Short Communication

A survey of social media use, motivation and leadership among public relations practitioners

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study investigates the relationship between motivation, leadership and social media use among a sample of public relations practitioners who recently had begun using Twitter to follow Universal Accreditation Board (UAB)-affiliated organizations. A majority of the survey respondents were classified as "everyday users." A series of Twitter leadership indicators correlated positively with internal motivation and correlated negatively with amotivation. Several word-of-mouth variables also were investigated with regard to motivation.

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1. Introduction

Identifying motivations for social media adoption and use is an important skill for leaders in public relations. Theories of full-range leadership suggest that effective leaders employ a mix of charismatic, transformational, and transactional approaches (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Klegg, Kornberger, & Pitsis, 2008). Motivation, be it internal or external, is a common thread tying these leadership approaches together (Klegg et al., 2008, p. 143).

Understanding the thinking and perceptions of public relations leaders themselves is key to making sense of changes in the general practice of public relations that result from the rise of social media. For example, Porter, Sweetser, Chung, and Kim (2007) found that found that public relations practitioners who wrote or maintained blogs perceived that they had significantly more prestige power and expertise power than those who did not blog.

Psychologists have identified a range of four factors to explain what motivates people. Based on self-determination theory the four psychological states can be placed on a continuum:

(1) *Intrinsic motivation*. People perform some activities simply for the satisfaction and pleasure of the activity itself.
(2) *Identified regulation*. People determine that the activity is a good idea in the long run. The reward may actually be extrinsic (money, recognition, promotion), but the key here is that people feel they are exercising free choice.
(3) *External regulation*. People perceive little or no value in the activity beyond the external rewards (e.g., the paycheck) or avoiding a negative outcome (e.g., no paycheck).

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(4) *Amotivation*. Some human behavior cannot be described as either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. "When amotivated, people either do not act at all or act without intent—they just go through the motions" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72).

2. Method

For this study, we chose to focus on Twitter use as social media activity in public relations.

2.1. Twitter as a tool to establish leadership

Twitter analysis tools were used for generating data on each respondent to indicate influence. Twitalyzer (http://twitalyzer.com/) provided the clearest algorithm-calculated series of leadership indicators through its:

(1) *Impact score*: a combination of the following factors: number of followers for users, number of unique references and citations for users in Twitter, frequency at which users are uniquely retweeted, frequency at which users are uniquely retweeting other people, and relative frequency at which users post updates.
(2) *Percentile*: relative rank of the individual within the Twitalyzer dataset.
(3) *Influencer type category*: *everyday users* have a small circle of influence but great potential, *reporters* are connected people and great communicators, *social butterflies* are very active within their individual networks, *trendsetters* are early adopters who love to share new ideas, *thought leaders* are the voices people listen to most (as defined at http://twitalyzer.com/definitions/influencer-type.asp).

Twitter Grader (http://twittergrader.com/) provided a *rank* (out of more than 8.2 million Twitter accounts), a *grade* (out of 100), and the date that the respondent began tweeting. According to their website, Twitter Grader attempts to measure the power, reach, and authority of a Twitter account to understand the impact a tweet might have when it is posted. The *rank* represents one's position on the list of more than 8.2 million users who have been graded, and the *grade* is an approximate percentage of other users who have an equal or lower score.

2.2. Sample

Universal Accreditation Board (UAB)-affiliated organizations were used as a basis for sampling because the accreditation process in public relations serves as an indicator of a commitment to professionalism in practice and ethics. Accreditation can be one of many indicators of leadership as accreditation-minded practitioners are typically more senior practitioners and act as public relations mentors through their various public relations associations. Certainly accreditation-minded practitioners are not the only grouping of public relations leaders, however finding a master list of those one can consider public relations leaders from which to randomly sample will challenge any research study. This study asks questions to identify leadership after a prospective respondent has been selected to participate. A total of 10 Twitter accounts from UAB-affiliated organizations were used to identify the first 50 followers of each who met two criteria: (1) accounts were public (not locked or protected), and (2) accounts appeared to be maintained by public relations professionals to either tweet about public relations or to represent an organization.

2.3. Procedure

Using a Twitter account set up for this research study, researchers attempted to connect with the people running the 500 accounts in the sampling frame, and 273 reciprocated the connection attempt. These 273 Twitter users were each direct-messaged an invitation to participate in the survey. During later waves the researchers sought and used e-mail addresses for others in the sampling frame, increasing the potential reach in the sample to 354 (including direct messaging and e-mail attempts). The survey had an overall response rate of 22.88% ($n = 81$).

2.4. Survey instrument

The survey focused on three main sets of variables: situational motivation for using Twitter measured with Guay, Vallerand, and Blanchard's (2000) Situational Motivation Scale (SIMS), leadership within the Twitter community as measured by various Twitter ranking tools (Twitalyzer, Twitter Grader), and leadership among one's professional contacts. The Guay et al. (2000) SIMS measure was used in its entirety with the question reference as "Why do you use Twitter?". Items that gauged leadership among one's personal contacts asked questions (separately) such as how likely one would be to tell a co-worker, intern, boss, etc. about Twitter.

3. Results

Participants had worked in public relations from 0 to 35 years with a median of 10 years experience. They ranged in age from 21 to 61 with a median age of 40. Of those who reported their gender, about 60% were female ($n = 44$) and 40% male ($n = 30$). Most work in relatively small organizations: 37% in one-person operations and 90% in organizations with 15 people or less. Regarding positions of leadership, 62% of those who responded to this part of the survey (44 of 71 people) reported supervising at least one other person. A quarter ($n = 20$) of the total sample reported being businesses owners. The demographic data confirmed that most of the randomly selected respondents were leaders in public relations.

3.1. Self-reported Twitter use

About a third (35%, $n = 28$) of the participants reported using Twitter in the 15 min prior to taking the survey. More than half (51.2%, $n = 41$) used Twitter within one hour of taking the survey. Ninety percent ($n = 72$) used Twitter within 1 day, and everyone ($n = 80$) had used it within a week.

3.2. Situational motivation

Based on theory and statistical analyses of the SIMS factor data in this particular study, the researchers combined intrinsic motivation and identified regulation into a single index of "internal motivation." Indices were built for three situational motivation constructs: 8-item internal motivation index (alpha = .87), 4-item external regulation index (alpha = .86), and a 3-item amotivation index (alpha = .81).

Correlation tests revealed a moderate negative relationship between time lapsed since using Twitter and internal motivation ($r = -.354$, $p \leq .005$). A moderate relationship in the opposite direction was found between time lapsed and amotivation ($r = .486$, $p \leq .001$).

Looking at motivation based on demographics, there was a moderate negative correlation between age and internal motivation ($r = -.322$, $p \leq .010$). No statistically significant differences were found in motivation constructs based on educational level (analysis of variance and post-hoc tests) or gender (independent-samples t-tests).

3.3. Twitter leadership

The majority of respondents were categorized as "everyday users" ($n = 48$; 59.3%), followed by "social butterflies" ($n = 17$; 21%) and "reporters" ($n = 5$; 6.2%). Only one respondent was labeled a "trendsetter" (1.2%) and none were categorized as "thought leaders" by Twitalyzer's standards. This means that most the respondents in the sample are talkative and perhaps influential within their own networks, but not considered so on a larger scale across Twitter as a whole.

Results indicated no statistically significant differences between men and women for any of the Twitter analysis tool leadership variables.

3.4. Relationship between situational motivation and leadership

For the construct of internal motivation, the following correlations were found: Twitalyzer percentile ($r = .304$, $p \leq .05$), rank from Twitter Grader ($r = .374$, $p \leq .001$), and grade from Twitter Grader ($r = .381$, $p \leq .001$).

For the construct of amotivation, the following correlations were found: Twitalyzer percentile ($r = -.284$, $p \leq .05$), number of tweets on Twitter account ($r = -.232$, $p \leq .05$), rank from Twitter Grader ($r = -.390$, $p \leq .001$), and grade from Twitter Grader ($r = -.398$, $p \leq .001$).

Another indicator of leadership in this study is whether the respondent would tell other professionals about the tool. An independent samples t-test showed that respondents who would tell another practitioner had lower amotivation index scores ($M = 1.72$, $SD = .66$) than those who wouldn't tell another practitioner about Twitter ($M = 2.47$, $SD = .92$), $t = -2.72$, $p \leq .01$. Similar results were found for amotivation and whether one would tell subordinates about Twitter. Respondents who reported they would tell someone who worked for them about Twitter had lower amotivation ($M = 1.69$, $SD = .66$) than those who wouldn't tell a subordinate ($M = 2.06$, $SD = .82$), $t = -1.99$, $p \leq .05$.

4. Discussion

Successful leadership within a profession or even within an organization may not require elite prominence in worlds of social media (e.g., population of all Twitter users), but those who are more influential relative to others in the same group (in this case, public relations tweeters following UAB-affiliated organizations) are more likely to see the value of social media for themselves personally.

The data from this study clearly show that motivation matters. Leaders in public relations should be cognizant of motivation when trying to cultivate their subordinates. A keen awareness of what is motivating someone with regard to using social media will provide leaders with better tools for helping grow future leaders. Given the importance of internal motivation, it

may make just as much sense to look for a social media enthusiast to practice public relations as it does to try to "convert" a non-motivated public relations person to handle an organization's social media efforts.

In finding and developing a social media strategist it is important to acknowledge the role of motivation. Within our sample, internal motivation correlated positively with Twitter rank, grade, and percentile. In general, those who were more successful were more internally motivated.

To use the definitions of Twitalyzer, most of the public relations practitioners in our sample are described as *everyday users, reporters,* or even *social butterflies,* but not *trendsetters* or *thought leaders*. Accordingly, even everyday users can reap the rewards of social media by opening a conduit between an organization and its publics.

Acknowledgements

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