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Why do we use different types of websites and assign them different levels of credibility? Structural relations among users' motives, types of websites, information credibility, and trust in the press[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The phenomenal growth in the use of the Internet as an information source has raised questions among scholars about why and how individuals use this resource. Based on uses and gratifications theory, the current study explored structural relations among individuals' specific motivations for using the Internet, their specific use of the web, credibility perceptions of online information and trust in the press using structural equation modeling method ($N = 996$). Consistent with our predictions, the distinct motivations (i.e., information seeking, social utility, and entertainment) were associated with the use of web portals, news websites, and social networking sites, respectively. Our findings also indicated that the use of news websites particularly influences users' perceptions of the credibility of online information as well as trust in the press. Furthermore, a significant association between credibility perceptions of online information and trust in the press was revealed. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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Thanks to the Internet, individuals are able to access and obtain information more easily than ever before. Recent estimates indicate that approximately 71.7% of households in the United States access the Internet (United States Census Bureau, 2011). The phenomenal growth in the use of the Internet as an information source has raised questions among scholars about why and how individuals use this resource. The uses and gratifications (U&G) perspective provides a theoretical framework through which to address these broad questions. The U&G perspective applies an audience-centered approach, which views individuals' media usage behaviors as guided by specific needs and motivations (Rubin, 2002, 2009), and it has been widely used to identify the underlying motivations that account for variations in individuals' media usage. In particular, with respect to the Internet, studies from this

perspective have identified the major motivational factors for using the Internet: (1) information seeking, (2) information surveillance, (3) entertainment, and (4) social utility (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; You, Lee, Lee, & Kang, 2013). These findings provide a basis for understanding and predicting people's actual behavior in regard to using online media. However, research to date does not provide a sufficient explanation for the nuanced variations in individuals' use of online media to satisfy distinct needs (i.e., whether they use different websites depending on certain motivations). In general, research studies have treated the Internet as a whole rather than differentiating between different types of websites that can be used according to differentiated motivations. For this reason, we know why people use the Internet in general (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Kang, Lee, You, & Lee, 2013; Kaye & Johnson, 2002, 2004; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; You et al., 2013). However, we know very little about which websites people tend to use driven by which motivations. Thus, to address this gap in the literature, the present study aims to examine the relationship between specific motivations and people's specific use of the web. In particular, given that the three most frequent online activities are (1) using a search engine to find information, (2) using social

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networking sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and (3) reading news (Pew Research, n.d.), the present study investigates how specific motivations are associated with the use of three types of websites (web portals, social networking sites, and news websites), which are assumed to invite the aforementioned online activities.

In addition, the current study explores the associations between online media use and credibility perception and trust in the press. With the rapid growth of the Internet, researchers have raised questions regarding how people evaluate and perceive the credibility of online information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Metzger, Flanagin, & Zwarun, 2003; Rieh & Belkin, 1998). However, these studies focus on investigating the extent to which online users consider online information to be credible in general and which factors, principally message-, source-, and medium-related, contribute to increasing the perceived credibility (Eysenbach & Köhler, 2003; Fogg et al., 2001; Hong, 2006; Metzger, Flanagin & Medders, 2010) of online information. But they have done so without considering the possibility that different online media usage patterns might produce different effects on the perceived credibility of online information. The present study, therefore, aims to investigate such relationships. Furthermore, given that perceived information credibility can be highly correlated with trust in the press (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), the present study also explores the effects of online media use in building trust in the press.

In sum, the aim of the present study is to answer the following questions: What are the motivations that lead to the specific use of different types of websites? In what ways do different online media usage patterns result in differences in the perceived credibility of online information and likewise in trust in the press? And, is the perceived credibility of online information related to trust in the press?

1. Literature review

1.1. Motivations for using the Internet

In light of the growing popularity of online media, scholars have begun investigating how people use online information media and why they use them in certain ways. To explain people's media usage behaviors, previous studies have primarily focused on human factors, arguing that our diverse media usage behaviors are initiated by people's pre-existing motivations (Lin, 1999; Palmagreen, 1984). This approach has shifted the field's understanding of media usage behavior from passive media consumption to active media use, implying that media users are goal-directed in their media use.

One of the most well-established theories addressing the role of the motivations underlying media usage behaviors is uses and gratifications (U&G) theory, according to which people choose and use media based on their motivations (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000; Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004). According to this theory, a person's media usage behaviors are guided by “(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations from (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones” (Katz et al., 1974, p. 20). In short, this theory holds that media usage patterns are driven by users' full awareness of their needs and motivations and the ways in which they expect to fulfill these by using the media. Thus, different users can use the same media in very different ways depending on respective motivation and purpose (Severin & Tankard, 1997).

Since the introduction of U&G, scholars have made a considerable effort to identify key motivations for media use by applying the

theory to diverse types of media. For example, studies have explored what drives people to use newspapers (Elliott & Rosenberg, 1987), radio (Mendelsohn, 1964), and television (Babrow, 1987; Conway & Rubin, 1991; Rubin & Rubin, 1982). As the media landscape has become more diversified, U&G scholars have attempted to identify people's motivations for using the Internet. Such investigations have demonstrated that the motivations of and gratifications from using the Internet are similar to those that underlie the use of traditional media (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Flanagan & Metzger, 2000; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Indeed, the motivations identified as underlying use of the Internet largely overlap with those that underlie the use of traditional media. For example, Ferguson and Perse (2000) found that entertainment, passing time, obtaining social information, and relaxing are the key motivations for using the Internet and that these are also salient motivations for using traditional media such as television and radio (Greenberg, 1974; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979; Rubin, 1983). Likewise, Kaye and Johnson (2002) found that motivations for using online media are similar to those for using television, arguing that key motivational dimensions for consuming online political information are guidance, information seeking, information surveillance, entertainment, and social utility. Furthermore, a recent study found three motivational dimensions for using the Internet, i.e., learning, entertainment, and one-upmanship (Kang, Lee, You, & Lee, 2013). In addition, You et al. (2013) also proposed three types of motivations for using the Internet: information seeking, social utility, and entertainment. Thus, by drawing on these previous studies and exploratory factor analysis, the present study considers three prominent dimensions—information seeking, social utility and enjoyment.

1.2. Motivations for using the Internet and patterns of online media use

Previous U&G studies are somewhat limited, particularly in regard to explaining audiences' complicated online media usage behavior, especially given that nuanced gratifications can be obtained from using different types of websites. In other words, U&G studies to date focus on identifying the key motivations driving Internet use in general rather than specifying how people use specific types of websites in accord with specific motivations.

The advent of new media technology has changed the media landscape further. In particular, diverse websites now serve as major information sources. First, web portals, such as Google and Yahoo, are among the most frequently used sites, given that they provide a wide range of information such as news, stocks, and weather as well as diverse functions such as chatting, messaging, and e-mail. Second, as more traditional news organizations now have online versions, people largely rely on online news websites such as CNN.com and New York Times.com to access news. Furthermore, social networking sites serve as an important online information source, especially among younger generations. With the widespread diffusion of Facebook and Twitter and diverse functions afforded by such sites such as “likes” and “tweets”, people are able to publish their own content in online with ease. Therefore, people can even catch up with the current hot issues or trends on social networking sites without visiting other online media.

Given these diverse types of websites, it can be assumed that people choose to use different websites depending on their specific motivations. Indeed, Ferguson and Perse (2000) found that individuals who have “escape”, “entertainment”, or “excitement” motivations for using the Internet are more likely to visit sports websites, whereas those who have “passing time” or “escape” motivations tend to visit interactive websites. In addition, a recent study (Lee & Oh, 2013) found that people who have information-

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