

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

Jeremy Littau

Dr. Esther Thorson, Dissertation Committee Chair

ABSTRACT

This research introduces a new measure of social capital for users of online communities. Whereas “local community” forms of social capital consist of ties created in local community for the benefit of local community, and “Web-local” social capital is ties created online for the benefit of local community, “Web network” social capital measures the strength of ties created online for the benefit of engagement that is non-local, specifically activism and reciprocity over distance to groups and people whom the user has not met. 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. Entertainment was a negative predictor. Print and opinionated news content alternated as predictors of types of engagement. Social media predicted distance forms of engagement, but not local forms.