Social Networking and Communities
Collective and Individual Perspectives
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Social Networking and Communities: Collective and Individual Perspectives

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1. Introduction

The Social Networking and Communities mini-track is now in its 12th year at HICSS, having begun at HICSS-43. This mini-track is intended to be a forum for research on how social phenomena live in and through technological media and settings, and examination of the reciprocal relationship in which media influences use, and use appropriates and re-imagines media. On a grander scale, this mini-track seeks to contribute to the classical debates on theorizing and explaining social action in terms of structural determinism vs. agentic intentionality with a contemporary focus on technological mediation. The scope is broad: 'communities' includes (for example) communities of inquiry, interest, or practice, and networks of individuals that display community-like activity; and these may be in the context of personal life, education, work, politics and society. Both virtual communities and social media use that supports or complements geographically based communities are in scope. We especially encourage a focus on relationships between social phenomena and technologies, including how social phenomena are embedded or emerge within technological settings, how communities use technologies to further their goals, or how technologies otherwise influence or are appropriated by social phenomena and entities. Although the intention was that networks and communities would be the primary unit of analysis, an exception was allowed for individual actors as the unit of analysis to the extent that they inform understanding of collective phenomena in technological settings. This exception has become the rule, as most papers we received take an individual unit of analysis.

2. Papers

For HICSS-54 we received 15 submissions, out of which 6 were accepted. We are most grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their service. (For transparency we should add that there were two submissions with a mini-track chair as co-author: the track chair handled reviewing of these papers and decisions, and only one was accepted.)

The paper by Sun and Suthers, "Cultural Affordances and Social Media", addresses the call for exploring new theory. This work began with the question of the relationship between (social media) affordances and culture, and whether affordances are culturally permeable. After reviewing Gibsonian affordances and subsequent literature on platform-centered and user-centered treatments of affordances, Sun and Suthers define cultural affordances as having two interacting dimensions: cultural affordances of technology examine how social media and its use could shape established and emerging cultural values, and affordances of the cultural explore how established cultural values can influence the design and ways of using social media. These dimensions are illustrated with prior research on WeChat as it is used in China, showing for example how user practices are on the one hand influenced by WeChat design and traditional cultural values, while in other ways users choose to use WeChat affordances in ways that form new cultural values.

Papers were due a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic and in the call for papers we encouraged studies of how social networking and media are used to take collective action on or mitigate the impact of COVID-19. We received and accepted two papers that referenced the pandemic. The paper by Vogel, Kurtz, Grotherr & Böhmann titled "Fostering Social Resilience via Online Neighborhood Social Networks During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: Status Quo, Design Dilemmas and Research Opportunities" is the most exemplary (of the six papers) of research taking a community level of analysis. Consistent with our call for analyses of the dual agency of users and technology affordances, authors base their study on both user-generated content and platform design. They identify how users leverage the design of ONSN's to strengthen resilience, and how flexibility in these media can be leveraged to address present and future challenges, particularly with respect to the tension between the need for interconnectedness that sustains a local community and the need to avoid proximity due to the disease. This work clearly can be continued to track recovery and creativity in communities' strategic use of social media resources as we hopefully emerge from the pandemic.

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Manga and Wang's "Predicting User Response and Support Activities in Virtual Health Support Communities" takes individual contributions as the unit of analysis, examining how three dimensions of social awareness (sensitivity, insight and communication) predict numbers of replies, and of support, thanks and usefulness votes. Data is taken from an online Coronavirus support group, and social awareness measures derived via sentiment scores from the linguistic inquiry word count method. Significant influences of social awareness on the dependent variables were found, although with a surprising negative relationship in one case. Here, the coronavirus is more incidental to the study than the previous paper, as the analysis does not address pandemic-specific responses and could also be undertaken in other support groups. Platform affordances are not discussed.

Although also focused on individual behavior, "The Many Facets of Me: Multiple Account Management on Reddit" by Wohn, Yuan & Siri provide an interesting analysis of the interaction between technology affordances and behavior. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, Wohn et al. examine why people have multiple Reddit accounts, as evidenced by how they are used, and discuss implications for theories of presentation of self, imagined audience, and context collapse. They find that multiple needs motivate multiple accounts, including the desire for anonymity, impression management differentiated across different social boundaries, organizing information, or seeking attention. A tension is that the sociotechnical design of Reddit does not support compartmentalization via devices such as sites or friend lists: "social networks and audience groups embedded in different subreddits coexist on a site. Social boundaries are thus difficult to navigate and regulate." The affordance of multiple accounts, managed appropriately, meets these multiple needs. Further work could examine and compare to the use (or lack thereof) on other social media platforms that have different affordances for compartmentalization and impression management.

In "Trust and Closeness: A Mixed Method for Understanding the Relationship of Social Network Users", Yang, Wang, and Luo take dyadic ties as the unit of analysis. Authors develop a regression model for trust based on similarity of user characteristics, interaction measures, and users' evaluation of the Qzone (QQ) platform. Data on these factors and control variables was obtained by crawling the platform from consenting user accounts. For more active users, positive correlation was found between trust and the closeness indicators of comments,

messages and "@s" (nudge for attention) to QQ friends. Characteristic similarity and platform evaluation did not factor as much. The use of @s is especially related to trust, and reminds this writer of the concept of "connected presence" studied by Licoppe & Smoreda [1] and others in a previous decade. It would be interesting to ground the interpretations of how platform affordances signal trust in data of a more phenomenological nature.

"Exploring Leadership in Facebook Communities: Personality Traits and Activities", by Tali Gazit, asks whether the personality traits of community leaders in Facebook differ from those of other Internet users in a manner that makes sense for their leadership roles, and how their online activity relates to offline activity. Surveys included questions from a "Big 5 personality theory" questionnaire as well as demographic and activity questions. Among other findings, Facebook community leaders are more extroverted and more active online than other Internet users, but this is reversed for leaders who manage support communities. Coming back to the theme of affordances for social interaction, it would be interesting to examine what is different between Facebook and other media that lead to different kinds of community leaders. Is the difference a historical accident of user communities that have evolved on Facebook, or is any of this attributable to the means of interaction on this platform, for example, in terms of how users discover a group, how access is controlled, visibility of contributions, types of modeling and moderation actions available to the leader, etc.?

3. Conclusions

As in previous years, this collection of papers reflects the diversity of social networking and community studies, particularly from the agentic perspective of individual participation. We encourage authors to pursue community and network levels of analysis for future submission, or to bridge between individual and collective levels of analysis by considering how individual behaviors construct and aggregate to collective experience, and how platform affordances factor into this process, in order to inform our understanding of collective phenomena in technological settings

4. Reference

[1] Licoppe, C., & Smoreda, Z. (2005). Are social networks technologically embedded? How networks are changing today with changes in communication technology. Social Networks, 27(4), 317-335.