

Social Media Affordances

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1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of organizational capabilities has gained increasing attention in the management and Information Systems literature. They represent “the ability of an organization to perform a coordinated set of tasks, utilizing organizational resources for the purpose of achieving a particular result” (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003: 999). Tourism scholars have also embraced the construct to uncover the key capabilities required for managing tourism business networks (Lemmetynen & Go, 2009) and to better understand the development of tourist destinations (Haugland, Ness, Grønseth, & Aarstad, 2011).

Recent work theorizes that capabilities arise not merely through the accumulation of experience but also from deliberative learning such as knowledge articulation, knowledge codification (Zollo & Winter, 2002) and explorative learning (Danneels, 2008). In this context, a firm’s Information Technology (IT) capabilities represent its ability to mobilize and deploy IT resources in combination with other resources and capabilities (Bharadwaj, 2000). Given the widespread adoption of information technologies, very few organizational capabilities can be defined without considering the integral role played by IT. Consequently, there is a growing need to understand the interplay of the technological resource and organizing efforts (Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty, & Faraj, 2007). This need is central in the tourism literature (Buhalis & Law, 2008) where the rapid development of both supply and demand makes the use of IT an imperative for industry players (Buhalis, 1998; MacKay & Vogt, 2012).

A recent line of research focuses on the socio-material approach to explain the ways in which the functionality of technological artifacts enables and constrains action (Leonardi & Barley, 2008; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) leading to different degrees of flexibility and change in organizational structures (Zammuto et al. 2007). Particular social processes activate a technology’s material features for organizational changes through collective affordances (Leonardi, 2011b). However, despite a growing interest in the literature, we know little about the specific mechanisms through which capabilities are created and sustained (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003).

Our lack of understanding in this area of inquiry is particularly evident with respect to emerging technologies, such as social media, that provide novel opportunities for changing operational routines and create novel value. We propose to address this understudied area utilizing an affordance lens (Cabiddu, De Carlo, & Piccoli, 2014). Affordances are the products of relationships between people and technology or between organizations and technology (Hutchby, 2001; Zammuto et al., 2007). We leverage these ideas to understand how organizations, and more specifically hotels, perceive social media affordances. We then theorize the possible effects of these affordances in order to provide guidance to future research in this area.

1.2 Why Focus on Social Media?

Social media are a “group of Internet-based applications which build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Thus, social media are browser-based or mobile-based applications that allow users to easily create, edit, access and link to content and/or to other individuals. Examples include blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, and electronic social networks, but also user generated content aggregators like Yelp and TripAdvisor, and location-based applications like Forsquare or MyCityWay. We focus on social media for their importance in the tourism industry. There is no doubt that social media represent an innovation of critical importance to the tourism industry, not only because of their massive adoption, but also for their potential for enabling innovation. Moreover, an analysis of the literature shows a growing number of studies focusing on social media in tourism (Bronner & De Hoog, 2010; Hvass & Munar, 2012; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). As a consequence, there is a growing need for academic research to contribute to a theory of social media use in the tourism industry explaining how industry operators can exploit social media and what the effects of such use are.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Affordance

In the ecological psychology literature, the concept of affordance represents the notion of “opportunities for action” as perceived by an organism in its environment (Gibson, 1979). As originally conceptualized, affordance simultaneously considers the characteristics of an object (e.g., a surface) and the characteristics of a perceiving entity (e.g., a baby). Affordances are “properties of the animal-environment system that determine what can be done” (Stoffregen, 2003 p. 124); for example, a person may perceive a set of stairs as offering him the opportunity to “climb”, whereas a crawling baby will perceive the same stairs as an insurmountable obstacle. As a possibility for action, rather than the action itself, an affordance is conceptually separate from a given behavior and is merely the necessary precondition for the behavior. Furthermore, it is not necessary that the entity “picks up information about the specific affordance” but rather that “the possibility exists for the affordance to be realized” (Bærentsen & Trettvik, 2002 p. 53). Consider a nut-eating bird: a bird with a beak span of at least 3 inches can crack walnuts, given their characteristics of weight and resistance, by dropping them from the sky onto a hard surface like asphalt. Japanese crows are known to do so. Thus, the “walnut-bird” system displays an “affordance for cracking”.

A more fundamental question pertains to the relevant characteristics of the social agent (an animal or a human) that coincide to determine an affordance (Chemero, 2003; Warren, 1984). An affordance exists when the characteristics of the object intersect with the ability of a social agent.

2.2 Learning Affordances

Although affordances exist when the possibility for action is available, recognition of the affordance is critical for the entity to enact a behavior that exploits it. Because an affordance is a property of a relationship between an object and an organism, perceiving an affordance requires the combination of exteroception and proprioception. Exteroception is the interaction between an object and the perceptual/cognitive

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