

# **The Emergence of a Public Good through Online Social Capital Activation**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines how consumers activate online social capital, characterizes the resources which they elicit, and considers of the resulting good's properties. Content analysis of the initial posts of 975 publicly available threads of an online community reveals six forms of activation, based on whether the activator seeks convergent or divergent responses; and seeks factual information or subjective viewpoints, or mobilizes action. The findings suggest that the network is used in three ways: to (1) source a 'rare' resource possessed by at least one member, (2) generate a form of consensus among several members, or (3) combine the divergent resources possessed by different members into a 'knowledge or action bank'. Hence, the network may be used in a search for 'unity' or 'additively'. An emergent, public good develops in the process. Of particular value for a public good is the unfolding richness that comes from the diversity of resources.

## **Introduction**

Participation in social media has now become the leading online activity worldwide (Comcore, 2012). Not surprisingly therefore, social media have become a growing area of investigation for marketing and consumer researchers: it is becoming increasingly important to better understand the role that online networks might play in people's lives and in their behavior as consumers. Concurrently, a new conceptual lens in the marketing field is emerging, that studies marketing actors in networks rather than in exchange or in relationships. By providing consumers with access to wide and complex networks, the internet renders this new conceptual lens applicable to the study of consumers online.

Among a large number of potential goods and ills, the internet provides consumers with access, via social networks, to online social capital which they may not have offline (Hoffman, 2012). Social capital, or the value available from access to a network, is empirically associated with a multitude of benefits – in individuals, across organizations, and in wider communities (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995). As sources of social capital, and as informational resources, online networks can be extremely valuable, even emancipatory and transformational, to individual consumers.

This study aims to understand how consumers access an online social network's resources through the activation of social capital, to characterize the different resources which they elicit, and to consider the properties of the resulting good that is created by the individual activations of social capital.

## **Theoretical background**

Social capital, resident in networks, enhances people's lives by giving them access to resources, including information, which they do not possess on their own. Hoffman (2012) remarks that the internet enables consumers to access social capital online which offline would not have been possible.

Several studies have considered this form of social capital formation. By conceptualizing peer-to-peer sharing communities as consumer gift systems, Giesler (2006) considers how community contributions are made. Mathwick, Wiertz and de Ruyter (2008) study the impact of the social structure of peer-to-peer problem-solving virtual communities on the accumulation of social capital. Chiu, Hsu and Wang (2006) use social capital theory to consider motivations to share knowledge within virtual communities.

Despite the clear value of social capital theory in studying networks, little is known about how individuals activate the resources that are inherent, yet dormant, in online networks. We adopt Adler and Kwon's (2001) definition of social capital: "the goodwill available to individuals or groups", whose "effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor" (p. 23). Network activation enables individuals to obtain information or action from other members of the network; hence online networks are virtual places for developing social capital.

An important characteristic of online networks is the public nature of resources, although they are only revealed when "called up". This constitutes a fundamental difference from the resources created through the activation of offline social capital, which are only shared between the activator and the resource provider. The implications of the public nature of these resources are important. This paper focuses on the characteristics of the resources that are shared by the activation of social capital.

## **Methodology**

Data was collected from the online forum 'Dubai and the Northern Emirates' hosted by [www.expatwoman.com](http://www.expatwoman.com). This forum, which is for expatriate women sharing the same geographic location in the United Arab Emirates, was deemed particularly suited to our study because social capital may be especially useful to expatriates who are cut off from their original network in their home country. Additionally, while sharing a gender (female) and a status (expatriate), the members do not possess any expertise, and therefore may be characteristic of 'consumers' in general. On the day of data collection, the website's communities had 46,369 members. The forum had hosted a total of 84,024 threads. This particular forum was selected in preference to others on the site which were less popular, as per the advice by Kozinets (2002), to be able to observe a wide range of possible manifestations of various phenomena, and variance between participants.

Although membership is necessary to post or access advanced features, the forum posts are publicly available data whose authors are only identified by their pseudonyms. The researchers did not become members of the community nor did they interact with its members directly, and only accessed the publicly available data. Besides the search facility that retrieves earlier threads, at any one point in time, the forum displays the 1,000 threads for which there has been the most recent activity. The forum rules state that the purpose of the forum is to exchange information about living in the region. The forum is moderated, and posts or threads are removed if they potentially go against the laws of the country, or if anyone contacts the forum asking for their deletion.

This study, on how users activate social capital to draw resources, focuses on the first posts of each of the 1,000 threads visible on the day of data collection. The first post of a thread is the means by which the dormant resources are mobilized by an individual enquirer and shared

with all. After excluding posts by administrators about rules, duplicate posts and personal messages, 985 posts remained – approximately 63,000 words in total.

The content of the posts was analyzed inductively, using the constant comparative method (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), with the purpose of letting themes emerge about the nature of the resources drawn through the activation of social capital. A categorization of ten main types of resources was identified. These ten types were then further organized conceptually.

## **Findings**

On conclusion of the analysis, ten different types of resources sought were identified. Two conceptual distinctions help organize them: whether the information sought is convergent or divergent; and whether the activator (initial poster) is seeking factual information, subjective viewpoints or to mobilize action.

The calling up of *convergent resources* consists in seeking a ‘unitary’ answer, such as confirmation that a doctor someone has been referred to is indeed a good physician. The calling up of *divergent resources* consists in asking for a variety of options such as asking for ideas to organize a different kind of birthday party for a child. *Factual information* consists of statements about products, services or the environment that are deemed ‘objective’ and verifiable. *Subjective viewpoints* consist of statements that include a poster’s personal opinion and therefore are debatable. *Action mobilization* consists of statements whose purpose is to generate a form of action by the readers, such as calls for the adoption of pets or calls to contribute to an emergent thread or bank of information.

The crossing of the two dimensions discussed above creates a 2 x 3 matrix, which is able to contain the ten main types of resources that were identified as being activated through the 985 first posts in the sample (see Table 1). These are now discussed in more detail, and illustrated with some verbatims.

Activators seeking convergent, factual information may seek information related to products, service or access, such as opening times, where particular products or brands may be purchased, or directions to a particular location, via the roads or the metro. An example is this verbatim: “*Anyone know where I can find a snow cone maker machine (close to Mall of Emirates)?*” [poster 1; 59 posts]

The search for convergent, factual information may be related to non-commercial aspects of living in the region, such as the search for advice on particular official procedures whose exact rules (often unpublished) tend to be opaque. For instance: “*Health card for maid - do I have to go to the big hospitals? - or can i go to the health centres and get one? On line doesn't work.*

*Have used Search but it is not giving me what I want in a quick answer... Are there speciific hours etc as I went to Al wasl once and achieved nothing as it was the " wrong time" ...*” [poster 2; 17,727 posts]

In some instances, convergent factual information is sought as the poster is trying to make sense of a situation that may be unusual. For instance: “*There is a horribly noisy helicopter flying daily on the Marina and the Palm. I started noticing it around the UAE National Day festivities so I assumed it was some inevitable collateral to public security and safety measures, but it is still flying, non stop, and like every helicopter its noise and vibrations are*

particularly disturbing. What is it? Is it ever going to stop? Was it here even before and I didn't notice it?" [poster 3; 225 posts]

**Table 1:** Types of resources drawn and created through social capital activation

Type of resources	Factual information	Subjective viewpoints	Action
<b>Characteristic of resource activated</b>			
<b>Convergent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Product location or availability; Access; Product information</li> <li>• Factual advice; Advice on procedures</li> <li>• Sense-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word of mouth; advice; assent</li> <li>• (Cultural) norms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobilization of 'takers' (animal adoption);</li> <li>• Injunction to act or behave; network mobilization</li> </ul>
<b>Divergent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brainstorms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opinions; views; recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appeal to develop knowledge bank or thread for its own sake; spurring of diverse reactions</li> </ul>

Activators seeking convergent, subjective viewpoints may seek word of mouth, advice or even assent about a proposed market-related action or statement. For instance: "*Dr [doctor name]. My DH has been recommended this doctor at [hospital name]. Does anyone have any experience of him please?*" [poster 4; 861 posts]

Alternatively, the convergent, subjective viewpoints may be concerned with seeking advice about local (cultural) norms or procedures, such as in this case: "*We will be looking for a villa in mirdif for when our lease is up at the end of february. [...] When exactly do you start looking? [...] is it the norm to negotiate the price? Or should I just stop dreaming! Thanks for any help or advice you can give me.*" [poster 5; 212 posts]

The mobilization of convergent action can consist in calling forum members to commit to a cause, or to conform to a desired behavior. It may entail the search for a person able to solve a problem, such as adopt a pet. It may entail asking more members of the network to adopt a particular behavior. For instance, a poster used the forum to gather Starbucks mugs for her across the city: "*Whilst you are in a Starbucks over the next week or two, would you please look out for the mugs on sale of Dubai (large mugs with Dubai on them in creams and browns)? [...] If you would ask them to hold them for me and I will collect asap, then let me know, or just let me know and I will dash off for them....*" [poster 6; 54 posts]

Other activators aim to generate convergent action when they post injunctions to behave in a specific manner. For instance: "*To all dog owners! Since more than 90% of Dogs here are owned by us, we are responsible for all the ::: on the sidewalks. Please pick up after your dog and if you see someone doesn't, let them know that they must. [...] Remember any ::::: that is*

*left behind make us look bad in none dog owners. I have no intention of preaching you, I just would hate it if the abandon dog walking in my area.”* [poster 7; 43 posts]

Posters who seek divergent, factual information initiate a brainstorm to obtain a variety of ideas and options to consider. For instance: *“New Year ideas for a family with 2 yr old? Something like a nice dinner and then some fireworks, where kids are welcome.....any ideas out there?”*[poster 8; 61 posts]

When seeking divergent subjective viewpoints, posters ask for opinions, views or advice about complex dilemmas. For instance: *“SOS! My new neighbour is driving me crazy!!! [...] I have a new neighbour, a friendly old lady, who's moved in next doors a couple of days ago. She has a peculiar habit... She opens the door of her apartment and plays music out loud while she goes about her cooking or whatever! It's most disruptive, I can hear the music with my bedroom door closed! [...] Any suggestions how to put a stop to this? [...] What do you think? Ideas please!”* [poster 9; 25 posts]

Finally, posters may mobilize divergent action by initiating the development of a knowledge bank through the solicitation of different perspectives. A typical example is this verbatim: *“The UAE turns 40 but do you know how old is your home country? Switzerland celebrated its 700th birthday back in the 90s. Wondered about other countries...”* [poster 10; 235 posts]

## **Discussion**

The findings suggest that when calling up convergent or divergent resources, posters can use the network in three different ways: they seek convergent resources to (1) source a ‘rare’ resource possessed by at least one member in the network, or (2) generate a form of consensus among several members; or (3) they seek divergent resources possessed by different members of the network that, once responses come in, develop into a form of ‘knowledge or action bank’. In the first two instances the network is used in a search for ‘unity’; in the third instance is it used ‘additively’. We note that all three forms leverage the power of a network’s weak ties (Granovetter, 1973).

Each use of the network potentially results in different outcomes. In the first instance, once a rare resource surfaces, the search typically ends. In the second instance, the result of the activation is a consensus view, which might be characterized as a form of ‘common wisdom’. In the third instance, the activation of the network leads to the materialization of a rich bank of information, potential suggestions or perspectives, or action, made possible by the diversity of resources distributed across the network.

Altogether, the findings suggest that the overall good created (‘good’ refers to the sum of resources available on the forum) has the following four important characteristics.

1. It is an emergent good arising from a myriad of individual activations which, collectively, create a vast resource. Although most of the activations are motivated by individual rather than collective needs or concerns, the resulting resource is of value beyond its originator.
2. It is a communal good, which is developed around the common socio-cultural conditions of expatriation and womanhood. In this sense, the forum is a true information neighborhood (Savolainen, 1995), the internet enabling people to congregate in spaces where they expect to obtain information that is of value and relevance to them.

3. It is a public good because it is non-excludable: anyone can draw from it without impoverishing it.
4. It is created and continues to develop outside of the traditional market, although marketers are known to attempt to 'infiltrate' it to pursue their marketing interests.

Of particular value for a public good is the unfolding richness that comes from the diversity of resources, creating what Jenkins (2006) terms 'collective intelligence'. The data reveals that some activators are aware of the public good nature of the network, apologizing when they ask too specific a question. Others are aware of the value for all of the divergent information they seek.

The characteristics mentioned in the description above can be valuable: not only are individual needs that initially triggered the activation of social capital satisfied, but the good remains, grows and is available to all. Although some of the resources created such as information on store location or opening hours have a specific but restricted usefulness, other types of resources, such as brainstorm or knowledge banks, may be valuable to many users over the long term. Similarly, the 'common wisdom' that emerges from multiple viewpoints converging from a diversity of sources, may never have materialized or been known otherwise. If, in a traditional setting, it may have taken an intermediary (a journalist or writer) to piece together the different resources or identify the common wisdom, this is now achieved without a middleman, and possibly also without any initial intention.

Such forms of online social capital can clearly enhance consumers' lives by providing them with vast amounts of cultural capital and consumption expertise. However, the internet may also provide similar forms of expertise for destructive rather than emancipation purposes, as we are reminded by hearing the story of how a Norwegian citizen acquired the necessary knowledge, contacts, conviction and resources to decide to kill dozens of people.

### **Conclusion**

This study has identified the main resources which the users of an online network activate, and it has characterized the overall good created as a result of the users' multiple individual activations of online social capital.

Many traditional conceptions of social capital have viewed it as a private good (e.g., Bourdieu 1986). In the case of online communities, we show that social capital is a communal, emergent public good. Further resources present (but invisible until they are activated) in the network can be made explicit and shared through the activation of social capital. Thus, a public good emerges from individual actions seeking to address personal information needs.

The main limitation of our study is that it was circumscribed to just one online community, which has its own culture and norms, its own structure (what is visible, accessible, membership). Other communities may generate or encourage other forms of behavior. Furthermore, there research did not consider how activators actually dealt with the resources they had drawn (i.e. the answers to their initial posts). There are several avenues for future research. First, the same data can serve to consider how the resources latent within the community are best surfaced, through the use of discourse analysis. Second, it will be useful to consider the impact of the resources available through online social networks on consumer expertise. Third, the search for and creation of divergent resources is of interest due to the general value of the good it creates. Further research could investigate how such resources are

best created, developed and maintained. Research could also seek to understand how activators deal with divergent information, and whether they attempt some synthesizing or resort to simpler heuristics.

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