Keeping Users Engaged: The Moderating Role of AI Expectations on Forum Engagement

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Abstract:

Online community forums have long served as essential platforms for fulfilling users' informational and social needs through mechanisms such as knowledge exchange and emotional support. However, with the increasing ubiquity of generative AI tools in users' daily lives, these tools now offer immediate feedback and simulate human-like interactions, thereby emerging as alternative channels for fulfilling user needs. This alternative choice may divert user attention and thereby declining user engagement in online community forums. Although prior studies have examined how to motivate users' forum engagement, but they did not consider the impacts of generative AI tools. That is, current literature remains unclear how AI, as an external technological stimulus, alters the ways in which users engage with forums to fulfill their needs. Based on the uses and gratifications theory, this study investigates how informational enablement and social interaction enablement affect user engagement in online community forums. This study also further examines the moderating role of users' expectations toward generative AI tools. The results indicate that users' expectations of AI, acting as one key moderator, would weaken the positive impact of informational and social interaction enablement on user engagement in online community forums. These findings advance our understanding of user engagement and offer practical implications for forum platform managers seeking to optimize forum design and participation strategies in increasingly AI-mediated digital environments.

Keywords:

Artificial intelligence, online forum, online community, user engagement, survey, structural equation model, uses and gratifications theory.