Understanding Social Media in Organizational Culture

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Abstract
The central aim of this paper is to elucidate how the use of social media can impact an organization’s culture. The paper comprises a literature review of concepts of culture, organizations, and socialization in the bracket of social media. I employ an interpretive approach in order to understand the connection between social media and organizational culture, and specifically, how organizational culture can be enhanced with the use of social media and the subjective experiences to which it may lead. In addition, I assume a neoclassical perspective in support of modern organizational theories to illustrate the subject matter. Research demonstrates that social media may help in enhancing organizational culture with potential benefit to employees through factors such as collaboration, cooperation, networking, and reduction of conflict.

Introduction
For the first time in my life I witnessed profound human cultural diversity as I walked into a very new and unique organization, California State University, Los Angeles. Coming from India, I consider myself blessed with a variety of experiences today and for the days to come. At CSULA, people from different cultural backgrounds come together for an academic pursuit. As I witnessed the diversity of my class, I was elated and concerned at the same time: elated at the prospect of being able to enrich my learning experience, and concerned about acceptance into the organizational culture.

On day one, like any new student, I was anxious about interacting with my peers. After a few interactions within the classroom, I thought of using social media, and Facebook in particular, to connect with them online. Our conversations helped us to know each other better and brought out a few surprising common interests. Through social media I was able to easily discuss questions and concerns that I would have hesitated to discuss in the class. Days passed, and I became more comfortable with the group. I was able to work on
my communication apprehension with the help of my interactions with peers online. Eventually, I came to see the classroom as a safe environment in which to express my thoughts, gaining better confidence to participate in class discussion. Also, through social media, I was able to spend much more time with the group than otherwise possible. Thus, I realized how social media played a vital role in enhancing my understanding of the organizational culture of CSULA.

Organizations have changed the way they do things today. Traditionally, there was the model of organization where employees worked from a particular time to a particular time in their offices to fulfill their “job requirement.” In the last decade, this paradigm has changed from a quantitative to a qualitative perspective, in which the quality of work done is appreciated and observed by the employer. Collaboration, cooperation and networking are a few factors that facilitate employees’ performance within their team in their organizations. With time and other technological advancements, humans have gotten closer to each other, and one such advancement is social media. Nielsen (2012) supports the view that communication on social media may make it easier for people from different cultural backgrounds to converse with each other, and it can be a good way to discover and learn more about other cultures.

Social media is transforming communication across cultures. Social media might actually push cultural boundaries away and bring people together who might otherwise be culturally distant from each other. Because it brings with it some kind of focus, social media actually allows people with very different cultural backgrounds to find a connection, and allows for conversations between people that would otherwise not have taken place at all. In sum, it can be said that communication on social media may make it easier for people from different cultural backgrounds to converse with each other, and it can be a good way to discover and learn more about other cultures, not just in bringing people together but also in the creation of new cultures. While cultures around the world value their individual traditions, beliefs, and norms that make them unique, social media links people around the world regardless of differences and geographical boundaries. According to Chen and Zhang (2010), “The compression of time and space, due to the convergence of new media and globalization, has shrunk the world into a much smaller interactive field.”

I intend to study the impact of the use of social media in enhancing organizational culture. I want to discuss the value of various channels of social media platforms as a means to foster an understanding of organizational culture and the integration process. In this light, I assess the role of collaboration in
Social media and its impact in the understanding and acceptance of organizational culture.

**Analytical Framework**
In order to understand the impact of the use of social media in enhancing organizational culture, I undertake a review of scholarly literature surrounding the subject. The review begins with a discussion of culture, since in order to understand organizational culture one must first understand this concept. We then move to a discussion of organizational culture, after which the impact of social media is illustrated with the help of literature in books and various articles. I discuss the value of various channels of social media platforms as a means to foster an understanding of organizational culture and the integration process. Through this discussion I also study its impact on collaboration in light of its role in the understanding and acceptance of organizational culture. By way of the literature review, I take a neoclassical perspective in addition to modern organizational theory, focusing on Schein’s (1985; 1994; 2003; 2006) theory of organizational culture, the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, and Socio-technical Theory in particular, to support my research question.

**Social Media and Organizational Culture**
People use social media for many reasons. First, the need for connection and interaction with other people is evident. As supported by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, people desire to fulfill a sense of belonging through support from relationships with others. After obtaining physiological and safety needs, people strive to achieve Maslow’s third need of belonging. Social media provide this opportunity where people can communicate with others and belong to different networks via virtual communities on the Internet. In relation to interacting with others online, people use social media to gain knowledge and learn about different opinions and perspectives regarding issues, topics, and events. Most importantly, social media is used for socializing; it is a form of media that allows people to participate in conversations and online dialogue without being face-to-face with others.

Despite this revolution in organizational communication, communication researchers have largely ignored the impact of social media on organizational culture and, instead, concentrated their scholarship on how social media is utilized in development (Barker & Ota, 2011; Baron & Segerstad, 2010; Koc, 2006), in what ways culture affects social media development and design (Campbell, 2007; DeGoede, Van Vianen, & Klehe, 2011), and how computer-
mediated communication (CMC) is influenced by culture (Chen, 2012; Gue’guen, 2008; Mollov & Schwartz, 2010). What is missing from communication journals—except for Shuter’s (2011) guest-edited forum on intercultural social media research—are lines of research on how information and communications technologies (ICTs) affect intercultural communication between individuals and groups. Research on this topic challenges more than fifty years of intercultural communication knowledge and theory rooted in the twentieth-century paradigm of face-to-face interaction.

Culture
It is generally presumed that few organizations have a “strong” culture as they demonstrate a long-shared history of experiences and participation (of members) within themselves. As a result of having no common history or certain frequency of members, some organizations have no profound culture at all. The definition of organizational culture is quite problematic, as the concept of organization is itself uncertain, especially as a result of its indistinctness. In 1871, British social anthropologist E. B. Tylor provided one of the earliest and most influential definitions of culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (qtd. In Stocking, 1995, p. 332).

In order to understand the concept of “organizational culture,” we must first understand the notion of “culture.” In his book Organizational Culture and Leadership, Schein (2006) stated that culture “as a concept has had a long and checkered history. It has been used by the layman as a word to indicate sophistication, as when we say that someone is very ‘cultured.’ It has been used by anthropologists to refer to the customs and rituals that societies develop over the course of their history” (p. 3). In Hofstede’s words, culture is the “software of the mind” (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 1991).

Culture can be defined as a pattern of basic assumptions that is invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration (Schein, 2006). Such assumptions have worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, are to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. Once a group has learned to hold common assumptions, the resulting automatic patterns of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and behaving provide meaning, stability, and comfort; the anxiety that results from the inability to understand or predict events happening around the group is reduced by the shared learning. The strength and tenacity of culture derive, in
part, from this anxiety-reduction function. (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1989; Menzies, 1960; Schein, 1985).

According to current understandings, culture is a group phenomenon comprising a combination of values, beliefs, and basic assumptions. We, as participants of certain cultures, become part of a culture through acculturation or enculturation, socialization, conditioning, and economic determinism. In other words, culture is what a group learns and maintains over a period of time, solving its problems of survival in an external environment and through internal integration. The learning here is a concomitantly cognitive, behavioral, intellectual, social, and emotional process.

Culture can be managed through hiring, socialization, training, and rewarding apt behavior. Viewed in this light, culture is a mechanism of control and power. It manages behavior and identities. Researchers have supported some of these views by reporting findings that cultural “strength” or certain kinds of cultures correlate with economic performance (Denison, 1990; Kotter and Heskett, 1992; Sorensen, 2002). To support the statement further, consultants have touted “culture surveys” and have claimed that they can improve organizational performance by helping organizations create certain kinds of cultures. Schein (2006) further attempted to understand whether or not a culture is “good” or “bad,” “functionally effective” or not, emphasizing the fact that these factors “depend on not only culture but on the relationship of culture to the environment in which it exists” (p. 14).

However, few scholars believe that culture cannot be managed, as they believe culture is created in and influences interactions because values, norms, and assumptions are so deeply grounded in routines and actions. There is a conceptual problem, conversely, because systems contain subsystems, and organizations contain groups, subcultures, and units within them. As such, it is not clear over what range the tendency toward equilibrium will exist in any given complex total system. Schein’s experience with large organizations tells us that the size of the variations among the subcultures is substantial, suggesting that it might not be appropriate to talk of the culture of, say, IBM or General Motors or Shell. In the evolution of the Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) over its thirty-five-year history, one can see both a strong overall corporate culture and the growth of powerful subcultures that reflected the larger culture but also differed in important ways (Schein, 2003). In fact, the growing tensions among the subcultures were partly the reason why DEC as an economic entity ultimately failed to survive.
Some organizational researchers and managers of the twentieth century use the term “culture” to refer to the climate and “practices that organizations develop around their handling of people, or to the espoused values and credo of an organization” (Schein, 2006, p. 13). Simply put, culture for an organization has to do with certain values that managers are trying to inculcate in their organizations. In terms of understanding organizational culture, culture gives us a basic assumption about human relationships (e.g., collectivistic versus individualistic orientation, hierarchy, and universalism versus particularism). In sum, conceptualizing culture as “the way of life of people” opened the door to defining organizational culture as the way of life within an organization. It also helps to explain how organizational culture “arrived” within the symbolic and modern perspective of organizational theory around the same time but in a different way.

**Organizational Culture**

It is a common misperception that the first known reference to organizational culture appeared in a 1979 article by Andrew Pettigrew published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*. In fact, with the publication of his book *The Changing Culture of a Factory* in 1952, British sociologist Elliott Jaques was the first organizational theorist who described organizational culture. He defined “organizational culture,” stating that “the culture of a factory is its customary and traditional ways of thinking and doing things, which is shared to a greater or lesser degree by all its members, and which new members must learn, and it least partially accept, in order to be accepted into service in the firm” (Jaques, 1952, p. 251). Jaques’s work inspired organizational scholars like Barry Turner and Andrew Pettigrew in the United Kingdom, who were soon joined by Pasquale Gagliaridi in Italy, Gareth Morgan and Peter Frost in Canada, and Lou Pondy and Linda Smircich in the United States, among others.

Today, the main views on organizational culture as practical, interpretive, critical, and postmodern characterize cultural studies of organizations. Organizational cultures emerge from organizational members’ individual and collective symbol-using practices. These various symbolic expressions combine to create a “unique sense of place” that defines an organization’s culture (Pacanowsky & O’Donnel-Trujillo, 1983). Scholars and practitioners often focus on one or more of those symbolic expressions, referred to as cultural elements, to learn more about or to transform an organization’s culture. Metaphors, rituals, stories, artifacts, heroes and heroines, performances, and values are the
elements of organizational culture. Different approaches towards each of the elements can lead to different understandings.

In a pragmatic or prescriptive view, organizational culture is something that an organization “has” and that can be managed. Organizational culture provides meanings for routine organizational events and shapes employees’ work ethic and behavior. Schein (1994) offers a variation of this idea in his statement that “An organizational culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions that have been invented, discovered, and/or developed by a group as it learns to cope with problems of external adaptations and internal integration.” The term “organizational culture” stands for the actions, ways of thinking, practices, stories, and artifacts that characterize a particular organization. The culture of an organization can be studied by closely examining and observing its symbolic environment. It also involves comprehending the meanings of symbols such as topics of conversation, key vocabulary and jargon, treasured accomplishments, and awards. In support of this notion is Kenneth Burke's classic essay “Definition of Man” (1966) in which he defines human beings as symbol-using animals. Burke's view helps to further explain why symbols present symbolic possibilities.

Furthermore, the practical view responds to managers’ desires for practical advice and specific communication strategies for enhanced competitiveness and increased employee satisfaction. From this perspective, technology or management style is an organizational feature that can be leveraged by managers to create more effective organizations. Two successful books, both sponsored by the McKinsey Corporation (a management consulting firm), provide the foundation of this view. The first, Terrence Deal and Allan Kennedy’s Corporate Culture; The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life (1982), define the elements of strong cultures as a supportive business environment, dedication to a shared vision and values, well-known corporate heroes, effective rites and rituals, and formal and informal communication networks. The second book, In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best-Run Corporations (1982) by Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman Jr., made the New York Times bestseller list for nonfiction. In it, the authors studied sixty-two financially successful companies and found eight common characteristics of their cultures: a bias for action; close relations to the customers; autonomy and entrepreneurship; productivity through people; hands-on and value-driven; stick to the knitting; simple form, lean staff; and simultaneous loose-tight properties.

Many of the early works on organizational culture were normative in orientation. Culture was treated as something to be managed, a tool to enhance organizational effectiveness and competitiveness. Meanwhile, organizational
culture researchers who adopted the symbolic perspective began expressing doubts about the ease with which organizational cultures might be manipulated to managerial ends.

**The Modernist Perspective in Organizational Culture Theory**

Robert Cooke and J.C. Lafferty exemplify the quantification in organizational culture research associated with the modern perspective. They developed the Organizational Culture Inventory (OCI) in the 1980s as a means to measure the extent to which an organizational culture is supported by each of twelve different behavioral norms. Although modernist studies of culture such as those based on the OCI provide knowledge that is readily translatable into normative prescriptions for management, they are limited to studying dimensions of organizational culture that are predefined by the researcher and are common to numerous cultures.

Geert Hofstede, a Dutch organization theorist, explored national influences on organizational culture through differences he first observed in the international subsidiaries of IBM. His enormously influential work in defining dimensions of difference between cultures around the world was complemented by work being done at the same time by American social psychologist Edgar Schein. Hofstede measured and studied cultural differences quantitatively. Hofstede’s model shows how organizational communication is impacted by national cultures.

Hofstede’s cultural dimensions are power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term/short-term orientation. Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. Individualism and collectivism refer to the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. Masculinity and femininity describe the distribution of roles between the genders; for example, assertive and competitive versus caring and nurturing. Uncertainty avoidance deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, and long-term and short-term orientation illustrate the focus and values of a culture (Itim, 2009). Schein’s theory of organizational culture states that a set of basic assumptions forms the core of a culture. The three levels of culture according to Schein are comprised of basic assumptions, values, and artifacts. Basic assumptions represent what members of a culture believe about their reality. Values are the social principles, goals and standards that cultural members
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believe have intrinsic worth. Artifacts are manifestations or expressions of the
same culture core that produces and maintains the values and norms.

Modernists claim that if culture shapes behavior via norms and values, then
it should be possible to manage the culture of an organization in such a way that
desired behavior is more or less guaranteed. However, some postmodern
organizational theorists challenge a “grand narrative” conceptualization in
organizations and organization theory, criticizing the ideological function of
modernist narratives and stories, including modernist theory and modernist
writing styles. One of these, American communication scholar Dennis Mumby
(1988), suggests that organizational narratives lead to a systematic distortion of
organizational culture because they reproduce and maintain particular
meanings that support existing relationships of dependence and domination.

Socialization: A Recent Trend in Organizational Culture Research
The cultural approach to organizations centers on organizational socialization, a
process of assimilating members into an organization’s culture. Socialization is a
process by which people learn the rules, norms, and expectations of a culture
over time and thereby become members of that culture. To support this notion,
one can refer back to Schein, who stated that spontaneous interaction in an
unstructured group gradually leads to patterns and norms of behavior that
become the culture of that group—often within just hours of the group’s
formation. Organizational socialization is a process through which new people
or employees learn to adapt to an organization’s culture and norms. Due to the
introduction of information communication technology (ICT) and other
technological advancements, the way in which organizations are working is
changing rapidly. Social media is a form of computer-mediated communication
and is one of the major modes of communication. Boyd and Ellision (2007)
define social networking sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to
(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2)
articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view
and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the
system” (in Veltri and Elgarah, 2009).

The world is currently undergoing a radical change regarding assumptions
about the use of technology, and organizations must adapt to such paradigm
shifts in the interest of their sustainability. One such paradigm shift is the way in
which communication takes place within and outside of organizations. It is
argued that Web 2.0 is not characterized by technological innovation, but by a
shifting understanding of the status of information, knowledge, and the use of
social media in information applications. Web-based platforms allow workers to (1) communicate messages with specific coworkers or broadcast messages to everyone in the organization, (2) explicitly indicate or implicitly reveal particular coworkers as communication partners, (3) post, edit, and sort text and files linked to themselves or others, and (4) view the messages, connections, text, and files communicated, posted, edited and sorted by anyone else in the organization at any time of their choosing. In relation to new social media, differences in individualistic and collectivistic cultures are apparent in users’ communication and behavioral styles. Rosen et. al (2010) describe how people from individualistic cultures focus on meeting new people and being seen by many people, rather than maintaining their already existing relationships. In contrast, people from collectivistic cultures utilize social network sites to “maintain close relationships with a small number of ties instead of creating new connections with people” (Rosen et. al, 2010). Qualman (2012), in his book Socialnomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business, quoted numerous thought-provoking statistics about the advent of social media.

The emergence of ESM (Enterprise Social Media) has typically followed one of three primary paths into organizational contexts: (1) use of publicly available sites like Facebook, Google+, and Twitter; (2) private implementations of open source or proprietary software, either installed on a company’s own servers or acquired as a hosted (cloud-based) software service; or (3) in-house proprietary solutions, often built as prototypes by software vendors for later incorporation into commercial offerings. Social media has also played a vital role in enhancing relationships among employees within organizations. It helps them to connect, coordinate, and cooperate. It makes them productive. “People who do surf the Internet for fun at work—within a reasonable limit of less than 20 percent of their total time in the office—are more productive by about 9 percent than those who don’t” (Coker, qtd. in Qualman, 2012, p. 251).

Social Media
The term “social media” refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue. It also means the use of media for social interactions. Social media is a broad term; it encompasses a large range of websites. But one common link between such websites is that people are able to interact with the website and interact with other visitors. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are few forms of social media. The best way to define social media is to break down the term. Media is an instrument of communication, like a newspaper or a radio, so social media would be a social
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In Web 2.0 terms, this would be a website that not only provides people with information but also interacts with people while giving them that information. This interaction can be as simple as asking for their comments or letting them vote on an article, or it can be as complex as an application recommending movies to watch based on the ratings of other people with similar interests. Regular media is a one-way street where one can read a newspaper or listen to a report on television, but it provides one with very limited ability to express thoughts on a particular matter.

Here are some examples of social media websites:

- Social bookmarking: interaction through tagging websites and searching through websites bookmarked by other people (Del.icio.us, Simply)
- Social news: interaction through voting for activities and commenting on them (Digg, Propeller, Reddit)
- Social Networking: interaction through adding friends, commenting on profiles, joining groups, and engaging in discussions (Facebook, Hi5)
- Blogs and microblogs (Twitter)
- Social photo and video sharing: interaction through sharing photos or videos and commenting on user submissions (YouTube, Flickr)
- Wikis: interaction through adding articles and editing existing articles (Wikipedia, Wikia)

Social media integrates technology, social interactions, and content creation using the wisdom of words to collaboratively connect online to provide information. Through social media, people can create, organize, edit, comment on, combine, and share content. It refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to transform monologic communication into an interactive dialogue. One main fact of social media is its emphasis on creating and maintaining relationships. Social media is changing people’s relationship styles in several important ways. First, it is allowing us to connect with more people more rapidly. Secondly, it is easy to over-estimate the level of intimacy of our online relationships. Third, it makes us more susceptible to a sort of social media contagion effect, which means that we may possibly start adopting behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs from those within our social network. Finally, social media facilitates comparing ourselves with others, which may lead to positive as well as negative effects.
Studies also suggest that about 80% of interactions on social media are with “known” people who might as well strengthen their relationship, but social media enables them to be virtually present somewhere else; that is, the online world has the potential to destroys a physical community. This phenomenon can be identified through a close observation of the techniques used in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections. Social media contributed to public engagement and political participation. The author of “From Networked Nominee to Networked Nation: Examining the Impact of Web 2.0 and Social Media on Political Participation and Civic Engagement in the 2008 Obama Campaign” (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011) found that “the Obama campaign created a nationwide virtual organization that motivated 3.1 million individual contributors and mobilized a grassroots movement of more than 5 million volunteers” (p. 189).

In contrast to a rosy view of social media, Haque (2010), in his blogged article “The Social Media Bubble,” states that “Despite all the excitement surrounding social media, the internet isn’t connecting us as much as we think it is. It is largely home to weak, artificial connections, what I call thin relationships.” In spite of all of the critiques as well as demonstrations of advantages, I think that there is an unexplored connection between organizational culture and social media. There is a significant relevance of social media for organizations and cultures as a means for developing better understanding, and for enhancing communication connections between people, ultimately contributing to the success of an organization.

Conclusion
Social media does not have a longstanding history. It is one of the recent trends in organizational culture. Research has shown that organizations who have not adapted to the paradigm shifts of this kind have come back to nothing from something, or perhaps everything. Social media is one such shifting paradigm in the twentieth century. Potential benefits of the use of social media among employees or team members within an organization are cooperation, collaboration, a healthy competitive environment, and networking, all of which will ultimately help in the reduction of conflict. Challenges of this model of communication can range from security and privacy issues to the understanding of effective and efficient communication failure. Potential challenges in this approach are issues pertaining to online security, privacy, and lack of time management. Indeed, one of the major prospective challenges may be poor time management. Social media is an attractive as well as distractive mode of
communication. Hence, it would be unfair to say that people may end up using more time than required in such mediums and interactions. Moreover, issues of identity may impact the cultural and communicative dimensions of teamwork.

An area that deserves more research is the relationship between social media and organizational participation. Can one contribute to the other? Can better connections between employees and employer increase participation? Can the network help an organization to identify significant trends? Can social media help in creating organizational cultures? Can social media assist in bringing an organization together as one strong unit? Would the relationship online give more scope for critical thinking in an environment of individuals connected socially? The possible connection(s) between organizational culture and social media must be explored in more depth in order to support or weaken the finding that the two are connected for the betterment of an organization.

There is a bright prospect for future research in this new area of communication. The deep reach of social media can be harnessed by any form of an organization for better communication between the employees, resulting in better outcomes. With the advancement of technology and resources, the channels of communication are not just altering but developing at such a fast pace that it would be challenging for individuals to track it comprehensively. The fact that this area of communication research is growing and changing rapidly is an amazing challenge. It would be interesting for communication scholars to study how social media creates an opinion leader and influences its surroundings, be they in an organization or a community.

I believe that the use of social media will have a positive impact on organizational culture, resulting in what we may call “The Webbed Society” or “The Networked Culture” in various organizations.

References


