Use of social networking sites for product communication: A comparative study of Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites

Weirui Wang [a,*], Sigal Segev [b,1], Yu Liu [c,2]

[a] School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Florida International University, 3000 NE 151 ST., AC2-328, North Miami, FL 33181, United States
[b] School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Florida International University, 3000 NE 151 ST., AC2-325A, North Miami, FL 33181, United States
[c] School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Florida International University, 3000 NE 151 ST., AC2-319B, North Miami, FL 33181, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study extends the uses and gratification theory and examines SNS use in a specific context, namely product communication, among Hispanic and non-Hispanic whites, two important consumer segments in the U.S. market. It tests the relationships between motivations, attitudes, and usage outcomes that are unique to SNSs in an integrative model. Structural equation modeling analysis of the results obtained from an Internet-based survey ($N = 595$) demonstrates that the information motivation predicts favorable attitudes and various usage outcomes in both groups. However, the motivation to socialize positively predicts attitudes and usage outcomes among Hispanics only, while the entertainment motivation emerges as a determining factor for whites only. Results from this study provide theoretical and managerial implications for the development of effective marketing communication in the area of social networking sites.

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1. Introduction

The use of social networking sites (SNSs) is growing steadily. A recent study shows that 69% of online adults — representing more than half of the entire adult population in the United States — use an online social network. Moreover, about half of all adult Internet users access a social networking site on a daily basis (Pew Research, 2013). These vast numbers of interconnected users who create and publish content, share ideas and vote on them, and provide their recommendations and opinions over SNSs create unprecedented opportunities for businesses in terms of reach, segmentation, targeted marketing, advertising and promotional activities. SNSs, along with other social media channels, provide a new area for product communication in which consumers play a more active role as marketers and brand advocates (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Walsh, Thorsten, Sassenberg, & Bornemann, 2010). Consumers turn to social media to share their own experiences with brands, products and services and to provide a more realistic view of their product experience. At the same time, consumers are leveraging the experience of others as shared in SNSs before they make purchase decisions themselves (Evans &

McKee, 2010). For example, a recent survey found that consumers trust Facebook as a source of product/service recommendation (68%) more than any other social media site such as Pinterest, YouTube or Twitter. This survey concluded that Facebook friends and community members play an important role in product discovery, research and conversion (Social Media Link, 2013). Similarly, a survey of 30,554 consumers in 16 countries revealed that nearly 60% of global consumers surveyed said their purchase choices are influenced by friends' posts in social media about items purchased or about retailers shopped (Marketing Charts, 2014).

Social media has amplified the power of consumer-to-consumer conversations, enabling one person to communicate with many other consumers quickly and with relatively little effort. In fact, these new media have affected consumer behaviors particularly in information acquisition and post-purchase behaviors that are based on conversations and are beyond the direct control of marketers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Given the importance of this new environment and its unique dynamics, marketers must understand consumer-to-consumer interactions, their antecedents and outcomes (Libai et al., 2010). In this context, it is important to identify consumers' motivations to use SNSs for product conversations and establish how these motivations determine consumers' engagement in various online activities. Such understanding will help marketers better engage and interact with potential consumers via SNSs in a way that is consistent with their business objectives while addressing consumers' needs for informed purchase decisions.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 (305)919 4428.
 E-mail addresses: weirwang@fiu.edu (W. Wang), segevs@fiu.edu (S. Segev), liuy@fiu.edu (Y. Liu).
[1] Tel.: +1 (305)919 5618.
[2] Tel.: +1 (305)919 5520.

The growing body of literature that explores people's motivations to use SNSs provides important insights into the reasons behind people's engagement with these new media (e.g., Leung, 2009; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Shao, 2008; Sheldon, 2008a); nevertheless, several gaps still remain. First, these studies, which were built on Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch (1973) Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G), focused on exploring individuals' motivations to use SNSs *in general* and therefore limited in their ability to shed light on the use of SNSs in specific contexts such as consumption (Katz et al., 1973). While past research about the reasons for using social media suggests a broad range of motivations, one of the objectives of this study is to identify the dominant motivations underlying product communication over SNSs. Second, for the most part, these studies were limited to exploring only the motivations for using SNSs. However, a more comprehensive examination of the components that are involved in consumers' experiences is needed to understand product communication via SNSs fully. According to Leung (2013), it is important to explore not only users' motivations but also their subsequent effects on online activities in social media. Third, most studies did not distinguish among SNS users based on their ethnic background. Given the growing ethnic diversification of the consumer market in the U.S. and globally, comparing individuals from different ethnicities is a common approach in consumer segmentation strategies (Lee, Fairhurst, & Dillard, 2002). Distinctiveness theory posits that ethnicity is a distinctive and important trait that differentiates behavior (Lee et al., 2002; Steenkamp, Hofsted, & Wedel, 1999; Torres & Briggs, 2005), and each ethnic group constitutes a unique community that shares common characteristics (Lee et al., 2002). Thus, ethnicity might be an important differentiating factor that is associated with unique uses of media. This aspect of SNSs has yet to be explored.

In an attempt to address these gaps, this study investigates the motivations that underlie consumers' communication about products in SNSs. Building on the theory of uses and gratification (Katz et al., 1973), we test a model that explores the relationships among several motivations and usage outcomes. The model views attitudes toward the social networking site as a mediator of these relationships. The proposed model is tested among non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics. Today, non-Hispanic whites account for 64% of the U.S. population, followed by Hispanics, the largest ethnic group, who constitute more than 16% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Understanding how and why consumers of the two largest segments in the U.S. use SNSs for product communication has theoretical and managerial implications. Theoretically, this study provides insights into the use of SNSs across ethnic groups and explores the possible differences among consumers with respect to their SNS use for product communication. In addition, the study helps establish the dominant motivations depending on the context of use. Practically, this study can help marketers and advertisers develop social media brand engagement strategies and communication programs that fit the specific needs of these consumer segments.

2. Related work

2.1. The uses and gratification of SNSs

The U&G theory (Katz et al., 1973) has long been applied in various communication settings to explain patterns of media use (e.g., Brandtzæg & Heim, 2009; Conway & Rubin, 1991; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). This conceptual framework is also useful in examining new media adoption (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011) and has been used to investigate audience motivations and decisions about media use whenever a new technology enters the stage of mass communication (Elliot & Rosenberg, 1987). The core question of the U&G approach is what people do with the media rather than what the media do with people (Swanson, 1979). The U&G theory views people as active and goal-driven in their media use, purposively selecting and consuming certain media content to satisfy their needs (Katz et al., 1973). In addition, given their interests and motives, media users have specific expectations that lead to their choice of media and gratification from it. In a world where new media co-exist with conventional mass media, people can select from a wider range of channels and content. Therefore, the U&G theory is considered one of the most effective paradigms for identifying media usage in an ever-changing communication environment (LaRose, Mastro, & Eastin, 2001).

Given the ubiquity of SNSs, a growing body of research has applied the U&G paradigm to understand the motivations for using this new media genre. A review of the extant research about the use of and gratification from SNSs reveals several common motivations: information-seeking, social connection, habitual use and entertainment (Leung, 2009; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Park et al., 2009; Pempek et al., 2009; Shao, 2008; Sheldon, 2008a; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009). For example, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) examined individuals' U&G by using two popular SNSs in the U.S., Facebook and MySpace, and found that the primary reasons for using these sites were to meet friends (social connection) and find information. Brandtzæg and Heim (2009) identified 11 motivations for using SNSs in Norway, but only four of them emerged as the main motives: information, entertainment, social interaction, and personal identity. However, meeting new people and making new friends were the key motives in individuals' use of SNSs. The need to be socially connected is inherent to users' engagement in SNSs, which provide an ideal platform for creating a personal identity and community (Hargittai, 2008). Thus, Pempek et al. (2009) showed that college students use Facebook for social interaction and to establish their own personal identity. Zhang, Tang, and Leung (2011) identified six gratifications obtained from using Facebook including social surveillance, entertainment, recognition, emotional support, social network extension (i.e., new friends) and social work maintenance (i.e., old or existing friends). Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011) found that of the nine motives they identified, a habitual way of passing time and relaxing and entertainment were the prevalent reasons for using SNSs. Similarly, Park et al. (2009) determined that participating in groups within Facebook satisfied four primary needs: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information.

Although the findings of these studies shed light on the key motivations for using SNSs, they suffer from three shortcomings. First, these studies mainly examined why the general public uses SNSs. To the best of our knowledge, no attempts have been made to look at ethnicity as a differentiating factor. Indeed, the studies that have explored the motivations of using SNSs across countries with different cultural contexts have reported differences among users (e.g., Jackson & Wang, 2013; Kim et al., 2011), and these analyses provide a reason to believe that differences might also exist among ethnic groups within one country. Second, these studies were limited to providing insights about the general use of SNSs rather than their use in a specific context. In reality, SNSs serve as communication platforms in various domains including personal, economic, civic engagement, community, political participation, consumption and marketing. The motivations for using SNSs are likely to vary depending on the specific context, leading to the need to identify the dominant motivations that are unique to each domain. Finally, given that SNSs are different from traditional media in terms of their interactivity, more research is needed to explore the relationship between the motivation for using them and the degree of interactive activity exhibited on them.