

Public Abstract

First Name:Jeremy

Middle Name:John

Last Name:Littau

Adviser's First Name:Esther

Adviser's Last Name:Thorson

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

Graduation Term:SS 2009

Department:Journalism

Degree:PhD

Title:THE VIRTUAL SOCIAL CAPITAL OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES: MEDIA USE AND MOTIVATIONS AS PREDICTORS OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE ENGAGEMENT VIA SIX MEASURES OF COMMUNITY STRENGTH

Past research has made a distinction between offline and online forms of social capital, but the focus has always been on relationships and networks that benefit local community. This research recasts offline and online forms of social capital as local community and Web-local social capital, then creates the construct Web network social capital, which measures the strength of ties created online for the benefit of online communities. All three forms of social capital then are tested against forms of engagement both local and over distance, with a focus on how Web network social capital can help to explain activism and reciprocity over distance. A survey of randomly selected online community users (N = 582) found that local community and Web network forms of social capital work together to predict online forms of helping one another, while there was a complex set of relationships that predicted different types of engagement. Motivations for using the online community, consistent with the Media Choice Model, found that use for information and connectivity were key positive predictors of engagement online and were powerful indicators of how social capital in its various forms can be predicted, consistent with past research. Entertainment as a motivation was a negative predictor. In accounting for news use as a possible explanation of social capital and engagement, print and opinionated news content alternated as predictors of types of engagement. Social media predicted distance forms of engagement, but not local forms.