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Need fulfillment and experiences on social media: A case on Facebook and WhatsApp



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ABSTRACT

With an increasing inflow and outflow of users from social media, understanding the factors that drive their adoption becomes even more pressing. This paper reports on a study with 494 users of Facebook and WhatsApp. Different from traditional uses & gratifications studies that probe into typical uses of social media, we sampled users' single recent, outstanding (either satisfying or unsatisfying) experiences, based on a contemporary theoretical and methodological framework of 10 universal human needs. Using quantitative and qualitative analyses, we found WhatsApp to unlock new opportunities for intimate communications, Facebook to be characterized by primarily non-social uses, and both media to be powerful lifelogging tools. Unsatisfying experiences were primarily rooted in the tools' breach of offline social norms, as well in content fatigue and exposure to undesirable content in the case of Facebook. We discuss the implications of the findings for the design of social media.

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1. Introduction

As social media have diffused widely in society, with estimates of nearly one in four people worldwide using them (eMarketer, 2013), researchers have opted to understand the human experiences they mediate, and the factors that drive their widespread use (e.g., Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Hart, Ridley, Taher, Sas, & Dix, 2008; Joinson, 2008).

This is increasingly important as we witness users' migrating across communities while we lack a clear understanding of the reasons that drive those transitions. Facebook, ranked as the most successful online community, and the 2nd most visited website¹ globally (consulted in January 2014), has recently seen an outflow of users with increasing reports of negative experiences resulting from its use, especially among teenagers (Rainie, Smith, & Duggan, 2013; Time, 2004). At the same time new social media, such as WhatsApp, have seen a dramatic growth, with reports suggesting an increase of up to 1 million users per day, reaching a number of 600 million users in 2014 with a daily engagement higher than the industry standard (Forbes, 2014).

Facebook and WhatsApp do not necessarily compete, and in fact,

researchers have argued that users adopt a wide range of tools on a daily basis (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Yet, while they offer very similar functionality – with Facebook, for instance adopting rich instant messaging features present in WhatsApp – anecdotal evidence, and as our findings confirm, the two tools afford different social practices, which then lead to different user experiences with the same functionality. For instance, Facebook's better support for multitasking affords asynchronous communication practices, while in WhatsApp's restricted environment users experience a heightened sense of presence in the communication. Through the study of these two similar, yet different social media, we aim to shed some light into how the use and experience with social media is co-constructed by the functionality the tools offer and the social practices users establish.

Prior work has found Facebook to satisfy a wide range of needs, from keeping up with old and making new friends (Ellison et al., 2007; Joinson, 2008; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008), to acquiring information about events or individuals through surveillance and social browsing (Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010; Joinson, 2008; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009) and leveraging individuals' self-esteem through the portrayal of their ideal image (Dunne et al., 2010). Recent work on WhatsApp and other instant messaging applications has found such services to support a more intimate and private way for members to communicate with friends, better fulfilling the fundamental need for relatedness. The majority of this research has taken a 'uses and gratifications' approach (U&G, see

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Joinson, 2008) where individuals are surveyed about their typical uses and reflect on the needs these uses address. Qualitative content analyses then identify the most salient needs users seek to satisfy through their use of the particular media.

In this paper we take an alternative approach to the study of the needs that social media satisfy, relying on a theoretical framework and methodological approach proposed by Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, and Kasser (2001). This makes our study different from U&G studies in two ways.

First, rather than deducing needs from participants' qualitative accounts, we employ a validated framework of 10 universal human needs, such as the need for *relatedness*, *competence* and *popularity* (Sheldon et al., 2001). This enables the quantitative study of need fulfillment in users' experiences with social media and the impact this has on individuals' behaviors – in terms of their intensity of use.

Second, rather than focusing on typical use, Sheldon et al. (2001) approach asks from participants to focus on a *single recent memorable (positive or negative) experience*. This has a number of implications. First, it minimizes recall and selection biases as, when people recall recent concrete episodes, they are more likely to tap into episodic memories and introspect on the “felt experience” (McCarthy & Wright, 2004) rather than report on what is considered to be a typical use of social media (see Schwarz et al., 2009 for a review of affective memory). Second, by focusing on the memorable rather than the typical, it samples a distinct aspect of our experience with social media. While much of our attitude towards social media may be shaped by our day-to-day use, outstanding, memorable experiences may as well be shaping our attitudes in ways we haven't yet understood. Focusing on such outstanding experiences may provide a new perspective to the inquiry of users' experiences with and need fulfillment through social media.

All in all, this paper makes two contributions to the study of social media. First, through taking a novel methodological approach, it asks what makes for *memorable*, rather than typical, experiences with social media. Second, through inquiring into the differences in the adoption and use of similar functionality offered by Facebook and WhatsApp, it sheds some light into how subtle differences in the design of social media features, afford the creation of different social practices by users, which in turn results to different communication experiences.

2. Background

Need theories have been a long-standing topic in psychology and have also recently played a central role in understanding users' experiences with technology. In this section we review prior work on two theories: 1) uses & gratification, a communication theory that has recently been employed in understanding users' experiences with social media, and 2) a model of 10 universal human needs that is used as a methodological lens in our study.

2.1. Uses and gratifications theory

Uses & Gratification Theory (U&G) is an approach to understanding why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs (Severin & Tankard, 1997). U&G studies typically ask participants to self-report on their typical uses of the media and the gratifications they derive from them.

2.1.1. Facebook studies

U&G theory has been applied across a wide range of media. More recently, researchers have successfully employed the U&G theory in their attempt to understand the gratifications users derive from their use of Facebook. Typical benefits users acquire

from Facebook tap to their needs for relatedness and social interactions, through supporting relationship maintenance and “staying connected” (Dunne et al., 2010), as well as making new connections (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Next to social needs, Facebook has been found to provide content gratification and is commonly used as a source of information either to search and learn about events (Dunne et al., 2010; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008), or even to acquire and track information on members through surveillance and social surfing (Joinson, 2008; Urista et al., 2009). Other studies have highlighted a wider range of gratification, tapping to individuals need for pleasure, escapism and the alleviation of boredom (Dunne et al., 2010) as well as to satisfy their self-esteem through the portrayal of their ideal image. (Dunne et al., 2010; Urista et al., 2009).

2.1.2. Instant messaging studies

Using the same perspective, Quan-Haase and Young (2010) compared Facebook to Instant Message (IM) applications with respect to the extent to which they fulfill different user needs. Their study suggests a similar gratification profile for both media with similar uses and fulfilling similar communication, sociability and pleasure/stimulation needs. Yet, they noted that the key distinctions between Facebook and IM were brought by from their use. For instance, while IM requires social interaction among its users to acquire social information, Facebook broadcasts such information to its entire network. Furthermore, IM's near-synchronous and private communication channels provides their users the ability to engage in more intimate communication, emulating in-person conversations, allowing for intimacy and a sense of connection, whereas Facebook tends to support the exchange of short messages.

Church and de Oliveira (2013) further studied the factors that influence the acceptance, usage and growing popularity of WhatsApp. Similar to Quan-Haase and Young (2010), they found social influence to be one of the main reasons for the adoption of WhatsApp, and remarked that the nature and the intent of WhatsApp supports social, informal and conversational communications which lead to high frequency of use.

2.2. Sheldon's framework of human needs

Sheldon et al. (2001) aimed at deriving a list of universal human needs. Starting from Ryan and Deci (2000) Self-Determination Theory and the “big three”: autonomy, relatedness and competence, they elaborated to a more fine grained list and proposed a list of 10 universal human needs, using two criteria. First, needs should be salient within individuals' most satisfying experiences. Second, their fulfillment should promote psychological thriving, as measured through the experiencing of positive affect.

The 10 needs they derived were: *autonomy*, or feeling like one is the cause of her own actions rather than feeling that external forces or pressure are the cause of her action, *competence*, or feeling that one is very capable and effective in her own actions rather than feeling incompetent or ineffective, *relatedness*, or feeling that one has regular intimate contact with people who cares about her rather than feeling lonely and uncared of, *self-esteem*, feeling that one is a worthy person who is as good as anyone else rather than feeling like a ‘loser’, *self-actualized meaning*, or feeling that one is developing her best potentials and making life meaningful rather than feeling stagnant and that life does not have much meaning, *physical thriving*, or feeling that one's body is healthy and well-taken care of rather than feeling out of shape and unhealthy, *pleasure-stimulation*, getting plenty of enjoyment and pleasure rather than feeling bored and understimulated by life, *security*, or feeling safe and in control of one's life rather than feeling uncertain

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