



Facebook as a toolkit: A uses and gratification approach to unbundling feature use

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ABSTRACT

Research on social network sites (SNSs) typically employ measures that treat SNS use as homogenous although the user-base, user practices, and feature sets of these tools are increasingly diverse. Using a uses and gratifications approach, we address this problem by reconceptualizing SNSs as *collections of features*. Survey data collected from undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university ($n = 267$) revealed that users' motivations for using Facebook predict their use of different features, such as status updates and Wall posts, but features that share similar capabilities do not necessarily share underlying motivations for use. When these results are contrasted against models employing a more unidimensional measure of Facebook use, we find differences between motivations for both general Facebook use and use of specific features of the site. This suggests that unidimensional measures of SNS use obfuscate motivations for using specific features. Theoretical and methodological implications of these findings and this approach are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNSs) provide users with a variety of communication tools. For example, the SNS Facebook allows users to broadcast messages to large audiences using status updates and Wall posts, while also providing features, such as chat, for messages the user wishes to keep private. While the diversity of features available on SNSs allow for equally diverse forms of communication, previous research addressing the motivations for using SNSs have not fully considered the possibility that users may be attending to different features for different reasons.

One method for distinguishing among different kinds of Facebook use is offered by the uses and gratifications approach, a traditional mass media framework which enables researchers to study how users select media and content to meet their individual goals (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevich, 1974). In recent years, researchers have applied this approach to Internet use in order to identify a wide range of motivations driving the use of various online sites and services, including SNSs such as MySpace and Facebook (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

Although previous research has looked at how motivations affect general use of SNSs, often measured as overall time spent on the site, little is known about what motivates users to utilize particular site features. Given the wide range of activities possible on these sites, it is likely users' motivations for utilizing the various features

available will differ. This study explores the user motivations associated with the use of specific features of Facebook, enabling SNS scholars to move beyond measures of general usage and thus providing insight into the interaction between user motivations and the characteristics of specific features of technical systems that support social interaction.

1.1. Understanding Facebook use

A growing body of research explores various uses of Facebook. Early work showed how Facebook was used to connect with previously existing social connections, rather than make new connections (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). Furthermore, researchers have shown that Facebook provides features that enable these connections (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007) and that the connections that are made reflect similar closeness of ties between online and offline ties (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009).

However, central to the focus of this study, researchers have shown how Facebook use varies among users (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, in press; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2008). For example, users differ on measures of social capital and loneliness depending on whether they use the site actively or passively (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010). Research suggests that status updates can support offline student interactions (Barkhuus & Tashiro, 2010), be used to answer questions posed to the social network (Morris, Teevan, & Panovich, 2010), or can be mined to describe geographic "happiness" levels (Kramer, 2010). Other work examines differences in the use of SNSs in the workplace (DiMicco et al., 2008; Skeels & Grudin, 2009).

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Additionally, research has found that the manner in which people use Facebook changes over time (Lampe et al., 2008). Taken together, this literature shows that Facebook can support a wide range of social activities. Given the heterogeneous nature of these sites, and the diversity of users of these sites, it is likely that different users come to Facebook for different reasons and that these reasons may be associated with different types of use, such as connecting with strangers or interacting only with close friends.

1.2. Measures of SNS use

In this paper, we extend SNS research on Facebook use by specifically exploring users' motivations as they relate to use of individual features on the site, rather than use of the site as a whole. Facebook use has typically been measured through self-reported metrics such as assessments of time on the site (Joinson, 2008), number of friends (Tong, Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008), and the *Facebook Intensity* scale (FBI) created by Ellison and colleagues (2007) and used by others (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). FBI takes a number of Facebook-related metrics into consideration, such as number of friends, time spent on site, as well as Likert-scale items such as, "Facebook is part of my everyday life." While FBI does include multiple dimensions of use and is thus more nuanced than measures of time on site, FBI does not enable researchers to distinguish among different kinds of uses. These uses can range from participating in Groups where one is likely to interact with strangers to using other communication tools, such as chat, which are more frequently used to support interaction with Friends. These general measures of use may obfuscate outcomes associated with individual features because positive and negative trends may cancel each other out.

Thinking about the various features of the platform, it is possible that Facebook is more usefully conceived of as a *collection of tools* utilized in different ways to meet different needs. We define a "feature" as a technical tool on the site that enables activity on the part of the user. In this paper we focus on features that enable or facilitate communication among users. The features considered in this research include: status updates, comments, Wall posts, private messages, chat, and Groups. Status updates are short messages contributed by users that are visible to other users via the News Feed, a feature that aggregates the Facebook activity of one's friend network. Any piece of user-generated content on Facebook can be commented on, unless the owner of the content has used a privacy setting to restrict comments. The Wall is the hub of a user's profile and displays aggregated posts, photos, videos, and applications-related content from the profile holder, as well as comments and other content contributed by Facebook Friends. Each Facebook user has the ability to send private messages to most other users using a feature similar to email or can engage in synchronous communication using Facebook's chat (or instant messaging) service. Users can also join Groups, often centered around common interests.

2. Theoretical background and research questions

2.1. Uses and gratifications

Uses and gratifications (U&G) is a theoretical framework that is used to study how media, including social media, are utilized to fulfill the needs of individual users with different goals. Individuals distinguish between different forms of media based on the needs the user expects to satisfy through his or her use (Katz, Gurevith, & Haas, 1973; Perse & Courtwright, 1993).

The U&G approach allows technology and media researchers to explicate users' various goals when engaging with media, allowing for a better understanding of differing behaviors, outcomes, and

perceptions. Katz et al. (1973) highlight the recursive relationship between user expectations and practices inherent in U&G approaches, which examine the "social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations of the mass media or other sources, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure, resulting in need gratifications and other consequences" (p. 510). They emphasize that U&G studies have two distinct approaches: how needs are gratified by media and how gratifications reconstruct needs.

2.2. Uses and gratifications of social media

Scholars have employed the U&G perspective to answer foundational questions about the motivations for using social media. For example, Lampe and colleagues (2010) used U&G to explain motivations to contribute to a content-generation online community, and showed that different motivations for use were tied to different patterns of contribution by site members and to intentions to contribute in the future. Additionally, researchers have used U&G in order to better understand the extent to which users expect various needs and desires will be fulfilled by use of Facebook (Bumgarner, 2007; Foregger, 2008; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). These studies reveal various motivations for general Facebook use. More specifically, Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011) used factor analysis to extract nine distinct scales of motives for using Facebook: habitual pass time, relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, escapism, cool and new trend, companionship, professional advancement, social interaction and meeting new people.

Beyond providing an understanding of the motives for using Facebook, U&G has also been used to predict frequency of site visits (Joinson, 2008). According to this work, uses and gratifications related to photographs, social investigation (e.g., using the site to meet new people or find out more information about specific users), and status updates were all significant predictors of the frequency of Facebook visits.

These Facebook studies explain the different motivations that predict general use of the site and, in the case of Joinson (2008), predict the amount of time users spend on the site. However, previous research on traditional forms of mass media highlight the need for a more granular approach to the measurement of use, one that acknowledges that individuals attend to specific features or type of content (e.g., comedy) within a larger media framework (e.g., television). For instance, past research on television has focused not only on the motivations that predict media choice, but also the motivations that lead to *selection of specific content* in a given medium. Ferguson and Perse (2000) applied this approach to the World Wide Web and found that motives for use significantly predicted specific types of use. More recently, research addressing YouTube use has identified similar genre motivations when predicting engagement with specific types of content (Haridakis & Hanson, 2008). Shen and Williams (2011) employed a related approach to Internet and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMO) use: the researchers identified different types of Internet and MMO use in order to better understand how specific types of use, in addition to a general measure of use, were related to psychosocial well-being (e.g., loneliness, family communication quality, and sense of community online). Results suggest that the way individuals use the Internet, such as for gathering information, meeting new people, and communicating with both geographically distant and close others, "contributes to the prediction of psychosocial outcomes over and above time spent online" (p. 20). Similar results were found concerning MMO uses, such as social motivation, achievement motivation, and immersion motivation. Likewise, we consider Facebook to be a collection of communication tools rather

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