HYBRID TIES, ENTREPRENEURIAL OPPORTUNITIES, AND ENTREPRENEURS’ ACTIONS: A STUDY OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORK RELATIONS (SUMMARY)

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalknowledge.babson.edu/fer/vol35/iss6/7
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Principal Topics

A phenomenon in recent years reveals that entrepreneurs are increasingly creating a new form of social ties enabled through social media, attracting a community of strangers with whom the entrepreneurs would share personal aspirations, opinions, problems as well as solutions about their new ventures. This presents a new process of entrepreneurial resource acquisition, which has not been examined by entrepreneurship scholars (Fischer & Reuber, 2011). To address the gap, we investigate the factors that drive entrepreneurs to engage in online networking activities and the circumstances under which the entrepreneurs will benefit from such ties with strangers. We propose that entrepreneurs in online communities form a new type of “hybrid ties”, through which the participants obtain both fine-grained and novel information. Using affective events theory and discourse experience theory, we build a framework to explain the experiential factors which create and maintain hybrid ties, and how cognitive and emotional factors can facilitate the entrepreneurs' acquisition of information.

Method

We studied an online community of entrepreneurs in Wechat (a mobile social network hosted in China), and obtained 31,927 messages from Oct 2014 to Feb 2015. The community is known as “Alliance of Chieftain of Small & Beautiful Stuff”, and has about 150 members who are mostly start-up entrepreneurs of small and medium-sized businesses. We adopted discourse analysis methodology (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002) to examine the nature of the text messages and regression analysis to test the hypotheses regarding how these ties are formed and influence the entrepreneurs’ acquisition of information via a social media platform.

Results and Implications

Our study shows that hybrid ties are distinct from weak ties by rendering fine-grained information and emotional support, and from strong ties by providing novel rather than redundant information. Besides the direct effects, the influence of hybrid ties is also mediated by competence-based trust and affect-based trust. The competence-based trust is built on entrepreneurs’ prior knowledge and professional background, whereas the affect-based trust comes more from the discourse interactions via social media. In summary, by investigating a novel research context, our study fills an important gap in entrepreneurship literature and provides new insights into the behavioral theory and social psychology of entrepreneurial process via a social media platform. Our study also contributes to social network theory by defining a new form of social ties that are prevalent in our digital world.

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