Advocator, Jester, Spokesperson, Provocateur or Boundary spanner? Exploring different communication styles at Twitter

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Structured Abstract

Purpose – The recent development of digital communication technologies, and of social media in particular, have enhanced more direct communications between companies and their customers. Among many other things, the use of social media has become considerably popular in customer services. However, communicating with different types of customers is not easy. More profound understanding is needed about how to succeed in communicating with the customers in the increasingly impersonal, yet often emotionally sensitive online environments.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on an extensive empirical data from Twitter discussions on climate change and energy industry, the analysis will follow the ideas and concepts of research on personalities and motivation in the context of social media.

Originality/value – By theorising the impacts of human personality traits to a person´s communication style in social media, in accordance with the person´s own choices of roles and motivations to communicate in social media, this study will provide companies new insight on how to approach their customers in online environments.

Practical implications – This study offers significant information for any company that wants to improve their customer service through social media. That is, by presenting the early phase taxonomy for different social media communication styles used in Twitter, this study will provide companies with both new insight and practical advice on how to better share information and manage discussions on their social media channels, considering the different communications styles of their customers.

Keywords – Social Media, Twitter, Big Five, Uses and Gratifications Theory

Paper type – Academic research paper

1 Introduction

In his book review "Invisible Manipulators of Your Mind", from April 2017, Tamsin Shawn declares how modern behavioral scientists have attained the capacity to manipulate people's emotions, that is, their fundamental preferences, values, and desires (Shaw, 2017). Yet, it was already in 1980 when Dervin advocated that those working in media or conducting information campaigns should begin by examining the potential information users and their specific needs for the information. Since then, a massive number of studies have been conducted in order to increase the understanding of customer needs and the ways to engage them through information sharing in different media. With a growing trend towards stressing the individual use and choice of different media (e.g. Rubin, 1994) and the cultural impacts (e.g. Lull, 1995) from the 1990´s onwards, the more recent research has been more or less dominated by the emerging need to understand the shift from analogue to digital technologies (e.g. Hargittai & Walejko, 2008).

With various studies indicating that the use of Internet, and of social media in particular, has lead to profound changes in the media users' personal and social habits and roles (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Bakshy et al., 2015; Baym, 2015), the use of Internet and social media has now become a part of our everyday lives, and the ways how we use it is strongly influenced by our personalities (Correa et al., 2010). In doing so, the use of Internet and social media is now more and more linked to individuals' motivations for self-gratification (Ruggiero, 2000) and of value creation in multi-stakeholder service systems (Jaakkola et al., 2015; Singaraju et al., 2016; Wieland et al., 2016).

Besides the prolonged dominance of trait theories which seek for understanding the consistent, enduring ways of thinking, feeling or behaving according to personality traits, it has been argued that some of the individual behavioural patterns may turn out rather opposite once online and compared to their behaviour offline (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Kraut et al., 1998). That is, according to some research, individual variations do exist within the structures of personality states and emotions, depending on time, context and generation (Revelle, 2009; Correa et al., 2010) of the person in question. On the other hand, it is to be considered that many of the external influences affecting our behaviour do so through cognitive processes only and not directly. It means that observing environmental events is at least partially impacted by the cognitive factors, thus defining the emotional impact and the power of motivation. With that in mind, the cognitive processes will also define how the information they convey in different forms of experience-based symbols will be organised for future use. (Bandura, 2001.)

An extensive research has been carried out related to the development of Uses and Gratifications Theory (Ruggiero, 2000), with a focus on reasoning people´s motivations to use social media, and increasing the understanding of the impacts of personality, age and gender to social media use and motivation (e.g. Correa et al., 2010; Seidman, 2013). Or, on studies like the Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication (Bandura, 2001), which offers a conceptual framework for analysing the determinants and psychosocial mechanisms for using symbols in communication. While a lot of research has focused on understanding the motivations of mass behaviour, the knowledge and understanding about how to customise information sharing according to specific personalities or communication styles is still very limited. That is, besides constructing social media architectures that guide people towards specific behaviour, quite little is known about how to adjust to different communication styles in customer service situations for instance.

Hence, the purpose of this study is *to explore the potentially different communication styles in social media*. That is, a sample of Twitter discussions related to energy industry and climate change was being collected, and then analysed by the means of Grounded Theory. In doing so, the analysis was inspired by probably the most common personality trait theory of our modern time, the "Big Five", as well as by the Uses and Gratifications theory. Hence, an early attempt of taxonomy of analysis for different communication styles for social media will be presented as a conclusion of this paper.

2 Theorising social behaviour and communication in social media

Developing a theory or a new framework for studying human interactions is a complex activity. So, understanding that this study only represents our first attempt towards creating the taxonomy of analysis for social media communication, the term "theorising" will thus be used instead of speaking of theory making. By theorising we also mean that this work will entail conceiving or intuiting ideas and concepts which then will be formulated into a logical, systematic, and explanatory scheme by grasping on the meanings of events or happenings that might seem obscure in the first glance. In doing so, this paper aims at constructing an explanatory scheme, providing novel and versatile understanding of the acquired data.

Given that Twitter is seen as a channel for gratifying the needs to connect with others (Chen, 2011), the motivational aspects of social media communication - hereby presented through the lenses of the Uses and Gratifications Theory - will be considered as at least somewhat important to the analysis of communication styles. In addition, the Five-Factor-Model taxonomy - often called as "the Big Five" or the OCEAN - a commonly accepted framework that classifies the various and diverse systems of personality to five main dimensions, will serve as a good starting point for theorising the communication styles. (Matthews et al., 2003). Hence, both human personality traits and inner motivations may have significant input to a person´s communication style.

2.1 Motivations for social media communication

Some recent studies indicate that the more active people are on Twitter, the more they are expected to gratify their needs for an informal sense of friendship and connection with other users (Chen, 2011). With a number of studies having applied the uses and gratifications theory for understanding the motivations underpinning consumers' media

choice and usage, it differs from many previous mass media theories by assuming that, instead of passively receiving media, people tend to actively prefer certain media according to the media´s ability to satisfy their specific needs (Katz et al., 1973). Considering this, many Twitter users look for weak ties with the purpose of getting connected. As people also tend to look for those alike, the more they discuss, the more they become alike with those they are connected with. (Chen, 2011.)

The uses and gratifications theory represents a synthesis of many studies including gratifications typologies of traditional mass media (Katz et al., 1973). The five categories are: information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, and impression management (see table 1).

Table 1. Uses categories explaining social media motivation (adapting Katz et al., 1973).

Use category	Motivations
Information seeking	To learn about news and events
Entertainment	To entertain oneself
Social interaction	To exchange social support, to maintain existing relationships, and to meet new friends
Self-expression	To share information about themselves and to show who they are and what they like
Impression management	To give others a positive impression of oneself

The information seeking type of communication aims at lowering the barriers to information share through networks of trust and shared interests, it refers to people who mostly use social media to learn about news and events (Kwak et al., 2010), recommendations about products and content (ibid.), or about any subject in their interest. The entertainment then refers to the use of social media for entertaining oneself, that is, for browsing interesting content shared by others and for sharing others' life experiences, thus often using negative expressions while trying to escape from problems or dullness. In comparison to entertainment, the social interaction refers more to a need to exchange social support, to maintain existing relationships, and to meet new friends. That is, social media is used as a tool to enhance connectedness and to develop common ground (Wright, 2016).

When self-expression takes place, people are using social media to show who they are and what they like. This behavioural characteristic is associated with a motive for self-verification, that is, to presenting one's true self to the outside world, to confirm an established self-concept, and to maintain consistency in self-knowledge (Escalas &

Bettman, 2003). It is also associated with identity creation, i.e. for obtaining peer acceptance and exchanging social support. As a difference to self-expression, the impression management refers to social media use which aims at deliberately creating a positive impression of the user or, at some cases, to develop social relationships and promote self-status (Wright, 2016).

2.2 "Big Five"

What then comes to understanding different personalities, the research has been going on for decades now. One of the pioneering taxonomies was made by Cattell (1946a) in the 1940´s. First, he subdivided all the traits under two main categories – surface and source traits. With the surface he then referred to personality traits such as shyness of talkativeness, easily observed in interaction with other people. With source traits he referred to qualities that underlie beneath, such as being introvert or extrovert. Later, the same year, Cattell (1946b) defined three main categories, referring to traits that reflect abilities, traits that are dynamic and traits that are more stable.

With a vast number of surveys and statistical analyses conducted in the 1980´s and 1990´s, Cattell´s early work still forms the basis of modern studies of personality traits. Along the way, the combination of the five main personality types, "the Big Five", was also being initialised. (John & Srivastava, 1999; Revelle, 2009.) Often referred to as the OCEAN model, the five personality dimensions (table 2) are considered to cover hundreds of more specific personality characteristics, as well as adjustable to different cultural or linguistic settings (McCare & John, 1992). More importantly, considering the aim and scope of this study, some researchers have claimed that as people do not act consistently from one situation to another, and since people are strongly influenced by situational forces, these traits might not be as stable as predicted (Diener, 2009).

Table 2. "Big Five" personality traits according to McCare & John (1992).

Dimension	Characterisation of the dimension
Openness	New ideas, values, feelings and behaviours
Conscientiousness	Orderly, responsible, dependable
Extraversion	Talkative, assertive, energetic
Agreeableness	Good-natured, cooperative, trustful
Neuroticism	Anger, worry, sadness

3   Case study

3.1 Case description

Applying a special tool created for social media researchers (see futusome.com), providing an easy access to all publicly open social media data in Finland, a list of most employed keywords referred to in social media discussions connected with the energy industry was being generated. Considering Twitter as an important social media platform for sharing ideas and information between experts – and for both shaping and forecasting the more popular discussions and interests on the field of renewable energy - the analysis for limited to Twitter only.

3.2 Data collection

All in all, 58.194 tweets were thus collected in between February 2016 and February 2017. From this data, about 47,5 % of the users were civilians, that is, individuals with no reference to companies, political parties or any other organisations in their profile. With about 11 % of the users representing companies with no particular links to environmental issues, less than 5 % of the users had profiles indicating of their expertise in environmental organisations or in companies working in the energy industry. Again, about 9 % of the users were citizens with high interests on environmental issues.

From the 30.313 original tweets and 27.881 retweets, a sample of 10.130 tweets, representing 357 individuals having posted a minimum of 10 tweets, was selected for a closer examination. Then, every fifth tweet was categorically selected and coded for further analysis. Eventually, all the 2.101 tweets were individually coded according to the following six (6) categories: 1) The function of the tweets was classified as either informing, connecting, collaborating, confrontational or with an aim to position the tweeter at some way. 2) The style of the tweets was classified as descriptive, editorialised, critical, supportive or entertaining. 3) The argumentation of the tweets was judged to be reasoned either emotionally or through logical reasoning. 4) The tweets were categorised based on their targets: individual, organisation, and both or no target. 5) The number of used keywords with # were counted. 6) Each tweet having a) a picture or b) a link to some other content was marked with yes or no.

3.3 *Method of analysis*

The socio-psychological communication tradition as the starting point, applying the methodology of grounded theory, intuitive ideas and concepts were conceived and then formulated them into a logical, systematic, and explanatory scheme for further analysis. In practice, by coding the qualitative data, the focus of analysis did not hang on single responses or phrases, but assured a wider perspective for the analysis. In doing so, the researchers were forced to examine their basic assumptions, their biases, and their perspectives. As such, they were more alert than usual to notice possible properties and dimensions or to grasp on the meanings of rather obscure events or causalities. Yet, in order to include the impact of roles (categorised into politician, journalist, specialist, environmentalist and citizen) on the social media communication styles, an analysis of the Twitter profiles was also being made.

As moving from the level of description to that of abstraction will become more effective, observing both variation and general patterns will also become more appearent. Thereby, the analysis did not focus on finding the most relevant questions and answers, but on properties and dimensions enhancing better understanding of the data. By consequent, grounded theory was significantly different from the traditional research models with researchers choosing an existing theoretical framework – with data being collecting to demonstrate its potential implications to the phenomenon under study. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998.)

The results of the data will be discussed in the light of the five personality characteristics described in the Five-Factor-Model (FFM) (McCare & John, 1992), presented in section 2. The theorising will consist of both making inductions (i.e. of deriving concepts, their properties, and dimensions from data) and deductions (i.e. of hypothesising about the relationships derived from data and found between different concepts). That is, the aim of this paper remains in creating an understanding of the case data, not in forming an overarching explanatory scheme through interpreting events or explaining why certain events occurred and not others. As a result of the evolving theoretical analysis, further research questions will thus also be suggested for continuing the theory (taxonomy) building.

4   Results

4.1 General overview

The aims, methods and data of this research being taken into account (see section 3), all 2.101 tweets were first coded according to their contents (see table 3). The classification into different communication styles was then initiated rather intuitively, based on discussing the observations of both authors. Hence, a logical, systematic, and explanatory scheme for analysis was being formulated in an excel format. The following five communication styles were found*: advocator, jerker, spokesperson, provocateur, and boundary spanner.*

The categorisations were largely based on the functions of communication, i.e. the attitudes and/or motivations to tweet. While the advocators (41 %) and spokespersons (82 %) are considered as those mostly interested in sharing information, the jesters (68 %) and provocateurs (52 %) seem to focus on challenging others with rather negative or at least provocative tweet contents. Hence, the boundary spanners are active both in information sharing (36 %) and in social interaction (37 %). As we then take a look at genders, it is interesting to see that only 8% of jesters are females and that most of the females (30 %) fall in the category of boundary spanners. Or, that the number of specialists, including e.g. company representatives, researchers and public servants, is highest among the spokespersons (38 %), whereas the number of politicians (5 %) is smallest among the jesters.

On the other hand, only 10 % of the jesters base their arguments on rational reasoning, meaning they are very emotional (90 %) in their expressions and argumentation. The most rationally argued tweets are those of spokespersons (95 %), advocators (77 %) and boundary spanners (with 63 %). More variation appears among the provocateurs as their tweets are categorised as 41 % rationally argued and 59 % emotionally argued.

Table 3. Overview of the results.

	Advocator	Jester	Spokes-person	Provocateur	Boundary spanner
Gender					
Male	73 %	88 %	70 %	74 %	66 %
Female	25 %	8 %	28 %	24 %	30 %
N/A	2 %	4 %	2 %	2 %	4 %
Role					
Politician	11 %	5 %	8 %	10 %	11 %
Journalist	3 %	7 %	4 %	5 %	2 %
Specialist	31 %	26 %	38 %	25 %	34 %
Environmentalist	2 %	4 %	1 %	3 %	0 %
Citizen	53 %	58 %	49 %	57 %	53 %
Function of communication					
Sharing information	41 %	8 %	82 %	13 %	36 %
Social interaction	41 %	16 %	16 %	24 %	37 %
Suggesting collaboration	0 %	0 %	1 %	9 %	18 %
Challenging others	15 %	68 %	0 %	52 %	2 %
Self-expression	3 %	8 %	1 %	2 %	7 %
Argumentation					
Rational	77 %	10 %	95 %	41 %	63 %
Emotional	23 %	90 %	5 %	59 %	27 %
Tweet targets at					
Individual(s)	39 %	29 %	17 %	38 %	24 %
Organisation(s)	7 %	5 %	11 %	8 %	21 %
Both individual(s) and organisation(s)	9 %	4 %	3 %	9 %	6 %
No target	45%	58%	69%	43 %	50 %
A (web) link included					
Yes	43 %	42 %	74 %	41 %	6 %
No	67 %	68 %	26 %	59 %	94 %
Hashtag(s) included					
Yes	34 %	48 %	44 %	35 %	55 %
No	66 %	52 %	56 %	65 %	45 %

While about half of the tweets were not directed to third parties at all, the spokespersons often address their tweets to both individual(s) and organition(s) (22 %), or at least to either

of them (see 17 % for individual(s) and 11 % for organisation(s)). The advocators (39 %), jesters (29 %) and provocateurs (38 %) often target their tweets to individual(s) only.

In addition, about half of the advocators (43 %), jesters (42 %) and provocateurs (41 %) included a (web) link to their tweets, while for the spokesperson that was a lot more common (74 %) and the boundary spanners (6 %) rarely shared any links. Less variation (34-55 %) appeared when observing whether the tweets had a hashtag included or not. Furthermore, what table 3 does not tell, is that tweets by jesters went 2-3 times more viral than the others and that they got, on average, about 4 times more likes than other tweets.

4.2 Taxonomy building – first attempt

When reviewing the data each communication style at a time, the following descriptions were initiated (table 4).
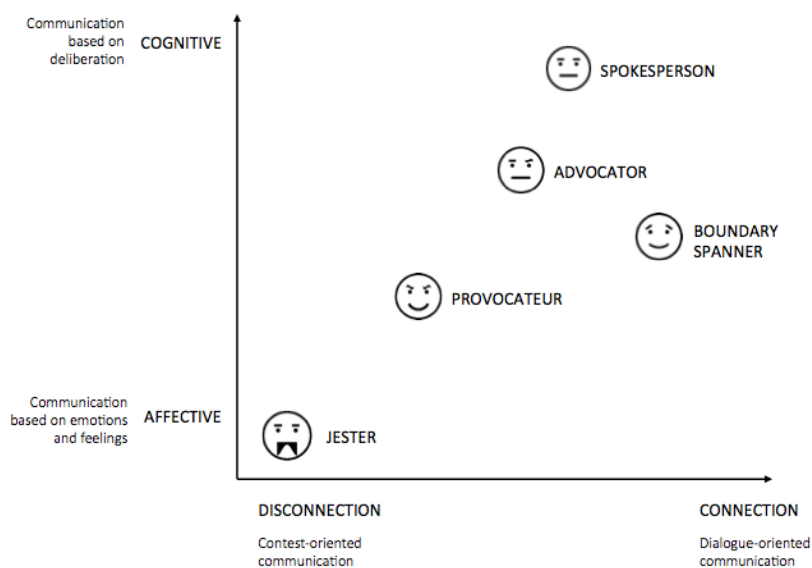
Table 4. The five social media communication styles.

Advocator: Likes sharing information with rational arguments. Is socially active, and mostly targets tweets to individuals, not organisations.
Jester: With strongly emotional tweets, the jester often targets individuals with his (her) tweets. Likes challenging other people, but not necessarily in a negative way.
Spokesperson: Very rational, focus on information sharing with additional links. The profile of a specialist or expert.
Provocateur: Likes challenging others in a mostly socially and emotionally positive way. Targets his (her) tweets mostly to individuals.
Boundary spanner: Specialists who communicate in a rational way. Strong drive to reconcile opposite point-of-views. Active in information sharing, but the tweets rarely include weblinks.

Although rather compatible with the big five personality traits or the motivational categories of the uses and gratifications theory, it is important to note that this categorisation by styles does refer to individuals as such. That is, the communication styles are not stable and linked to a tweeting person, but on the context of the discussions and on the role the person takes regarding the matter being discussed. In fact, the same person may appear in several categories depending on the role and context.

5   Discussions and conclusions

As a result of this study, the following communication styles were identified: advocator, jerker, spokesperson, provocateur, and boundary spanner. By identifying these five archetypes, this study gives valuable insight on the importance of creating profound understanding of different motives and styles for communicating in social media. As we can see from figure 1, visualising the double dichotomy between a) connection and disconnection and b) affective and cognitive, these five communication styles quite closely mirror the different human personalities presented by the Big Five theory (McCare & John, 1992). Yet, following the characteristics of any living system (Maula, 2006), these different communication styles should not be seen as stable dimensions, but as roles and functions that continually self-produce themselves according to their context.

Figure 1. Visualisation of the five different communication styles.

Several studies have suggested that companies should use robust techniques to monitor social media discussion (e.g. Fan & Gordon, 2014; Lee, 2017). Sentiment analysis and opinion mining techniques have been seen as solutions for improving companies' responsiveness to customers' (existing and potential) needs. Without questioning the

usefulness of monitoring techniques, this paper encourages companies to analyse their customers' communication styles. Understanding why the customers communicate as they do will significantly increase an organisation´s ability to interact with their customers and to react on customer feedback in ways which best respond to the motives and communication styles of different customers. Realising that these roles and functions are not bound to a personality, and that some people might change their communication style contextually, will also add the companies´ knowledge and understanding about their possibilities to influence their customers through social media. In doing so, it will be crucial for the companies to recognise that the existing roles and functions will not predict certain behaviour, but that they are continuously reproducing themselves (Bolton et al., 2013) and thus need regular updating.

By limiting this study in one theme specific Twitter data, with only a shallow analysis on user profiles, and with no longitudinal data for observing variations in the communication styles over time, the generalisation of these results are debatable. More than that, a sample of Twitter users does not stand for a valid sample of all social media users and differences can appear according to different media.

Regardless some limitations, this study offers a great stepping stone for testing the results with other social media data, including the analysis of both individual and organisational user profiles. Conducting discourse analysis or visual analytics of these discussions – from a single communication style perspective or between different communication styles – might reveal additional information worth studying for. Moreover, considering that young adults between 18 to 34 years old are more likely than any of the older age groups to prefer social media use for social networking, and that they are more influenced by others' opinions in social media (Bolton et al., 2013), comparing the communication styles between different age groups would be an interesting subject for further studies.

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