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COMMENTARY PAPER

Why people use social media: a uses and gratifications approach

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to demonstrate the importance of uses and gratifications theory to social media. By applying uses and gratifications theory, this paper will explore and discuss the uses and gratifications that consumer receive from using social media. This paper seeks to provide a better and more comprehensive understanding of why consumers use social media.

Design/methodology/approach – Exploratory study was conducted. 25 in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who use social media.

Findings – This study identified ten uses and gratifications for using social media. The ten uses and gratifications are: social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations are small sample size. Research implications are that uses and gratifications theory has specific relevance to social media and should be given more prominence. Uses and gratifications theory helps explain the many and varied reasons why consumers use social media.

Practical implications – This paper helps organizations to understand why consumers use social media and what gratifications they receive from social media.

Originality/value – This paper makes the contribution that uses and gratifications theory has specific relevance and should be given more prominence within the area of social media. This paper also provides a rich and vivid understanding of why consumers use social media.

Keywords Social media, Web 2.0, Consumer generated media, Uses and gratifications theory, Uses of social media, Exploratory study, Qualitative study, In-depth interviews

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Social media is a critical area of interest for marketing scholars and practitioners. Recent research has shown that 88 percent of marketers are using social media and that they are spending over $60 billion annually on social media advertising (Gil-Or, 2010; Smith, 2011). Successfully making contact with consumers via social media is predicted to show great returns for marketers in the coming years (Okazaki *et al.*, 2007). Despite the importance of social media, there is little understanding of how and why consumers use social media.

Uses and gratifications theory, which has its roots in the communications literature, can be an integral part of developing better scales and measurement instruments for social media marketers. The basic premise of uses and gratifications theory is that individuals seek out media that fulfill their needs and leads to ultimate gratification

(Lariscy *et al.*, 2011). Uses and gratifications theory has specific relevance to social media, but it has not been given prominence in the marketing and social media literature. Therefore, this paper seeks to apply uses and gratifications theory to help explain why consumers use social media. In particular, this research seeks to:

- demonstrate the importance of uses and gratifications theory to social media;
- to apply uses and gratifications theory to social media; and
- to identify the uses and gratifications that consumers receive from using social media.

By applying uses and gratifications theory, this research seeks to provide a better and more comprehensive understanding of why consumers use social media.

We begin by briefly summarizing the literature on social media and uses and gratifications theory. Next, we describe the methodology used and the research findings. Last, the article discusses the implications and conclusions of the current research.

Literature review

Social media is defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media includes a multitude of sources of online information that are created, circulated and used by consumers to educate one another about products, services, and brands available in the marketplace (Murugesan, 2007). Current examples of social media platforms include social networking sites like Facebook, photo sharing sites like Flickr, video sharing sites like YouTube, business networking sites like LinkedIn, micro blogging sites like Twitter, and numerous others. Social media sites are inexpensive and, more often than not, completely free to use.

Uses and gratifications theory is relevant to social media because of its origins in the communications literature. Social media is a communication mechanism that allows users to communicate with thousands, and perhaps billions, of individuals all over the world (Williams *et al.*, 2012). The basic premise of uses and gratifications theory is that individuals will seek out media among competitors that fulfills their needs and leads to ultimate gratifications (Lariscy *et al.*, 2011). Studies have shown that gratifications received are good predictors of media use and recurring media use (Kaye and Johnson, 2002; Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1979). Uses and gratifications theory has also been used extensively within the study of politics and the dissemination of political messages (Blumler and McQuail, 1969; McLeod and Becker, 1974). While widely used in other disciplines, uses and gratifications theory can also be relevant in helping to explain social media uses.

Among the uses and gratifications frameworks available in the literature, this study focused on four: Palmgreen and Rayburn's (1979), Korgaonkar and Wolin's (1999), Papacharissi and Rubin's (2000) and Ko *et al.* (2005). The Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) scale was selected because it was the first to look at both uses and gratifications simultaneously and because it looked at television viewing which is somewhat similar in nature to social media. The Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) scale was also selected because many previous studies have used this scale (Barton, 2009; Leung, 2007). The Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999), the Papacharissi and Rubin (2000)

and the Ko *et al.* (2005) frameworks were selected because they looked at uses and gratifications with respect to the internet.

Review of the four previously mentioned frameworks and scales revealed some common themes. The seven themes that will be discussed are:

(1) social interaction;
(2) information seeking;
(3) pass time;
(4) entertainment;
(5) relaxation;
(6) communicatory utility; and
(7) convenience utility.

These themes will be explained in the following paragraphs.

Social interaction

Relying on uses and gratifications literature, this usage theme is defined as using social media to communicate and interact with others. The title of this theme comes from Ko *et al.*'s (2005) research on social interaction motivation and web site duration. Their scale items included "meet people with my interests" and "keep up with what is going on". Other uses and gratifications researchers have also had a category similar to social interaction. Similar constructs in the literature are social motivation (Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999), interpersonal utility (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000), and companionship (Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1979). After reviewing the literature, we preferred the term social interaction because it was narrower than interpersonal utility but broader than companionship.

Information seeking

This uses and gratifications theme is defined as using social media to seek out information or to self-educate. The title of this theme comes from Papacharissi and Rubin's (2000) research on information seeking and internet usage. Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) also had a similar construct called information motivation which they defined as how consumers use the web for self-education and information. Our categorization of this theme includes both information seeking and self-education.

Pass time

This uses and gratifications theme is defined as using social media to occupy time and relieve boredom. The title of this theme comes from Palmgreen and Rayburn's (1979) research on uses and gratifications for television viewing. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) also had a construct called *pass time* which they used when investigating internet motives. Items in their scale included statements such as "use the internet when I have nothing better to do" and "to occupy my time".

Entertainment

This type of social media usage is defined as using social media to provide entertainment and enjoyment. Both Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) and Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) had an entertainment dimension in their scales. Korgaonkar and

Wolin (1999) also had a related factor for internet use which they called escapism. They defined escapism as pleasurable, fun, and enjoyable.

Relaxation
This social media usage category is defined as using social media to relieve day-to-day stress. Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) included this dimension in their uses and gratifications of television viewing. Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) also included relaxation in their dimension of entertainment. Based on the uses and gratifications scale development of Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) we believe that entertainment and relaxation are two separate constructs. Relaxation provides relief from stress while entertainment focuses on enjoyment.

Communicatory utility
This category of social media use is defined as communication facilitation and providing information to share with others. This form of usage was investigated by Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) with television viewing. Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) also had a similar construct labeled socialization motivation for using the internet. They describe their construct as a facilitator of interpersonal communication and actions and its usefulness in terms of conversational value. This construct is different from the previously discussed social interaction construct. Communicatory utility helps facilitate communication instead of providing social interaction.

Convenience utility
This category of social media usage is defined as providing convenience or usefulness to individuals. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) had a construct called convenience for internet uses and Ko *et al.* (2005) had a convenience motivation factor for interactive advertising. Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) also had the word convenience in some of their scale items such as "enjoy the convenience of shopping on the web".

Research methods
Due to the limited amount of literature on uses and gratifications theory and its relationship to social media, an exploratory study was conducted. The exploratory study consisted of 25 in-depth interviews with individuals ranging in age from 18 to 56 years old. The in-depth interviews were designed to elicit responses in terms of the uses and gratifications of social media. Individuals were asked questions such as why they use social media, why their friends use social media, what they enjoy about social media, and how often they use social media. A total of 25 individuals participated in the interviews. The breakdown for gender was 52 percent females and 48 percent males. Responses ranged from 150 words to 1,000 + words.

Results and discussion
The qualitative comments were analyzed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines. First, the authors developed a list of uses and gratifications from Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979), Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999), Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) and Ko *et al.* (2005). Next, the authors independently read and reviewed the responses. After reading and reviewing the respondents' comments, the authors sorted the uses and gratifications comments into groups. After discussing the groupings

numerous times, the authors concluded on ten uses and gratifications themes. The themes will be discussed in the following paragraphs:

(1) *Social interaction.* 88 percent of the respondents mentioned using social media for social interaction. Respondents mentioned that Facebook is "a place to interact and socialize with others", that they "have more contact with people via social media than face to face", and that "social media gives them a social life". The respondents indicated that they use social media to connect and keep in touch with family and friends, interact with people they do not regularly see, chat with old acquaintances, and meet new friends. Survey participants reported that they use social media to interact with many different types of people ranging from friends, family, spouses, co-workers, old friends, old acquaintances, and new friends.

(2) *Information seeking.* 80 percent of respondents reported using social media to seek out information. These study participants reported that they use social media to:

- find information about sales, deals, or products;

- find information on events, birthdays, and parties; and

- look at information about businesses.

Respondents also mentioned that they use social media for self-education. Respondents stated that they use social media to get how-to-instruction, to get help with math, and to learn new things.

(3) *Pass time.* 76 percent reported using social media to pass the time. Respondents stated that they use social media when they have idle time or when they are bored and want something to do. Many individuals reported using social media to pass time at work or school. Some of their comments were "I use Facebook when bored at work", "I use social media during class to pass the time", "I use social media when waiting for class", and "I use social media when class is boring".

(4) *Entertainment.* 64 percent of respondents reported that they used social media as a source of entertainment. Some of the entertainment activities reported were playing games, listening to music, and watching videos. Others mentioned that they use social media for humor and comic relief. Some of their comments were "listening to jokes", "reading comments and stuff makes me laugh", and "watching the crazies on Facebook, and how they display themselves, provides entertainment to me". Some respondents mentioned playing games regularly with friends via social networking platforms.

(5) *Relaxation.* 60 percent of respondents used social media for relaxation purposes. Some of their comments were "it is relaxing to go through profiles", "looking on Facebook does not take any thought", "it is an escape from reality", and "it takes my mind off things". Respondents also mentioned how social media helps them escape from reality and escape the stress of the real world. Over 16 percent of respondents mentioned they use social media to escape from the real world.

(6) *Expression of opinions.* This type of social media use was mentioned by 56 percent of respondents and is defined as using social media to express thoughts and opinions. Respondents discussed how they like to make comments such as liking postings and photos, commenting on updates, and sharing comments on others postings. Others discussed how they liked to express their

opinions anonymously, how they liked to criticize others, and how they enjoyed the opportunity "to vent" on social media.

(7) *Communicatory utility*. 56 percent of respondents discussed how they use social media to give them things to talk about with others. Respondents reported that social media "gives them something to talk about with friends", that "Facebook gives them things to gossip about". Others mentioned that they talk to others about what they found on Facebook and that they will ask their friends if they saw what a person said on Facebook.

(8) *Convenience utility*. This type of social media use was mentioned by 52 percent of respondents. Several of the respondents actually used the word *convenient* in their responses such as "it is convenient and accessible anytime and anywhere". Others mentioned that they use social media because it is readily available and has no time restraints. One individual mentioned that she uses social media because of the convenience of being able to communicate with a lot of people at one time.

(9) *Information sharing*. This type of social media use was mentioned by 40 percent of respondents. This factor is different from information seeking which was previously discussed. Information sharing is defined as using social media to share information about you with others. Unlike television and the internet, social media is interactive in nature and allows consumers to communicate and share information via a two way dialogue. This information sharing construct has not been used by other uses and gratifications researchers. However, information sharing has been used in other marketing studies (Jarvenpaa and Staples, 2000; Miranda and Saunders, 2003). Respondents mentioned many different ways that they share information. Many respondents mentioned that they like to post updates and share pictures. Some study participants mentioned that they advertise their business on Facebook and some mentioned that they share information in order to market themselves.

(10) *Surveillance/knowledge about others*. This sort of social media usage was mentioned by 32 percent of the respondents and is defined as watching people or things and watching what others are doing. The title of this theme comes from Kaye and Johnson's (2002) study on motivations for using the web for political information factors. Respondents mentioned many different ways that they use social media to watch others. Some of the respondents stated that they are "nosey", they "spy on people", they "creep on people", they "spy on their kids", and they "look at stuff about others without them knowing about it". Many individuals mentioned that they want to know what others are doing and that they try and keep up with others.

Conclusions

This paper demonstrates the importance and usefulness of uses and gratifications theory to social media research. The application of uses and gratifications theory to social media helps explain the many and varied reasons why consumers use and like social media. The findings from the in-depth interviews provide a very rich and comprehensive understanding of why consumers utilize social media. These findings can help businesses to more effectively market to and communicate with its existing and potential customers.

The current study identifies ten uses and gratifications for using social media. The ten uses and gratifications found in this study are social interaction (88 percent), information seeking (80 percent), pass time (76 percent), entertainment (64 percent), relaxation (60 percent), communicatory utility (56 percent), expression of opinions (56 percent), convenience utility (52 percent), information sharing (40 percent), and surveillance and watching of others (20 percent).

This research contributes to the extant literature in several ways. First, the paper makes the contribution for academics and practitioners that uses and gratifications theory has specific relevance and should be given more prominence in social media research and social media marketing. Second, the paper's qualitative design provides a rich and vibrant understanding of how and why consumers use social media. Last, this research provides both academics and the business community with a wealth of knowledge about the ever expanding world of social media.

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