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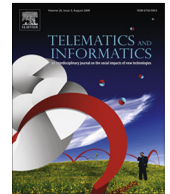
Uses and Gratifications of digital photo sharing on Facebook

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Despite the rapid adoption of Facebook as a means of photo sharing, minimal research has been conducted to understand user gratification behind this activity. In order to address this gap, the current study examines users' gratifications in sharing photos on Facebook by applying Uses and Gratification (U&G) theory. An online survey completed by 368 respondents identified six different gratifications, namely, affection, attention seeking, disclosure, habit, information sharing, and social influence, behind sharing digital photos on Facebook. Some of the study's prominent findings were: age was in positive correlation with disclosure and social influence gratifications; gender differences were identified among habit and disclosure gratifications; number of photos shared was negatively correlated with habit and information sharing gratifications. The study's implications can be utilized to refine existing and develop new features and services bridging digital photos and social networking services.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, personal photography has gained immense popularity and adoption (Goh et al., 2009; Kirk et al., 2006; Van House, 2011). Affordability, better imaging quality, ubiquity of devices and, notably, the emergence of social networking services (SNS) can be credited for this immense growth (Goh et al., 2009; Litt and Hargittai, 2014). Lately, sharing photos, especially on the internet and particularly on SNS, has risen substantially, making it one of the most popular online activities (Duggan, 2013; Joinson, 2008; Madden et al., 2013; Pai and Arnott, 2013). For instance, in Britain, almost 70% of the internet users in the country shared photos in 2013 (Dutton et al., 2013). The same study reports that engagement around photos has become the most popular leisure activity on the internet in Britain, superseding listening to music, downloading music, playing games and watching videos (Dutton et al., 2013). Similarly, around 64% of British internet users post photos on SNS, and the activity is considered as the most frequent activity, surpassing posting messages and sharing videos on SNS (Dutton et al., 2013). Likewise, on Facebook, deemed to be the largest and fastest growing photo sharing SNS (Rainie et al., 2012), roughly two billion photos are shared daily ("Facebook Newsroom," 2015). While the presented numbers suggest that an overwhelming number of SNS users frequently engage with digital photos, understanding of the reasons behind this activity has yet been limited. Without understanding the reasons for photo sharing in the context of SNS, it is rather unknowable to grasp the role of digital photos in the world of the contemporary web.

Online sharing of information and content and related research issues has received a significant amount of attention (Lampe et al., 2010; Lee and Ma, 2012); however, despite the enormous growth and usage of SNS, relevant research has not increased proportionally. In particular, the understanding of why and how specific activities (including those related

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to photos) are being performed on SNS is as yet quite limited (Joinson, 2008; Krause et al., 2014; Smock et al., 2011). More specifically, as SNS support a broad range of activities, and the usage and gratifications vary considerably among the users (Joinson, 2008; Smock et al., 2011), understanding the gratifications individuals seek and gain from specific activities provides a richer picture of their level of participation (Smock et al., 2011).

Considering the immense popularity of photo sharing practices on Facebook, the aim of the current study is to determine the various gratifications behind Facebook-based photo sharing related activities. In addition to this, the study also examines the relationship of age, gender and number of photos shared with photo sharing gratifications. To address these inquiries, a theoretical framework of Uses and Gratifications (U&G) has been utilized in the present study.

2. Theoretical background and research questions

2.1. Uses and Gratifications (U&G)

Media consumption habits are guided by the needs of the individuals that they seek to gratify (Katz et al., 1999). Exploring potential gratifications that individuals seek from a media or service can provide insight into the reasons for continued use of a given media (Limayem and Cheung, 2011). U&G theory is one of the media use theories most commonly utilized by researchers and offers a broad application for understanding media usage (Dwyer et al., 2007; Foregger, 2008). Understanding the potential U&G can aid in predicting media usage, as well as its recurring use (Kaye and Johnson, 2002).

Due to the strong basis of U&G theory in the communications literature, its theoretical grounding provides excellent foundations and relevance for research on social media usage and practices. An increasing number of researchers have adopted U&G theory for understanding the gratifications obtained from SNS. The popularity and growth of SNS has motivated researchers from various fields to apply U&G theory for studying gratifications of SNS usage, its impact and possible consequences (Bumgarner, 2007; Pai and Arnott, 2013; Quan-Haase and Young, 2010; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Previous studies have clearly demonstrated relationship creation and maintenance, passing time, information seeking, entertainment, sharing personal information, affection, and social surveillance as some of the key gratifications obtained from SNS use (Cheng et al., 2014; Joinson, 2008; Leung, 2013; Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2010; Quan-Haase and Young, 2010; Whiting and Williams, 2013). As SNS support a wide variety of activities, it becomes important for researchers to investigate the reasons and motivations behind the use of SNS-specific activities. Previous literature has also shown that individuals are devoted, engaged, and highly motivated to spend effort and time in contributing content to specific SNS services (Boyd and Heer, 2006; Foregger, 2008; Krause et al., 2014). More recently, a number of studies have evaluated the U&G of specific activities on Facebook, including music listening (Krause et al., 2014), sharing links (Baek et al., 2011), participation in groups (Karnik et al., 2013; Park et al., 2009), and news sharing (Lee and Ma, 2012). Considering the significance of photo sharing activity on Facebook, exploring the specific U&Gs is both timely and relevant.

2.2. Digital photo sharing

A large portion of the previous research on digital photo sharing and related practices has been directed towards the development and testing of experimental prototypes and concepts (Kirk et al., 2006; Naaman et al., 2008), aimed at facilitating and simplifying sharing of digital photos, management, navigation and browsing of large digital collections.

Previous literature on digital photo sharing consisted of a variety of empirical work. This included examining various aspects of engaging in mobile phone photo sharing (Ames et al., 2010; Ames and Naaman, 2007; Van House et al., 2005; Vartiainen and Väänänen-Vainio-Mattila, 2010), online photo sharing (Chew et al., 2010; Miller and Edwards, 2007; Nightingale, 2007; Nov et al., 2010; Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar, 2010) and collocated photo sharing (Lucero et al., 2011; Van House, 2009).

People share photos to fulfill their intrinsic, as well as extrinsic needs (Nov et al., 2010). Sharing photos online can help people in fulfilling their social interaction needs, such as self-expression, self-presentation, communicating, and maintaining and nurturing social relationships (Frohlich et al., 2002; Goh et al., 2009; Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar, 2010; Pering et al., 2005; Van House et al., 2005). Sharing photos online can also have functional purposes with the aim of supporting personal and mutual tasks (Goh et al., 2009; Kindberg et al., 2005; Van House et al., 2005). Other gratifications of online photo sharing, such as feedback, public approval, attention, recognition, and social rewards in yje form of comments and consequent conversation on shared photos, have also been frequently highlighted in the literature (Ames and Naaman, 2007; Frohlich et al., 2002; Malinen, 2011; Nov et al., 2010). Many people engage in the activity out of habit, as they wish to share and get appreciation and attention from a wider audience on the web rather than just family members (Frohlich et al., 2012; Miller and Edwards, 2007). Furthermore, engaging with photos is a fun and joyful activity, as photos shared with others provide entertainment value to the users (Nightingale, 2007; Vartiainen and Väänänen-Vainio-Mattila, 2010). Finally, photos are also deemed to be an imperative form of content used for self-disclosure purposes with the aim of sharing more information about oneself (Lee, 2009; Stefanone and Lackaff, 2009).