Government websites and social media’s influence on
government-public relationships

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Recent years have witnessed the increasing use of online media, such as websites, blogs, and social networking sites, by the government for various public relations purposes. These government communication channels are often regarded to promote democratic values and public trust in government by helping the government provide the public with information and respond to citizen inquiries. Further, such channels help the public provide the government with feedback. This study questions whether individuals’ experience with government websites and social media do, in fact, influence their perception of the government-public relationship (represented by public trust in government). The results, which are based on a nationwide survey of more than 2000 American citizens, showed support for a positive relationship between this online experience and public trust in government. In particular, experiences with informational online services and social media were associated with greater trust in government at the local and state levels, while those with transactional online services conveyed greater trust in the federal government. However, successful experience with the channels was more important than the experience itself, and an unsuccessful experience could even backfire in terms of trust in government.

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1. Introduction

It is not surprising that many governments have difficulties with the deteriorating public trust in government. In the US, for example, the level of trust that citizens have in the government has been continuously declining over the few decades (Jones, 2008; Thomas, 1998), and people scored less than two points on a 1-to-7 scale for their trust in government (Schario & Konisky, 2008). According to a national survey conducted recently in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2012), only 33% expressed positive opinions in the federal government. Although US citizens perceived their state and local governments more favorably (52% and 61%, respectively) (Pew Research Center, 2012) and there has been a signal of ripping trust in government recovering from the 2009 financial crisis (Gallup, 2012), public skepticism, inactiveness, and indifference have been a long-held concern of government that indicates unfavorable government-public relationships, threatening democratic values (Hong, Park, Lee, & Park, 2012; Kim, 2005).

Meanwhile, advanced communication technologies, such as the Internet and social media, have changed how the government communicates with its citizens, and some studies have suggested that innovative modes of communication can improve the transparency of the government and encourage citizens to participate in the government’s decision-making process (Harris, McKenzie, & Rentfro, 2009; Sadeghi, 2012; Searson & Johnson, 2010; Welch & Hinnant, 2003). For example,
Searson and Johnson (2010) argued that a high-quality government website can foster credibility of both the websites and the government. In his presidential memorandum, US President Barack Obama (2009) emphasized the role of online media in improving the transparency of government information, soliciting public feedback, encouraging public participation and increasing collaboration within the government as well as between the public and private sectors, adding that such efforts can ensure public trust and strengthen democratic values and operational effectiveness and efficiency. As such, enhanced transparency, government responsiveness, and citizen participation, resulting from innovative communication technology, are expected to contribute to the central foundation of democracy.

However, although governments worldwide have made increasing use of online media for public relations purposes, few studies have examined the impact of online government channels on individual citizens in the field of public relations. In this regard, the purpose of this study is to explore, if any, how individuals’ experiences with government online channels influence their perception of the government-public relationship, particularly the level of trust in government.

2. Literature review

2.1. The government’s use of online media and democracy

Broom (2009) explained the importance of the government’s public relations activity in terms of two democratic principles: the government’s responsibility to report its activities to citizens and the need for public support and participation for effective government performance. Similarly, Lee (2012) emphasized that the purpose of the government’s public relations activity is to fulfill its responsibilities by providing citizens with the necessary information and services and by responding to their needs. Given such importance, some legislations, such as the Freedom of Information Act, impose the government to take this responsibility, which ensure citizens access to government information and prompt the responses of the government to external demands (e.g., citizen requests) (Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012).

The emergence of online media (e.g., government websites) has been expected to provide the government with more opportunities to better fulfill its responsibilities. In particular, previous studies have addressed the role of online media in terms of government transparency and interactivity (Harris et al., 2009; Sadeghi, 2012; Searson & Johnson, 2010; Welch & Hinnant, 2003). According to Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2012), transparency is defined as “the extent to which an entity reveals relevant information about its own decision processes, procedures, functioning, and performance” (p. 3). In the government context, the transparency principle implies that information regarding government policies, activities and other performance should be available to citizens in a timely manner; moreover, it should be simple and clear to understand (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2012). Government transparency became an important issue as online media has allowed the information provision of the government to be more effective and efficient as they reach a wider group of citizens at a relatively low cost with less spatial and temporal limitations (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2012; Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012; Lee, Chang, & Berry, 2011; Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005) The nature of online media are believed to facilitate citizens’ access to government information and thus promote their information sharing and participation in the government’s decision-making process (Searson & Johnson, 2010). Also, governments are able to respond to citizen inquires in a more timely manner as well as reflect citizen feedback in the administrative processes. In this regard, government online media have the potential to ground citizen-government interactions and communication, which represent the essence of democracy.

Likewise, the concept of e-government or Government 2.0 highlights the government’s use of communication technologies, such as the Internet and social media. The United Nations (2002) defined e-government as a system of government “utilizing the Internet and the world-wide-web for delivering government information and services to citizens” (p. 1). The United Nations (2012) further classified the government’s online services into the following four categories: (a) emerging information services, (b) enhanced information services, (c) transactional services and (d) connected services. Emerging and enhanced information services refer to the delivery of government information to the citizens through various online channels. Emerging information services address basic government information on services, policies, regulations, and laws (e.g., service hours, announcements, and website addresses), whereas enhanced information services involve the use of more sophisticated formats and techniques, such as video clips, downloadable files, and statistics (United Nations, 2012). Transactional services include both financial and nonfinancial services offered online, such as filing tax returns, applying for a birth certificate, and resolving various issues associated with civil affairs (United Nations, 2012). Connected services involve a two-way communication between the government and citizens in the administrative process and often make use of online surveys, one-to-one interviews (Q & A), and e-petitions (United Nations, 2012). Along the same line, Scott (2006) measured the quality of websites of local governments on a four-point scale: (1) “no communication or service”, (2) “one-way information flow”, (3) “two-way interactions”, and (4) “full-service transactions”. In a similar yet simpler way, Norris and Reddick (2013) classified the functions of e-government into two groups: (a) information and communication and (b) transaction-based services. However, it has been highlighted that, although the e-government of governments tends to be moving toward interaction-based and transaction-based services, the current e-government applications remain mainly as a one-way communication (Norris & Reddick, 2013; Welch & Hinnant, 2003).

Meanwhile, Searson and Johnson (2010) emphasized the advantage of advanced functions of government websites that can facilitate a two-way communication between the government and citizens and thus promote transparency, usability, and interactivity. The enhanced interactivity and usability of government websites supported by advanced technologies
go beyond the simple provision of government information. For example, highly sophisticated interactivity can be established by tools, such as blogs, forums, online petitions, polls, and surveys, whereas providing only contact information (e.g., e-mail addresses and telephone numbers) illustrates low interactivity (Searson & Johnson, 2010). Similarly, Welch and Hinnant (2003) identified transparency and interactivity as two major components of government websites. They suggested that transparency is achieved primarily by information dissemination and that interactivity is ensured by being open and responsive to citizens’ input (Welch & Hinnant, 2003).

Social media have played an increasingly important role in the two-way communication between the government and citizens. Because social media are based on the connectedness of users through their immediate and direct communication or sharing of information, opinions, and ideas, government-citizen communication through social media have greater chances to be dialogic and interactive. Typical social media channels include blogs, microblogs (e.g., Twitter), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), and multimedia sharing services (e.g., YouTube and Flickr) (Sadeghi, 2012; Scott, 2006; Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2011). According to the 2011 e-government survey by Norris and Reddick (2011), 67.5% of local governments use at least one social medium, and among the social media channels, Facebook (92.4%), Twitter (69.8%), and YouTube (45.3%) were the most popular communication channels of government.

In spite of its inherent interactive nature, the interactivity on social media is sometimes suspected in government communication. For example, analyzing 1800 postings on Twitter accounts of 60 government agencies, Waters and Williams (2011) indicated that the updates were often used to provide information and share multimedia resources (e.g., video clips), but not to engage government-citizen conversations. However, Waters and Williams (2011) did not disrespect the value of one-way communication on Twitter, noting that a one-way communication between government and citizens are often necessary; further, a one-way model and a two-way model are not exclusively separate in government communication. Nevertheless, they urged government communicators not to be “overly promotional” on the social media site (Waters & Williams, 2011). With prevalent expectations for the two-way interaction, compared with traditional websites, social media have been defined as “a collection of Internet-based tools that enhance communication through openness and interactive capabilities” (Sadeghi, 2012, p. 126), and are often referred to as Web 2.0 or Government 2.0 (Gov 2.0) in the context of government. According to the introduction of the Obama administration, Gov 2.0 focuses on (a) promoting social media channels of government agencies, (b) providing citizens with an online space for posting suggestions and feedback, and (c) integrating a diverse spectrum of interactive channels, such as blogs and online forums, under traditional government websites (Sadeghi, 2012). By doing so, the government can increase its transparency and efficiency in information and service delivery and also ensure inter- and intra-agency cooperation (Sadeghi, 2012).

2.2. Public trust in government

As scholars in public relations have embraced the relational perspective, the organization-public relationship (OPR) has become a focal concept as part of a management function of public relations (Ledingham, 2006). Correspondingly, a number of studies (e.g., Huang, 2001; Ki & Hon, 2007; Ledingham & Brunning, 1998; Ledingham, 2006) have explicated OPR conceptually and proposed adequate measures. Although their conceptualization varies to a certain extent, there is a general consensus that trust is an important component of any OPR. Similarly, public trust in government has been regarded as a key indicator of the quality of government-public relationships, regardless of sociopolitical or cultural differences (Boeckmann & Tyler, 2002; Kim, 2005; Tsang, Burnett, Hills, & Welford, 2009; Wang & Wart, 2007).

Whether or not an organization is trustworthy can be determined in terms of many aspects. For example, Scott (2007) conceptualized trust as integrity, dependability, and competence, and others have identified reliability, consistency, honesty, and accountability as the major components of trust (Ki & Hon, 2007; Moorman, Deshpande & Zaltman, 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). For public trust in government specifically, Thomas (1998) identified the characteristic, process, and institution-based dimensions of public trust in government. Wang and Wart (2007) defined public trust in government as the extent to which the public perceives the government as doing the right thing and performing its assigned duties, and the government officials as being fair and driven by public interest. Regardless of the conceptual scope of public trust in government, it is undisputable that the base of the democratic system is rooted in citizen trust in government (Im, Cho, Porumbescu, & Park, 2012) because it causes diverse behavioral and perceptual consequences that may influence the operations of the government.

An individual’s trust in an organization, including the government, is well-known to have considerable influence on the individual’s perceptions, attitudes and behaviors. More specifically, those individuals with a high level of trust in an organization are more likely to be satisfied with the organization (Huang, 2001; Ki & Hon, 2007), cooperative and compliant with respect to the organization’s policies (Kim, 2005; Richey & Ikeda, 2009; Tsang et al., 2009; Tyler, 2003), emotionally attached to the organization (Ledingham, 2001), and committed to the organization (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Ki & Hon, 2007; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

2.3. The influence of online channels on government-public relationships

As information and communication technologies expand public experience with organizations (in both private and public sectors) into the online environments, how such emerging channels influence public relations practices and further organization-public relationships became an important agenda (See a special issue for public relations and social media of
Journal of Public Relations Research, edited by Kelleher (2010), for more extensive discussion). Although still under scholarly dispute, some studies have demonstrated the potential role of government websites in government–public relationships, particularly public trust in government (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Welch & Hinnant, 2003; Welch et al., 2005). For example, Welch and colleagues showed that the level of public trust in government is positively related to the extent to which citizens are satisfied with online government–citizen interactions and believe that government websites provide reliable information (Welch & Hinnant, 2003; Welch et al., 2005). Welch et al. (2005) argued that the use of government websites does not guarantee greater public trust in government, but instead, it is positively related to the extent to which the users are satisfied with their experience with the websites. Welch and Hinnant (2003) portrayed that the use of a government website has an indirect effect on trust in government through the mediation of the perceived level of the website’s transparency and interactivity. In this regard, Welch and Hinnant (2003) suggested that the two major contributions of government websites are the perceived improvement of government transparency and interactivity. Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) produced somewhat mixed results. They found a significant effect of the use of government websites on public trust in government at the local level but not at the state or federal level, and argued that the higher level of trust at the local level may stem from citizens’ favorable evaluation of the local government’s responsiveness while interacting with it through its websites (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Particularly for public trust in federal government, previous studies rarely found a direct link with the individual use of the government website (Morgeson, VanAmburg, & Mithas, 2011; West, 2004). For example, the responses from 800 users of the federal government website indicated that the individual adoption of federal government online services was not associated with his/her trust in the federal government; however, it appeared to influence his/her confidence in the future performance of the particular agency that s/he interacted, which may lead to stronger trust in the federal government overall (Morgeson et al., 2011).

As such, the influence of individual experience with government online channels on public trust in government is somewhat complex to generalize. However, what is relatively consistent across studies is that those individuals who use government websites are more likely to perceive the government as transparent and open to citizen monitoring, responsive to citizens’ input, and accessible and accountable to citizens (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Scott, 2006; Welch & Hinnant, 2003). Thus, the role of online channels was emphasized in increasing citizen participation opportunities and reducing the information gap between the government and citizens (Bertot et al., 2010; Welch et al., 2005). In addition, government websites also facilitate citizen involvement or engagement in public issues by promoting citizen-to-citizen communication as well as government-to-citizen communication (Levenshus, 2010; Scott, 2006). For example, regarding the 2008 presidential campaign, Levenshus (2010) demonstrated how a strategic employment of participatory online channels can contribute to building and maintaining a strong voter–candidate relationship. The online platforms played a significant role in supporters’ communication with each other and organization of events, which reinforced a sense of community and fund-raising among supporters (Levenshus, 2010). More importantly, these online supporters reached out further into the offline environment (Levenshus, 2010). To sum up, either directly or indirectly, previous studies viewed the potential of government online channels to reverse the long-term decline in public trust in government by enhancing government services to citizens, improving access to government information, and encouraging government-citizen interactions (Morgeson et al., 2011).

2.4. Research questions

Although an increasing number of governments have made use of online channels, such as websites and social media, few studies have examined this important trend in the context of the government’s public relations efforts. In this regard, the present study examines the influence of individuals’ experience with government websites on their perception of the government–public relationship, particularly their trust in government, by considering the following research question:

RQ1: How is an individual’s experience with government websites related to his or her trust in government?

As discussed earlier, online channels managed by the government may have different functions. In this regard, the study examines the influence of three major online services of the government using the following research questions:

RQ2a: How is the use of informational online services related to public trust in government?
RQ2b: How is the use of transactional online services related to public trust in government?
RQ2c: How is the use of social media services related to public trust in government?

3. Method

3.1. Dataset description

This study used a dataset of a national survey on Americans’ use of the Internet, which was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International and released by Pew Research Center. The survey was completed in December 2009, selecting approximately 2200 adults based on the random-digit dialing (RDD) technique using both landline and mobile connections in order to ensure the representativeness of the sample (See Pew Research Center, 2010, for detailed information about sampling and data collection procedure).
3.2. Measurement

Trust in (a) the federal government, (b) state government and (c) local government was measured respectively by asking the respondents how much they think they can trust each level of government with the four options: “just about always” (coded as 4), “most of the time” (coded as 3), “only some of the time” (coded as 2) or “never” (coded as 1).

Respondents were classified into four groups based on the use of government websites: (a) non-Internet users (n = 515, 25.0%), (b) Internet users with no government website experience (n = 509, 24.7%), (c) unsuccessful government website users (n = 224, 10.9%), and (d) successful government website users (n = 816, 39.5%). First, non-Internet users were identified as those who answered “no” to the following two questions: “Do you use the Internet, at least occasionally?” and “Do you send or receive email, at least occasionally?” Among Internet users, some visited government websites, whereas others did not (including those who recalled no visit to a government website). The latter was defined as Internet users without government website experience. Government website users were again divided into two groups: those who successfully obtained what they needed (i.e., successful government website users) and those who did not (i.e., unsuccessful government website users). These two types of users were identified based on the question “How much of what you were trying to do on the government website did you succeed in doing” with four response options: “everything” (coded as 4), “most of it” (coded as 3), “only some of it” (coded as 2), and “none of it” (coded as 1). Respondents who answered either 3 or 4 were classified as successful government website users, and those who answered either 1 or 2 were classified as unsuccessful ones.

Experiences with government websites were further explored, and for this, some questions regarding their use of informational services and transactional services were selected. Specifically, respondents were asked a set of yes/no questions about the use of 15 types of informational services through government websites during the past 12 months. Some of these questions addressed whether the respondents have “looked for information about a public policy or issue of interest”, “downloaded government forms”, “looked up what services a government agency provides”, and “gotten advice or information from a government agency about a health or safety issue” online with their local, state, or federal government. The number of “yes” responses to these questions was summed in order to derive a score ranging from 0 to 15 for a respondent’s individual experience with government websites in terms of informational services. Here, the higher the score, the greater the respondent’s online experience with informational services was. For a group comparison, the respondents were put into three groups: (a) no informational service use (a score of 0; n = 297), (b) a low level of informational service use (a score between 1 and 4; n = 658), and (c) a high level of informational service use (a score of 5 or higher; n = 594). To distinguish between the low- and high-use groups, the cutoff was determined by rounding off the mean score of 3.85.

The second type of government website use was transactional service, which was measured using three questions. Respondents were asked whether in the past 12 months, they had (1) renewed his or her driver’s license or auto registration online, (2) applied for fishing, hunting, or other recreational license online, and (3) paid a fine such as a parking ticket online. The number of “yes” responses was first summed (yes = 1; no = 0). Due to the fact that a large number of respondents (875 out of 1549) had no experience with transactional services, the respondents were divided into two groups: those with some experience using transactional services and those without.

The extent to which each respondent engaged in communication with the government through social media was measured using six yes/no questions, addressing whether the respondent had (1) “followed or become a fan of a government agency or official through their page on a social networking site”, (2) “posted any comments on their page on a social networking site”, (3) “read the blog of a government agency or official”, (4) “posted any comments on their blog”, (5) “followed a government agency or official on Twitter”, and (6) “communicated directly with an agency or official using Twitter”. The “yes” response was coded as 1 and 0 otherwise, and the total score was used to indicate the level of government-public communication through social media. The higher the score, the greater the use of social media was. Only 261 (16.8%) out of 1549 Internet users appeared to have some experience participating in government social media channels. The respondents were compared in two groups: those with any experience with government social media and those without.

3.3. Analysis

Using SPSS, a series of multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted in order to examine the differences in the level of public trust in government at the local, state, and federal levels between the groups classified according to the use of websites and social media of the governments. A MANOVA is preferred over multiple ANOVAs when there are moderate levels of correlations among the dependent variables because the analysis takes the interdependence among dependent variables into account (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). In this study, Pearson’s correlation coefficients between the three public trust measures (i.e., trust in local, state, and federal government) ranged from .468 to .579, all of which were statistically significant at p < .001.

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1 Although the level of trust in government was measured on an ordinal scale, the mean scores were calculated for the purpose of a group comparison.
Table 1
Public trust in government based on the use of government websites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent characteristics</th>
<th>Non-internet users (N = 515)</th>
<th>Internet users</th>
<th>Total (N = 2064)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With no government website experience (N = 509)</td>
<td>With government website experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsuccessful (N = 224)</td>
<td>Successful (N = 816)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in government</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>2.17 (.822)</td>
<td>2.00 (.670)^a</td>
<td>2.21 (.730)^b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>2.22 (.795)^a</td>
<td>2.16 (.697)^c</td>
<td>2.34 (.710)^abc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>2.35 (.871)^a</td>
<td>2.24 (.712)^c</td>
<td>2.50 (.730)^abc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Means with same superscripted letters differed significantly at the .05 level.

4. Results

4.1. Description of respondents

For a more rigorous statistical analysis, 194 respondents were excluded from the original dataset of a total of 2258 respondents because of one or more missing or invalid responses (e.g., "I do not know") to the selected variables. Among these remaining 2064 respondents, 55.3% were female and 44.7% were male. Their ages ranged from 18 to 95 (Mean = 50.1, SD = 18.12). As for race, a large majority (80.4%) were Caucasians, followed by African-Americans (11.8%), Asians/Pacific Islanders (1.6%), mixed (1.8%), and Native Americans (1.4%). In addition, about half of the respondents (54.3%) were married while the other half had either been never married (16.2%), divorced (10.0%), or widowed (8.9%). In terms of education, 8.7% had no high school degree, 29.5% had a high school degree, 26.7% had some college or vocational school education, 20.5% had a four-year college degree, and 14.0% had a postgraduate degree.

4.2. Statistical tests of the influence of online experience with the government

For the first research question (RQ1), a MANOVA test showed that the combined trust measures (a combination of public trust in local, state, and federal government) were significantly different in the government website experience group (Wilks’ λ = .982, Pillai’s Trace = .018, p < .001; partial-η² = .006). Specifically, for an individual trust measure at each level, there were significant differences in the level of trust in government at the federal (F(3, 2060) = 4.984, p = .002), state (F(3, 2060) = 5.337, p = .001), and local levels (F(3, 2060) = 9.856, p < .001) between the four groups based on experiences with government websites. Table 1 reveals the group differences in the level of trust in government based on a post hoc analysis. Successful government website users showed the highest level of trust in government at all three levels of the government. Successful government website users showed a higher level of trust in government at the state and local levels than the other three groups (non-Internet users, Internet users with no government website experience, and unsuccessful government website users), which reported almost the same level of trust in government at the state and local levels. For the federal government level, unsuccessful government website users (M = 2.00, SD = .670) showed a significantly lower level of trust in government, even compared to the non-Internet users (M = 2.17, SD = .822) as well as successful government website users (M = 2.21, SD = .731).

To better examine the respondents’ experience with government websites, the use of government websites was classified into two types: informational service use and transactional service use (RQ2a & RQ2b). Because 515 non-Internet users were irrelevant, a total of 1549 respondents were considered for further analyses. MANOVAs resulted in a significant difference in public trust in government as a whole among groups with varied levels of government informational online services (Wilks’ λ = .987, Pillai’s Trace = .013, p = .009; partial-η² = .004). There were no significant differences in the level of trust in government between the three groups of informational service users at the federal level (F(2, 1546) = .726, p = .484). However, those respondents making extensive use of informational online services showed a significantly higher level of trust in government at the local and state levels than those making little or no use of these services (F(2, 1546) = 3.249, p = .039, for the state government; F(2, 1546) = 6.667, p = .001, for the local government). Table 2 shows the scores for trust for each group.

On the other hand, the use of transactional services was not significantly different in the combination of the three levels of public trust in government (Wilks’ λ = .996, Pillai’s Trace = .004, p = .093; partial-η² = .004). In spite of an insignificant result, separate ANOVAs, with each trust measure as a dependent variable, were conducted in order to check if there were subtle differences depending on the level of the government. Differences were found based on the experiences with transactional service only in terms of public trust at the federal level (F(1, 1547) = 5.925, p = .015). That is, those respondents who used transactional services (M = 2.21, SD = .721) showed a higher level of trust in the federal government than those who made no use of these services (M = 2.12, SD = .733). However, there was no relationship between the respondent’s experience with transactional services and his or her trust in the state (F(1, 1547) = 3.600, p = .058) or local (F(1, 1547) = 2.199, p = .138) government.

There was a significant relationship between how the respondent communicated with the government through social media and his or her trust in government (RQ2c). Public trust in local, state, and federal government as a whole turned out
to be varying between those who have experience with government social media and those without (Wilks’ Λ = .992, Pillai’s Trace = .008, p = .007; partial-η² = .008). The influences were particularly significant at the state (F(1, 1547) = 9.862, p = .002) and local (F(1, 1547) = 9.104, p = .003) level trust. Those respondents who interacted with the government through social media showed significantly higher levels of trust in government at the state (M = 2.41, SD = .671) and local (M = 2.53, SD = .752) levels than those who did not (M = 2.25, SD = .736 for the state government; M = 2.37, SD = .764 for the local government). However, there was little difference in trust in government at the federal level between those with some social media experience and those with no such experience (F(1, 1547) = 2.676, p = .102).

5. Discussion

5.1. Major issues

Online communication channels, such as websites and social media, have become a popular public relations tool for many governments, and such advanced communication technologies are often speculated to enhance public trust in government by facilitating government transparency and government-citizen interactions, both of which are a central foundation of democracy (Sadeghi, 2012; Seearson & Johnson, 2010; Welch & Hinnant, 2003). Thus, this study empirically examined whether individuals’ experience with such online channels increased their trust in government.

Previous studies in the field of public relations have typically paid little attention to the public sector. If any, it was mostly either a historical case study or descriptive analysis (Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2010). The current study attempted to meet scholarly expectation for empirical studies in government public relations. Particularly, for more rigorous empirical testing, this study, first, embraced public trust at three different levels, simultaneously. Additionally, this study identified varied functions of government services provided through government websites and social media and examined the impacts of specific functions (e.g., informational services, transactional services, and social media services).

In general, the results indicate a positive relationship between the respondent’s favorable experience with government websites and his or her trust in government. In addition, among the four groups (non-Internet users, Internet users with no government website experience, unsuccessful government website users, and successful government website users), unsuccessful government website users showed the lowest level of trust in government. This results corresponds with previous studies by Welch and colleagues (Welch & Hinnant, 2003; Welch et al., 2005), who emphasized the mediating role of user satisfaction in the influence of government websites on individual users. Thus, the results suggest that government websites should focus more on providing and updating high-quality information than on short-term eye-catching events to attract Internet users to the government websites.

On the other hand, there was little difference between non-Internet users, Internet users with no government website experience, and unsuccessful government website users. In this vein, Welch and Hinnant (2003) found that an individual’s Internet use, in general, has little effect on his or her trust in government, although frequent Internet users are more likely to access government websites (Welch & Wong, 2001). During the initial stages of the Internet, Internet users were believed to have some distinct characteristics, such as a high level of education or socioeconomic status. However, such distinct characteristics may have disappeared as a result of the extensive penetration of the Internet in recent years. More specifically, the digital divide, which refers to the gap between those with access to online information and those without, may have narrowed substantially as a result of the deep Internet penetration worldwide. In this regard, the more important factor may be the extent to which the users of this online vehicle find information available online to be valuable and satisfactory. For satisfactory content, structure, and function of online government channels, Morgeson and Mithas’s (2009) study may

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public trust in government based on online experiences with informational, transactional, and social media services.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Informational services</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust in government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No experience (N = 297)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low use (1 - 4) (N = 658)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High use (5+) (N = 594)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N = 1549)</td>
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| **Transactional services**                                   |
| Trust in government                                         |
| Federal                                                     | State | Local |
| No experience (N = 875)                                     | 2.12 (.733) | 2.25 (.726) | 2.32 (.725) |
| With experience (N = 674)                                   | 2.21 (.721) | 2.32 (.725) | 2.43 (.741) |
| Total (N = 1549)                                            | 2.15 (.729) | 2.28 (.727) | 2.40 (.764) |

| **Social media services**                                   |
| Trust in government                                         |
| Federal                                                     | State | Local |
| No experience (N = 1326)                                    | 2.14 (.736) | 2.25 (.736) | 2.37 (.764) |
| With experience (N = 276)                                   | 2.22 (.694) | 2.41 (.671) | 2.53 (.752) |
| Total (N = 1549)                                            | 2.15 (.729) | 2.28 (.727) | 2.40 (.764) |

Note: Means with same superscripted letters or symbol differed significantly at the .05 level.
provide government communicators with a grateful insight. According to the study (Morgeson & Mithas, 2009), the end users of the federal government website evaluated government websites less positively in terms of customization, navigation, organization, reliability, and satisfaction, compared to their major corporate counterparts. What is more, although users reported higher rates in terms of government website retention and recommendation, the authors presumed it resulting from no alternative channels for government information (Morgeson & Mithas, 2009).

In terms of the use of informational services, there was no difference regarding the public trust in government at the federal level between those respondents who made no use, little use, and substantial use of such services. On the other hand, those who made substantial use of informational services were more likely to show trust in government at the local and state levels than those making little or no use of them. Overall, the results suggest that an individual’s interaction with government websites and social media is more likely to influence his or her perception of state and local governments than the federal government. Relatively weak associations between individual experiences with federal government websites and trust in federal government are consistent with what other scholars found previously (Morgeson et al., 2011; West, 2004). Regarding such a pattern, Gallup (2012) pointed out that, not only do citizens perceive the federal government more distant to themselves compared to the local or state government, but their perceptions are significantly impacted by the partisan nature based on political identification. Similarly, highlighting that political party identification was only a significant predictor for explaining the level of public trust and confidence, West (2004) argued that long-established public cynicism toward the federal government is not changed radically even with the favor of digital or electronic government communication tools. Previous studies (Blendon et al., 1997; Orren, 1997) also have suggested that, due to differences in the nature of tasks at various levels of government, citizens often experience the federal government vicariously through mediated channels, such as television news, whereas they tend to interact with local and state governments in more direct ways, such as personal experience. In other words, even when individuals make successful use of information from the federal government websites, their favorable experience may be diluted by the unpleasant performance of the federal government (e.g., an economic recession and corruption), which is often reported in national newscasts. Previous studies have suggested that, generally speaking, local and state governments are perceived to be more responsive to social issues and concerns facing citizens than the federal government (Blendon et al., 1997; Schario & Konisky, 2008). It is feasible that citizens tend to prefer and trust those government entities with which they have direct interactions. Under such circumstances, social media channels managed by local and state governments may be able to provide citizens with better opportunities for direct interactions.

In this study, the respondents’ experience with social media had a positive effect on their trust in government at the local and state levels. Those respondents who interacted with the government through social media were more likely to trust state and local governments than those who did not. Ironically, however, the online use of transactional services (e.g., renewing a driver’s license and registering an automobile) showed a difference in public trust in government only at the federal level. This may suggest that citizens are likely to perceive such transactional services as requiring substantial resources at a higher level of government even when they are in fact managed at the local or state level. Government services at each level of government are closely interrelated and thus cannot be considered separately. However, for more favorable relationships with citizens, government communicators should strategically plan their deployment of online channels by carefully considering this study’s findings. More specifically, state and local governments should prioritize their interactions with citizens by emphasizing social media, updating high-quality information, and enhancing the accessibility of information on government websites. In this regard, regular monitoring and evaluative research are desirable to acknowledge the long- and short-term effectiveness of online channels and improve the quality of online information and services of government. The evaluation program may include a wide array of formal and informal research, such as measurements of communication outcomes (e.g., the frequency of website visits, retention time, viewership/readership characteristics), periodic user satisfaction surveys, and collection of feedback and comments of the users. What the findings of this study suggest is that online government tools do not necessarily guarantee successful results simply by their existence.

According to the statistics in this study, a large majority of the respondents (83%) had no experience using social media for interacting with the government. Although these services are relatively new and the numbers might have increased after the survey in 2009, this result implies both opportunities and challenges for government communicators given the potential to improve favorable government–citizen relationships. Having citizen participation as a core of democracy, citizens’ following a social media channel of government and posting a comment or engaging in a short conversation via online channels could be a trivial yet elemental step of more in-depth citizen participation in the decision-making process and provision of citizen input into government performance. The emerging channels, such as Twitter and Facebook, are important, as Grimmelmanhuijisen and Meijer (2012) noted, because they are likely to work well for those with less interest and knowledge in government performance. Meanwhile, in order to increase the overall accessibility of government online services, a personalized online hub that integrates websites and social medial channels of local, state, and federal governments is recommended. As West (2004) proposed, a one-stop web hub or portal that integrates diverse online channels of government institutions and agencies at different levels may not only increase the overall accessibility of government online services, but also provide the first spot for those who need government information, communication, and services.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study does not neglect the values and insights from the government communication decision wheel, as suggested by Liu and colleagues (Horsley, Liu, & Levenshus, 2010; Liu & Horsley, 2007; Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2010). The government communication decision wheel (Horsley et al., 2010; Liu & Horsley, 2007; Liu et al., 2010)
proposed eight factors that make public relations practices in the public sector different from those in the private sector, including larger societal influences (e.g., politics, laws, federalism), work environments (e.g., extreme media and public investigation, lack of managerial supports and professional development opportunities), and unfavorable citizen perception of government communication. The present study bears the potential influences of those factors on the government communicators’ management of information and services via government websites and social media and its consequences on public trust in government. However, with no adequate investigation, it might be beyond the scope of this study to discuss the validity of those factors in detail. What this study can add to the literature is that, as diverse formats of online channels are introduced into the government communication environment, the distinction between mediated and direct communication channels through which four public sector microenvironments interact with the public became blurry and thus need more discussion on the two axes of the government communication decision wheel.

According to Hiebert (2005), the upside of innovative communication technologies is their potential for facilitating public dialog and shaping useful public relationships. At the same time, their downside is that they can be used wrongfully as a means for propaganda by those who seek to control the technologies (Hiebert, 2005). Similarly, Gelders and Ihlen (2010) indicated that the government’s communication channels may be weakened as a tool for government propaganda. From the citizens’ viewpoint, their expectations for government transparency and interactivity have increased with advances in communication technologies (Welch et al., 2005). In this regard, as the findings of this study showed, the use of government websites and social media may backfire if citizens’ needs or expectations are not sufficiently met. In addition, given the dominance of a one-way communication over a two-way communication in the government’s online space (Welch & Hinnant, 2003; Waters & Williams, 2011), it is worth noting that citizens showed relatively low satisfaction with transactional services and interactivity while they reported fairly high satisfaction with the information from government websites (Welch et al., 2005).

5.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

In spite of the scholarly and practical contributions of this study, there are some limitations and the results should be interpreted with caution. First, although there are many potential factors that may influence public trust in government, this study focused on an individual’s personal experience with government websites and social media. It did not control for other factors that may influence the use of the Internet, government websites and social media. According to Hong et al. (2012), citizens are not homogeneous, and therefore a wide range of factors, such as demographic characteristics (e.g., income, gender, and education), media use, social cognition, and participation in social groups, should be comprehensively considered in order to identify their distinct characteristics, to understand the level of their trust in government, and ultimately to establish and maintain better government-public relationships. Particularly, citizen trust in federal government has been known to be strongly associated with personal predisposition, such as political identification, rather than with sporadic (or ephemeral) website experiences (e.g., West, 2004). In this regard, it would be beneficial if future research considers the aforementioned variables to better elucidate their effects on public trust in government.

Second, there were some limitations in measurements because this study employed a secondary dataset. For example, although trust is understood as a multifaceted concept consisting of integrity, dependability, and competence (e.g., Scott, 2007), this study relied on a single question to measure trust. In spite of the validity issues akin to a single-item trust measure, it is often unavoidable, due to other scholarly benefits, for those studies relying on large secondary datasets. In addition, the measures of transactional service use were limited to the three items. Although the selected items have been reported as a few of the popular online transactions (e.g., filing taxes, ordering publications, filing complaints, registering/renewing vehicle registration, applying hunting licenses (West, 2004)), the results of this study regarding transactional online services of the government may have been influenced by such a limitation. Further consideration of various items for these services would help the richer explanations by reflecting on a wide range of transactional services available through government websites. In addition, pinpointing the specific type of government website or social media channel used by each respondent would generate more insightful findings that the current dataset could not answer. Lastly, questions asking social media use are limited in warranting whether government-citizen interaction really happened, or if government parties actually responded to the citizens. Given that government-citizen communication on social media, such as Twitter, was predominantly one-way (e.g., Waters & Williams, 2011), citizens’ posting or contacting via social media may not garner active interaction with the government. Despite these measurement restrictions, noteworthy is that the use of online services was related to the level of public trust in government to a certain extent. Future research should provide stronger empirical support for this argument by better articulating the measures of some key variables, such as public trust in government and transactional services.

Given the adverse consequences of a low level of public trust in government and the importance of favorable government-public relationships in the efficiency and effectiveness of a democratic government, future research should pay more attention to government-public interactions, including those through government websites and social media. With the increasing popularity of online services in the public sector, the ratio of social media and transactional service users to non-users has increased sharply in recent years. Further investigations are prudent for demonstrating how such a growth would change the government-public relationships.
5.3. Conclusions

Using a national sample, this study investigated the influence of government websites and social media as the government’s major public relations tools, and found that they have the potential to facilitate high-quality government-public relationships. It also specified various types of online services by the government (i.e., informational services, transactional services, and social media services) and found differences in the level of trust in the government at the local, state, and federal levels between users and non-users. Given that the government-public relationship is not an immediate outcome of a single communication program, there is a need for a longitudinal study and continuous efforts concerning the government-citizen relationships.

References


