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Publisher: Routledge

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Communication Research Reports

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcrr20>

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Published online: 12 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Avery E. Holton , Kang Baek , Mark Coddington & Carolyn Yaschur (2014) Seeking and Sharing: Motivations for Linking on Twitter, Communication Research Reports, 31:1, 33-40, DOI: [10.1080/08824096.2013.843165](https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2013.843165)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2013.843165>

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Seeking and Sharing: Motivations for Linking on Twitter

Avery E. Holton, Kang Baek, Mark Coddington,
& Carolyn Yaschur

Hyperlinks are connective devices that allow users to direct each other in digital spaces while also demonstrating their own interests in specific types of content. Communication scholars have analyzed motivations for the use of social network sites (SNSs) at a broad level, opening up questions about the impetus for sharing hyperlinks in these spaces. In particular, scholars have focused on Twitter as an important platform for news and information sharing and community building, exploring a variety of motivations for its use. This study expands upon recent research by analyzing user motivations for posting hyperlinks on Twitter. Through a survey of Twitter users, this study revealed a central social role for hyperlinks, indicating their use to seek information by soliciting reciprocal linking from other users. The findings provide new insights for researchers and practitioners into an increasingly important part of users' engagement and information flows on Twitter. Broader implications for media scholars and practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: Hyperlinks; Motivations; Reciprocity; SNS; Twitter

Introduction

Originally conceived as a mobile platform where people could discuss what they were doing or where they were, Twitter has evolved into a mechanism for breaking, sharing, and contextualizing news where more than 500 million global users now post more than a billion messages, photos, and links each week (Hermida, 2010; Messieh,

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2012; Perez, 2011). Twitter users seek out and share content, often posting or reposting hyperlinks to original sources of information. Understanding what drives users to actively engage in the news and information ecology of Twitter, specifically through the posting of hyperlinks, can build upon existing scholarship that has explored motivations for social media use, specifically on Twitter, but has not yet parsed out specific content interactions such as link posting.

Using a survey of Twitter users, this study examined an extensive list of possible motivations for posting links on Twitter. The findings illustrate the use of linking as a tool for communal acquisition of information while also indicating the central role of news and information in decision making regarding linking. Collectively, the findings here contribute to current understandings of what drives people to use Twitter and similar social network sites (SNSs) in particular ways.

Literature Review

Hyperlinks are fundamental connective tools that allow users to direct each other in digital spaces while displaying their own interests in specific news and information (De Maeyer, 2012; Hsu & Park, 2011). SNS users have employed hyperlinks to provide contextualization and to promote knowledge acquisition (Hughes & Palen, 2009; Java et al., 2007). Increasingly, SNSs such as Twitter are being accessed through mobile devices, where the ability to quickly seek and share information is magnified (McGee, 2012). Hyperlinks provide a primary mechanism for such rapid content engagement, making them a critical component of SNSs.

Though a wealth of scholarship has explored the motivations associated with SNS use (e.g., Baltaretu & Balaban, 2010; Chen, 2010; Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012; Humphreys, 2012; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011), none has examined the motivations for posting hyperlinks on Twitter. If the primary uses of Twitter include monitoring and selecting conversations to engage in related to the news (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), then hyperlinks might provide an accessible means for users to connect one another to such conversations.

Yet the motivations for Twitter use are not limited to conversation alone. Users have adapted the platform as a space to break and contextualize news (Gleason, 2010; Hermida et al., 2012) and have aided in the evolution of useful tools that help them manage and share information (Humphreys, 2012). Researchers have also identified a performative dimension to social media users' motivations, which centers on the construction of an "imagined audience" to which their discourse is projected (Litt, 2012, p. 330; Papacharissi, 2012).

This suggests that what drives users to include links may well be deeper than information sharing. Therefore, this study first focused on linking motivations on Twitter and then sought to understand them in relationship with frequency of linking, noting in particular that Baek and colleagues (2011) found that link-posting frequency on a similar SNS rose along with certain broad motivations such as information sharing, community building, and a need for autonomous control. With that in mind, this study asked the following:

RQ1. What are Twitter users' motivations for sharing links on Twitter?

RQ2. Do Twitter users' motivations for sharing links influence the extent to which users frequently share links on Twitter?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Given the privacy barriers presented by Twitter, the researchers relied on a seeded snowball sample. They first identified 200 Twitter users (i.e., relative seeds) in their own networks who actively provided links in their tweets. A link for the survey was distributed to each user through direct messages (i.e., private messages) on Twitter, along with a request to pass the survey along to other Twitter users who actively linked. The survey ran from November 15 to December 15, 2011, resulting in 481 responses. Partial or incomplete survey responses were removed, resulting in an overall population of 396 ($N=396$).

Measurements

Motives

Motives for sharing links on Twitter were assessed through specific items developed by previous studies on motivations for using general Internet (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Sun, Rubin, & Haridakis, 2008), personal home pages (Papacharissi, 2002), and SNSs (Baek, Holton, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011; Kim et al., 2011), relying particularly on open-ended responses generated in a previous study by the authors (Baek et al., 2011). Forty items were used to measure eight motives (i.e., information sharing, information seeking, interpersonal utility, convenience and entertainment, passing time, social support, control, and promoting work) for sharing links on Twitter. The items were folded into a 5-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). A factor analysis retrieved a total of six motives with 26 items (see Table 1 for the specific items).

Frequency of sharing links

Respondents were asked how often they post links to other information on Twitter on a 6-point scale (from 1 to 6: *never or rarely, once a week, twice a week, three times a week, four times a week, more than four times a week*; $M=3.23$, $SD=2.08$).

Control variables

Respondents' gender (68.7% female), age (median=25–34 years), and education (median=4-year college degree) were included in analyses as controls as well as daily Twitter use ($M=2.64$, $SD=1.57$) and duration of use ($M=4.2$, $SD=1.9$). Daily use was measured on a 6-point scale ranging from *less than 10 minutes* (1) to *more than 180 minutes* (6). Duration of use was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from *less than 6 months* (1) to *more than 35 months* (7). The number of followers (i.e., inbound connections; $M=4.64$, $SD=2.97$) and following (i.e., outbound connections; $M=4.85$, $SD=2.75$) were also controlled for. They were measured on a 9-point scale ranging from *less than 10* (1) to *400 or more* (9), respectively. Respondents had 269 followers on average, and they followed 240 users on average.

Table 1 Hierarchical Regression Predicting the Frequency of Posting Links on Twitter

	Frequency of posting links			
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> ²	F
Block 1: Demographics			0.07	10.27**
Gender (Female)	-0.26**	-5.32		
Age	-0.08	-1.12		
Education	-0.03	-0.52		
Block 2: Amount of use			0.54	91.20**
Been a user (month)	0.35**	9.21		
Daily use (minute)	0.54**	14.51		
Block 3: Number of followers			0.70	132.06**
Number of people who follow you	0.51**	8.56		
Number of people you follow	0.03	0.51		
Block 4: Motivation			0.74	82.52**
Information sharing	-0.05	-1.17		
Interpersonal utility	0.02	0.62		
Pass time	-0.10**	-3.00		
Convenience and entertainment	0.01	0.14		
Information seeking	0.16**	4.59		
Control/promoting work	0.13**	3.37		

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

Results

A factor analysis yielded six motivations for posting links on Twitter: information sharing, interpersonal utility, passing time, convenience and entertainment, information seeking, and control and promoting work (see Table 2). Among the six motivations, information sharing was the most salient motive for sharing links on Twitter, accounting for 16.48% of variance after rotation. Most motivation factors correlated moderately and all factors were significantly correlated at the .01 level. The highest correlations were between information sharing and control and promoting work ($\gamma = 0.60$), followed by information sharing and convenience and entertainment ($\gamma = 0.56$).

Examining the extent to which motivations predicted the frequency of sharing links on Twitter (see Table 1), a hierarchical regression analysis controlling for demographics and general use of Twitter revealed that information seeking ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$) was the most significant predictor. This finding demonstrated that those who have a higher level of motivation for seeking information were more likely to post links on Twitter.

Discussion

As more individuals take up Twitter and similar SNSs that promote connectivity based on content, it is important to understand what motivates users to engage in certain components of these platforms. Hyperlinks have been used to help share information across SNSs (Hughes & Palen, 2009; Java et al., 2007), and the findings here indicate they might also be used to seek information. One of the primary purposes of linking,

Table 2 Factor Analysis of Motivations for Linking on Twitter

Items "I share links on Twitter ..."	Motivations for sharing links on twitter					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Factor 1: Information sharing						
To share news	0.86	0.08	0.02	0.09	0.17	0.27
To share information that might be useful to others	0.85	0.04	0.03	0.10	0.13	0.33
To get feedback on information I have found	0.80	-0.06	0.03	0.13	0.30	0.22
To share information about my interests	0.73	0.15	0.03	0.22	0.19	0.35
To communicate with friends and family	0.55	0.19	0.16	0.39	-0.16	-0.21
To share a source that is important to me	0.52	0.10	0.10	0.31	0.30	0.47
Factor 2: Interpersonal utility						
To meet people with same interests as mine	0.15	0.89	0.03	0.05	0.17	0.10
To meet people with similar backgrounds	0.17	0.86	-0.04	0.14	0.14	0.08
To meet new people	0.02	0.84	0.04	0.15	0.17	0.12
To belong to a group	0.01	0.82	0.30	0.09	0.06	0.09
To feel less lonely	-0.05	0.60	0.37	0.21	-0.08	0.12
Because it's cheaper than calling or sending letters	0.03	0.50	0.44	0.12	0.23	-0.26
Factor 3: Passing time						
Because I have nothing better to do	0.16	0.03	0.90	0.02	0.08	-0.03
Because I am bored	0.20	0.02	0.87	0.16	0.04	0.03
Because it's popular	-0.06	0.19	0.85	0.18	0.16	0.10
Because everyone else is doing it	-0.13	0.22	0.80	0.16	0.12	0.20
Factor 4: Convenience and entertainment						
Because I just like it	0.40	0.07	0.03	0.76	0.20	0.26
Because it provides a distraction	0.08	0.22	0.36	0.75	0.15	0.03
Because it's enjoyable	0.40	0.16	0.04	0.71	0.23	0.18
To relax	0.03	0.25	0.37	0.73	0.28	-0.10
Factor 5: Information seeking						
To get information quickly	0.23	0.12	0.12	0.16	0.88	0.11
To get information I can't find anywhere else	0.12	0.08	0.14	0.21	0.87	0.03
To get new ideas	0.26	0.31	0.12	0.16	0.80	0.09

(Continued)

Table 2 Continued

Items "I share links on Twitter ..."	Motivations for sharing links on twitter					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Factor 6: Control/promoting work						
To promote the work of people I know	0.33	0.06	0.12	0.04	0.06	0.82
To promote my own work	0.30	0.22	0.17	-0.12	0.03	0.79
To stimulate discussion	0.25	0.20	-0.03	0.30	0.07	0.72
Eigenvalue	4.28	4.05	3.76	2.87	2.80	2.56
Variance explained	16.48	15.58	14.48	11.04	10.75	9.83
Reliability (Cronbach's α)	.90	.90	.91	.88	.92	.84
Mean (SD)	3.74 (0.90)	1.99 (0.82)	1.93 (0.90)	2.72 (0.10)	2.93 (1.24)	3.24 (1.10)

Note. $N = 396$. The bold values represent factor loadings greater than ± 0.50 . Cross-loaded items were removed.

on SNSs or otherwise, is to point other users to sources of information (Walejko & Ksiazek, 2010), and the information sharing motivation corresponds well with that purpose. On Twitter, users may post links to spark conversations with followers or to find links to similar information. In other words, users may be both sharing and seeking information at the same time, facilitating a gathering and sorting of information. In this way, the information-seeking motivation may be a manifestation of Adamic's (2008) concept of the social hyperlink, in which users post links to navigate information spaces communally, with the expectation of reciprocation from others in the network.

Respondents indicated that they post links, at least in part, to find information quickly and to reach hard-to-find content. The latter is interesting considering that respondents also indicated they are not all that likely to post links when sharing information with family or friends or sharing important sources. Yet, the more followers a Twitter user has, the more engaged in linking that user is. Linking may thus be employed more commonly as a form of information seeking in larger and more diverse networks, where its ability to reach into a broad range of information sources may be greater.

There is still much to learn about motivations on SNSs, and motivations for linking and sharing information on SNSs in particular. Though they were developed based on a broad foundation of prior research, the motivations in this study were determined through closed-ended survey questions and factor analysis, which may not yield a comprehensive range of motivations. Additionally, this study was limited to one platform, and because motivations might be affected by the structure of and access to certain platforms, comparative analysis could help extrapolate richer findings about the key differences between platforms. Motivations may also be affected by existing dynamics in the networked community within which users are communicating, so questions about those community interactions could introduce a fuller picture of motivations to share links.

Despite some limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the research on hyperlinks and motivations for their deployment on SNSs. The findings suggest that linking on SNSs is guided not just by simple social or utilitarian motivations of information sharing but also by an expectation of reciprocity in linking and information sharing from other users. The findings help illustrate that even in the seemingly simple act of posting a link on Twitter, users may be both relying on a web of trust and reciprocation and helping build that web for others.

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