Chapter 39
The Networked Self:
Collectivism Redefined in Civic Engagements Through Social Media Causes

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ABSTRACT

The number of digital networks established for a common social 'cause' having passion of civic activism increase globally day by day. The purpose of this study is to provide explanations for civic engagement through social media causes. In the current study, a structured questionnaire is administered to 308 social media users in Turkey. The findings refine existing research bringing a new perspective to collectivism by explaining civic engagement in specific areas through social media causes in terms of individualistic values, self-identity (social vs. personal) and social media use. Overall findings ascertain social media's role on raising social capital while enhancing not only the individual selves but also collective performances through diverse civic cause engagements. The study has significant outcomes for both non-profit and profit organizations in building strategies of communication with their stakeholders through digital means.

1. INTRODUCTION

Impressive levels of civic activism are marking the millennium for common causes such as environmental problems, political problems, health problems or education in the world. Social media use over the Internet effectively constructs a basis for civic engagements by enabling people to organize networks of causal politics in ways that overcome limits of time, space, identity and ideology in the globe. Understanding how their stakeholders utilize these networking sites is very important for organizations committing to

CSR. These sites can be effective tools of corporate communication to reach stakeholder groups and invite them to engage in social causes (Waters et al., 2009).

The Internet has a major role in reshaping media consumption and triggers this new type of experience of civic engagement, placing the audience in the role of active media producer. In this time of media convergence, social media consumers participate in the production process and circulate media content about civic activities across social networks, blogs, wikis, news sites, aggregation applications and instant messengers. The non-hierarchical structure of the social network linkages in cyberspace makes information exchange relatively open and enables the users to be an active part of such communication. Social media users interchangeably play the role of not only sender and receiver but also mediator and transmitter, thus completing the circle of communication about causal content (Bennet, 2003; Jenkins, 2008).

Civic activism is defined as individual or collective behavior aimed at resolving the problems of the community. Cause involvement is a behavioral domain that covers individuals' active engagement in civic activities (Zukin et al., 2006). Because of the willingness of civic activists to interact, social media use has become a basis for the public to access, produce and share diverse causal content. The objective of the current study is to explain the dynamics of this new type of growing collective activism through self-engaging networks of different social media causes.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Although the global expansion of public relations industry is widely emphasized, there isn't much solid evidence whether practitioners make sense of globalization, thus adapt the radically changing global realm (Bardhan, 2013). The globe is now an area that underlies the dynamism of distances as well as proximities as they are experienced by both individuals and their collectivities (Rosenau, 1995). In the beginning of the last century, modernity enters history as a progressive, rationally constructed movement that liberated humankind from everyday obligations and traditional bonds praising individualism. Starting in the second half of the last century, postmodern thought protests the negative consequences of modernity. That era is accepted as the emergence of a pre-existing reverse movement of search for community. The Internet reinforces this turn of societies in the developed world that are organized around networks of individuals rather than group or local solidarities (Wellman et al., 2003). Internet use improves individual relations, strengthening social networks (Hampton & Wellman, 1999). Lee and Lee (2010) found that people accessing Internet for online community have higher sociability than non-users. Wellman's theory of 'networked individualism' suggesting, "this shift toward "networked individualism" involves the transition from spatially proximate and densely-knit communities in which people belong to more spatially dispersed and sparsely-knit personal networks in which people maneuver" (Boase & Wellman, 2004, p. 1), has important implications for civic engagement through social media causes (Wellman et al., 2003).

2.1. The Networked Self

As the Internet evolves, it becomes embedded in the daily lives; its users and uses grow and diversify globally in much of the developed world (Di Maggio et al., 2001; Howard et al., 2002; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). In Turkey, a country in the crossroads of Asia and Europe, 32 million uses

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