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The generation of virtual needs: Recipes for satisfaction in social media networking<sup>☆</sup>Anjala S. Krishen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Orië Berezan<sup>b,1</sup>, Shaurya Agarwal<sup>a</sup>, Pushkin Kachroo<sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas, NV 89154, USA<sup>b</sup> California State University, Dominguez Hills, 1000 East Victoria Street, Carson, CA 90747, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Successful social media networks motivate people to engage in behaviors that speak to their most basic psychological needs through citizenship in a virtual society. These environments provide individuals with the ability to build relationships (relatedness), exercise competence, and express autonomy. Recipes for satisfying these basic needs are vital to the success of virtual societies. This research contributes to existing literature by framing social media interaction using the self-determination theory (SDT); the study analyzes a sample of 570 social networking participants using the generations of baby boomers, generation X, and millennials with fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). Findings indicate that affinity, belonging, interactivity, and innovativeness are all base expectations for social media networking usage, depending on the generational cohort. Indeed, understanding the motivational needs of unique generational cohorts allows marketers to more effectively design precise adaptive strategies for their social media, which can impact engagement and thereby loyalty.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media infiltrates numerous aspects of people's daily lives; this effect supports and even changes people's needs from professional to creative and romantic. Platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, Match.com, and Pinterest have joined Facebook and others in becoming a daily ritual in many people's lives for various reasons. Social media promotes loyalty in many ways. Perhaps most notably, social media networking gives users the opportunity to engage in consumer-to-consumer (C2C) communications such as sharing experiences and knowledge through eWOM (electronic word of mouth), seeking information, and meeting people (Raab, Berezan, Krishen, & Tanford, 2015). Social media also enables organizations large and small to engage their target markets on a multitude of levels, thereby increasing the loyalty of their customers (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czapslewski, 2006). This engagement also applies to the social media initiatives that consumers create and support through a process called co-creation. Social media, in an unprecedented way, offers marketers the ability to gather valuable insights about consumers through multiple levels of engagement. Further, social media has become a vital part of the marketing mix. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit

(2015), social networks will become one of the top technological investments for many of the world's leading organizations.

The research shows that social media has a tremendous psychological effect on its users by influencing their sense of self-worth as well as their anxiety levels. This effect potentially leads to obsession and addiction, for better or for worse (Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011). Successful social networking platforms motivate people to engage in social networking behaviors that speak to some of people's most basic psychological needs through citizenship in a virtual society. These platforms provide users with the ability to build relationships, exercise competence, and express autonomy. The self-determination theory (SDT) argues that the satisfaction of certain needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) affects behavior, such as engaging in social networking (Sheldon & Gunz, 2009; Sheldon et al., 2011). In effect, social networks have the unique ability to offer users a platform from which to satisfy each of these motivational needs. Specifically, users cannot fulfill their need for relatedness without social interaction of which users often value virtual interactions (via social networks) more highly than real life. Overall, the success and sustainability of social media networking platforms rely on the sense of community that the platforms create among members through communicating with one another (Berezan, Raab, Tanford & Kim, 2015; Rosenbaum, Ostrom, & Kuntze, 2005). However, this sense of community is only sustainable if the social media motivates users to engage in the networking that then continues to meet their need for relatedness. Many social networking sites would struggle to attract users and would also lose users without this promise of the relatedness. Furthermore, the recipes for meeting these needs might differ depending on the unique perspectives of those in the network, including members from a variety of segments such as different generations.

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For example, the approach that meets the unique needs of generation X might not meet the needs of millennials (Noble, Haytko, & Phillips, 2009). Therefore, understanding how the needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy motivate members from different generations and how social networking meets those needs might be the secret recipe to affecting engagement. Ultimately this greater engagement would enhance the sense of community among users rather than create or increase gaps between them.

Much like many technological advances in the past and present, social media developments run the risk of increasing the generation gap. The research on millennials argues for both the positive and negative aspects of social networking as a part of life (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). One positive aspect of growing up in a technologically innovative society is that younger generations find multitasking, for example, Facebooking and writing a paper simultaneously, to be less difficult than their older generational cohorts find multitasking to be (Carrier, Cheever, Rosen, Benitez, & Chang, 2009). However, aspects such as multitasking could also create a communication gap between the millennials and other generational cohorts in their social network communications.

To further explore this potential generation gap, this study conducts a survey of social media users from different generations with a quasi-convenience snowball sample. The study then analyzes the multi-group data with a fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). The study gathers insights into the virtual needs of baby boomers, generation X, and millennials and their motivations for using social networking through this analysis.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. Generational needs and motivations

The macro-environment during the period of time in which people “come of age” greatly influences their values, attitudes, and behaviors (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Jackson, Stoel, & Brantley, 2011). Therefore, generational differences offer important insights into the motivators of social media behavior. This study evaluates the baby boomer, generation X, and millennial cohorts with regard to the motivating factors behind their social media networking behavior.

Prensky (2001) refers to baby boomers as “digital immigrants.” Born between 1946 and 1964, boomers grew up in times of significant and dramatic change. This group has successfully adopted new technologies, but they are not as comfortable with technology as the millennials are. The literature on baby boomers considers them to be hard working, to support social causes, and to focus on self-fulfillment and personal growth (Littrell, Ma, & Halepete, 2005; Obal & Kunz, 2013). The literature sometimes considers baby boomers the gloomiest generation but also refers to this cohort as the sandwich generation. Baby boomers either support their parents, their children, or both, and thus the group focuses on economic security and career success (Jackson et al., 2011; Pew Research, 2010).

Generation X (born between 1965 and 1983) went through challenging economic and social times, including two recessions (Eastman & Liu, 2012). The literature on generation X often depicts this cohort as having a higher education, having tech and media savvy, being entrepreneurial, being independent, seeking emotional security, and being informal (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Pew Research, 2010).

The literature on millennials (from 2002) portrays them as confident, connected, trustful, tolerant, well-traveled, open to change, group-oriented, highly educated, tech savvy, and generally self-centered (Pew Research, 2010; Syrett & Lammiman, 2003). Prensky (2001) refers to this group as “digital natives” due to their familiarity and comfort with the digital technology that has surrounded them throughout their lives. This familiarity has resulted in millennials growing up in a connected and fast-paced environment where they value collaboration and easy access to information (Obal & Kunz, 2013).

### 2.2. Social media communication

The research shows that the virtual experiences of interactivity, affinity, belongingness, and innovativeness address several types of social needs. The communication between consumers, also known as consumer-to-consumer or C2C, allows for both structural and experiential interactivity (Chan & Li, 2010). The properties and features of the particular social media platform, such as informativeness and navigability, provide the structural route to interactivity. Whereas, the social bonds and enjoyment aspects of experiential interactivity measure the hedonic pleasure that people derive from C2C communication. The research on Facebook in particular finds that these interactions can come in multiple forms: negative ones such as addition and stalking, as well as positive ones such as personal branding and the building of brand relationships (Patterson, 2012).

Krishen, Trembath, and Muthaly (2015) propose a model of a social network for building loyalty that they base on affinity. In this model, they define affinity in terms of building connections between people that ultimately leads to higher satisfaction and higher loyalty to the social platform. Multiple theories speak to the importance of the relationships and the affinity from social media communication, such as the social presence theory (Lin, Fan, & Chau, 2014), the usability–sociability framework (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003), and the social influence theory. The social presence theory argues that in the context of online communities, the fact that individuals are unable to see each other makes them more likely to communicate personal and surreptitious information. This communication leads to connections with similar others over time and creates a contagious effect of self-disclosure and trust (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003) that builds the social network’s affinity.

Innovativeness is a trait that has a high association with the idea of adopting change and trendy technologies at a faster pace (Pagani, Hofacker, & Goldsmith, 2011). Information and communication technology’s (ICT) innovativeness is a significant predictor of the usage of a social networking site (Zhong, Hardin, & Sun, 2011). This description is consistent with other views of innovativeness, such as domain-specific ones, that also measure the greater use of social networking (Pagani et al., 2011).

Lin (2008) defines a sense of belonging as an individual’s perception of positive membership in a virtual community. The communication in social media platforms continues to rise, even in virtual world environments such as Second Life. This communication provides individuals with social interaction and feelings of connectedness and belonging (Krishen, Hardin, & LaTour, 2013). Several researchers find support for the building of belongingness from social media communication and the communication’s effect on both satisfaction and loyalty (Krishen et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2014).

### 2.3. Self-determination theory

The SDT combines individual differences with motivation. This theory states that the satisfaction of core psychological needs shapes behavior, growth, and development. The literature defines SDT as a metatheory that argues that an individual’s core needs fall into three main categories: competence (desire for mastery), relatedness (desire to have others care, care for others, and to have a relation with significant others), and autonomy (sense of freedom and volition) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory argues that these three needs are central to the propensities for growth, integration, social development, and well-being. The SDT identifies relevant regulatory styles, the perception on the loci of causality, and regulatory processes with a spectrum from no motivation to intrinsic motivation. At the furthest extreme, self-determination requires a high level of intrinsic motivation, a high perception on the internal locus of causality, and high intrinsic regulation (Sweeney, Webb, Mazzarol, & Soutar, 2014). The opposite end of the spectrum, no motivation, is the result of no regulation, impersonal

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