

College Students' Use of Social Media: Site Preferences, Uses and Gratifications Theory Revisited

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Abstract

With the ubiquity of computer-mediated communication, it is becoming increasingly difficult to choose which medium or content to employ in gratifying whatever use or need people may seek at each point in time. Empirical results in 2012 from questionnaires administered among 289 college students ranging in age from 18 to 28 years show that college students use Social Media Network Sites (SMNSs) for so many reasons. These include keeping in touch with friends (98.9%), sharing photos (81.7%), keeping in touch with family (79.3%), and entertainment (70.9%), among others. Facebook emerged as the preferred SMN site followed by Twitter, while LinkedIn was the least popular site among this group. While some participants still maintain their MySpace account, they depicted this site as archaic and a rarely visited site. Overall, ease of use and potential for eclectic tasks are qualities that garnered Facebook most preferred status as a social networking site.

Keywords: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, Social Media, Uses and gratification theory.

1. Introduction

Contemporary communications studies devote more and more time and space towards examining the audience as active participants who consciously choose what media and media contents to use with the intention of serving specific needs. Mass media research focusses on what we do with media which, in essence, contradicts earlier studies on mass society, direct effects, and even limited effects of what-media-do-to-us approaches. At the center of this active audience paradigm is the Uses and Gratifications theory (Katz & Blumler, 1974) which postulates that people put specific media content and medium to specific use in the hope of having some needs gratified. There is a natural nexus, of course, between media and technology. The trend in emergent technologies comprises three major components, namely: content creation, content sharing, and interactivity. These are the attributes shared by social media, a phenomenon that now dominates most adult peoples' lives. The Pew Research Center (2011) indicates that 66% of online adults use one form of social media or another. The same study also found that social networking sites are an appealing medium for various personal human gratifications including, but not limited to, staying in touch with current friends, staying in touch with family members, connecting with old friends, connecting with others who share similar hobbies and interests, making new friends, reading comments by celebrities, athletes or politicians, as well as finding potential romantic or dating partners.

With the ubiquity of computer-mediated communication, it is becoming increasingly difficult to choose which medium or content to employ in gratifying whatever use or need people may seek at different points in time. In August 2010, TM.Biz (an online resource for trademark owners) listed 4,000 active social networking sites worldwide. In addition to the obvious need for creating and maintaining social ties, social media networks have provided avenues for employees in organizations to maintain an active voice in the workplace by openly sharing their views. Such practice was neither encouraged nor attempted in the past (Miles & Muuka, 2011). Similarly, these sites also help users to create and maintain community (Ulusu, 2010), construct social identities (Salimkhan, Manago, & Greenfield, 2010) and many other functions.

This paper, applying the uses and gratifications theory and combining newer technologies functions of interactivity, demassification, and asynchronicity, examines the gratifications that college students seek in their use of four social networks—MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn—and compares these to previous studies. The paper further investigates participants' preferred network sites among the four types and identifies factors that influence their decisions or choices.

2. Overview of Social Media Networks and Previous Work

Defining social media networking sites is difficult especially since all Web 2.0 technologies seem to share similar traits of interactivity, user-generated content, content sharing and data upload and download. In their groundbreaking research, Boyd and Ellison (2008) proffered some universal traits inherent in social media. They include (1) constructing a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulating a list of other users with whom participants share a connection, and (3) viewing and traversing their list of connections and those made by others within the system. Boyd and Ellison (2008) further point out that the nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. In addition to sharing the above traits, social networking sites vary in so many other ways. As a result, users flock to some while others are abandoned to be rebranded, still others remain dormant. Essentially, SMNs are predominantly for making social connections. But some, like LinkedIn, are intended strictly for business and professional purposes. Others, though, can serve multiple purposes of socialization, learning, activism, content creation and sharing and maintaining filial and casual relationships as in Facebook and the earlier version of MySpace. Additional purposes include updating personal information and activities and maintaining a one-way parasocial relationship, as in Twitter.

For purposes of the current discussion, the terms social media networks, social media networking sites and social media network sites will be used interchangeably. The author, however, acknowledges previous discourse on the subject of overlooking the nuances inherent in the technicality of each term when used in their strictest sense. Beer (2008) observed the intricacies in Boyd and Ellison's (2008) usage of these terms. However, the social media phenomenon over the years has metamorphosed into a seamless mesh whereby their purposes include both relationship initiation in terms of strangers and relationship maintenance in the case of family and friends; sharing of information via text, video, audio, picture; as well as learning and a plethora of other uses. The focus of the current study, however, is on the usage that college students employ of SMNs and what factors compel them to choose one or more forms of this media over others.

2.1. SixDegrees.com and Friendster

Earlier social media networks included SixDegrees.com, Friendster, and many others. When SixDegrees.com debuted in 1997, registered users inputted contact information of friends, family members and acquaintances so that invitations would be sent to them to join the network. The idea for this site was derived from the six degrees of separation concept which holds that essentially every human being on the face of the earth can be connected to another by approximately a chain of six degrees or levels. Due to this concept of connectivity, one could only join through an invitation by another person who was already a user of the network. Sixdegrees.com basically allowed users to share information and post messages through a bulletin board. As Boyd and Ellison (2008) point out, several shortcomings plagued the site. First, it was unable to provide much activity for friends, family members and acquaintances after they were connected to one another other than posting information on bulletin boards. Second, during its time, people had not developed the confidence and interest of meeting strangers online. Third, the Web 2.0 technologies that currently allow users to generate and share content as well as download and upload information seamlessly were not easily accessible. Above all, the idea of infusing advertising with online activities was at its infancy. Therefore, SixDegrees.com closed in 2000, giving way to newer networking sites such as Friendster (2002), MySpace (2003), LinkedIn (2003), Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), and a plethora of others that burgeon so frequently that it is almost impossible for one to utilize all available social media networks.

2.2. LinkedIn

Among the four SMNSs that are the focus of this study, LinkedIn was among the oldest, albeit still very unpopular among younger generations. LinkedIn is a strictly professional site that focuses on business and professional relationships. Its mission statement attests to a commitment to "connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful" (LinkedIn, 2012).

Its creators, Reid Hoffman, Allen Blue, Jean-Luc Vaillant, Eric Ly, and Konstantin Guericke had a vision of providing an online forum for better professional networking.

2.3. MySpace

MySpace's founder, Tom Anderson, capitalized on a rumor that Friendster networks (social networking sites that helped people maintain their offline relationship online and provided a dating forum as well) might be asking for a fee. Andersen lured Friendster users to this new site with an offer for free membership. At the same time, the Indie-rock band from Los Angeles was expelled from Friendster for violation of some regulation and MySpace extended a welcoming hand to them as well. They found their new home on MySpace site (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Newman, 2008). Certain features such as the ability to build one's front page and profile, advertising, a forum for interaction between bands and their fans, and complying with user-demands—especially requests for personalizing pages including background designs, and uploading information links—were great advantages of and for MySpace (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). MySpace reached its peak in popularity when it attracted News Corp. to pay \$580 million in 2005 for its acquisition (BusinessWeek, 2005). Ironically, as soon as News Corp. acquired MySpace (which was considered the summit of its existence), the site met a downward spiral in terms of popularity, revenue, and membership due to incidences of sexual predators and abusers. This was a serious issue that compelled Connecticut Attorney General, Richard Blumenthal to call for more stringent control and regulations on MySpace (Oser, 2006).

2.4. Facebook

Facebook, on the other hand, had a humble beginning from the Harvard University campus. The founders, Harvard students Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz, Chris Hughes, and Eduardo Saverin (Facebook, 2012) had developed the network exclusively for Harvard Students but it gradually permeated to other universities around the Boston area and beyond allowing only people with a university e-mail address ending with (.edu) to join. Facebook broke the record of SMNs membership in July 2010 when it announced its 500 millionth member (Wauters, 2010). By the end of December 2011, Facebook documented 845 million monthly active users and to date, it is available in more than 70 languages (Facebook.com). Its mission statement says that Facebook exists “to make the world more open and connected” (Facebook.com).

2.5. Twitter

The simplest way of explaining the Twitter network would be an online version of text-messaging with the capability of sending the same message to several thousand people all at once. Twitter was invented in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams, and Biz Stone as a faster means of staying in touch (Beaumont, 2008 as cited in Sauerbier, 2010). Twitter's unique feature is the concept of 140 words and characters limit. Twitter was initially utilized for a journalistic effort, serving as an outlet for breaking a news story; but celebrities later popularized it by using it to tweet events of their daily lives. Also, the Austin Texas' South by SouthWest (SXSW) festival made Twitter even more prominent (Sauerbier, 2010).

2.6. Active Audience

Since the conception of, and subsequent recognition of active-audience and their uses of media and fulfillment derived from media and media contents, a plethora of studies have been conducted in this field. However, considering that young adults between the ages of 18 and 28 use SMNSs the most (Pew Research Center, 2011), there is a paucity of studies that focus on college students' use of SMNSs and gratifications derived from it. As such, this section reviews only the most recent studies on college students (aged 18-28) and their social media network usage and gratifications derived therefrom. Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) investigated the impact of social media networks on college students in light of the characteristics of students that use the networking sites, why they use them, and the uses and gratifications they derive from using these sites. Another study by Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2010) identified the dimensions of uses and gratifications from friend networking sites among college students. A somewhat similar study in this realm examined the formation and maintenance of social capital among undergraduate students (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) but did not focus on the uses and gratifications per se.

2.7. Gap in Literature

The current study attempts to fill certain gaps. Since the Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) and Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2010) studies reviewed only two networking sites, Facebook and MySpace, the current study furthers knowledge by expanding the research to incorporate the four most popular social media networking sites among college students: Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and LinkedIn. The aim is to ascertain whether they are still popular among college students. Additionally, considering the concept of demassification that avails users a wide range of choices, there is always a need to choose. With the four networks in question which are considered the most popular among college students (Martin, 2010), there is still a need for one to choose which site or sites to utilize. Therefore, this study seeks to identify and ascertain those factors that influence college students' choice or preference of one form of social media over others. Finally, the study will extrapolate on college students' use of social media networking sites by comparing the current participant responses with the uses derived from previous studies.

3. Theoretical Framework

The 1940s ushered in a divergent perspective for studying the effects and the manner by which media and media contents are used. Herta Herzog and other scholars such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton are considered the pioneers of this trend of thought in media research (Baran & Davis, 2012). Although the term Uses and Gratifications theory as it is used today was the work of Katz & Blumler (1974), it has since passed through different major developmental stages. Newer technologies have advanced the methodological application of this theory and provided ground for it to be applied. Baran and Davis (2012) argue that earlier researchers predominantly used the survey methods for their research because most of them especially Lazarsfeld were trained in this area. During this era, computer resources proved to be an advantage for researchers to conduct research faster and more accurately. Current technologies, especially the internet and World Wide Web components, have resurrected the validity and dynamic presence of the Uses and Gratifications theory in media and media content use. Ruggiero (2000) puts it succinctly by arguing that some characteristics of newer technologies (especially the internet) strengthen the theory of uses and gratifications. Such characteristics, he asserts, are interactivity, demassification, and asynchronicity (p. 15). Interactivity is defined as the users' ability to switch as well as regulate contents and other forms of exchanges during a mutual activity with others. This enables reciprocal information gathering and exchange. Ruggiero (2000) further explains demassification as "the ability of the media user to select from a wide menu" (p. 16). Lastly, asynchronicity is the term for a users' ability to access media messages at any time as opposed to one particular time. As such, messages may be "staggered in time" (p. 16) thus allowing accessibility at a later time.

The three foregoing qualities are inherent in social media. As mentioned earlier, there are over 4,000 SMNSs available for users and each allows for full interaction including creation, sharing, and downloading of contents in different formats—text, video, data, audio, and picture. Ultimately, Uses and Gratifications theory will inform this research by ascertaining the uses to which college students employ social media networks, and what activities they engage in once on these social media sites. A further relevant question centers on what factors influence student choice of one or more sites over others especially among the four selected SMNSs.

4. Aims of the Study

Specifically, the following are the research questions for this study:

RQ1: To what use do college students employ Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and LinkedIn?

RQ2: Are Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and LinkedIn still the most popular networking sites among college students in terms of usage?

RQ3: What factors influence college students' preference of one or some sites over others?

5. Methodology

The study used a purposive sampling method to ensure a good representation of the target group that is college students as users of the four social media networking sites. A call for participation was sent to students between the ages of 18 and 28 studying at a four-year public university in the Midwestern region of the United States. The study was earlier approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants were recruited predominantly from several large undergraduate classes from several departments on campus.

5.1. Data Collection

Data was collected between March 6 and March 26, 2012 using a questionnaire. The questionnaire was in both electronic and paper versions. This was to ensure that all participants who willingly volunteered to be a part of the study were given every opportunity to do so. Participant solicitation was administered through the course instructors, while other calls were sent via e-mail. The large undergraduate classes were targeted because they ordinarily encompass diverse student populations consisting of different majors. There was also more likelihood of obtaining a sample that fell within the target audience age range of 18-28 years. The questionnaire was pre-tested among 12 students and adequate adjustments were made to clarify some questions that had earlier proved ambiguous. The online version of the questionnaire was administered through the Survey Monkey software while the paper version was administered in classroom settings. Participation for both versions of the questionnaire was both anonymous and voluntary for all students.

5.2. Instrument

The questionnaire comprised 26 questions¹ that elicited both quantitative and qualitative data. This was a deliberate effort aimed at collecting rich data, especially with the qualitative questions that allowed students to articulate their opinions and provide richer responses as opposed to pre-packaged responses. Follow-up questions also provided opportunity for qualitative answers. For instance, students were asked to rank the four SMNSs (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and LinkedIn) by order of preference from #1 being the most preferred to #4 as the least preferred. A follow-up question required the students to provide attributes that made them rank a site as #1 and another as #4. Other questions listed the uses of social media networks as contained in previous studies. Students were asked to check off the uses pertinent to them. Demographic information on age, gender, race and college rank was also obtained. A total of 289 usable responses were received out of a sampling frame of some 450 students, for a response rate of 64%.

5.3. The Participants

The 289 responses (n =289) were all useful data as filters were used to eliminate participants outside the target population range of 18 to 28 years. The gender demographics showed the following results: 107 male (37.2%); 171 female (59.1%); 2 transgender (0.6%) and n=9 undeclared (3.1%). In terms of race/ethnicity, a majority of the respondents were found to be Caucasian (79.5%). The others were African-American (9.9%), Asian (6.7%), American Indian or Native Alaskan (1.4%), Hispanic or Latino (0.7%), while the "Other" category accounted for the remaining balance of 1.8%. These included Belizean Creole, Arab, European or Moroccan students. In terms of college rank, Seniors had the highest representation at 27%, followed by Juniors (24.1%), Sophomores (23%), Freshmen (17.4%), and finally graduate students at 8.5%. Why were graduate students found in undergraduate classes? The answer lies in the fact that many graduate students (both American and international) take foundation or prerequisite courses to prepare them for graduate level work. Some of the graduate students were, in fact, MBA students taking such foundation courses as Principles of Finance or Managerial Accounting that prepare them for MBA-level graduate work.

5.4. Data Analysis

The paper version of the completed questionnaire was inputted on Survey Monkey software. The software provided a compilation of the raw data as well as a summary of responses arranged by questions. The data was downloaded onto an Excel spreadsheet and frequency tables, charts and graphs were drawn from the summaries. Data from the open-ended questions was coded to generate categories and, later, themes. The themes were then entered in an Excel spreadsheet from which pivot tables were generated for frequencies of responses.

6. Results

Results are presented according to the three research questions covering uses of social media networks, popularity of the chosen networking sites among college students and factors that influence preference of one or more network over others.

¹ The questionnaire addressed two research topics: The uses and gratifications obtained from social media networks sites (the current study) and Generation Y'ers perception and reception of advertising on SMNSs.

6.1. Uses of Social Media Networking Sites among college students

Keeping in touch with friends emerged as the number one reason for using SMNSs among College students, with the affirmation of 98% of the participants. Other top uses include sharing photos (81%), keeping in touch with family (79%), reconnecting with old friends (73%) and for entertainment (71%). A comprehensive list of participants' uses of SMNSs is provided in Table 1. Interestingly, shopping emerged as the least cited reason for using SMNSs among this group, at only 5%. In the "other" category, participants listed reading Bible verses, having something to do, reading quotes, sharing upcoming events, and working as additional uses for SMNSs.

6.2. Popular Sites

Facebook emerged as the favorite site for college students among all four sites, while MySpace was the least favorite. However, in terms of popularity, LinkedIn was the least popular for 32% of the participants, who indicated that they have never heard of it and have never used it. For those who currently have an account on LinkedIn, usage is strictly for business while others do not find it useful at the moment because of lack of current professional engagement or jobs. In terms of the number of users, 99% of the participants have a Facebook account, 67% have Twitter, 40% have created an account on MySpace while only 29% have created an account on LinkedIn. Students spend varying amounts of time on these sites. The most time spent by a preponderance of the students on all four sites was about five hours per day. However, for the "I'm on 24-hours" option, Twitter ranked the highest for a 24-hour log-on.

6.3. Factors that influence Preference

By order of preference, Facebook was ranked #1 among the four social networking sites followed by Twitter at #2. Interestingly, MySpace took both the #3 and #4 positions. Obviously, LinkedIn was not very popular among college students as 32% of the participants indicated that they have never heard of the site and so were unable to rank it. Participants were asked to provide on their own, with no choices provided, factors that influenced their preference especially for the first and last position. Characteristics of Facebook that endears it to this group were identified as: easier to navigate and very user-friendly, most popular among friends and family members, provides greater opportunity for interactivity, is universal in nature as it includes international friends, and very eclectic for users because they can do a number of things including the ability to upload information especially pictures and videos, chat with friends, get updates of friends' activities and link with other social media such as Twitter. MySpace, on the other hand, was characterized as being outdated and old, very unsafe, and an unattractive interface. A condensed list of participants' description of all four network sites is contained in Table 2 and Table 3.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Some interesting results emerged from this study although there are no major surprises as to the uses for which college students apply social media in comparison to previous studies. In fact, the results of this study synchronized with those by Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) and Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2010). The same purposes of keeping in touch with old friends, current friends and family members emerged as the highest use of social media. However, it is interesting to note that participants in the current study spend more hours (5 hours) on SMNSs than the Raacke and Bonds-Raacke study in 2008, where the equivalent time was 1.5 hours. There is a possibility that emergent technologies, especially mobile devices, might contribute to this increase especially since most cellular phones and cellular phone providers offer a bundle of Talk, Text, and Web for a reasonable price. This is supported by participant's indication of method of accessing social media. As high as 94% of the participants access the sites through portable devices such as laptop computers, 78% through cellular phones and 14% through iPad.

With over 500 million users worldwide, it is not surprising also that Facebook is the most popular site especially considering that it was invented by (and originally for) college students. However, it is worth noting that Twitter is becoming very popular as well among college students with 67% of the participants in the current study owning a Twitter account. Also, a majority of the participants indicated that they have only owned a Twitter account for less than one year, yet Twitter was ranked the second most preferred site among the four sites.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that only about 29% of the respondents indicated having a LinkedIn account and 32% indicated that they have never heard of the site. This is surprising given that LinkedIn is the oldest among all four sites. Also, LinkedIn's mission is to provide a networking arena that has the potential of benefiting people professionally. College juniors, seniors, and graduate students make up 60% of the total respondents for this study, a group that is expected to be navigating some employment or internship opportunities.

Another interesting point that emerged from this study is the fact that MySpace is not dead after all. Several sources have been posting an extinction notice on MySpace including the eMarketer (2012) 2011-2014 Projection of Social Media Network Advertising Revenue report which removed MySpace from the list effective 2012.

Finally, this study provides an in-road for future studies that could draw comparisons for gender, college rank, race, and length of use to ascertain further results that might lend insight into social media network usage and preferences among different groups of people.

Table 1. Social Media Network Uses based on the Survey of 289 Respondents

Answer Options	Response (%)	Response (count)
Keeping in touch with friends	97.9%	279
Sharing photos	80.7%	230
Keeping in touch with family	79.3%	226
Reconnecting with old friends	72.6%	207
For entertainment	70.9%	202
Getting news	69.8%	199
Sharing videos	45.3%	129
Discovering new music, films, books, and Other entertainment	37.2%	106
Meeting new people	34.7%	99
Providing my opinion to mainstream media	34.0%	97
Promoting a cause	30.5%	87
Sharing music	28.8%	82
Making professional and business contacts	27.4%	78
For learning	26.0%	74
Playing Games	21.8%	62
Sharing information on products/brands	18.9%	54
Promoting a business	18.2%	52
Shopping	6.7%	19
Other	5.3%	15

Table 2. Abridged list of Participants' description of the most preferred and least preferred sites

Facebook [Most Preferred]	MySpace [Least Preferred]
Most people are on Facebook	Outdated; no one really uses it anymore
I am on it most of the day	It is full of spam and viruses
It's the easiest way to contact family and friends	I've heard bad things about it
I like that you can post pictures and see profiles	It has a lot of creepy people
I can talk and chat with my friends	I don't like the interface
I can see what my friends are up to: lots of updates	It has been overshadowed by other sites
It has more to offer	It is a dead zone
I like the privacy settings	There are too many ads; not very useful
It is cleaner-looking and easier to manage	I don't like the interface; not pleasing
I don't like it very much; provides too much Information	You can have your own song on your page
Lots of drama and too many baby pictures	You can customize your own page

Table 3. Abridged list of Participants' descriptions of Twitter and LinkedIn

Twitter	LinkedIn
Ease of use and condensed information	Never heard of it
You can follow celebrities	I have no use for it for now
Simpler, fun, less drama	It's more of a business profile
It's the latest and less clutter	I'm not looking for a job yet
It's funny and more sociable	
Short bursts of very useless information	
Annoying and useless comments	
I like the quotes	

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