



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Journal of Academic Librarianship



Individual Differences in Social Media Use for Information Seeking

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 January 2014

Accepted 3 March 2014

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Information sources

Social media

Undergraduates

User characteristics

ABSTRACT

This study investigated which social media platforms are used as information sources, and for what purposes. It also examined how user characteristics are related to the use of different platforms. A Web-based survey was used to collect data from undergraduate students. Responses from more than 800 students showed that most of the social media platforms are used as information sources, where wikis, user reviews, and media-sharing sites emerged as the top platforms. The purpose of use varied across platforms. T-test and ANOVA results also revealed individual differences. Significant differences in gender, class level, academic discipline, and Big Five personality traits were found in the frequency of information seeking using different platforms and also in the purpose of use. Study findings have implications for information literacy (IL) education and information services. Because many students are actively using social media platforms for a variety of information-seeking purposes, it is suggested that IL programs embrace social media as potential information sources and offer effective strategies for using and evaluating these increasingly popular social media sources.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media have become increasingly popular among younger generations (Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Lenhart et al., 2010). Social-networking sites (SNS), for example, are used by 89% of online users between the ages of 18 and 29 (Brenner & Smith, 2013) and 86% of undergraduate students (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). As social media have become more popular, a number of studies have been conducted to examine college students' social media use (Correa et al., 2010; Gray et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2012; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009; Yang & Brown, 2013). However, most of these studies focused on specific types of social media and investigated social media use for social networking or for marketing purposes (Berthon et al., 2012; Ellison et al., 2007; Lampe et al., 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Little attention has been given to the roles that different social media platforms play in individuals' information seeking. While some studies acknowledged the informational value of social media, they highlighted general trends, rather than individual differences, in college students' use of social media to acquire information (Head & Eisenberg, 2010; Kim et al., 2011). Because the veracity of social media information is an issue of concern, it is important for library and

information science (LIS) professionals to understand the informational purposes for which students are using social media. Also of interest is whether certain types of users are more inclined to use social media for satisfying their information needs, such that relevant information literacy training can be provided.

Focusing on undergraduate students, this study aims to investigate which social media platforms are used for what kinds of information-seeking purposes and who are likely to use such platforms. Relations between user characteristics, including demographics and personalities, and the use of different social media platforms, are examined. Findings of the study will help to better understand different types of users and their preferences in terms of social media use for information seeking. Based on the findings, suggestions are made for improving information services and information literacy (IL) programs on social media use.

LITERATURE

Across different age groups, social media are widely used for various purposes. SNS, for example, are among the most popular social media platforms used by college students (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). While SNS are used mainly for socialization purposes, recent research shows that many individuals get news from SNS. Microblogs such as Twitter and media-sharing sites such as YouTube are also frequently used as sources for news (Mitchell, Holcomb, & Page, 2013; Pew, 2012). Wikipedia is another popular social media platform, which is often used as a go-to source. It seems that many college students start with Wikipedia to get an overview of a new concept and related

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resources (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). Although initial evidence suggests that various social media platforms are used as information sources (Head & Eisenberg, 2010; Kim et al., 2011; Sin et al., 2011), there is a dearth of research related to the question of who is likely to use which social media platforms as information sources, and for what purposes.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

Students' usage of various social media as an information source is a concern for librarians and educators, in part due to the varying quality of information available via these forms of media. The popularity of social media, similar to that of the Web, has prompted debates over the goals and scope of information literacy (IL). Broader concepts of IL, such as critical IL (Dunaway, 2011), IL 2.0 (Carpan, 2010; Farkas, 2011; Spiranc & Zorica, 2010) and metaliteracy (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011) have been proposed. Some libraries have started to introduce guidelines and other resources to support the use and evaluation of social media (Austria, 2007; Bridges, 2012; Mitrano, 2012; Witek & Grettano, 2012). In this digital age, it is generally agreed that IL should move beyond the static check-list approach. IL should actively cultivate higher-order critical thinking skills, such as competencies in engaging with information, in a collaborative environment, and from various media. Furthermore, IL may need to prepare individuals to become valuable creators as well as informed consumers of information (Cronon, 2012). These recognitions of the import of broadening the scope of IL highlight the need to survey the current landscape of students' information seeking in a wide range of sources, including the use of social media for information seeking purposes.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

Gender seems to have some effect on social media use. In general, male students are known to use Internet sources more frequently than female students do (Li & Kirkupb, 2007). However, SNS, a social media platform, seem to be used by female students more often than by males (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Women also tend to have more friends (Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009) and spend more time on SNS (Moore & McElroy, 2012) than men do. Men, on the other hand, are found to use SNS more for task-oriented reasons and less for interpersonal purposes (Lin & Lu, 2011; Shade, 2004). Related to the level of education, studies suggest that more undergraduates than graduate students use SNS (Lampe et al., 2006; Park, 2010; Stutzman, 2006). Among undergraduates, underclassmen (i.e., freshmen and sophomores) tend to use SNS more frequently than upperclassmen, mainly for keeping in touch with others (Pempek et al., 2009; Yang & Brown, 2013). Head (2013) found that sophomore, junior, and senior students use Wikipedia more frequently than freshmen do. Freshmen, on the other hand, are found to use blogs frequently. Academic background is another factor that seems to influence the use of social media and other resources. Among doctoral students, social science students tend to use more journals in both print and e-journals, whereas science students use more Internet resources and conference proceedings (Sheeja, 2010). A study on social media use indicates that more natural and engineering scientists than humanities researchers use social media (CIBER, 2010). Philosophers use blogs often to stay up-to-date with the newest contributions in their field (Collins & Jubb, 2012).

PERSONALITY TRAITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

Users' personality traits have been shown to predict various behaviors, including communication (Moberg, 2001; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000) and information seeking (Heinström, 2005, 2010; Weiler, 2005). To date, one of the most widely used trait classifications is the "big five" personality taxonomy (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). The model identifies five broad dimensions of

personality, including extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to new experience. Personality tests, similar to all self-reported measures, are subject to the possibility of respondent reactivity and social desirability responses. The big-five model, nonetheless, has shown good reliability measures. The Big Five Inventory (BFI) instrument, for example, scored an average of .80 alpha reliability and a .85 three-month test-retest reliability (John et al., 2008). The big-five model (Costa & McCrae, 1992) has been frequently used to examine behavior differences in the online environment, such as personality differences in Internet and social media usage for online social capital building (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Correa et al., 2010; Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008; Moore & McElroy, 2012; Ross et al., 2009). The model is also gaining attention in information user studies (Heinström, 2003, 2005; Kwon & Song, 2011).

Extroverts tend to be adventurous, sociable, and talkative, whereas introverts are typically quiet and shy (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Facebook users are found to have significantly higher scores on extroversion (Ryan & Xenos, 2011). Extroverted individuals generally have more Facebook friends (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008) and belong to more Facebook groups (Ross et al., 2009) than introverts do.

Agreeableness is related to the degree of friendliness, and is associated with individuals who are kind, sympathetic, and warm (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Heinström (2003) shows a link between competitiveness (i.e., a low level of agreeableness) and the critical analysis of information that contributes to more effective information seeking. Those individuals with low levels of agreeableness tend to be "broad scanners," a classification characterized by wide and thorough information seeking (Heinström, 2005).

Conscientiousness refers to a person's work ethic, orderliness, and thoroughness. Individuals with high levels of conscientiousness tend to have a high search drive and high involvement in source use (Halder, Roy, & Chakraborty, 2010). Conscientious searchers are more likely to use a structured information-seeking approach, which contributes to fewer information-seeking problems (Heinström, 2005). Song and Kwon (2012) found that conscientiousness is a strong personality predictor of information competence. High levels of conscientiousness are positively related to higher levels of information competence.

Individuals with low levels of openness tend to prefer familiarity and convention, and adhere to established patterns (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Those who are open to new experiences, in contrast, have broad interests and seek novelty (John & Srivastava, 1999). They tend to have a "broad scanners" information-seeking pattern (Heinström, 2005) and quickly adopt new social media platforms. For example, at the time when blogs were still an emerging platform, individuals with high levels of openness tended to use blogs more frequently than others (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008). Heavier users of SNS also tend to have higher levels of openness to new experiences (Ross et al., 2009).

Neuroticism is a personality trait characterized by anxiety and moodiness. Interestingly, individuals who have high levels of neuroticism tend to use Internet social services, including chat rooms and social media such as SNS more frequently (Ehrenberg, Juckes, White, & Walsh, 2008; Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000). These individuals are likely to prefer Internet services that provide more time for contemplation before acting than offline or face-to-face interactions, as the former can help individuals to feel less nervous or worried (Ehrenberg, Juckes, White and Walsh, 2008; Ross et al., 2009). Those with high levels of neuroticism tend to prefer using the Wall in SNS, for example. The Wall is a public writing space where users can post their thoughts or views for everyone to see. It offers users the opportunity to take their time in formulating and controlling messages and responses (Ross et al., 2009).

Although a substantial amount of research has been done to examine the relationship between user characteristics and social media use, most of the extant studies focus on social media used for socialization purposes rather than for information seeking. While a few studies have

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