Understanding Why Young Adults Use Multiple Forms of Social Media: A Uses and Gratifications Approach

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Introduction

Social media has become ubiquitous in today's world and this is underscored by the fact that 88% of marketers are using social media as advertising space (as cited in Whiting & Williams, 2013). Social media applications like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and now Snapchat all target its users with different types of ads that tend to correspond with user activity on each social network. Despite the number of ads targeted at users, people are interacting with social media at an increasing rate. According to the Pew research center 71% online adults use Facebook alone, 26% use Instagram and 23% use Twitter (2014). Facebook is the most established social network, attracting 70% users to engage with the site on a daily basis (2014). People tend not to limit themselves to one social network, 52% of adults have profiles on at least two social networking sites (Pew, 2014). Social network use is very high for a variety of reasons; according to Sundar “the tools offered by modern media have expanded the range and scope of our interactions with media content” (2013). Users are simultaneously active audience members and are able to share with friends, family, and acquaintances that are also members of the network. This allows users to receive a range of gratifications from their interaction with media content across the various networks.

The idea that audience members are able to fulfill some need based off of their media consumption is related to uses and gratifications theory. The basic idea of the theory is that individuals seek out media that fulfills a need, and that this provides gratification to the individual. Research done on uses and gratifications theory has shown that “the use of personal computers has been linked to individuals’ motivations to use the Internet for communication purposes linked to the fulfillment of gratifications such as social identity, interpersonal communication, parasocial interaction, companionship,
escape, entertainment, and surveillance” (Ruggiero, 2009) The uses and gratifications theory will provide a framework for the meanings and objectives behind the use of social media.

This research will apply uses and gratifications theory to understand why individuals seek out different types of social media. Using the theory as a framework, researchers will interpret survey data to discover the reasons why individuals use the different social media platforms available to them. Given the high degree of saturation of social media into our daily media environment this research should be relevant to a large portion of the population.

**Literature Review**

Over the last two decades, the mass media landscape has evolved to make room for new types of devices, channels, and services. Historically, media has referred to a small number of mass communication devices including newspapers, radio, television and film (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Because of this gap in traditional understanding and contemporary use, there is a need to clarify the current academic conception of mass media technology. Mass media communication devices and applications have grown in their definition to include smart phones, tablets, laptops and computers, robots, social media applications and web services (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Computers are the source of all of the other technologies, they allow for the design and use of every application, web service, robot, as well as make possible the operation of most modern electronic devices. Computer based media technologies allow users to interact with media directly by way of human-computer interaction. In addition to this, these technologies
allow users to communicate with other users by way of computer-mediated communication.

Computer-mediated communication is almost completely reliant upon the World Wide Web. The web is a medium that has evolved in many ways from its original purpose. Because of this researchers have described the series of advancements that have occurred in the web as Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. Web 1.0 refers to the way the web was used prior to the development of mass user generated content, which is now pervasive in Web 2.0. As discussed by Kaplan and Haenlein “while applications such as personal web pages, Encyclopedia Britannica Online, and the idea of content publishing belong to the era of Web 1.0, they are replaced by blogs, wikis, and collaborative projects in Web 2.0” (2009). The medium of the web has itself evolved to accommodate more user-generated content. Contrast this with the medium of traditional print media, which is generally not highly interactive, according to Sundar & Limperos (2013) that is due to the structure of letters to the editor and other feedback mechanisms that are not as personal as the media experience offered online. The first iteration of the Internet, dubbed Web 1.0, is akin to traditional print media in the sense that it lacked feedback mechanisms that are afforded by social media and other collaborative projects. Web based social media is more interactive than a newspaper; web users can comment on stories and then read the comments of other users. Taking these things into account, Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (2009).
Users can write directly to newspaper editors via e-mail, can contribute to the news directly through social media, or can use social media to rally users together for a cause. According to Sundar & Limperos the idea of being a user implies volitional action and not simply passive reception of whatever the user is consuming (2013). This relates to the concept of users being active audience members. As opposed to communication flowing in one direction from the media to the audience like in the model proposed by mass society theory, the media audience member becomes a user that is able to give immediate feedback in accordance with their interaction. There are more action possibilities on modern media devices like computers, smart phones, and tablets. These action possibilities result in a lot of user generated content that is shared with other users in one’s own social network. The more networks a user belongs to, the more action possibilities that the user is able to fulfill which may equate to higher levels of gratification.

People use different platforms of social media for several reasons. Research done by Quan-Hasse, et al., (2010), suggests that “...users do not completely replace one form of social media with another because each form supports unique communication needs that the other cannot completely fulfill” (Quan-Hasse, et al., 2010, p. 350). During a study that focused on how people use Facebook and instant messaging to fulfill different needs “Comparative analysis showed that Facebook is about having fun and knowing about the social activities occurring in one’s social network, whereas instant messaging is geared more toward relationship maintenance and development” (Quan-Hasse, et al., 2010, p.350). This trend is active today in the way people consume social media and are
able to use different social media landscapes to gratify their various interpersonal and psychosocial needs.

The uses and gratifications (U&G) theory was originally used to examine traditional media, such as newspapers and television. Recently, studies have used the same theory and applied it to new media, such as social media sites (Quan-Hasse, et al., 2010, p. 351). Recent research utilized a questionnaire to measure Facebook usage, which was identified as the dependent variable. The initial measurement was used from the Pew of American Life Project’s “Social Networking Websites and Teen Survey,” to examine how much the participants used Facebook on an 8-point scale. 1 = never and 8 = several times a day. This is to show how much the users were committed to the site, and to highlight the high rate at which users share information with other people in social networks. Participants were asked how long they had been using Facebook, to receive a measurement of the participant’s experience with the social media site (Quan-Hasse, et al., 2010, p.354). Gratifications that were obtained aided in the measurement of the benefits users gained from using the site, and a 5-point likert-type was used (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) (Quan-Hasse, et al., 2010, p. 364).

From that research, they also looked into why people would join Facebook. Their results showed that there was, “…identified peer pressure, social connectivity, and curiosity as the three key gratifications students sought from joining the site” (Quan-Hasse, et al., 2010, p.350). There were some limitations from the study. There was a limit of the number of items that could be in the questionnaire and it was found that “measuring gratification could be expanded by adding more items, which would add the
same items that were used in the gratifications obtained measure” (Quan-Hasse, et al., 2010, p.350).

Research by Lee and Ma (2012) demonstrates why people share news via social media. To do this they distributed a survey to college students. What they found was people were more willing to share news if they were driven by information seeking and socializing. In addition, it was noted that familiarity with social media also contributed to the willingness to share news. This article is able to present the case that social media is a way for people to exchange information with each other as well as establish their credibility. For example the authors state “In the context of news sharing in social media, individuals tend to do so for others to access relevant content. If the content they share turns out to be credible, they in turn will appear to be credible and be seen as an opinion leader within the community which will then allow them to attain the desired status within that social network” (Le & Ma 2012). Social media has become a medium where people can establish themselves as credible and can share information on issues of interest.

A study performed by Ancu (2012) looked at how older people use Facebook through the lens of the uses and gratifications theory. The methodology for this study included sending an email invitation for a survey was sent out to people in AARP Florida. From the data collected from the survey the researcher was able to conclude that older people use Facebook more as a means for entertainment rather than for social connections, which is different from young adults. The authors were able to conclude that older Facebook users have more intimate social networks that consist of people that they actually have relationships with. In addition, this study also shows that unlike the
average Facebook user, older users do not post at a consistent rate. This allows them to use Facebook more to provide entertainment then for social connections. Overall this study is able to show that age has a role in how and why social media is used.

In Whiting's work "Why People Use Social Media: A Uses and Gratifications Approach", uses and gratifications theory is further examined to understand what and why consumers use social media. This journal begins by defining social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Citing recent research, Whiting highlights the growing trend of marketing investment and use on social media by stating that 88 percent of marketers are using social media and over $60 billion annually is spent on social media advertising (Gil-Or, 2010; Smith, 2011).

The process of conducting this exploratory study consisted of taking in-depth interviews from participants with responses ranging from 150 to 1,000 plus words. Interview questions such as why they use social media, why their friends use social media, what they enjoy about social media, and how often they use social media were presented to participants (Whiting, Williams).

After sifting through results and analyzing them using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) guidelines, the authors identified 10 uses and gratification themes: Social interaction, Information seeking, Pass time, Entertainment, Relaxation, Expression of opinions, Communicatory utility, Convenience utility, Information sharing, and Surveillance/knowledge about others. Each of the 10 themes below were defined and
were followed by results in relation to the specific theme outlined. Participant reasoning and responses for why they use social media can be found in parenthesis.

(1) **Social interaction**: 88 percent of the respondents mentioned using social media for social interaction. (Connect and keep in touch with family and friends, and meet new friends)
(2) **Information seeking**: 80 percent of respondents reported using social media to seek out information. (Find information about sales, events, and businesses)
(3) **Pass time**: 76 percent reported using social media to pass the time. (Pass time at school or work)
(4) **Entertainment**: 64 percent of respondents reported that they used social media as a source of entertainment. (Playing games, listening to music, and watching videos)
(5) **Relaxation**: 60 percent of respondents used social media for relaxation purposes. Over 16 percent of respondents mentioned they use social media to escape from the real world. (Take the mind off things)
(6) **Expression of opinions**: This type of social media use was mentioned by 56 percent of respondents and is defined as using social media to express thoughts and opinions. (Liking postings and photos, commenting on updates, and sharing comments on others postings)
(7) **Communicatory utility**: 56 percent of respondents discussed how they use social media to give them things to talk about with others. (Something to talk about and gossip)
(8) **Convenience utility**: This type of social media use was mentioned by 52 percent of respondents. (Communicate with a lot of people at one time, readily available and has no time restraints)
(9) **Information sharing**: This type of social media use was mentioned by 40 percent of respondents. Information sharing is defined as using social media to share information about you with others. (Post updates and share pictures, advertise their business/market themselves)
(10) **Surveillance/knowledge about others**: This sort of social media usage was mentioned by 32 percent of the respondents and is defined as watching people or things and watching what others are doing. (Spy on people, try and keep up with others)

This study was able to yield fruitful in-depth information in relation to how and why people use social media due to the fact that it conducted interviews with participants instead of Likert style surveys. The benefits of conducting interviews include: face-to-face interaction, clear and concise answers, clarification and reduced confusion, and no limitation on possible answers and responses. The main issue that was raised in the study in relation to conducting interviews was the small sample size and time available.
The current study seeks to explore the themes presented in Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) guidelines. The study seeks to gain understanding of why people subscribe to multiple forms of social media and seeks to address the needs that each fulfills for the user. It is presumed that the user has increased levels of gratification when using multiple forms of social media. The primary research question of this study is: what gratifications do young adults who are members of social networking sites earn from using those sites? The secondary question of this study is: are there specific gratifications earned from either Facebook or Snapchat?

**Methods**

This research will utilize a survey study to determine the uses and gratifications of Facebook and Snapchat.

**Participants**

The participants in this survey are drawn from the student body at George Mason University ages 18 to 30, as it provides the most convenient source of social media users. Participants have also been drawn from the existing social networks of the researchers. In addition these participants were adept and experienced social media users. Studies focusing on Facebook and instant messaging have already been done with college students so some research already exists to compare with. (Quan-Haase, et al., 2010, p.354) As the research is focusing on social media, only those who use it have been included in the research data.

**Procedures**

Online surveys were used to gather the research data. These surveys were distributed via social media sites like Facebook, through word-of-mouth, and through e-mail by the researchers to help insure the participants met the desired demographics. The
following recruitment statement was used to draw participants: *Calling all 18-30 year olds who use Facebook and Snapchat! I am conducting a survey for my research methods class about social media use. It only takes about 10 minutes to complete and can be found by clicking on the following link:*

**Measures**

Basic demographic information including age, gender and race, was collected from participants in order to compare results with other research. In order to measure how heavy a social media user the participant is they were asked which social media platforms they subscribe to as well as how often they use social media. To discover how much a participant is invested in Facebook they were asked about their number of Facebook friends, the nature of these relationships, as well as questions about how they use specific Facebook features (Chat, status updates, uploading photos etc.) Participants were also asked to rate the importance to them of different aspects of Facebook. The ratings exist on a five point Likert-type scale from “very important” to “not important” with “neutral” in the middle. The aspects of social media gratifications that were asked about have been drawn from the needs coded in the Whiting & Williams (2013) survey. With this information it is easy to examine which are the most used social media sites and which ones are used to get news. In addition, the information will allow the research team to determine the differences or similarities between which social sites earn which kind of gratification. Furthermore, with this information it would be viable to compare it with other research that has been conducted.

**Results**

The results consisted of 128 participants, with 27 males, 78 females and 23 other/did not answer. Considering this survey is researching the uses and gratification
theory as it relates to social media, heavy social media users are the desired participants. 121 respondents answered “Yes” when asked if they were frequent users of social media. 101 of those surveyed answered that they subscribed to Snapchat and 116 of the 128 subscribed to Facebook. 101 participants used social networking websites several times per day, and 112 used social networking mobile applications several times per day.

Correlations between different aspects of Facebook and Snapchat were analyzed for their significance to the theory of uses and gratification. Facebook users had significant correlations to both short and long term planning between Facebook chat use, social interaction, relaxing, and the strongest correlation of 0.515 for short term and 0.346 for long term plans with staying in touch. The importance of social interaction had significant correlation with the importance of other features of Facebook, the most significant being that of communication at 0.558. Few categories in Facebook usage showed correlations among only two or three categories, generally many different aspects of Facebook’s importance appeared to correlate in a range of 0.200 to 0.350, going as high as 0.651 between the importance of Facebook to pass time and using it for entertainment.

The importance of Snapchat as a way to pass time showed a correlation of 0.636 with frequency of use. The correlation between using Snapchat as a way to pass time and a form of entertainment was 0.871. A strong negative correlation was shown between the number of friends met in person on Snapchat and frequent use at -0.565 along with a -0.498 correlation to updating their story and a -0.497 for viewing other user's stories.

The correlation for frequency of use of Snapchat and those who view other stories was .898. Interestingly, Facebook showed no correlation between frequency of use and
checking of other status updates. Furthermore, Facebook use showed a higher importance rating for ‘expressing our opinion’ than does Snapchat use. Respondents report 28.1% importance rating on Facebook compared to 8.6% on Snapchat. Facebook use was also higher in importance for making long-term plans; 28% rate important on Facebook compared to 3% on Snapchat. Additionally, 47% said they would be more likely to post a selfie on Snapchat, compared to 11.7% who chose Facebook, while 18% chose neither network. The uses and gratifications of each network were rated based off of the percentage of survey respondents who rated any given use category as ‘very important’ (See Appendix A and Appendix B for uses and gratifications graphs)

**Discussion**

This study found that the uses and gratifications earned from both Facebook and Snapchat combined are: being social, staying in touch with others, getting to know others, sharing information, convenience of the network, communication, relaxation, entertainment, and passing time (see Appendix A). Either network could be used to fulfill the needs listed above.

To those who use Snapchat, it likely is not surprising that many users rate viewing other stories as very important. Viewing others stories is similar to seeking out the status of a user on the Facebook network, yet this study found no correlation between frequency of network use and viewing others stories on Facebook. What this suggests is that Snapchat has become the destination for presenting ones immediate status. This is presented in the form of a picture or video of one’s surroundings and can be shared instantly to a select group of users. In addition this content can be added to the users
story so that anyone who follows said user might view it. This is a more rich and intimate way of exchanging information with friends and followers than Facebook offers.

This study found that 47% of respondents would be more likely to post a selfie on Snapchat, compared with 11.7% who chose Facebook. Perhaps, this is related to the function that permanence plays in the use of the two networks. When a user posts something on the Facebook network, that thing is then preserved on the network. Conversely, when a user posts something on the Snapchat network, the thing being posted is deleted from your account and cannot be seen again by any user, including the content creator. This is an interesting feature within Snapchat that perhaps is a driving factor in the uses and gratifications earned from the application. This may also relate to Snapchat being the preferred social media landscape for users to update their status. Indeed this is a topic worth further exploration and consideration.

The current study found that 28% of respondents rated ‘making long term plans’ as highly important when using Facebook compared to 3% of respondents who chose Snapchat. Facebook offers users the ability to plan events and share event plans with other users that they are ‘friends’ with, whereas Snapchat has no such feature. The researcher Quan-Hasse identified peer pressure as a reason for network engagement on Facebook (2009). Perhaps the use and gratification of making long term plans with friends provides enough social pressure to make those who would not normally join Facebook then actually sign up so that they could have access to those planning opportunities. Increasingly those planning opportunities with friends only exist on such social networks, the pressure to avoid being excluded forces people to join. Further
research in this area may yield information on why individuals join Facebook who do not actually ‘like’ the network.

The research team must acknowledge that there are limitations to the current study. The limitations that occurred include survey fatigue, survey diffusion, and slight ambiguity in some survey questions. The survey itself took around 10 minutes to complete and included 63 total questions for the respondents. The research team recognizes that this could have been reduced while still allowing for valid results to be obtained. In addition there were some obstacles that made it difficult for the survey to diffuse and reach a higher and more desirable response count. Future researchers would benefit from narrowing their focus in the uses and gratifications of each network to allow for less overlap. In addition researchers could look at potential gender and race differences in the uses and gratifications of social media networks.

**Conclusion**

Facebook and Snapchat are both important for users when it comes to being social, staying in touch with others, getting to know others, sharing information, convenience of the network, communication, relaxation, entertainment, and passing time. Facebook remains to be the dominant social media platform, because it is the most convenient network for people with the highest rate of use. On the other hand, Snapchat is becoming increasingly popular, and it is arguably the new destination for ‘status’ updates. The function of permanence in social media use will be an increasingly important element to consider when conducting research on why individuals seek out different forms social media.
References


Appendix A
Importance ratings for Snapchat and Facebook

- Social
- Intouch
- Knowothers
- Shareinfo
- Conven
- Communicate
- Relax
- Entertain
- Passtime
Appendix B
Importance ratings for Snapchat and Facebook: major use differences

![Bar chart showing importance ratings for Snapchat (SC) and Facebook (FB) in Status, Opinion, and LT plans categories.](image-url)