

Social Media's Role in Enhancing Social Capital and Economic Growth in Rural Bengaluru

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Abstract – Social media has emerged as a major source contributing to the development of our nation. The purpose of the present study is to evaluate the role played by social media in national reconstruction through enhancement of social capital and economic growth of the rural population, thereby assisting the rural development sector of India. Social media, with its highly interactive tools and advantages such as user-friendliness and cost-effectiveness, can assist in rural development through democratization of information within the rural communities. Rural communities in the outskirts of Bengaluru were treated as sample for the study and quantitative data was collected using a questionnaire (N=500). The role of social media in the formation of social networks and ties of rural individuals through enhanced social interaction, exchange of information, etc. for the betterment of their knowledge and economic status was evaluated by the study. The study also assessed changes in the economic growth of rural Bengaluru, such as opportunities for professional growth and innovation, resulting from social media exposure. Findings of the present study are valuable for rural development, a crucial issue for the economic growth of our nation.

Keywords: Social Media, Rural Development, Social Capital, Economic Growth

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media provides an online platform for personal and informal interactions of its users across the globe. These online platforms include Social Networking Sites (SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES), podcasts, online forums, blogs, groups, discussion boards, etc., facilitating flow of information across different online social communities. Facebook is one such prominent SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES which recorded a huge success as a means of global communication and also promoted the development of other SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES such as reddit, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, etc. (Hargittai, 2007).

The Government of India with the aim of promoting inclusive growth, introduced various programs delivering easy access to SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES, websites and other online information sources, which are also supported by the private SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES companies, news channels and NGOs (Rai & Shahila, 2013). As a result, social media exposure in rural India increased to 70% with the most popular activities of rural populations identified as using e-mails (30%), chats (30%), information search (41%) and media downloads (45%) (BCG, 2016). Therefore, it is

evident that social media plays an important role in the transformation of lifestyle of rural people, emphasizing the need to study the social capital and economic growth consequences of rural social media exposure, as attempted in the present study.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Social capital

Social capital has been defined as the network developed among people to enhance their functional growth as well as of the society (Field, 2008). Prior research evaluating the effects of social media usage on social capital predominantly focused on the three types of social capital, namely, bonding, bridging and linking social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the ties formed between individuals of similar demographic profile, bridging refers to associations between individuals of different backgrounds yet almost similar social standing while linking depicts ties formed with powerful people of high positions (Portes, 1998).

Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton (2001) revealed that the interactions conducted in SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES supplemented their physical face-to-face interactions and did not result in much

increase or decrease of social capital. However, enhanced participation in community activities was observed in the case of intense users of the internet. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) concluded that Facebook usage resulted in enhancement of all the three types of social capital, with its maximum influence on bridging social capital as this type of social capital can be easily and cheaply targeted by the software applications. The authors also reported maximum social capital benefits of social media for those users with relatively lower self-esteem and satisfaction with life. Valenzuela, Park and Kee (2009) reported a weak, yet positive significant association between levels of usage of Facebook and trust, life satisfaction, participation in political activities as well as community activities of college students. Hofer and Aubert (2013) observed that the number of followers as well as followees of Twitter users enhanced bridging social capital but not their bonding social capitals. The enhancement of social capital however exhibited a threshold limit, beyond which information overload occurred, leading to minimisation of social capital. Ellison and Gray (2014) identified that those respondents who posted information requests, requests for assistance and favors in Facebook exhibited higher social capital in terms of both bridging and bonding social capital. Sabatini and Sarracino (2014) established that Facebook helped the users in alleviating the common hindrances for preserving relationships such as busy work schedule, mobility, etc., thereby resulting in social capital enhancement.

Not many studies have explored the links between social media and social capital as well as economic growth among rural populations. Chew, Larose, Steinfield and Velasquez (2011) explored the nature of participants and interactions in social networking sites pertaining to rural communities and reported that social media played no significant role in enhancing community involvement of individuals. However, the researchers reported self-efficacy of individuals as a possible moderator for social media usage and bonding social capital. Tiwari, Lane and Alam (2015) on analyzing respondents from rural areas reported that bridging capital was a significant determinant of social capital enhancement in rural communities.

2.2 Economic growth

Rai and Shahila (2013) in their review discussed several important achievements of social networking sites in rural India. The authors mentioned Facebook to be advantageous to the rural farmers by citing an event that took place in February 2012 when farmers of Sangli district, Maharashtra, connected with turmeric farmers of other countries to impose sanctions on the highly reduced prices of turmeric. Jain (2016) assessed the impact of internet usage on structural, knowledge and economic capitals of respondents from rural areas. The results revealed empowerment and enhanced scope of work

to be the most significant factors. Idiegbeyan-Ose and Akpoghome, (2009) emphasized the importance of information such as information related to bank loans, preservation of crops, supply of raw materials, etc., for economic development of rural areas, suggesting the important role played by social networking sites in enhancing economic growth. Bohnert and Ross (2010) observed that social networking sites with their crowd sourcing abilities provided information on job opportunities, especially in the Philippines and India, leading to economic growth. Fischer and Reuber (2011) posited that social networking sites such as Twitter and LinkedIn enhanced interactions between entrepreneurs or individuals from the same professional circle, which in turn assisted their career. Nwabueze, Nwabueze and Egbra (2013) pointed out that social media helped the banks and microfinances to communicate to the rural masses, significantly influencing economic growth.

2.3 Research gap

From the literature review it is evident that most of the studies pertaining to social media and social capital focused on particular applications such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition, such studies could be found lacking in the Indian context. Similarly the literature available on social media and economic growth pertaining to developing countries such as India was found to be scanty. Finally, even though studies such as Jain (2016) had examined social capital with the help of similar factors as adopted in the present study, interactions of these factors with economic growth were not analyzed. Against this backdrop, the present study assumed the following objectives:

3. STUDY OBJECTIVES

- 1) To identify the important determinants of social capital and economic growth enabled by social media among rural populations
- 2) To assess the interrelationships between aspects of social capital and economic growth

4. METHODS

The researcher adopted a positivistic, descriptive and quantitative research approach while conducting the study.

4.1 Sample selection

Stratified convenience sampling was employed and respondents residing in rural areas of Bengaluru were selected. Self-administered, structured questionnaires were employed as research instruments for the present study. Questionnaires

were distributed to 600 respondents, from which 500 responses were identified as valid and were treated as the final sample for the study.

The final sample constituted a slightly higher number of female respondents (54.8%) than the male respondents (45.2%). Most of the study respondents belonged to the middle age of 21 to 30 years (79.4%) and possessed a UG degree (81%). Over 83.6% of the respondents were students, while the other respondents represented different occupational backgrounds such as farmers, labourers, salaried employees, etc. Nearly half of the study respondents (54.6%) spent less than an hour on social media while one-third of them (33.2%) spent 1 to 4 hours and 12.2% spent 4 to 8 hours every day on social media applications.

4.2 Questionnaire development

The questionnaire was structured based on the two predominant approaches to defining social capital: 1) as the resources procured by individuals by means of relationships, i.e., resources are assumed to flow based on who interacts and how frequently one interacts with another within networks (Burt, 2000) and 2) as the nature of one's involvement in a given network or a civic organization (Putnam, 1993). Deriving from the concepts, the present study defined social capital in terms of three important dimensions, adapted from the Integrated Questionnaire for the measurement of Social Capital (SC-IQ) by Grootaert, Narayan, Jones and Woolcock (2003), namely, 1) 'Groups and networks', which represents the participation and contribution of individuals within networks as well as the support derived from networks as a result of social media usage, despite the differences between group members, 2) 'Social cohesion', which refers to the role of social media in influencing the extent of conflicts within groups, management of such conflicts, etc. and 3) 'Empowerment', which denotes the extent to which individuals gained control over their well-being through social media. Similarly, economic growth of the respondents was assessed under two dimensions, namely, 'Novelty' and 'Opportunities', the former referring to the innovations in business and at work allowed by social media while the latter refers to the introduction of new opportunities through social media such as exposure to new professional contacts, better knowledge of suppliers available, etc. The questions were scored on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Social media's role in enhancement of social capital

Promotion of social capital through groups and networks

A linear regression analysis was carried out to understand the effectiveness of social media enabled groups and networks in enhancing social capital among rural communities. From Table 1, it is understood that even though Groups and networks significantly effected social capital formation, it accounted for a small amount of the total variation ($R=0.249$, $R^2=0.062$, $F(7,475)= 4.468$, $p=0.000$). Social media's success in increasing the frequency of contacts among friends and family ($B=0.116^*$) and in linking with other people from different communities ($B=0.120^*$) were found to be the two significant reasons behind enhancement of rural social capital.

Frequency and heterogeneity as important social capital dimensions has also been established in the past. For instance, Narayan and Pritchett (1999) suggested frequency of interactions to be a measure of quantity of social capital. Sethi and Somanathan (2003) mentioned that repeated interactions led to reciprocity. Cassar, Crowley and Wydick (2007) determined social capital in terms of the number of past and positive experiences of individuals, which indirectly represents the frequency of interactions. Sabatini and Sarracino (2014) mentioned that Facebook lowers the barriers perceived by people while interacting with people outside their reference groups and reveals the common aspects shared by an individual with others, thereby helping them to interact with people of different orientations. Infact, Williams (2006) stated that interactions between diverse communities from dissimilar life situations were found to improve the weak-tie social capital, which led to improved opportunities and knowledge among the users.

Table 1.

Impact of groups and networks on social capital

Groups and networks	Mean±S.D.	B	S.E	β
(Constant)		2.576	0.226	
Formed activity groups	2.82±1.017	0.014	0.065	0.013
Relationship with co-workers improved	3.30±0.953	0.002	0.066	0.002
Increased my frequency of contacts with others	3.52±0.994	0.116*	0.056	0.110*
Linked with people outside my community	3.47±1.125	0.120*	0.052	0.128*
Improved trust towards neighbours, service providers and strangers	3.14±1.191	0.011	0.051	0.012
Improved support during emergencies	3.37±1.172	0.107*	0.054	0.120*
Improved my satisfaction with social life	3.26±1.039	-0.083	0.058	-0.082

$R=0.249$, $R^2=0.062$, $F(7,475)= 4.468$, $p=0.000$, where * significance at $p<0.05$

Social capital through promotion of social cohesion

Social cohesion among rural people promoted by social media applications was identified as a significant determinant of social capital, accounting for a moderate variation of over 12.9% ($R=0.359$, $R^2=0.129$, $F(8,475)= 8.790$, $p=0.000$). It is interesting to observe that improved intimacy of rural people with their neighbourhood effected from social media usage significantly decreased their social capital ($B=-0.163^{**}$), suggesting failure, dissatisfaction and instability in relationships, probably leading to conflicts (Table 2). For instance, Newton (1999) observed that Facebook unveiled certain character attributes of others which resulted in dislike or mistrust. Sabatini and Sarracino (2014) in their study on Facebook observed that the tendency for aggression was higher when the respondents used social media, owing to their physical invisibility and the ease of resolving controversies on social media apps than in physical meetings. Further, the social networking sites also posed the threat of information incomprehension and miscomprehension, possibly resulting in reduction of social capital.

However, social media's positive impact on everyday interactions of diverse people ($B=0.112^*$), in imparting the habit of voluntarism ($B=0.132^*$), enhanced support within communities ($B=0.160^*$) and consequently their sense of belonging ($B=0.115^*$) resulted in significantly higher social capital of rural social media users. Improvements in voluntary engagement as a result of social media were also reported by Stern and Adams (2010). Researchers such as Best and Dautrich (2003), Rasanen and Kouvo (2007), etc. also found that interactions held online significantly improved community participation and community building of individuals.

Table 2.

Impact of social cohesion on social capital

Social cohesion	Mean±S.D.	B	S.E	β
(Constant)		2.430	0.219	
Increased the closeness in my neighbourhood	3.27±1.101	-0.163**	0.051	-0.172**
Problems due to differences among people reduced	3.25±1.026	0.040	0.057	0.039
Positively influenced everyday social interactions	3.27±1.018	0.112*	0.053	0.110*
Increased the willingness of people to help each other	3.30±1.034	0.160**	0.052	0.159**
Increased my sense of belonging to the community	3.30±1.050	0.115*	0.051	0.116*
Influenced donations and voluntarism	3.06±1.095	0.132*	0.051	0.139*
Improved my participation in community projects	3.29±1.064	-0.047	0.053	-0.048
Introduced friends from different ethnic backgrounds	3.39±1.079	-0.001	0.050	-0.001

$R=0.359$, $R^2=0.129$, $F(8,475)= 8.790$, $p=0.000$, where * significance at $p<0.05$ ** significance at $p<0.01$

Promotion of social capital through empowerment

Empowerment of rural people achieved through social media exposure exhibited a significant impact

on social capital, accounting for 7.9% of the total variation in social capital ($R=0.281$, $R^2=0.079$, $F(7, 476)= 5.847$, $p=0.000$). One of the reasons behind this effect were identified as the changes in political activities of the respondents' neighbourhood as a result of their social media presence ($B=0.123^*$). An example for such an event as discussed by Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela (2012) is when more than 20,000 Facebook users from Canada together protested against a government bill, which eventually led to delays in passage of the bill. The second reason was identified as the new opportunities provided by social media applications to the respondents in changing their course of life ($B=0.119^*$), which can be attributed to the enhanced availability of information and contacts (Table 3).

Table 3.

Impact of empowerment on social capital

Empowerment	Mean±S.D.	B	S.E	β
(Constant)		2.353	0.217	
Decision making improved	3.53±3.358	-0.010	0.014	-0.032
Access to information and knowledge improved	3.40±1.103	0.057	0.051	0.060
Changed the course of my life	3.29±1.078	0.119*	0.053	0.123*
Affected political activities	3.34±1.056	0.123*	0.055	0.125*
Discovered my identity	3.38±1.042	0.005	0.051	0.005
Knowledge on market conditions and public services	3.32±1.094	0.059	0.052	0.062
Political participation of my community members improved	3.29±1.058	0.013	0.053	0.013

$R=0.281$, $R^2=0.079$, $F(7, 476)= 5.847$, $p=0.000$, where * significance at $p<0.05$

5.2 Social media's role in enhancement of economic growth

Economic growth through promotion of novelty in business

It can be observed from Table 4 that the new opportunities presented at work and in businesses ($B=-0.299^*$) significantly reduced the economic growth of rural people, which can be attributed to insufficient resources for pursuing novelties, for commercialization of novelties, etc. Novelty in products ($B=0.273^{**}$) and in business practices ($B=0.163^{**}$) were also identified as significant predictors of economic growth, even though several respondents did not agree that social media usage resulted in such innovations. Overall, novelty significantly accounted for 16.9% of the total variation in economic growth of the rural people ($R=0.441$, $R^2=0.169$, $F(3, 488)= 32.999$, $p=0.000$).

Table 4.

Impact of novelty on economic growth

Novelty	Mean±S.D.	B	S.E	β
(Constant)		3.040	0.210	
My skills at work improved	2.74±1.116	0.273**	0.046	0.275**
New opportunities for business	3.50±0.986	-0.299**	0.047	-0.266**
Innovation in business	3.36±1.090	0.163**	0.046	0.161**

R=0.441, R²=0.169, F(3, 488)= 32.999, p=0.000, where ** significance at p<0.01

Economic growth through enhancement of opportunities

The new opportunities presented by social media to rural individuals involved in business and at work exhibited a significant influence on their economic growth, accounting for a large variation of 29.6% (R=0.544, R²=0.296, F(7, 478)= 28.722, p=0.000). The increased competition among businesses and for employees at work resulting from social media had a significant negative effect on economic growth (B=-0.229**), implying the struggle faced by small businesses due to heavy competition. Even though increase in income was identified as a major determinant of economic growth, several respondents failed to agree that social media resulted in enhanced income (B=0.341**). Another significant reason behind the increase in economic growth was that social media enabled the rural respondents to collaborate with others for the purpose of business (B=0.199**) and enhanced business efficiency (B=0.209**) as indicated in Table 5.

Further, the feedback received in response to their business or job responsibilities exhibited a significant negative impact on economic growth (B=-0.145**), which can be attributed to dishonest feedbacks from competitors, hurtful comments or denial of the users about the feedback given. It is noteworthy that SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES like Facebook other than offering a private service also extend public interfaces for sharing interpersonal feedback, which is available to millions of other users. Such an intense feedback system might drive the respondents to take the feedbacks personally, instead of constructively, thereby negatively affecting their income and growth of business.

Table 5.

Impact of opportunities on economic growth

Opportunities	Mean±S.D.	B	S.E	β
(Constant)		2.199	0.216	
Increased intensity of competition in business	3.47±1.142	-0.229**	0.043	-0.234**
Improved efficiency of business	3.13±1.116	0.209**	0.051	0.209**
Increased my number of professional contacts	3.12±1.229	-0.043	0.049	-0.047
Helped me collaborate with others	3.23±1.164	0.199**	0.051	0.208**
Reduced cost of supplies	3.41±1.110	0.071	0.044	0.071
Helped to receive feedback related to business	3.15±1.101	-0.145**	0.046	-0.143**
Increased my income	2.71±1.220	0.341**	0.042	0.373**

R=0.544, R²=0.296, F(7, 478)= 28.722, p=0.000, where ** significance at p<0.01

Correlations between factors of social capital and economic growth

From Table 6, it is evident that a strong positive correlation existed between Groups and Networks and Social cohesion factors of social capital (r=0.710**) resulting from social media exposure, i.e., as the formation of activity groups, development of trust for others and establishment of links with individuals out of their own community improved from social media usage, intimacy perceived among themselves, their sense of belonging to the community and their active participation in the community also improved significantly, despite their differences in ethnic backgrounds. Formation of groups (r=0.616**) and social cohesion achieved within groups (r=0.681**) through social media strongly assisted empowerment of individuals by improving access to information on market conditions, political activities, public services, etc.

Significant moderate and strong correlations between factors of social capital and economic growth can also be observed from the table. Groups and networks, social cohesion and empowerment enabled from social media exposure improved novelty (r=0.568**, 0.486**, 0.475**) and opportunities (r=0.561**, 0.426**, 0.366**) for betterment of business as well as job performance of individuals. Such a significant enhancement in the performance of individuals in their careers in terms of compensation, alternate job offers, resource exchanges, etc., as a result of better knowledge and behavioural modifications resulting from social media exposure, i.e., as a result of social capital has also been reported by researchers such as Hsu and Hung (2013). Finally, as novelty of products, business practices, etc. improved, a strong enhancement in opportunities to improve efficiency in business as well as at work, to gain a competitive edge and thereby progress in the overall income is effected.

Table 6.

Correlations between social capital and economic growth

Factors	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Groups and networks (1)	1				
Social cohesion (2)	.710**	1			
Empowerment (3)	.616**	.681**	1		
Novelty (4)	.568**	.486**	.475**	1	
Opportunities (5)	.561**	.426**	.366**	.627**	1

** significance at p<0.01

6. CONCLUSION

The present research empirically analyzed if social media participation affected social capital and economic growth of rural Bengaluru. The findings revealed that the social media enhanced social

capital mainly by promoting social cohesion as well as through groups and networks and empowerment of the rural people. Social media exposure also enhanced economic growth of the rural respondents predominantly by introducing opportunities and by enabling innovation. The study also identified significant associations between the various factors of social capital and economic growth, posing significant implications for development of rural regions.

7. IMPLICATIONS

As posited by 'Developments capitals' theory, to promote socio-economic growth of a region, it is crucial to strengthen participation and collaboration among the community people (Carnegie, 2009). The present study exhibits that social media plays a major role in achieving such a kind of social capital and economic growth, which according to the theory will definitively lead to rural development. Results of the present study thus offer valuable insights to the rural development agencies regarding the important aspects contributing to the overall social capital achieved through social media. However, social media should be handled carefully as minimization of social capital as well as economic growth is also possible as observed in the present study. In the future, the same study can be repeated by controlling for variations in demographics and among rural communities of other districts to improve the generalizability of the study findings.

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