

Special Section on Research on Engaging Stakeholders Online: The Bright and The Dark Sides

Guest Editors

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1 Background

Owing to the growing interest of people in using online media to communicate in their personal and professional life, organizations are striving hard to engage their stakeholders online much more than ever before. This has encouraged scholars to analyze what is specific to virtual means of engagement. From the little research available in the area of online engagement, it appears that along with advantages, online engagement also comes with grave consequences for an organization's stakeholders. Multi-stakeholder engagement and multi-stakeholder experience are gradually gaining prominence in management and IS research to investigate how organizations attempt to connect both internal and external stakeholders (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Such connection creates a better experience among the partners and also addresses long term sustainable relationships in networks of value co-creation where partners are mostly connected through the use of information and communication technologies as well as through service exchange in larger ecosystem (Chuluun et al., 2017).

Recently, the focus of research has turned to the differences in experiences and the different treatment of the partners in a firm's networked ecosystem. This has predominantly been driven by the adverse impacts of relationships, often driven by differences in the relative bargaining power of the participants within the network of value co-creation. However, there are a lot of benefits that strengthen such relationships in a network of value co-creation, where both parties engaged in co-creation of value get ample benefits and form a strong relationship (Payne et al., 2008). Such relationships and their outcome are documented in the existing literature, but the dynamics of such online engagement need a lot more research than has been undertaken so far.

Given this background, this special section explores various theoretical models that can be used to identify phenomena and factors that drive engagement in such dynamic and volatile ecosystems where stakeholders engage with each other for the co-creation of value. Thus, along with the bright side, this special section puts a particular emphasis on the dark side of engaging stakeholders online, a lesser researched area.

2 The Bright and the Dark Sides

Organizations are increasingly using the internet to engage their stakeholders (employees, suppliers, customers, government, and management) for outcomes such as higher

productivity, growing revenue, and increased profits. Different theoretical models of engagement have been explored for online platforms such as uses and gratification theory, dual processing theory, and technology adoption models (Dolan et al., 2016; Dolan et al., 2019; Grover & Kar, 2020a; Grover et al., 2019; Gupta et al., 2019).

Though research suggests that engaging stakeholders has a lot of benefits for individuals, groups, and organizations, the concerns relating to the overuse of these engagement practices especially through the internet cannot be ignored (Shelton & Skalski, 2014; Fox & Moreland, 2015; Baccarella et al, 2018). This side includes the darker aspects that cover 'too much of engagement' such as physical and mental strain leading to imbalances in the stakeholders' life. There are both positive and negative consequences of engaging stakeholders online and each engagement practice or intervention needs to be seen through both lenses. Further, there has been a plethora of evidence surrounding disinformation and misinformation in the existing literature which impacts stakeholder engagement (Aswani et al., 2019).

Such an exploration necessitates to investigate the context of engagement through more than one lens and from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (Friedman & Miles, 2002). This enhances the chances of a more holistic theoretical understanding of this new and complex nature of engagement. To address issues of such complexity, mixed-method research designs are often suitable. A plethora of emerging research methodologies like user-generated content mining, social media analytics, artificial intelligence, and other approaches are guiding a lot of such research beyond the traditional approaches based on surveys, expert feedback, and analyses using inferential statistics (Fan & Gordon, 2014; Rathore et al., 2017). Such studies on engagement often lead to insights about stakeholder satisfaction, and mixed research methods that combine big data, unstructured data, surveys, and qualitative methods may collectively create better theoretical insights (Kar & Dwivedi, 2020).

Multi-stakeholder ecosystems (Figure 1) create value for all participants. However, there is evidence that not all the stakeholders are in the focus of such value co-creation which may result in disruptions of the e in the long-run. The stakeholders not only interact with the core organization in the ecosystem, but also need to interact with other stakeholders (Kar et al., 2019). Given such interaction is necessary, the value created through some interaction often leads both to positive as well as negative encounters among the stakeholders. The stakeholders are often collectively connected in a value chain and more so in a more complex network of value co-creation. Positive engagement during encounters strengthens the value chain and the network of value co-creation, while negative engagement may adversely affect the long term sustainability of the ecosystem. While in the short run, benefits are more visible, especially for the larger partners of the ecosystem (Kar et al., 2019), in the long run, the network needs intervention if the darker sides become more prevalent than the positive encounters. Encounters of engagement may also impact the social life of the customers, when the mediation of relationships move beyond technical platforms and the entire ecosystem shows the effects of the engagement. Such engagement may also emerge between citizens and government when online platforms are used for capturing citizen participation in engagement models (Grover & Kar, 2020b).

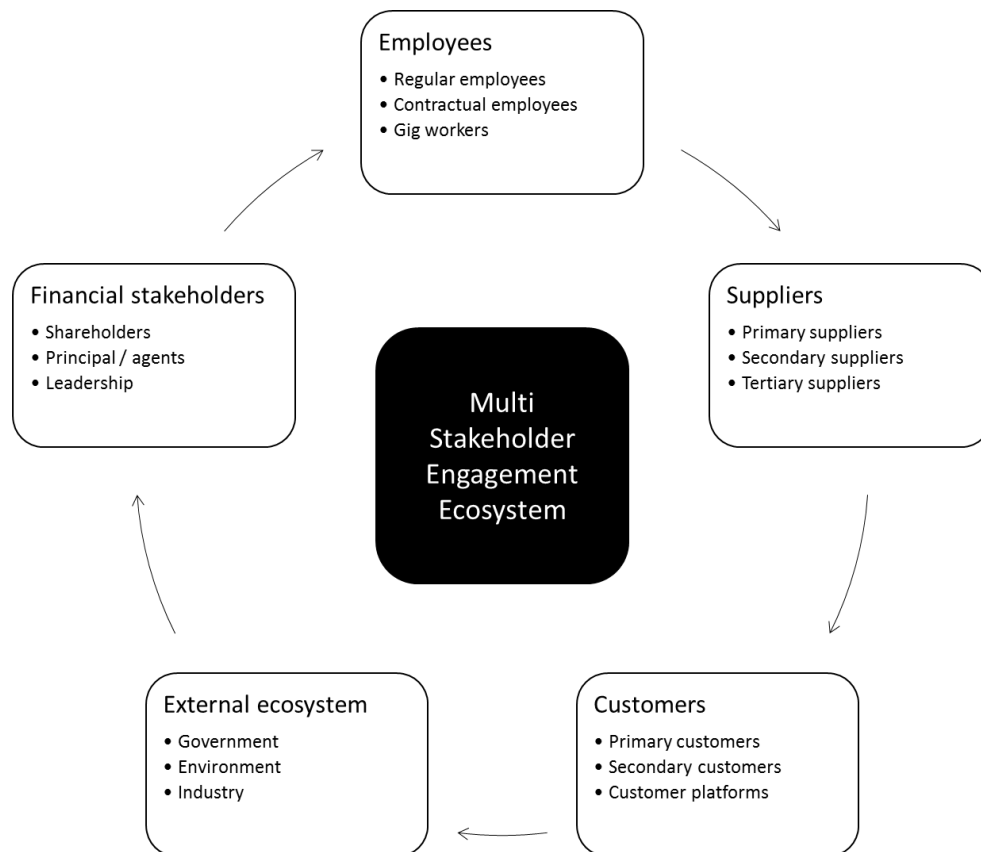


Figure 1: Multi-stakeholder engagement ecosystem

Based on this discussion, the overall objective of this special section and issue is to provide more insights about multi stakeholder engagement ecosystems. The special section thus has the following objectives. It sets out

- to challenge existing theories in the online engagement literature
- to explore different theoretical models of the dual effects, positive and negative, on stakeholders who are involved in online engagement
- to examine how the Internet itself can be a means to shift stakeholders from the dark side to the bright side of engagement
- to establish the need for interventions in such engagement in online communities of multi stakeholder ecosystems.

Articles in the Special Section

The following six articles have been selected for inclusion in the special section:

Article 1: Demystifying the Dark Side of Social Networking Sites through Mindfulness

While the authors of this article recognize the positive outcomes of using the social networking sites (SNS) for communication, they argue that using these site is spoiling individuals' real life human connections. In a sequential mixed method design, they studied a sample of 236 users and found that mindfulness impacts and counteracts exhaustion that is caused through compulsive usage and otherwise is a worrying factor for society.

Article 2: Do policymakers use social media for policy design? A Twitter analytics approach

This paper takes a macro-level view and investigates Ayushman Bharat, a government of India scheme, to explore what role does social media, in this case, twitter, plays in the public policy process and design. The authors analyzed twitter data about the scheme under investigation and found that despite consistent issues being raised by citizens and experts about the scheme, the policy design has not significantly been changed.

Article 3: Impact of addiction of online platforms on quality of life: age and gender as moderators

Using the Partial Least Square - Structural Equation Modeling technique, the authors of this article analyzed 320 responses to find factors that affect online platform addiction, often considered the dark side of excessive online engagement. Such factors in particular loneliness and depression, were found to predict addiction and in turn, the quality of life. Age and gender seem to affect this relationship. One of the findings, for example, is that compared to the mid-aged individuals, young adults are more prone to addiction while feeling lonely.

Article 4: Gamifying the gig: transitioning the dark side to bright side of online engagement

The authors of this article link an emerging section of the workforce, gig workers with an equally emerging online engagement technique, gamification. By analyzing 367 responses of gig workers, the authors recommend that gamification does enhance job satisfaction and productivity of gig employees and enhances retention rates.

Article 5: The dark side of social media engagement: an analysis of user-generated content in wildlife trade online communities

In this article, the authors used user-generated content (UGC) in the context of online exotic wildlife trade communities in a biodiversity hotspot, The Republic of Indonesia, by studying comments in 12 Facebook groups. They found that factors such as motivation, opportunity, and ability affect the information processing – comment valence relationship. Their findings encourage conservation practitioners to post the pro-conservation content after considering the user's unique attitudes and knowledge to engage their target audience online.

Article 6: Modelling Customer Engagement Behaviour in Smart Retailing

The authors of this study investigated the role of smart retail technologies (SRT) in engaging customers online. The findings of this study reveal complex relationships and provide evidence for the influence of SRT characteristics (novelty, effectiveness, and interaction quality) and meta-UTAUT variables (performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions) on customers' attitude, behavioural intention, and engagement behaviour towards smart retailing.

3 Conclusion

The articles that are included in this special section, collectively accomplish the section objectives by reviewing existing literature and investigating new primary and secondary data. The articles cover several types of online engagement such as, social, customer, and employee engagement among others. While some focus on the bright side, others have an emphasis on overcoming the dark sides of online engagement by discussing phenomena such as exhaustion, depression, compulsive usage, and addiction. We believe that together the six selected manuscripts provide an interesting reading of new insights into the bright and dark sides of online engagements.

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