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ENTREPRENEURIAL IDENTITY AND THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Principal Topic

This study investigates the extent to which, and how, online social network sites (SNSs) are leveraged for entrepreneurial advantage by founders. In particular, we investigate a hypothesized relationship between entrepreneurial identity and the entrepreneurial use of social media.

Method

A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct 15 depth interviews with founders of new ventures less than five years old with 10 or fewer employees. Interviewed entrepreneurs were active users of SNSs and ranged in industry focus, experience, and success. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed with NVivo 9 software to identify key themes and perspectives.

Results and Implications

Contrary to expectations, no relationship was observed between the type of entrepreneurial identity (Darwinian, Communitarian, or Missionary) and the extent to which or how founders of small ventures are using their SNSs. All of the interviewed founders purposely grew their online social networks and all used these relationships for marketing purposes (customer relationship management and branding). Few of the founders leveraged these relationships for entrepreneurial purposes; other than to develop relationships with people they might not otherwise have had access to, and to better maintain relationships so they could be utilized offline. Most used SNSs to access general (market or customer) information, but none of them (not even the Communitarians) used SNSs to build a community of venture supporters who could provide advice, tangible aid, or otherwise help the business. All but one of the founders were too concerned with impression management to honestly and openly disclose their venture needs and problems; regardless of SNS platform; the one exception was a founder who was extremely confident in his “authenticity” having made a lot of money exiting his first venture.

These results suggest that the manifestations of the newly identified entrepreneurial founder identities can be constrained by context; the affordances of online technologies and the saliency of entrepreneurial reputation limit entrepreneurs’ ability and willingness to represent their authentic selves online. The results also suggest that the theoretical lenses of institutional theory and signaling theory may be useful supplements to the Uses and Gratifications Approach for further understanding the extent to which and how entrepreneurs use social media to advantage.

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