

Chapter 88

Running with the Pack: The Impact of Middle-Status Conformity on the Post-Adoption Organizational Use of Twitter

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ABSTRACT

Prior literature has utilized many theories to explain an organization's post-adoption technology use of social media platforms, but none of the common models include status as either a primary or a moderating variable. This is a significant gap in the literature because status is a structural enabler and inhibitor that determines acceptable and unacceptable behavior in a given setting. In an empirical study of Twitter and the cultural norm of retweeting for a sample of US colleges and universities, the authors demonstrate the following: (1) middle-status institutions had a higher likelihood of following the retweeting cultural norm relative to their high- and low-status counterparts, (2) middle- and low-status institutions who followed the retweeting cultural norm in a manner consistent with their status experienced greater post-adoption success relative to those institutions who did not, but the reverse was evident for high-status institutions (who appear to be rewarded for deviation from this cultural norm), and (3) the negative effect of deviating from retweeting cultural norms on post-adoption success is more pronounced with decreasing status.

INTRODUCTION

Popular external social media platforms give organizations the ability to disseminate information, to collaborate with others, to enhance worker productivity, and to build relationships with stakeholders who may have previously been unreachable (Aggarwal, Gopal, Sankaranarayanan, & Vir Singh, 2012;

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Aral, Dellarocas, & Godes, 2013; Hemsley & Mason, 2013; Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014). Consequently, it is now common practice for organizations in all types of industries to have a social media presence on external social media platforms (Kiron, Palmer, Phillips, & Kruschwitz, 2012; Qualman, 2013). However, many organizations have yet to tap the full potential of these platforms even though they have been widely adopted (Kane et al., 2014). This may be the case because simply choosing to adopt a social media platform is only a small step toward extracting value from the platform. The larger value for the organization is determined post-adoption whereby value is co-created through the continuous engagement by the organization and its followers (Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010; Prahalad & Krishnan, 2008; Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan, Burns, & Neuberger, 2014).

Similar to other technologies, each social media platform may have different cultural norms that form around features embedded in and the people using the technology (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Germonprez & Hovorka, 2013). Cultural norms are explicit or implicit guidelines that designate acceptable conduct within the framework of a particular group of people (Triandis, 1994). In the context of social media platforms, for instance, the following are all cultural norms: (1) how often to retweet content posted by others on Twitter, (2) when to re-pin pictures and videos on Pinterest, and (3) how frequently and when to like content on Facebook (Al-Debei, Al-Lozi, & Papazafeiropoulou, 2013; boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Hall & Zarro, 2013). Although cultural norms may form around a technical feature, the explicit and implicit guidelines for how and when the feature is used (i.e., the cultural norm) are determined by the users who are appropriating the feature (Germonprez & Hovorka, 2013).

Social media platforms are used in the public, which means that how one organization chooses to use the social media platform is influenced by how others are using the platform (boyd et al., 2010). For example, how often an organization conforms to the cultural norm of re-pinning content on Pinterest is, in part, determined based on how frequently similar organizations are conforming to the cultural norm of re-pinning. Yet, some companies knowingly or unknowingly do not follow the platform's cultural norms and following the cultural norms is not always indicative of an organization's successful or unsuccessful post-adoption use of a given social media platform. Anecdotally, it is easy to find examples of organizations across multiple industries where following the social media platform's cultural norms leads to a successful adoption of the platform and an unsuccessful adoption for others. The purpose of our paper is to theoretically and empirically investigate whether and how often organizations follow the cultural norms associated with a social media platform and whether following those cultural norms leads to greater post-adoption success.

We argue that an organization's status (i.e., hierarchical ranking of similar organizations) impacts how frequently it will follow the social media platform's cultural norms, because an organization's status helps determine what acceptable and unacceptable behavior is in a given context (Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001). We specifically hypothesize that middle-status organizations will have a higher likelihood of following the social media platform's cultural norms, because middle-status organizations have equal amounts of upside potential and downside risk and following the norms is the safest course of action (Durand & Kremp, 2016; Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001). We finally assert that organizations following the cultural norms in line with normative expectations will be more successful (*ceteris paribus*) relative to those who do not, because conforming to norms minimizes negative sanctions and maximizes positive rewards (Axelrod, 1986). However, we further theorize that the negative impact of deviating from the cultural norms will be greatest for low-status organizations, because it is more socially acceptable for higher status organizations to deviate from social and cultural norms (Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001;

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