motivations, including self-efficacy and altruism.

2.2 Brand Attitude and Purchase Intention

Brand attitude is the evaluation that a consumer has of a brand based on the information and knowledge they have accumulated - such as that acquired through sharing - and is an important element to social exchanges [25]. In a social media environment, where consumers are surrounded by networks of other individuals, they inherently learn their behaviours, attitudes and purchasing approaches through the knowledge these networks share. If a consumer holds a positive attitude towards a brand, then they are more likely to purchase that brand [26].

Consumers are influenced in their purchase decisions through what they gather and perceive from the sharing of knowledge from their peers about products or services [3]. The information that they receive through their social media networks, leads them to evaluate the product or service and thus result in their subsequent willingness to purchase in future [27].

2.3 Self-Construal Theory

Originally expanded from Hofstede's individualist-collectivist scale, which depicted cultural level differences [28], self-construal theory outlines individual-level differences not explained by the original theory [29]. It has been widely used within the marketing discipline as a way of studying the individual differences within consumers, particularly within consumer behaviour [30], and consumer psychology [31]. Defining two aspects of the self-concept, the independent and interdependent self-construals have become synonymous with differing motivations such as uniqueness and status seeking motivations (independent) or group focused, relationship oriented motivations (interdependent) [32]. Thus it can be argued that these differing self-views will have an impact on the uses and gratifications an individual seeks and obtains from utilising social media for sharing purposes, overcoming the identified lack of social psychological reasoning previously identified.

3 Discussion

Many studies have utilised social psychological theories to explain sharing on social media, yet few have considered the different dimensions of the self and how this impacts motivations to share on social media. Despite the seemingly strong ar-

gument for the selection of uses and gratifications theory, it has been suggested that this perspective is highly individualistic in its approach, failing to acknowledge the social aspects of media consumption [19].

Although the theories that have previously been used have made headway in identifying some of the behaviours of individuals who share, they fail to recognise intrinsic motivations that are extremely relevant to understanding sharing behaviour from an individual perspective [17]. It is suggested that the theories that have been used have all identified elements that can be classified under the uses and gratifications theory to identify motivations for sharing. For example, elements of social exchange theory could be classified under the remuneration motivation identified by Oh and Syn [6]. More unique theories that have been used to understand sharing such as social network theory [32], social capital theory [33], and social learning theory [34] also have the capacity to be incorporated into motivations for sharing and thus provide a better understanding of sharing as a whole. Uses and gratifications theory could be one way of making sure underlying propositions from many theories are incorporated to explain sharing behaviour.

It appears that much of the literature regarding sharing on social media is focused on behavioural tendencies rather than the underlying individual aspects of those who share. These individual characteristics are a much needed area for future research in sharing behaviour [35]. Understanding why they share would establish a more grounded understanding for their behaviour and allow brands to incorporate these motivations when approaching influential individuals. Kim et al [36] used the uses and gratifications theory to examine motivations of the self-construal on Facebook in terms of use and satisfaction, but only distinguished between social and non-social motivations. Providing evidence for the need to incorporate these individual level differences into motivations for social media use, they suggested that future research should focus on alternative social media platforms other than Facebook. Munar and Jacobsen [8] also posit that motivations on social media differ depending on the type of content. Therefore, it is perhaps necessary to identify the differing motivations individuals derive from sharing different types of content on social media. Self-construal theory is one of the social psychological theories that are yet to be explored in depth within the realm of sharing on social media. Much of the literature points to the need for a more detailed look at the motivations of consumers who curate content [37] rather than those who initially create content. The opinion seeking, opinion passing, and opinion giving dimensions of eWOM would also provide a relevant addition to understand the motivations of sharing, as individuals within social media can take on these multiple roles and thus may be distinctly motivated to pursue each one [38]. The next step in addressing this topic will be to provide a stronger theoretical evaluation and development of relevant hypotheses.

4 Conclusion

This paper has explored the theoretical concepts for explaining sharing on social media and pointed to the areas of future research that are needed to further under-

standing on the topic, suggesting uses and gratifications theory combined with self-construal theory to be an appropriate way to address this gap.

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