



Generational differences in content generation in social media: The roles of the gratifications sought and of narcissism



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the roles of the gratifications sought and of narcissism in content generation in social media and explores the generational differences in motivations and in narcissistic personalities when predicting the usage of Facebook, blogs, and forums. Data were gathered from a probability sample of 596 social media users through a telephone survey in 2010. Factor analysis results showed that content generation using social media was satisfying five socio-psychological needs: showing affection, venting negative feelings, gaining recognition, getting entertainment, and fulfilling cognitive needs. In particular, people who used social media to meet their social needs and their need for affection tended to use Facebook and blogs. In contrast, when users wanted to air out discontent, they often turned to forums. Results also showed that exhibitionists seemed to use social media to show affection, express their negative feelings, and achieve recognition. The study found no generational differences in using Facebook and blogs as a means to satisfy social needs or the need for affection. However, differences in patterns of social media usage were found among Baby Boomers with different narcissistic personalities. The paper includes a discussion of the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content (UGC) (O'Reilly, 2005). UGC in social media has exploded in recent years. Social media takes many different forms, including both web-based and mobile technologies, such as internet forums, email, social networking sites (SNSs), blogs, microblogs, vlogs, wikis, and voice-over IP. In the Web 2.0 era, social media is a platform for service deliveries that emphasize user control, participation, and emergent behavior; they also provide a way of creating micro-content focusing on social connections between people (Alexander, 2008). Enabled by ubiquitously accessible and scalable communication techniques in mobile devices, social media has substantially changed the way individuals, organizations, and communities communicate and share content in an unprecedented environment of hyper-inter-connectivity. Through social media such as Facebook, MySpace, MSN Spaces, Blogger, forum, YouTube, and Twitter, users can publish their own diaries on their own websites, post-photos or videos, express opinions, meet other users, and establish communities based on shared interests. Among these different examples of social media, the present study narrowed and focused on three most popular, namely Facebook, blogs, and forums. These

social media were chosen in this research because they facilitate many of the seven functional building blocks of social media (i.e., identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups) (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). However, it is not the aim of this study to differentiate which social medium functions best in any of the seven in our conceptualization and tested in hypotheses. Nevertheless, the results may invite such concepts to be adopted to explain the differences in the use of social media.

To examine media behavior and its consequences, an appropriate approach is to examine the objectives, the underlying assumptions, and the perspectives of the uses and gratifications (U&G) of its users. What motivates users to create content in social media and how the gratifications of generating content affect the activities in social media are important research topics. Thus, the first objective of this study was to identify the gratifications sought in the production of UGC in social media (especially in Facebook, blogs, and forums).

In addition, the study focused on the contribution of narcissism to social media content generation. Narcissism is the fascination with oneself, and narcissists generally think they are better than others, inflate praise of themselves, and believe that they are unique and special. Buffardi and Campbell (2008) found that these qualities may predict participation in social media. Narcissism has been consistently and positively related to content-generation online among young adults (Poon & Leung, 2011). People with

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strong narcissistic tendencies generally report a greater number of microblog friends and wall-posts, and they are more willing to upload photos (Ong et al., 2011). In line with these studies, it could be hypothesized that highly narcissistic subjects are likely to participate actively in social media content-generation.

2. Generational divide

In his book, *Grown up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*, Tapscott (2009) characterized different generation cohorts, primarily as Baby Boomer, Baby Bust, and Echo Boomer (sometimes called the Net Generation or the Y Generation). A Baby Boomer is anyone born between 1946 and 1964, after the end of the Second World War, when the after-war economy was thriving. Following the boom, birth rates fell dramatically, with 15% fewer babies born in the next 10 years (Tapscott, 2009). These babies were named “Baby Bust,” Generation X, or the Gen Xers, and were born between 1965 and 1976; the “X” stands for the feeling of exclusion from society and of being less competitive in the job market.

The Echo Boomer, or the echo of the Baby Boom, came next. Tapscott named this generation according to its defining characteristics; according to him, naming this generation according to the timeline, such as Millennials or Generation Y, diminished its importance in the larger scheme of things. Therefore, the term “Net Generation,” referring to those born between 1977 and 1997 most precisely described this generation, as it was the first generation bathed in bits (Tapscott, 2009). In 2012, ‘Net Generation’ babies are adolescents and young adults between the ages of 15 and 35.

Social media is at the heart of a culture and a grown-digital generation who, in profound and fundamental ways, learn, work, play, communicate, shop, and create communities very differently from their parents (Livingstone, 2002; Tapscott, 1998, 2009). The Net Generation feels more comfortable with computers than do their parents, so they are more likely to be online consumers and users of social media. Bombarded with information and being media savvy, this generation has grown up understanding the digital economy. More than any previous generation, Net Geners are conversant with a communications revolution transforming business, education, health care, social relations, entertainment, government, and every other institution (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007).

3. Rationale for the study

Social media is a very recent social phenomenon. However, there is a distinct lack of psychological theory relating to its use. Past research has begun to identify the types of people who use Facebook (Barker, 2009) and found that the specific gratifications of Facebook use differs as a function of individuals’ personality traits (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Ross et al., 2009; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009). However, this line of investigation has been limited to student or adolescents and research focusing on generational differences in the use of social media has been scarce. Furthermore, in order to obtain a more accurate representation of the types of users that social media appeals to, this study focused on the relationship between a narrow personality trait of narcissism, gratification-sought, and social media use across the different generational cohorts. Going beyond the most commonly used Facebook to include blogs and forum use, this study aimed to investigate how narcissistic personality traits and generational differences are related to users’ gratifications-sought and in actual production of UGC in social media.

4. Theoretical frameworks

4.1. Uses and gratifications

The uses and gratifications approach assumes the active participation of the audience in media selection and use. The general theoretical conclusion of many uses and gratifications studies is that the gratifications sought from an audience motivate the use of a particular medium. The audience is often attempting to satisfy certain social and psychological needs, such as surveillance, information-seeking, entertainment, personal identity, or companionship (Dimmick, Sikand, & Patterson, 1994; Lin, 1998; Rubin, 1983). Maslow (1970) described these psychological needs as cognitive and emotional in nature. As such, the behavior of media gratification-seeking is regarded as goal-directed and utility-driven (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979). This utilitarian view of media use can be conceptually applicable to people’s motives associated with UGC in social media.

Past research in the gratifications or benefits of computer-mediated technologies, such as the Internet (Leung, 2003; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), electronic bulletin boards (Dimmick, Kline, & Stafford, 2000), and user-generated content (Leung, 2009), among others, suggests broad motivations. These motivations include information exchange, conversation and socializing, information viewing, entertainment, information and education, escape and diversion, reassurance, and fashion and status. Therefore, one of the goals of this study was to explore a wide range of motivations connected to content generation in social media, which users can identify as unique. Therefore, we proposed the following research question and hypothesis:

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| RQ ₁ | What motivates internet users to produce content using social media (especially in Facebook, blogs, and forums)? |
| H ₁ | The more gratification internet users find in content generation using social media, the more they will use social media. |
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4.2. Narcissism

Narcissism is first of all a personality. According to Campbell and Foster (2007), “narcissism is a quality of the self that has significant implications for thinking, feeling, and behaving. Individuals with narcissistic personality possess highly inflated, unrealistically positive views of the self. Often times, this includes strong self-focus, feelings of entitlement, and lack of regard for others. Narcissists focus on what benefits them personally, with less regard for how their actions may benefit (or harm) others (p. 115).”

Scholars often measured a person’s narcissistic personality using a scale called Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). It was a 223-item inventory originally developed by Raskin and Hall (1979) to measure the extent of a narcissistic personality. With a reduced inventory and clustered into fewer components, Raskin and Terry (1988) proposed that narcissism included seven dimensions: authority, self-sufficiency, superiority, exhibitionism, exploitativeness, vanity, and entitlement. More recently, Ackerman et al. (2011) proposed a model in which three-factor dimensions, leadership/authority, grandiose exhibitionism, and entitlement/exploitativeness, constituted narcissism.

Scholars have found that in order to achieve narcissistic goals, the narcissists often use certain self-regulatory strategies to make themselves look and feel special, successful, and important (Bergman, Fearington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011). As Campbell and Foster (2007) suggested, narcissism is better understood as a self-regulatory system—“an interactive group of traits, abilities,

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