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A cross-cultural comparison of Croatian and American social network sites: Exploring cultural differences in motives for Instagram use

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ABSTRACT

Although Instagram is one of the fastest growing social media, scholars are yet to examine cultural differences among users' behavior. The current study compares motives for Instagram use between participants from two countries: Croatia, a highly collectivistic culture, and the United States, a typically individualist culture. Specifically, it examines the relationship between motives and behavioral outcomes of use (time spent on Instagram, the frequency of hashtagging, and the number of Instagram followers). Findings reveal that while motivations behind Instagram use do not vary across cultures, different forms of gratification determine how Instagram is used, and how culture moderates these relationships. Croatian students' Instagram use reflects collectivist tendencies, primarily social interaction. American students' use of Instagram reflects individualistic trends, namely self-promotion and documentation. In addition, American students' self-promotion gratifications are significantly related to the amount of time spent on Instagram, although this effect is not apparent among Croatian students. While American students are inclined to use hashtags for documentation, Croatian participants tend to use hashtags for other reasons, including self-promotion, social interaction, and creativity.

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According to Hofstede (1980), culture can be defined as the characteristics of a particular group of people who share common values, morals, a written and spoken language, customs, and lifestyles. Originally, Hofstede (1980) proposed four dimensions along which cultural values could be classified: individualism – collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and masculinity-femininity. Among these, the individualism – collectivism dimension has received much scholarly attention (Aaker & Maheswaran, 1997; Hofstede, 1980; Srite & Karahanna, 2006), and describes the extent to which members of a culture rely on and demonstrate allegiance to either themselves or the group (Hofstede, 1991). In individualistic societies, individual needs, duties, and rights are predominant. By contrast, collectivistic societies stress the priority of group goals and identity, and members must adopt group-based duties toward a common good (Hofstede, 1991, p. 51).

Culture determines our perceptions about ourselves and others, the ways in which we behave toward one another, and our communication habits and preferences (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1986; Kim, Coyle, & Gould, 2009). Given this, it is surprising that so few studies have applied cultural frameworks to examine cultural diversity on the World Wide Web. Comparing American and Chinese websites, Singh, Zhao, and Hu (2003) came to the conclusion that "the web is not a culturally neutral medium, but it is full of cultural markers that give country-specific websites a look and feel unique to the local culture" (p. 63). Cultural norms may emerge online and are often apparent on social media profiles.

Several studies (Cho, 2010; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Lee & Wohn, 2012) have found that there are differences in social media use between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Among these, one comprehensive analysis conducted by Cho (2010) surveyed social network site (SNS) users in the United States and Korea, analyzing the content of online profiles on Facebook and Cyworld. The results revealed that Cyworld and Facebook users prefer different types of communication styles, reflecting the individualism-collectivism dimensions. While Cyworld users disclosed themselves more than Facebook users, they tended to refrain

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from posting personal information on the public "About me" section. Facebook users also used significantly more first-person self-references than Cyworld users, which is consistent with self-oriented individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 2001). While Facebook users mainly uploaded photos featuring themselves, more than half of Cyworld users uploaded fake or anonymous photos.

According to uses and gratifications theory (U&G; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973–74), individual differences influence motivations for engaging with different media. Uses and gratifications theory has been used in a number of studies to understand why people use particular media. Kim et al. (2011) applied the theory to examine how culture influences the motives and usage of SNSs among college students in the United States and Korea. They found that American students' online social networks were almost five times larger on average than their Korean counterparts, even though American and Korean students spent almost the same amount of time on average on SNSs. There were also differences in the motives underlying SNS use. American students focused more on making new friends through SNSs, while Korean students tended to focus on nurturing existing relationships with socially close others for informational utility and social support.

In general, individualists tend to derive greater pleasure through emotional release than collectivists because they generally tend to favor self-stimulation and self-satisfaction (Lee & Wohn, 2012), and Kim et al. (2011) found that American students reported higher entertainment motivation than Korean students. Similarly, Hsu's et al. (2015) study of the 493 active Facebook users in five countries (Australia, Austria, Japan, Taiwan, and the USA) revealed that whereas information-seeking was a stronger predictor of continuance intention among those hailing from individualistic cultures, whereas socialization had a stronger influence on continuance intention for collectivist users.

Although Instagram is one of the fastest growing social media platforms, cultural differences in user behavior have been surprisingly overlooked thus far. Several studies have examined motivations for Instagram use (Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung, 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016), and its relationship to negative social comparison (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015) and depression (Sheldon & Newman, 2016). Most of these studies have focused on participants living in the United States. However, the fact that not all Instagram users are from the United States challenges the external validity of these findings.

Instagram was launched in 2010 as a mobile photo and video-sharing application. It currently registers over 600 million active monthly users (Instagram, 2017), and ranks among the most popular social media applications. Due to its enhanced photo-editing features, Instagram users can take, edit, and instantly upload high-quality images (Lee et al., 2015). Instagram use is characterized by selfies, photographs with hashtags, and a number of filters that users can apply to post-edit their images. Additionally, celebrity profiles contribute to its popularity, as glamorous icons share personal photos and videos with their fans.

There are approximately 670,000 Instagram users in Croatia (NapoleonCat, 2017) which constitutes about 15% of the overall Croatia population. In the United States, there are an estimated 77.5 million registered Instagram users, i.e., about 24% of the overall US population (Statista.com, 2016). To understand how culture might influence motives for Instagram use, the current study compares participants of two countries: Croatia, a highly collectivistic culture (score of 33), and the United States (score of 91), a typically individualistic country. In addition, the study examines the relationship between motivational factors (i.e., socialization, entertainment, and self-promotion) and behavioral outcomes of use (including, time spent on Instagram, hashtag frequency, and the number of one's followers).

1. Social media uses and gratifications

This study applies uses and gratifications (U&G) theory (Katz et al., 1973–74), a key assumption of which is that people actively choose media that can satisfy one or more needs. Originally, these needs, or gratifications, were identified as: *diversion* (escape from reality), *personal relationships* (using media for companionship), *personal identity* (reinforcing values), and *surveillance* (information that helps an individual accomplish something) (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972). For example, we use social media to stay in touch with distant family and friends, we watch YouTube videos for entertainment and escapism, and we watch TV news channels that typically reflect and reinforce our political ideologies. In other words, the exact nature of gratifications derived through media use changes based on the specific medium.

The utility of uses and gratifications theory encompasses both traditional and new media use. A number of recent studies have examined its application to Facebook use (Krause, North, & Heritage, 2014; Sheldon, 2008; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011), Twitter (Chen, 2011), YouTube (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008), Pinterest (Mull & Lee, 2014), Yelp (Hicks et al., 2012), and blogs (Kaye, 2005; 2010). A handful of studies have also examined gratifications for Instagram use (e.g., Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Sheldon & Newman, 2016).

Social media behavior has restructured and reconfigured the nature of gratifications.

For example, while television generally fulfils information or entertainment needs, we tend to use social network sites to maintain and cultivate existing relationships (Sheldon, 2008). Other social network sites (e.g., LinkedIn) satisfy professional advancement needs, or a user's need for creativity and organization (e.g., Pinterest) (Mull & Lee, 2014). Whiting and Williams (2013) expanded the original framework of uses and gratifications to encompass social media, and have added additional needs that include convenience, expressing opinions, and staying updated on others within one's network.

Sheldon and Bryant (2016) identify a new motivation for Instagram use that they term *documentation*, i.e., individuals use social media to store images and memories so that they can remember past events. Instagram, particularly, acts as a virtual photo album. Unlike other social media that are more text-based oriented (e.g., Twitter), Instagram relies on images. People who want to document a special moment are more likely to post a picture on Instagram, rather than compose a tweet (Highfield, 2015). Sheldon and Newman (2016) studied Instagram use among middle school students and identified two motives previously unidentified in U&G social media research. These included *lurking* and *escapism*. Lurking has been connected to a desire to remain anonymous and/or preserve privacy and safety (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000), being too shy to post publicly, and the ability to gain information without actively posting (Rau, Gao, & Ding, 2008). Lurking may also constitute a form of entertainment (Nonnecke & Preece, 2001), as in the case of celebrity voyeurism.

Surprisingly, motivations for Instagram use among individuals who do not live in the United States have not been previously examined. Accordingly, we address this lapse through an analysis of survey data that primarily engages the following research question:

RQ1. What motivations characterize Croatian versus American students' use of Instagram?

2. Behavioral outcomes

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) emphasized the importance of studying behavioral outcomes associated with Internet use –

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