

Examining Responses to Help-Requests in SNS Groups: The Perspective of Perceived Responsibility

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

More and more merchants carry out SNS marketing campaigns to promote products. The existing research about SNS marketing campaigns mainly focuses on how to identify and lure the influential requesters, whereas recipients' participation has been largely overlooked. To figure out the motivations of helping others in the context of SNS marketing campaigns, we proposed to conduct a field experiment to investigate how request directionality and relational closeness between requester and recipient influence perceived causality and perceived answerability that finally shape recipient's behavioral responses toward a help-request. The study is at this current stage of main experiment, and both theoretical and practical implications of the findings are expected.

Keywords: SNS marketing campaign, triangle model of responsibility, field experiment, proactive helping, reactive helping

Introduction

"The train tickets to Beijing are really hard to buy. I need you guys' help". These words are attached to the hyperlink which one of your friends just sent to your WeChat group of classmates (i.e., Social networking group, SNG). If you click on that hyperlink, your friend will get a higher priority to book train tickets in the list of ZhiXing¹, a most popular WeChat mini-program² to order tickets. This campaign often simply be named as "grabbing tickets".

This is an emerging type of social networking site (SNS) marketing campaign, where a triad of stakeholders exists, including the campaign provider, the requester, and the recipient. Compared with traditional marketing campaigns, it focuses more on the interactivity between audiences. To get the attractive prize, the requesters (i.e., direct audiences of the marketing campaigns) often need to forward their exclusive hyperlink about the marketing campaign to their social network, and ask their friends

¹ Zhixing is a one-stop travel service platform which has launched its WeChat mini-program. Its main business is providing the service of booking tickets, incorporating train tickets, plane tickets, and bus tickets.

² WeChat is the most popular social media in china. By 2018, WeChat had 1.04 billion monthly active users, and accounted for 34% of local mobile network traffic, exceeding the 14.1% of Facebook (WALKTHECHAT 2018); WeChat launched Mini Program project, which merchants can build easily and people can use conveniently and no need to download, in 9 January 2017, further inciting the thriving of SNS marketing campaigns.

for help. For the recipients (i.e., indirect audiences of the campaigns), they should decide about how to respond to the help-requests. The recipients' positive responses are the key precondition for the requesters' subsequent participation. What's more, the indirect participation behaviors of recipients can further transfer to favorable brand familiarity and use intention. Hence, it is imperative for merchants to substantively understand recipients' response behaviors regarding help-requests during SNS marketing campaigns.

Erlandsson et al. (2015) proposed there are three types of psychology mechanism which promote helping³. Characterized by low cost and tiny favor, SNS marketing campaigns are less likely to trigger deliberate calculation (i.e., the key characteristic of helping with the head) or intense emotional reactions (i.e., the key characteristic of helping with the heart). What's more, being monitored by other audiences in SNG, recipients become normative focus and more likely to conduct helping by the book. Helping by the book reflects a recognition-based help decision, which is impelled by the activated responsibility (Levine and Crowther 2008). According to the triangle model of responsibility (TMR), identity-event linkage (I-E link), identity-prescriptions linkage (I-P link), and event-prescriptions linkage (E-P link) are determinants of the responsibility judgement (Schlenker et al. 1994). Therefore, the first objective of the present study is to identify the key antecedents of perceived responsibility in SNG based on TMR.

Although the perspective of responsibility has been tested in online helping implicitly in the literature, most of them is based on the stimulus–response paradigm and simply take the helping intention (or behavior) as a proxy of perceived responsibility. To uncover the underlying mechanism of online helping by the book, we further classify the responsibility into two sub-dimensions, i.e., causality and answerability (Schlenker et al. 1994). Hence, the second objective is to elucidate the influences of identified antecedents on the two sub-dimensions of responsibility. Moreover, while past literature has mostly regarded the participation behavior in SNS marketing campaigns as a single outcome, this study intends to deepen the understanding of response behaviors toward help-request by specifying the response behaviors into proactive helping, reactive helping, and no-action. Upon that, the third objective is to investigate how the two sub-dimensions of responsibility influence the three response behaviors.

Theoretical Foundations

Online Helping Behaviors

Based on social exchange theory and functional motives theory, Spitzmuller and Van Dyne (2013) proposed that there are two types of helping: proactive helping and reactive helping. Moreover, proactive behaviors emphasize taking control or causing change, reactive behaviors do not depend on intentionality and foresight (Parker and Collins 2010). Thus, we infer that reactive helping will merely satisfying the minimum requirement, and proactive helping means doing something more than what they have to. Specifically, when receiving a help-request from a SNG member who is participating “grabbing tickets”, the reactive helping is helping but without any additional word, whereas the proactive helping is helping and seeking more interaction with requester.

The three psychological mechanisms of helping proposed by Erlandsson et al. (2015) have parallels in the online helping (Subrahmanyam et al. 2008), but the three psychological mechanisms are not equally important in all situations. In the context of SNS marketing campaigns, the recipients are more likely to conduct helping by the book, i.e., recognition-based help decision, which is impelled by the activated responsibility. Recognition-based help decisions are simple heuristic processing and cognitive shortcuts, and unduly influenced by extraneous factors (Weber et al. 2004). Several extraneous factors have been proved to influence the perceived responsibility to help others in the computer-mediated communication, such as the number and attributes of bystanders (Martin and North 2015), the gender of the individual

³ Helping with the heart, i.e., affect-based help decisions, is driven by intense emotional reactions, such as empathy or pity; Helping with the head, i.e., calculation-based help decisions, is characterized by a tradeoff between potential benefit and cost, such as expected social reward; Helping by the book, i.e., the recognition-based help decisions, is impelled by the activated role norm, such as responsibility.

seeking help and whether the help is asked for by specifying a name (Markey 2000). Surprisingly, the perspective of responsibility has been little tested in the context of SNS marketing campaigns. Whether such a kind of little favor is enough to evoke responsibility is still unknown. Additionally, most of extant studies focus on the dyadic interaction between requesters and recipients (Burtch et al. 2013; Rui and Li 2018; Wright and Li 2011), in which the recipients are aware of the number of potential helpers but unaware of the behaviors of each other. Whereas in the SNG, the recipients' behaviors are completely transparent, thus they will both take others as reference and be evaluated by others in return.

Triangle Model of Responsibility

The triangle model of responsibility (TMR) from Schlenker et al. (1994) is the most comprehensive theory which is widely used in the judgement of responsibility. According to TMR, responsibility is the combined strength of the linkages among the three elements, namely, (1) identity-event linkage (i.e., the connection between recipient's identity and event), (2) identity-prescriptions linkage (i.e., the role obligation perceived as being applicable to the recipient), and (3) event-prescriptions linkage (i.e., the clarity of the prescriptions applied to event). Focusing on the interaction between individuals and recipients' different response strategies, the event-prescriptions linkage, which is up to the specific characters of the campaigns and identical to all recipients, is unlikely to lead to different response strategies. Hence, we just take the I-P link and the I-E link into account.

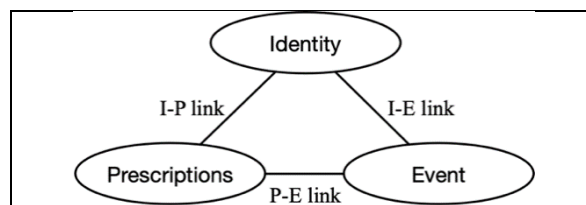


Figure 1. Triangle Model of Responsibility

The I-P link is the personal obligation or duty which depend on role. Whereas most relevant literature focuses on the social roles, such as polices or doctors, the relational roles have been largely overlooked. We propose that the relationship between two interactors will also influence responsibility (Sluss and Ashforth 2007). Particularly, relational closeness is the most important relationship in SNS (Dubois et al. 2016; Dunbar et al. 2015), hence low relational closeness and high relational closeness are considered as two types of I-P link.

The I-E link reflects the extent to which the actor is connected to the event, especially by virtue of appearing to have personal control over it (Schlenker et al. 1994). While Farsides (2010) argues that there is another distinguishable type of I-E link, I-E connection, strong to the extent that people feel connected to or otherwise associated with a particular event. Given the characteristics of SNS marketing campaigns, one should have complete personal control, therefore we focus on the latter kind of I-E link. In the context of SNS groups, there are two types of I-E connection, i.e., undirected requesting and requesting with tagging.

Although Schlenker et al. (1994) proposed that there are two sub-dimensions of responsibility, i.e., causality and answerability, it has been little tested empirically. Based on Schlenker et al. (1994) definitions, the perceived causality is defined as the extent to which recipients feel themselves ought to help out of the obligations bound by relational roles, whereas the perceived answerability is defined as the extent to which recipients anticipate the appropriate social sanctions will be applied to them in this study. According to the self-determination theory, perceived causality and perceived answerability can be seen as autonomous motivation and controlled motivation respectively, which may be effective in explaining the nuance between proactive helping and reactive helping.

Research Model and Hypotheses Development

Figure 2 depicts the research model of this study. Based on TMR, this study examines the effects of request directionality (I-E link) and relational closeness (I-P link) on the two sub-dimensions of responsibility which finally shape the behavioral responses. Drawing upon Choi et al. (2015), we

classify the response behaviors into a dichotomy of passive response, i.e., no-action, and active response. A step further, we divide the active response into reactive helping and proactive helping.

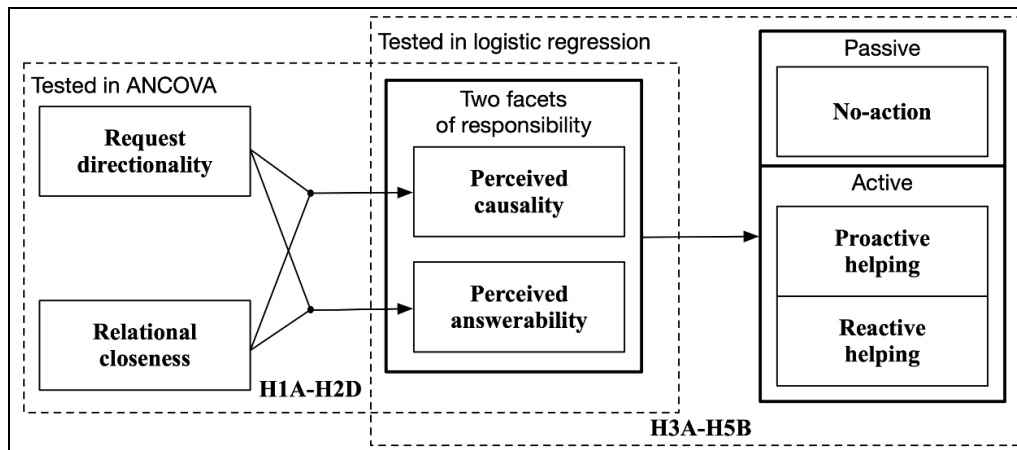


Figure 2. Research Model

Determinants of Perceived Causality

When an undirected requesting is sent, there is only a weak connection between each recipient's identity and the event. According to the deindividuation effect, the recipients probably fall into a herd mentality and feel himself to be dispensable (Weldon and Mustari 1988). In the contrary, when a recipient is tagged for requesting, the social help norm is activated because of the witness of other audiences (Muller and Butera 2007). Thus, we posit the following:

H1A: Compared with undirected requesting, requesting with tagging will lead the targeted recipient to perceive a higher level of causality.

Receiving help-requests sent by SNG members, the social role is not likely to take effect, whereas the relational role become relative salient. A help-request sent by a close friend can evoke the role norm of closeness which implies a high level of trust and reciprocity. Thus, we posit the following:

H1B: Compared to low relational closeness, high relational closeness will lead the recipients to perceive a higher level of causality.

According to the focus theory of normative conduct, the recipients' behaviors, only under conditions of normative focus, are conformed to the dictates of a relevant norm (Cialdini et al. 1991). Receiving a requesting with tagging, the recipient is in the spotlight witnessed by all other audiences, so that he/she feels emotional arousal (Zajonc 1965), which further lead to normative focus. Thus, we posit the following:

H1C: Compared to undirected requesting, the effect of relational closeness on perceived causality is stronger when receiving a requesting with tagging.

Determinants of Perceived Answerability

When an undirected requesting is sent, the negative consequences are jointly undertaken by all recipients. Whereas when receiving a requesting with tagging, the targeted recipient's identity is strongly connected to the event. According to the psychological highway of responsibility (Schlenker et al. 1994), the negative consequences can transfer to the recipient automatically. Thus, we posit the following:

H2A: Compared with undirected requesting, requesting will lead the targeted recipient to perceive a higher level of answerability.

Although all recipients are connected to an undirected requesting equally, the social expectation from requester and audiences is heterogeneous. In specifically, the requester and audiences will regard the

individuals who are in a high close relationship with requester as more obliged to help. Hence, the high close recipients are more likely to be blamed for without helping (Brees and Martinko 2015). Thus, we posit the following:

H2B: *When an undirected requesting is sent, compared to the low relational closeness recipients, the high relational closeness recipients will perceive a higher level of answerability.*

Receiving a requesting with tagging, the target, no matter relational closeness is high or low, will undertake the expectation from requester and audiences equally. Whereas the high relational closeness recipients have a higher level of interaction history and trust, so they have got some idiosyncrasy credits to exempt from the social sanction of occasional norm violations (Ammeter et al. 2004). Thus, we posit the following:

H2C: *When a requesting with tagging is sent, compared to the low relational closeness recipients, the high relational closeness recipients will perceive a lower level of answerability.*

Furthermore, combine H2B and H2C, we posit the following:

H2D: *Compare to low relational closeness, the effect of request directionality on perceived answerability is weaker when relational closeness is high.*

Behavioral Responses

Receiving a help-request from SNS groups, one should decide to help or no-action. Schwartz (1973) suggested that the greater the tendency to ascribe responsibility to the self, the stronger the relationship between personal norms and overt helping behaviors. Specifically, the obligation to help each other act as injunctive social norms, which, once activated, probably lead to beneficial social conduct (Cialdini et al. 1991). And, according to the principle of economics, the social costs of not helping is also an important factor for recipients to help (Flynn and Lake 2008). In sum, we posit the following:

H3A: *Perceived causality will reduce the likelihood of no-action.*

H3B: *Perceived answerability will reduce the likelihood of no-action.*

Perceived causality and helping

In our study, proactive helping and reactive helping are differentiated by whether recipients seek further interaction with the requester. Perceived causality refers to the identified motivation. If a person help others out of perceived causality, the major objective is satisfying self-expectation of observing personal norm, whereby meets the basic psychological needs and facilitates the intrinsic motivation (Deci et al. 2017), so individual is more likely to conduct proactively (Parker and Collins 2010), and, in the contrary, less likely to conduct reactive helping. In sum, we posit the following:

H4A: *Perceived causality will increase the likelihood of proactive helping.*

H4B: *Perceived causality will decrease the likelihood of reactive helping.*

Perceived answerability and helping

Perceived answerability refers to the controlled motivation, by which recipients feel themselves have to help because the fear of potential social sanction of norm violation, and treat the responsibility as a cost they try to avoid (Steffel et al. 2016). If a recipient helps others out of perceived answerability, the major objective is satisfying social-expectation of observing social norm, whereby exempt from the anticipated social sanction of not helping. The recipients are more likely to regard the helping as a damage to independence, so unwilling to behave proactively. What's more, a reactive helping (visible to requester) is enough to exempt from the potential social sanction, so the recipients will take the further communication as an additional cost. Hence, recipients are more likely to conduct reactive helping, whereas, accordingly, less likely to conduct proactive helping. In sum, we posit the following:

H5A: *Perceived answerability will increase the likelihood of reactive helping.*

H5B: *Perceived answerability will decrease the likelihood of proactive helping.*

Research Method

The “grabbing tickets” campaign was chosen for the study for three reasons: (1) it represents a special cluster of marketing campaigns where you need ask your friends for help so that to get the attractive prize, such as “voting for me” and “collecting enough likes”; (2) it’s very popular on WeChat and most known by our subjects; (3) it provide visible helping list incorporating all group members who have helped the requester.

A field experiment with a 2 (request directionality: undirected requesting versus requesting with tagging) \times 2 (relational closeness: low versus high) factorial design was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses. To keep the experiment real, the experiment was launched in the real WeChat groups, and the experimental conditions were manipulated through requesters (experimental assistants), so that the recipients (subjects) can feel the real stimulus and response in a natural way. By assigning the requesters into four experimental conditions randomly, the recipients were randomly allocated indirectly.



Figure 3. Experimental setting

Request directionality was manipulated by asking the requesters to request without tagging anyone or tagging a specific person additionally. Relational closeness was manipulated through the behavioral and psychological closeness perceived by the requester. The vignettes evoking different level of relational closeness were created based on the Relationship Closeness Inventory (Berscheid et al. 1989). The manipulation check for request directionality was performed by asking subjects one question on how the help-request was sent out. The manipulation check for relational closeness was conducted by asking subjects to rate on four items measuring their perceptions of relationship closeness with the requester.

Table 1. Manipulation of Relational Closeness

High	Think about a high closeness group member. He/she is a WeChat friend of you. You two will send WeChat messages with each other every now and then. Sometimes you two will talk about something important and personal to you, and you will take his/her suggestion into account. If he/she post an interesting moment in WeChat circle, you are probably click a “like” and comment on it. If he/she seek help in WeChat circle or classmate group, you are willing to spend some time helping him/her.
Low	Think about a low closeness group member. He/she is a WeChat friend whom you rarely interact with. The only conversation between you two is distant, and never involves something important and personal to each other. If he/she post an interesting moment in WeChat circle, you might click a “like” but unlikely comment on it. If he/she seek help in WeChat circle or classmate group, you will help his/her only if the task is extremely simple and you are not busy then.

Note. Translated from Chinese version

The items measuring two sub-dimensions of responsibility were adapted from Farsides (2010) and Schlenker et al. (1994). Whether recipients help or no-action was collected via helping list showed by the Zhixing hyperlinks, and whether recipients seek further interaction with requester was collected via the feedback of requesters. Helping and seeking further interaction was coded as proactive helping, and helping but without any additional word was coded as reactive helping.

Pilot Study and Concluding Remarks

A pilot test with 39 subjects (recipients) was conducted prior to the main experiment. The results showed that all subjects selected the right answer (out of four options) of how the help-request was sent out, and the average scores of relationship closeness between the two conditions were 3.40 and 5.20 ($t = -4.46, p < 0.01$), suggesting that the manipulation of two independent variables were valid. ANCOVA was used to test H1A to H2D, and logistic regression was used to test H3A to H5B. Among all 13 hypotheses, 4 were unsupported (2 of them are quite opposite to the results). The result failed to support H3B and H4B, perceived answerability hasn't significant effect on no-action, and perceived causality hasn't significant effect on reactive helping. Quite the reverse with H5A and H5B, the result showed that perceived answerability will facilitate proactive helping and inhibit reactive helping.

The pilot test helps us to follow the experimental set of the pilot test directly in the main experiment. The study is currently at the stage of conducting main experiment. In sum, this study enriches the understanding of SNS marketing campaigns participation by adopting a perspective of perceived responsibility. Additionally, this study establishes that recipient's perceptions of both perceived causality and perceived answerability influence their behavioral responses to help-request from friends in SNS marketing campaigns. This study also hopes to provide practical guidelines for online merchants in designing marketing campaigns.

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