

Social Media – An Arena for Venting Negative Emotions

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Abstract

Social media is seen as transforming into a global multiplier through which emotional experiences are shared and strengthened. The essential factor in the ongoing transformation is that, although emotions are felt on an individual level, in social media, they can simultaneously be shared *with* and *by* others. Many studies have shown that social media is an arena for sharing information that reflects *negative* emotions. The theme of the paper is important as nowadays people have access to online discussions, blogs and even websites devoted entirely to sharing negative emotional experiences. After reviewing the literature, the paper explores and discusses the implications of negative emotions shared in social media. The main contribution of the paper is the anatomy of the diffusion of collective negative emotion in social media. In addition, the paper discusses the positive consequences of negative emotions from an organisation's perspective.

Introduction

Social media has changed behaviour inside and outside organisations. It has provided new opportunities and posed new threats. A positive interpretation of social media draws on the thought that social media has provided new possibilities to the internal use of external knowledge as well as to the external exploitation of internal knowledge. This has meant significant improvements particularly in leadership, innovation management, knowledge management, marketing communication, and customer service. Studies have shown that social media has made organisations transparent in unparalleled way. In addition to positive and anticipated consequences, side-effects, such as the loss of control and power to manage the organisation's public image, have also been identified (Li & Bernoff, 2011). The more open and social organisations have become; the more vulnerable they are (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The odds of brand insults and the loss of confidential information have increased tremendously. Ironically, it may also happen, as Denyer et al. (2011) have pointed out, that social media can be used for political purposes by managers implying that social media is no more 'social', 'open' or 'participatory' than other communication methods.

Social media is creeping into many aspects of our lives. A little pointedly, it can be argued that much behaviour that sociologists study are nowadays taking place online. Social media is not an alternative to real life, but it is part of it. Social media is still a relatively new phenomenon whose consequences cannot be fully predicted. However, some sophisticated guesses can be made. One is that behaviour in social media contradicts with the theory of gatekeeping. According to the theory, which was originally developed by Kurt Lewin (1943), gatekeeping is the process through which information is filtered for dissemination. Every medium has gatekeepers, who select and confine the information flows. Reporters, for example, decide which sources are chosen to be included in a story, whereas editors decide whether stories are printed or covered. In contrast to traditional mass communication, social media is an unregulated context allowing ordinary people to publish almost anything that come to their minds. There is no need/room for gatekeepers in social media. Unsurprisingly, many studies have shown that social media is an arena for sharing information that reflects *negative emotions* (e.g. Lapidot-Barak-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Hughes et al., 2012; Lee & Cude, 2012).

The study focusing on collective negative emotions in social media is important because nowadays people have access to online discussions, blogs and even websites devoted entirely to sharing negative emotional experiences (Jones, 2009). Whether that mirrors “information democracy” (Sawhney & Kotler, 2001) or not, a possibility to ventilate feelings online poses a huge challenge for organisations.

Upon reviewing the literature, the paper explores and discusses the implications of negative emotions shared in social media. The paper proposes *the anatomy of the diffusion of collective negative emotion in social media*. In addition to detrimental consequences, it is supposed that negative emotions may have positive effects.

Social Media and Collective Emotion

Social media refers herein to a constellation of Internet-based applications that derive their value from the participation of users through directly creating original content, modifying existing material, contributing to a community dialogue and integrating various media together to create something unique (Tapscott & Williams, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Emotion is defined as a feeling state involving thoughts and physiological changes, outward expressions such as facial reactions, gestures or postures (Brehm, 1999; Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999). Emotion has an object at which it is intuitively or intentionally directed (Ibid.). Adapting Bar-Tal et al. (2007) and Schweitzer & Garcia (2010), the paper focuses on collective emotions which are shared by a large number of individuals who are not necessarily members of the same group or society. Collective emotions can display new properties, which are more (or less) than the aggregation of emotions felt by individuals. The paper adopts the view that textual communication can be used for evaluating emotions (cf. Jansen et al., 2009; Chmiel et al., 2011). Social media posts are seen as acts which are, at least partly, induced by emotions.

Psychological literature typically classifies emotions into two axes that describe their valence and arousal (Fig. 1). Valence indicates whether the affect related to an emotion is positive or negative, and arousal indicates the personal activity induced by that emotion (Russel, 1980; Schweitzer & Garcia, 2010). ‘Astonished’ is a positive emotion that encourages action, whereas ‘satisfied’ – although with positive valence – discourages action. ‘Annoyed’ refers to a negative emotion that encourages action, whereas ‘disappointed’ means negative emotion

that discourages action. The focus of this paper is primarily on emotions with negative valence and positive arousal.

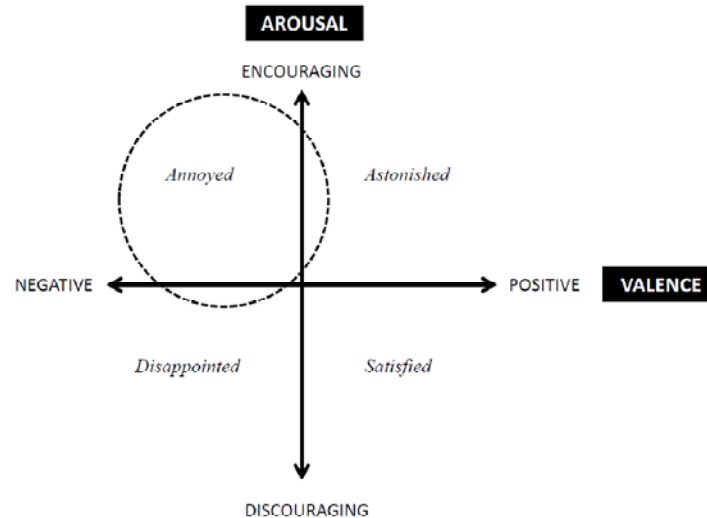


Figure 1. A circumplex model of affect (adopted from Russell, 1980).

Social media has provided organisations with new ways to *communicate* (publish and share content), *collaborate* (collectively create content), *connect* (network with other people and organisations), *complete* (describing, adding or filtering information, tagging contents and showing a connection between contents) and *combine* (mixing and matching contents) (Vuori, 2011). Social media extends organisations by creating new possibilities to engage with stakeholders both internally and externally. Through social media, organisations can acquire inspiration from their customers, suppliers and other stakeholders. Social media can also be used forgetting to know consumers' preferences and for testing the ideas that are being developed within the organisation before their launch on the market.

SOCIAL MEDIA

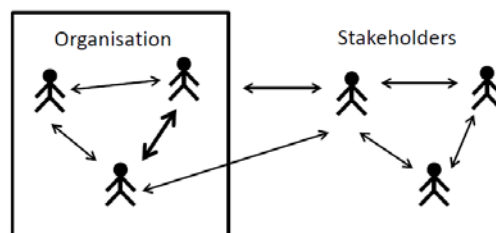


Figure 2. Social media changes organisations internally and externally.

From this paper's perspective, the most interesting is that social media enables direct two-way interaction not only between the organisation and customers but also among customers. It has been argued that marketing for the Facebook generation demands both thinking and acting differently (Meadows-Klue, 2008). The need for change holds true also within organisations as the distance between managers and subordinates has shortened dramatically. This paper suggests that social media forces organisations behave in a way which inspires its people and customers *emotionally*. Kieztmann et al. (2011), for example, have suggested that organisations should identify employees who can create content that is “emotionally appropriate for the community”. Adapting Rubin (2011), social media is seen transforming into “one big global amplifier through which emotional experience is transmitted and strengthened”. The essential thing is that, although emotions are felt on an individual level, in social media, they can simultaneously be shared *to* and *by* the others. This has a wide range of “real-life” consequences. It has been shown that social, political, cultural and economic events are correlated with Twitter mood levels. Similarly, Gilbert & Karahalios (2010) have found out that anxious expressions in social media could predict downward pressure on the S&P 500 index.

Negativity Bias in Emotions and Online Behaviour

It remains debatable whether the content of social media is more positive or negative. Previous studies paint a contradictory picture. Robertson et al. (2013), for example, have found out that there are more negative messages than positive ones in social media. Thelwall et al. (2010), among others, have come to an opposite conclusion. According to their study of Myspace messages, two-thirds of messages have a positive tone, and only one-third were negative.

Although there is no natural law which proclaims that negative emotional experiences dominate social media, however, this paper assumes that negative emotional experience and, particularly, its diffusion in the community are based on logic which is different than in the case of positive emotional experience. This is because of *negativity bias*. Psychological studies have shown that negative experience, or fear of bad events, has a greater impact on people than do neutral or positive experiences (Baumeister et al., 2001). Studies have also shown that negative events grow more rapidly with space or time than positive events. This

implies that negative emotions are more contagious than positive ones (Rozi & Royzman, 2001).

Negativity bias in online behaviour has been identified in a number of studies which have focused on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). eWOM refers to a “statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Lee & Cude (2012), for example, have found out that consumers are very likely to use the Internet as a means to express their dissatisfaction. The stronger impact of negative eWOM compared to positive eWOM has been explained by arguing that negative information is more diagnostic than positive information in terms of cognitive judgement and decision-making (Jones, 2009; originally Herr et al., 1991).

The Anatomy of the Diffusion of Collective Negative Emotion in Social Media

The paper views diffusion as a process in which an idea, thought or concept is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of the social system (cf. Rogers, 2003). Instead of a one-way and linear process, it is assumed that diffusion is a two-way and complex process in which members involved affect others and are being affected by others.

“United Breaks Guitar” (UBG) is probably one of the most popular examples of how negative emotional experience can be diffused through social media. UBG is a song made and posted on YouTube by David Carroll and his band, Sons of Maxwell. It tells a story of how United Airlines’ baggage handling broke Carroll’s guitar and how United refused to compensate the losses. The music video was embedded into the popular Boing Boing blog, where after it was given credit for by the Twitter community. After two weeks, the music video was downloaded over 3.5 million times. (Hemsley & Mason, 2013).

This paper suggests that the UBG case is not an exception but a prevailing reality. It is expected that, despite differences in nuances, UBG and similar incidents follow certain logic. Perhaps it is possible to reveal the anatomy of the diffusion of collective negative emotion in social media.

A literature review of previous studies implicates six attributes of diffusion of collective negative emotion in social media: 1) reasons to ventilate negative emotion, 2) clusterisation of

negative emotion, 3) global–local interplay, 4) non-linear feedback, 4) possibility to anonymity, 5) key complainers, and 6) emergent result.

Reasons to Ventilate Negative Emotions

People express negative emotions online for a number of reasons. In consumer behaviour research, three reasons have been identified (Verhagen et al., 2013). Firstly, consumers ventilate for themselves. Thøgersen et al. (2009) have found that consumers use negative eWOM for drawing attention to their dissatisfaction in order to get a solution or compensation. Secondly, consumers ventilate for helping others. This is the case when people disclose their negative experiences in order to prevent others from suffering a similar incident (Litvin et al., 2008; Parra-López et al., 2011). Thirdly, consumers ventilate for helping companies to improve their performance. Zaugg & Jäggi (2006), for example, have identified that consumers complain “to assure that the issue is structurally solved”. It has also been suggested that sometimes people run to rant-sites for venting anger (Martin et al., 2013). Posted rants may act as catharsis in the sense that people feel calm and relaxed after ranting (ibid.). Adapting Russell’s circumplex model, all above-mentioned reasons for ventilating represent behaviour which is motivated by emotionally negative valence and positive (encouraging) arousal.

Clusterisation of Negative Emotions

Instead of isolated experiences, what matters is their clusterisation. *Clusterisation of emotion* refers herein to transformation of individual emotional states into cluster emotional states. Many studies imply that emotion can bring people together. Bae & Lee (2012), for example, have found that the behaviour of popular Twitter users have an effect on their audiences’ moods. Metaphorically, clusterised emotions constitute avalanches (Tadic et al., 2013) and groundswells (Bernoff & Li, 2008), which may have detrimental effects on organisations. The “United Breaks Guitar” music video was a negative avalanche which hit United Airlines. The root cause was mishandling of an instrument, however, in order to become an issue, what was needed was other individuals’ contributions in terms of tweets, blog posts, comments, etc. Consistently with negativity bias, Tadic et al. (2013) have found out that negative emotion valence leads to the occurrence of larger avalanches than positive emotions. Presumably, the feature of social media that allows a particular post to be available to everyone immediately increases the odds of emotional bursts (Schweitzer & Garcia, 2009).

Global–Local Interplay

Social media's statistic is impressive. By the beginning of 2014, the number of users of popular social media sites is counted in hundreds of millions. The leading social media site, Facebook, has gathered 1,200 million users in ten years. The micro blogging service Twitter has attracted over 500 million users since its foundation in 2006. Even more rapidly has grown the instant messaging service WhatsApp, founded in 2009, which has claimed to have over 400 million active users. Sina Weibo, the biggest social media site in China has gathered over 500 million users. VK (originally VKontakte), a popular social networking site in Eastern Europe, particularly in Russia, is also growing rapidly having nowadays over 200 million users.

The numbers of users, even though impressive, are not the issue. Crucial thing is that a huge number of users enable two processes: *globalisation of local events* and *localisation of global events*. Within social media, there is no lack of examples of how locally felt negative experience has transformed into a global issue. The “United Breaks Guitar” case and many similar incidents have shown that, in the age of social media, what is local almost inevitably becomes global, whether the organisation wishes it or not. The power has been taken from organisations by the individuals and communities that create, share, and consume blogs, tweets, and so forth (Kietzmann et al., 2011). The same obviously holds true for the opposite direction. An incisive example is the discussion about the wholesome and safety of gene-manipulated food. It is a global issue, which influences customer behaviour at local level. The twin forces of globalism and localism are induced by the very nature of social media which removes time delays and physical distance.

Non-Linear Feedback

Social media could be an effective form of two-way communication as it: “potentially closes the feedback loop, or makes the loop smaller if you like, because it makes it easier for people to understand how they can give their feedback” (Denyer et al., 2011). Feedback processes are *non-linear* – i.e., minor changes can produce disproportionately major consequences and vice versa. Feedback processes multiply the connectivity inside and outside the organisation. A circular dependency relationship is typical of feedback processes: this means that the result of the previous situation is the stake in the following one. In other words, what has happened before is included, and continues, in what happens later. Many authors in the field of social

media have emphasised that most organisations have no choice: they cannot remain non-participants, because their customers and other stakeholders participate anyway. Social media enables customers to talk to one another and therefore multiplies the ability to express negative experiences. Avalanche, groundswell and eWOM originate from the same roots: a myriad of local interactions between individuals bring about a chain of events that progress non-linearly. From the perspective of negative emotions, the significance of the feedback processes promoted by social media lies in that they enable the multiplication of small influential changes. Social media has the potential to increase the non-linear characteristics of interaction (Tadic et al., 2013). Due to non-linearity, the direction, velocity and intensity of avalanche/groundswell originated from negative experience is unpredictable.

Possibility to Anonymity

Many social media sites allow anonymous “freedom of speech”. Naturally this freedom can be used both for good or bad. Yun & Park (2011) and Verhagen et al. (2013) have identified different consequence of online anonymity. According to them, anonymity makes people more honest in sharing their negative experiences online. This is because the Internet prevents people from facing any social consequences. Derks et al. (2004), for example, have suggested that anonymity creates deindividuation and may lead to anti-normative behaviour. Anonymity is considered a major factor of “disinhibitive behaviour” (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Lapidot-Lefler & Barak (2012) have further argued that anonymity may cause social media users “to feel unaccountable for their negative actions, as they cannot behave identified as the perpetrators of certain actions or behaviors”. This provokes toxic behaviour such as impulsive and aggressive cyber-bullying and off-topic and off-colour comments (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Seemingly, the possibility to anonymity, whether for good or bad purposes, tempts people to express negative emotions in social media.

Key Complainers

All users are not equal in terms of their influence on diffusion of negative emotions online. Adapting Russell’s circumplex model, it seems quite self-evident that individuals who have emotionally negative valence and positive arousal have different role than those who have negative valence and negative arousal. An annoyed individual is probably more keen to ventilate in social media than a disappointed one. Users who are biased to provide negative feedback in social media can be labelled in many ways. Noble et al. (2012), for example, have

labelled them as “trolls”, “rager”, “misguided” and “unhappy customer”. Although there are differences in behaviour between the labelled users, what they share is that they are able to create non-linearly developing viral events that spread more widely and quickly than expected (cf. Hemsley & Mason, 2013). Worth noting is that in recent years, many bloggers and twitterists have won a superior audience size compared with traditional mediums (Sandes et al., 2013). It is expected that this creates a fertile ground for emotional bursts.

Emergent Result

Collective emotions result from the process where each individual continually decides with which other actors he/she will engage, and what emotion he/she will share with them. Collective emotion is an *emergent whole*, which displays properties which cannot be traced back to individual contributions (Schweitzer & Garcia, 2010). This is what happened in the chain of events called “Arab Spring”. Arab Spring was a protest movement which was initiated in Tunisia by a Facebook campaign run by the opposition “April 6 Youth Movement” (Stepanova, 2011). The movement generated tens of thousands of positive responses to the call to rally against government policies (Stepanova, 2011). During the movement, social media carried inspiring stories of protests. Mass forms of socio-political protest facilitated by social media networks represent emergent behaviour as there is no possibility to pinpoint any specific event or act, which is accountable for rising local activities into a regional and, in some extent, even into a global protest. The power of “Arab Spring” rests on the movement’s ability to inspire disappointed and frustrated people into collective action. Inflow of negative emotions leads to the emergence of patterns of themes which no individual could have decided. Seemingly, things just happen without one particular reason. Collective negative emotion differs from individual negative emotion in terms of quantity and quality. The anatomy of the diffusion of negative emotion in social media is summarised in Figure 3.

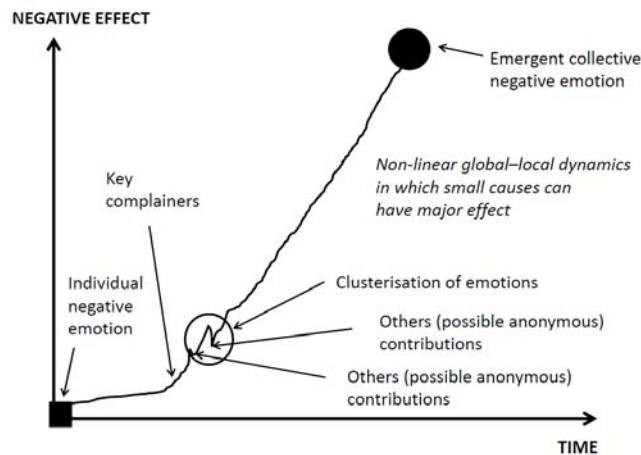


Figure 3. The anatomy of collective negative emotion in social media.

A Positive Side of Negative Emotion

From an organisation's perspective, negative emotional experiences are more dangerous than positive ones because they pose a threat to the existence of the organisation. Studies indicate that negative eWOM may have very strong effects on organisations' performance. Wangeheim (2005), Chevalier & Mayzlin (2006) and Park & Lee (2009), among others, have identified that negative evaluations of products and services have a stronger effect than positive ones. Negative eWOM affects negatively brand image (Jansen et al., 2009), consumers preferences (Khare et al., 2011) and purchase decisions (Fagerstrom & Ghinea, 2011). One possible explanation for this is that negative eWOM is more diagnostic than positive eWOM.

However, negative emotional experiences can also be valuable and useful for the organisation. They can be turned into positive ones. This is at least for two reasons. Firstly, as suggested before, for individuals, venting negative emotions may act as catharsis helping them to feel calm and relaxed. For organisations, this offers an opportunity to engage emotionally with venting individuals. Many studies have found that empathetic complaint management not only solves the problem but also strengthens customer relationship (Estelami, 2000; Kirkby et al., 2001, Lee & Hu, 2004). A bit paradoxically, it has been found that "customers rate service performance higher if a failure occurs and the contact personnel successfully addresses the problem than if the service had been delivered correctly the first place" (Hoffman & Bateson, 2001; Lee & Hu, 2004). Secondly, negative emotions may reveal unmet customer needs and preferences. Von Hippel (2005), for example, has suggested that

users of products and services themselves know the best how products and services actually meet their needs and how products and services should be improved. Social media heralds collaborative organisations in which employees, customers and other stakeholders create spontaneously micro-scale innovation networks which can be exploited for solving many resource problems (Morgan, 2012). Ignoring social network effects on the design process leads to a substantially inferior product design (Gunnec & Raghavan, 2013) and to negative customer experience. As social media also enables anonymity, which, in turn, makes people more honest (e.g. Verhagen et al., 2013), it is therefore reasonable to claim that social media is a powerful tool for turning negative experiences and emotions into positive ones.

Conclusions

This paper has proposed the anatomy of the diffusion of negative emotions in social media. The diffusion of negative emotion is defined as a complex process. It is a process in which actors affect others *and* are being affected by others. It is suggested that social media increases the odds that individually felt negative emotions escalate into collective negative emotions. Individual negative emotions are inclined to clusterise. As social media has removed time delays and physical distances, what has happened at local level can become a global issue and the other way round. Social media allows global–local interplay in venting negative emotions. Possibility to post negative information anonymously and the role of key complainers enable non-linear dynamics. This may create emergent whole which cannot be traced back to individual emotions. This paper does not contain any empirical data. Naturally, in order to validate the anatomy of the diffusion of negative emotions, empirical research is needed.

This paper has not focused on any particular social media platform. However, the findings of studies which have compared different social media sites (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2012) implicate that social media sites differ from each other based on their capacity to convey negative emotions. It can be hypothesised, for example, that social media sites that allow anonymous posts differ in sentiment from those sites which require identification. It has been proposed that Twitter offers greater user anonymity than Facebook, which, in turn, may mean that Twitter provokes more “toxic” behaviour (cf. Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Hughes et al., 2012). Furthermore, it can be supposed that mobile use of social media potentially increase negative emotional bursts (cf. Kwon et al., 2013). This is because pocket-

carried devices – smart phones and tablets – with a wide range of applications enable almost real-time reaction, for example, to bad customer service. This paper has not touched the economic consequences of negative emotions, but on the basis of research done in negative eWOM, it can, however, be suggested that organisations' ability to detect negative sentiments related to their products, services, brand images or businesses becomes more and more important. This argument is in line with Rintamäki et al. (2007), among others, who have identified that emotions play critical role in the competitive customer value proposition.

The paper implicitly suggests that, in order to handle negative emotions shared in social media, the organisation should aim at the ability to map the seeds of negative avalanches/groundswells as early as possible. This is because the value of negative emotion is the function of time. One possible approach to increase organisations' ability to detect emotional weak signals is taking advantage of *sentiment analysis* (Liu, 2010; Thelwall & Buckley, 2013). Sentiment analysis refers herein to computational study of sentiments, affects and emotions expressed in social media texts. Sentiment analysis is based on a very simple idea – i.e. texts are subjective which may express some personal feeling, view, emotion, or belief. Although, a completely automated solution is nowhere in sight (Lie, 2010), it is expected that sentiment analysis provides organisations with a useful tool to improve their ability to detect symptoms of collective negative emotions – before they become an issue.



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