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## Time spent online: Latent profile analyses of emerging adults' social media use



Carol F. Scott<sup>a,\*</sup>, Laina Y. Bay-Cheng<sup>a</sup>, Mark A. Prince<sup>b</sup>, Thomas H. Nochajski<sup>a</sup>,  
R. Lorraine Collins<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14260-1660, USA

<sup>b</sup> Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Studies of youth social media use (SMU) often focus on its frequency, measuring *how much* time they spend online. While informative, this perspective is only one way of viewing SMU. Consistent with uses and gratification theory, another is to consider *how* youth spend their time online (i.e., degree of engagement). We conducted latent profile analyses of survey data from 249 U.S. emerging adults (ages 18–26) to explore their SMU in terms of frequency and engagement. We derived separate 3-profile solutions for both frequency and engagement. High frequency social media users tended to be women and to have more Facebook friends. Highly engaged users (i.e., those most interactive online) tended to be White and more highly educated. Findings from this exploratory study indicate that youth SMU frequency and SMU engagement warrant separate consideration. As SMU becomes more ingrained into the fabric of daily life, it is conceivable that engagement may be a more meaningful way to assess youth SMU, especially in relation to the digital divide, since it can be used to meet important needs, including social interaction, information exchange, and self-expression.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media use (SMU) has become the most popular daily activity for the majority of emerging adults (18–29 years old) in the U.S.: 90% of U.S. emerging adults use social media every day (Perrin, 2015) and 24% of adolescents (13–17 years old) use it “almost constantly” (Lenhart, 2015, p. 2). Given the daily prominence, the current study sought to examine emerging adults' SMU more thoroughly. To this end, we used a person-centered analysis, latent profile analysis, to explore the dimensions of their SMU in terms of frequency of use and degree of engagement. Social media is defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and permit the continuous creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC)” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media includes

blogs (e.g., Tumblr), virtual game and social worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft and Second Life, respectively), collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), content communities (e.g., YouTube), and social networking sites (SNS) (e.g., Facebook) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Of the various types, SNS are the most popular, especially among youth (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Facebook has been the dominant SNS in the U.S. for almost a decade (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickurh, 2010). In fact, it dominates by a substantial margin: 88% of online American emerging adults use Facebook, which is more than double the share of use reported for other popular sites (e.g., 36% use Twitter, 36% use Pinterest, 59% use Instagram, and 29% use LinkedIn; Greenwood et al., 2016). Thus, although other SNS may become trendy, they tend to complement Facebook, not displace it (Greenwood et al., 2016; Lenhart et al., 2010). Youth are especially likely to be multi-site users: in 2015, 71% reported using two or more SNS each day (Lenhart, 2015).

Social media is a central conduit to information, advice, and relationships for youth (Coynne, Padiilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013; Davis, 2012). It can expand their reach, enrich the quality of their social networks, and facilitate social engagement (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) during a period when peers are a powerful source of influence (Borsari & Carey, 2001, 2003). Social

\* Corresponding author. School of Social Work, University at Buffalo, 685 Baldy Hall, Buffalo, NY 14260-1050, USA.

E-mail addresses: [carolfira@buffalo.edu](mailto:carolfira@buffalo.edu) (C.F. Scott), [lb35@buffalo.edu](mailto:lb35@buffalo.edu) (L.Y. Bay-Cheng), [markprince77@gmail.com](mailto:markprince77@gmail.com) (M.A. Prince), [thn@buffalo.edu](mailto:thn@buffalo.edu) (T.H. Nochajski), [lcollins@buffalo.edu](mailto:lcollins@buffalo.edu) (R.L. Collins).

media use is also associated with important psychological dividends for youth, such as diminished loneliness (Lee, Noh, & Koo, 2013), higher self-esteem (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008), and perceived social support (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014). Finally, SMU may enable identity development. Spies Shapiro and Margolin (2014) found that SNS provided ethnic and sexual/gender minority youth with a safe and supportive environment to explore their identities and forge communities, which importantly, often crossed over into offline life.

Social media use may be widespread in the U.S., but it is not uniform across demographic groups. For example, emerging adults are the most likely age group to report using social media (Perrin, 2015). Perrin also found that the previously observed gender difference that women use social media more than men do, is no longer statistically significant. Nevertheless, gender differences in types of use remain, with women preferring SNS and men favoring virtual games (Lenhart, 2015). The reliance on undergraduate samples means that much of our understanding of SMU among emerging adults neglects the experiences of those not attending college (Coyne et al., 2013). Similar to gender, studies have not revealed significant racial or ethnic differences in SMU in general, but have documented differences in preferences for specific sites (Krogstad, 2015). For example, Latino/a and African American users report a preference for Instagram while Pinterest is more popular among White users (Krogstad, 2015). Socioeconomic status (SES) is also correlated with SMU: 78% of users with a household income of \$75,000 or more use social media compared to 56% of users with income below \$30,000 a year; and individuals with at least some college experience use social media more than those with only a high school education or less (Perrin, 2015). Finally, due to the extensive reach of social media, particularly Facebook, the scope and depth of peer networks is growing (Davis, 2012). Consequently, emerging adults report having more friends than ever before (Davis, 2012). Previous studies have found that the number of Facebook friends varies greatly across users (range: 46–2045; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Moreno et al., 2014; Steinfield et al., 2008).

### 1.1. Social media use: distinguishing engagement from frequency

A significant body of research indicates the prominence of SMU in youths' daily lives, but SMU warrants more discerning examination. The vast majority of studies document youth SMU in quantitative terms of its prevalence and incidence, such as minutes spent online each day and frequency of checking SNS (Marshall, Gorely, & Biddle, 2006; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). While informative, these metrics may not reflect the subjective meaning or centrality of SMU in an individual's life.

Engagement is another possible dimension of SMU. The "participative" (Korda & Itani, 2013, p. 15) design of social media, specifically SNS, allow for various modes of engagement, including but not limited to: reposting other users' content; responding to others' content; filtering content by blocking or untagging; and posting original text, images, and/or videos (Hampton, Sessions Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). This flexibility indicates that two individuals with equivalent, near-constant social media access might both log significant time on SNS, but while one might habitually engage, another might lurk.

Uses and gratification theory (U&G) was developed and used to explain diverse media use practices (Katz & Foulkes, 1962; Katz, Gurevitch, & Haas, 1973; McQuail, 1994). The basic premise of U&G is that people are active and intentional in their media use (Katz & Foulkes, 1962; Katz et al., 1973), engaging those forms that are most likely to meet specific needs (e.g., social interaction,

information seeking and sharing, entertainment, self-expression, and surveillance of others; Arnett, 2007; Katz & Foulkes, 1962; Katz et al., 1973; McQuail, 1994; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Today, U&G is increasingly used by researchers to understand SMU (Coyne et al., 2013; Wang, Tchernev, & Solloway, 2012) and related behaviors, such as photo sharing on SNS (Malik, Dhir, & Nieminen, 2016; Pittman & Reich, 2016).

As SMU proliferates daily life, it becomes especially important to understand the time youth spend online. Notably, this means studying not only *how much* time they spend online (i.e., frequency of SMU), but also *how* that time is spent (i.e., degree of SMU engagement). Studies that accommodate the breadth, diversity, and interrelation among modes of SMU (e.g., posting captioned photos might spark multiple and ongoing online exchanges with others across sites) while examining not just SMU frequency, but also SMU engagement, are timely and relevant.

### 1.2. Current study: person-centered analysis of SMU

Empirical literature regarding youth SMU is dominated by descriptive overviews and variable-centered findings (e.g., see Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Tosun, 2012; Wang et al., 2012). These correlational approaches preclude more detailed investigations, especially pertaining to interindividual variation (Jung & Wickrama, 2008). Person-centered approaches, such as latent profile analysis (LPA), are timely and an important complement to existing literature. As a cross-sectional approach, LPA examines the relations among individuals rather than variables (Muthén & Muthén, 2000). The goal is to classify individuals into distinct meaningful groups (i.e., latent profiles) based on self-reported response patterns to continuous variables (Jung & Wickrama, 2008). Therefore, LPA can show how SMU varies across groups of individuals where group membership is not observed (Khang, Han, & Eyun-Jung, 2014). Finally, LPA permits simultaneous tests for differences among profiles and individual characteristics (Clark & Muthén, 2009).

We used LPA as a method of exploring the number and types of latent profiles among a sample of emerging adult social media users. We were also interested in examining if derived SMU profiles (frequency and engagement) differed by demographic and individual characteristics (e.g., SES, gender, and number of Facebook friends). In keeping with the exploratory nature of this study, we initiated analyses with only two hypotheses: (1) based on preliminary analyses, we hypothesized that we would find distinct profiles for SMU frequency and SMU engagement; and (2) in accordance with previous research (e.g., see, Lenhart, 2015; Perrin, 2015), we hypothesized that women and those with higher SES would be report more frequent SMU.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 249 emerging adults aged 18–26, residing in the U.S., and with experience using at least one SNS. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the sample. The average age of participants was 23.06 years ( $SD = 1.91$ ; range 18–26). Slightly more than half were men (56.2%) and not students (52.6%). Participants were predominantly White (67.9%) with a median annual household income of \$30,000 – \$39,000 ( $SD = 2.29$ ), and 90% reported having at least some college education. Finally, 88.4% of sample used Facebook and on average had 101–250 Facebook friends ( $M = 2.26$ ;  $SD = 1.21$ ).

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