An Examination of the Role of the Communicator on Gratifications Attained on Social Network Sites

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Abstract

The many features available on social network sites complicate interpretation of research results in uses and gratifications studies. This paper proposes a perspective that focuses on the communication role of the user that may promote greater understanding of uses and gratifications results, and applies its use. Results of this analysis suggest that our understanding of uses and gratifications based on survey research questions will benefit from distinguishing between user role as a message source or receiver. More specifically, results of this analysis found the communication role of the user was able to predict certain social network site gratifications. While results were promising, additional research should be conducted to refine these categorizations for predicting media gratifications.

Almost a decade has passed since Eveland (2003) proposed that mass communication researchers consider how features of a medium relate to media effects, rather than identifying each new medium as a unique entity. More specifically, he argued: "[w]hat is needed is a more thorough discussion of what it is about mass media that produces effects" (Eveland, 2003 p. 396). In Eveland's mix

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of attributes approach, he recommended that researchers consider the existing attributes of a medium and, when confronted with a new medium, identify what attributes are different. An example that has received much attention (e.g., DeFleur, Davenport, Cronin, & De-Fleur, 1992; Katz, Adoni, & Parness, 1977) compares radio to television. Upon television's introduction, soap operas transitioned from radio to television. Assuming consistency of content in soap operas, if differences in media effects were detected, these effects would likely be attributable to the visual stimulus. In contrast, unless a relevant difference is present, a similar action should elicit a similar response.

Lin (1999) proposed that media substitution may take place if the two forms of media were functionally similar. When examining news reading, Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) found people who heavily read newspapers transitioned their information seeking behavior to the Internet. While examining media uses rather than effects, it should be expected that the gratifications attained by functionally similar communication tools should, likewise, be consistent across platforms. If, however, the role of the user is substantively different, the attained gratification may not be achieved.

LaRose and Eastin (2004) were critical of identifying Internet usage in general terms, considering the diversity of functions that can be performed on the Internet. Function-specific platforms for synchronous communication such as instant messaging, and more recently video chatting, and asynchronous communication, such as blogs and email, have been brought together on social network sites (SNS), effectively making them the equivalent of Swiss army knives of online communication tools. Boyd and Ellison (2008, pg. 211) define social network sites (SNS) as: "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and, (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." While convenient for the user, the complexity of modern social network sites complicate the researcher's ability to understand user behavior unless specifically articulating the SNS function in question in the research design.

A primary departure from previous SNS studies in this analysis is a focus on the communication role of the user. While the attributes of traditional one-way mass communication media limited the role the user would play, returning to the mix of attributes approach put

forth by Eveland (2003), it is foreseeable that similarity of function would produce a similar gratification. As such, this analysis considers specific SNS functions and the role of the user when communicating through them.

While focusing on categorization of communication roles, this technique may also improve understanding of what features fulfill these needs. While one person might "express themselves" using an instant messenger feature on a SNS, a second SNS user may use photographs or other forms of asynchronous, public communication to fulfill this gratification. Similarly, relationship maintenance measures used in social media have frequently been general statements (e.g., maintaining relationships with people you may not get to see very often; finding out what old friends are doing now). Unless specifying user role, ambiguity of what action fulfills the gratification may cloud the results and limit the utility of these studies.

With the uses and gratifications framework widely used in analysis of social network sites (e.g., Sheldon, 2008; Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), the current study examines SNS user roles and puts forth communication role categorizations for understanding uses and gratifications within this media structure. Additional analyses are used to test the approach and determine if researchers should distinguish SNS studies by user role in future studies.

Literature Review
Uses and Gratifications
In contrast to traditional media effects research, the uses and gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) takes the perspective of an audience member (Windahl, 1981) and attempts to identify why people actively seek out media. The study of gratifications focuses on the satisfaction audience members receive from a medium (Cantril, 1942). It was posited early that individual differences may lead to divergent preferences in media exposure and use (Rosengren, 1974), with uses and gratification work in the following decades affirming this.

Media use considers whether that medium (e.g., television) is used, while exposure focuses more specifically on content (e.g., reality television). For traditional mass media (e.g., television, radio), factor analysis has found media uses to be fairly consistent across studies

(e.g., Rubin, 1981a; Abelman & Atkin, 2000), though additional uses have been detected when examining Internet consumption behaviors (Lin, 1999; Ferguson & Perse, 2000).

The demassification of media proposed by Williams, Rice and Rogers (1988) alludes to the abundance of media options available to consumers to fulfill their needs. Tracking the development of online computer mediated communication (CMC) tools, media use research has addressed bulletin board systems (James, Wotring, & Forrest, 1995), email (Stafford, Kline, & Dimmick, 1999), personal websites (Papacharissi, 2002), instant messaging services (Leung, 2003; Hwang & Lombard, 2006) and, more recently, social network sites (e.g., Sheldon, 2008; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Considered more generally, Ruggiero (2000) identified asynchroneity, interactivity, and demassification as attributes not found in traditional media, but found in this new media.

Focusing on individual differences, biological sex and psychological traits have often been used to explore uses and gratifications differences within a population. For interactive media such as video game use, sex has successfully predicted gratifications fulfilled (Greenberg, Sherry, Lachlan, Lucas, & Holmstrom, 2010). Studies of traits as predictors of online media use have developed a body of literature on what types of people utilize certain media. Examples of this include introversion predicted a liking of email (Hertel, Schroer, Batinic, Konradt, & Naumann, 2005), and the development of personal webpages (Machilek, Schutz, & Marcus, 2004).

A fundamental difference between traditional media and CMC is the ability for the user to act as both an information source and receiver (Parks & Floyd, 1996). CMC tools also allow users to participate in synchronous or asynchronous communication. The role of information receiver can, likewise, be divided with users undergoing interpersonal information reception (IIR) or receiving mass communication messages (IRM), from brands, organizations, or news services.

The earlier suggestion that the Internet acts as a continuum for mass and interpersonal communication (Ruggiero, 2000) may be observed on SNS sites. Research has explored both areas, with Flanagin and Metzger (2001) finding interpersonal communication to be used for status seeking, persuasion and relationship maintenance. In contrast, tools that parallel those used in mass communication have been

found to entertain and to inform (e.g., Haridakis & Hanson, 2008; Martinez, 2010). Factor analysis by Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2010) identified a friendship dimension, an information dimension and a connection dimension when identifying Facebook uses.

Information Role of User

Before online social network sites were conceived of, it was noted that the Internet allows users to act as both sources and receivers of information (Dizard, 1994). Identifying the role of a media user was pursued by Jeffres and Atkin (1996), who distinguished between information sources and receivers when studying the impact of media consumption as a predictor of the individual's communication patterns. Within an online context, research suggests not all Internet users elect to act as media sources, even when web platforms offer them this opportunity. Shang, Chen and Liao (2006) identified a large portion of participants in online communities acting as information receivers while not contributing to the content themselves.

Traditional social media relied on asynchronous communication such as email and message boards. More generally, Daly-Jones, Monk, Frohlich, Geelhoed and Loughran (1997) defined asynchronous communication as communication in which "one or more participants are not simultaneously available and have to pick up their messages at some later time" (p.2). Certain advantages offered by asynchronous communication include the ability to edit messages before the receiver sees them and, as noted by Baym (2002), communication that does not require the availability of both parties at the same time. A deficiency to asynchronous communication includes contextual concerns. Elaborating on this, asynchronous communication does not allow the information receiver to quickly clarify ambiguous messages. Because of this issue, Clark and Schaefer (1989) noted that an absence of context in asynchronous communication may require more effort from the information source to adequately convey a message.

While names of asynchronous communication tools differ across SNS platforms, many of them are fundamentally similar. SNS profile pages often include information and photographs that can be accessed by people within a user's network at any time. Functioning similarly to message boards, users can leave messages for their intended audience. More recently, mass communication outlets such

as the Washington Post and the New York Times as well as brands and organizations allow users within the recommender's network to link stories to profile pages (Inside Facebook, 2010). Similar in function with email, many SNS platforms also provide a means for users to send private messages to people within their communication network.

Synchronous communication involves communication in real time. While early synchronous communication in social media was often text-based and in the form of instant messaging programs, more recently, SNS platforms such as Orkut, Facebook, and Google+ have allowed users to video chat or talk by means of voice over Internet protocol. Two deficiencies of synchronous communication that have been identified are the interruption involved (Frohlich, 1995), and the need for both parties to be available (Clark & Brennan, 1991).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) identified five primary Internet uses and gratifications: entertainment, passing time, convenience, interpersonal utility and information seeking. The five hypotheses put forth in this analysis relate closely to these known gratifications. While measuring entertainment, passing time and convenience directly, the current study's focus on SNS led to the division of the interpersonal utility gratification found by Papacharissi and Rubin into the two more specific uses: relationship maintenance and impression management.

As distinguished by Rubin (1983), media uses and gratifications can be instrumental or ritualized. The use of media for purposes of passing time and habitual use is a ritualized form of media consumption which has been identified in television use (Rubin 1981a; Abelman & Atkin, 2000) and magazine use (Payne, Severn, & Dozier, 1988). SNS use patterns suggest people visit profile pages of friends and acquaintances for surveillance purposes (Joinston, 2008). With previous media use patterns suggesting that passing time/habitual media use is achieved without interaction, the nature of the communication tools available on SNS sites leads to the hypothesis:

H1: Acting as a communication receiver (IIR) will positively relate to SNS use for passing time/habitual use.

Before Web 2.0 created an environment in which most users acted as both receivers and sources, Charney (1996) identified diver-

sion entertainment as a common Internet gratification. Synchronous communication platforms have likewise been identified as fulfilling the entertainment gratification (Leung, 2001; Hwang & Lombard, 2006). While not found directly in social media and using different terminology, research on video games (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004) suggest information expression will be conducted for entertainment purposes, leading to the hypothesis:

> H2: Acting as a communication receiver (IIR), information expression, and synchronous communication will positively relate to SNS use for entertainment.

Shang, Chen and Liao (2006) identified a large portion of participants in online communities acting as information receivers while not contributing information themselves. While still acting as a receiver of communication, Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) concluded that people "track the actions, beliefs and interests of the larger group to which they belong" (Lampe et al., 2006, p. 167). In this capacity, SNS sites allow users to stay informed about friends and acquaintances without interacting with them. Sending emails has also been shown to be used for purposes of convenience (Wyatt & Philllips, 2005). The speed with which short-form messaging can be done has led to the convenience gratification being found for both text messages (Butt & Phillips, 2008) and instant messaging services (Hwang & Lombard, 2006). These results lead to the hypothesis:

> H3: Acting as a communication receiver (IIR) and synchronous communication will positively relate to SNS use for convenience.

Paparcharissi and Rubin (2000) identified interpersonal utility as a common use of the Internet. Christopher and Schlenker (2000), and Vonk (1999) identified a main function of impression management as editing information to maintain a desired image. Research has also examined how people "express their identities through digital association" (Schau & Gilly, 2003 p. 387) and visibly advocate a brand or product, allowing it to convey the desired impression (Hill, Provost & Volinsky, 2006). Effectively, the reception of mass media messages in SNS acts as a form of impression management, and leads to the hypothesis:

> H4: Information expression and receiving mass communication messages (IRM) will positively relate to SNS use for impression management.

Canary and Stafford (1994) noted that without maintenance,

relationships will deteriorate. More recently, research has identified social media sites as an inexpensive way to maintain relationships (Wright, Craig, Cunningham, Igiel, & Ploeger, 2008), though Bryant and Marmo (2009) note that symbolic behaviors must be performed to maintain these relationships, suggesting active participation as a message source in the network. Instant messenger services have been found to fulfill interpersonal utility (Hwang and Lombard, 2006) and social coordination (Segerstad & Ljungstand, 2002). With literature suggesting all three interpersonal communication roles will fulfill this use, it is hypothesized:

H5: Acting as a communication receiver (IIR), information expression, and synchronous communication will positively relate to SNS use for relationship maintenance.

This analysis will also examine survey subjects' responses by communication role. Without previous social media literature to guide them, early uses and gratifications studies developed different approaches when determining SNS gratifications. One technique focuses on the SNS function. An example of this is "to post/look at pictures" as tested in Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008). A second approach designated the SNS user a role (Sheldon, 2008). This analysis attempts to provide a third approach, believing that user role is important in predicting gratifications attained. Without previous studies to guide, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: Will SNS function use differ by user role?
RQ2: Will distinguishing by user role predict media gratifications?

Methodology

Following many previous Internet-based uses and gratifications studies (e.g., Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; Sheldon 2008; Ross, Orr, Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering & Orr, 2009) an online survey was conducted. Participants were college students enrolled at a school in the northeastern United States and recruited from 100-level communication courses. The survey received 478 respondents, whose average age was 19. Among respondents, 98.1% reported being a member of at least one online social network. The sample was 51.7% female, 47.1% male, with 1.3% of respondents declining to state their biological sex.

The dynamic changes in social media prompted the researcher to conduct a pilot study using 21 participants to examine the measures

and confirm they were representative of the social media features widely available. Nunnally (1978) proposes that you should not use scales with an alpha reliability of less than .7. All scales used in this analysis exceeded that standard, with each scale detailed in the appendix. The analysis used seven-point Likert-style scales, though some questions required a scale from "never" to "always" to determine the degree of usage.

The hypotheses were tested by means of multiple regression analyses. Regression is used to examine a dependent variable using one or more independent variables. Research question one used paired sample t-tests to compare questions pertaining to the communication role of the user, while research question two relied on the results of previous analyses when questioning whether support was received.

Results

Because the uses and gratifications framework believes the audience to be actively pursuing specific gratifications, this analysis examines what SNS roles, if any, are used to attain these goals. To test this, media uses found in different communication media (pass time/habit, entertainment, and convenience) and more specific to social network sites (relationship maintenance, impression management) were examined.

Hypothesis one predicted that communication reception (IIR) would predict SNS use for passing time/habit. Results of this analysis supported this hypothesis (β = .59, p<.001), and explained 35% of the variance. IIR was also the only predictor of SNS use for passing time/habitual use.

Hypothesis two predicted that acting as a communication receiver (IIR), information expression, and synchronous communication would predict SNS use for entertainment. Results of this analysis partially supported this hypothesis, with information reception (interpersonal) (β = .56, p<.001), and synchronous communication (β = .13, p<.01) significantly predicting SNS use for this purpose while information expression was not significant. The two predictors explained 40% of the variance.

Hypothesis three predicted that acting as a communication receiver (IIR), information expression, and synchronous communication would predict SNS use for convenience. Results of this analysis partially supported this hypothesis, with IIR (β = .46, p<.001) and

synchronous communication (β = .19, p<.001), predicting SNS use for convenience while information expression was not significant. The two predictors explained 32% of the variance.

Hypothesis four predicted that information expression and receiving mass communication messages (IRM) would predict SNS use for impression management. Results of this analysis supported this hypothesis with information expression (β = .27, p<.001) and IRM (β = .31, p<.001) both significant predictors of SNS use for impression management. Unexpectedly, IIR also significantly predicted impression management (β = .13, p<.05), with the three predictors explaining 32% of the variance.

Hypothesis five predicted synchronous communication, acting as a communication receiver (IIR) and information expression would predict SNS use for relationship maintenance. Results of this analysis supported this hypothesis, with IIR (β = .34, p<.001), synchronous communication (β = .18, p<.001), and information expression (β = .14, p<.01), all predicting SNS use for maintaining relationships, and explaining 30% of the variance.

Research question one asked whether SNS function use differ by user role. With previous studies not distinguishing by user role, but rather focusing on the SNS function, this analysis hoped to determine whether the ability to act as a sender and receiver will result in the user taking on both roles in a SNS site. A reason to doubt this was found in Shang, Chen, and Lio (2006) who noted that people on message boards often look at content but do not contribute content themselves.

Four common SNS functions were tested using questions purposely patterned to be similar, while altering the user's communication role. The first pairing: ("So I can get in touch with someone if I need to" and "So others can be in touch with me if they want to") was significantly different (t=4.55, p<.001). The second pairing: ("To read updates people add to their profile pages" and "To write comments on friends' profile pages"), was, likewise, significantly different (t=4.28, p<.001). Photographs were examined with: ("To look at photographs posted by others" and "To post photographs"), with the pairing significantly, and robustly, different (t=17.39, p<.001). When examining the posting and reading about events: ("To read about events posted by others" and "To write about events"), the pairing was also significantly different (t=19.27, p<.001), and to a greater degree

than the other three categorizations.

While all four produced statistically significant responses, the results were particularly pronounced for "posting/looking at photographs" and "reading/writing about events." Results of this analysis affirm that people disproportionately act as consumers, rather than sources of, information on SNS platforms.

The second research question asked whether distinguishing by user role can predict media gratifications. The results of the hypotheses suggest that some social media roles, most commonly interpersonal communication receiver (IIR) provide more predictive ability than others. Literature from earlier CMC platform studies provided information that was able to predict what communication role would be undertaken to attain a certain gratification. With several hypotheses confirmed or partially confirmed, results suggest that the approach should receive additional analysis.

Discussion

Returning to the inspiration for this study, Eveland (2003) argued that a medium of communication is composed of many attributes. Similarly, SNS platforms are composed of many communication tools. While SNS sites provide their users opportunities to act as an information source, receiver of interpersonal communication, receiver of mass communication messages, or synchronously communicate, it should not be assumed that users will elect to consistently undertake all these roles – or use some of them at all.

 Early distinction of the higher-level constructs of instrumentalized and ritual use of media (Rubin, 1983) may offer guidance for SNS research. With Rubin and Perse (1987b) finding instrumental goals to require greater cognitive involvement, it is foreseeable that acting as an information source will be used to fulfill different gratifications than acting as an information receiver. When examining results of the current analysis, impression management and relationship maintenance, are more instrumental goals than passing time/habit, entertainment, and convenience, and were the only uses predicted by acting as an information source.

Results of this study found mass communication information reception was not a strong predictor of SNS uses. With Chamberlain (1994) noting the abundance of media choices available to users, and media choices continuing to expand in the years since, this may sug-

gest that SNS platforms are not used to gather mass communication information. A second way of considering this is that other platforms are able to better fulfill gratifications these communications provide. Interestingly, mass communication information reception predicted impression management, suggesting that these messages function as a means to communicate to others as well as receive information.

It has been argued that measurement tools in survey designs need to have both content and construct validity (Ping, 2004). While asking unrepresentative or inadequate questions may lead to inaccurate results, the current study identified a second way in which the results of uses and gratifications research can be blurred. The ability to act as a message source, receiver or undertake synchronous communication on SNS sites offers users many ways to fulfill media gratifications. Future CMC research should consider how users arrive at the gratifications attained, rather than simply asking what gratification was attained.

While the use of a student sample limits this studies generalizability, researchers have recognized the appropriateness of student samples for CMC research due to their widespread Internet use (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Charney & Greenburg, 2002). The increased use of SNS platforms by people of all ages may allow future research to assess user roles and gratifications across generations. While current college students likely had access to computers in their schools and possibly homes, older generations did not, which may lead to generational differences in the communication role one elects to undertake.

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Appendix
Scales

Pass time/habit- alpha reliability: .87
I often go to my online social network to:
To waste time To put off doing other things Out of habit Because there is nothing to do It gives me something to do Because of boredom

Entertainment- alpha reliability: .85
I often go to my online social network to:
Because it entertains me. Because I enjoy it. Because it amuses me.

Impression management- alpha reliability: .81
I often go to my online social network to:
Because it lets me craft my identity. To impress people. To show people what I have accomplished. Because it allows other people to understand who I am. To present myself in a way I want to be seen.

Maintaining relationships- alpha reliability: .72

I often go to my online social network to:

To avoid losing touch with people.
To maintain long distance relationships.
To re-connect former relationships
To maintain my personal relationships.

Convenience- alpha reliability: .77

I often go to my online social network to:

Because it is easier to communicate this way.
Because it is more convenient than other ways of communicating.
Because it is always available.
So I can get in touch with someone if I need to.

Mass Communication Information Reception- alpha reliability: .86

I often go to my online social network to:

To receive information from companies or brands I like.
To receive updates from organizations I'm interested in.
To receive information from news organizations.
To receive news about a well known person or organization that I am
    interested in.
To receive news from a media outlet.

Interpersonal Information Reception- alpha reliability: .81

I often go to my online social network to:

Look at photographs posted by others.
Read about events posted by others.
Learn about interests and preferences of others.
Read updates people add to their profile pages.
Read comments added to my profile page.
Read comments added to other people's profile pages.

Information Expression- alpha reliability: .74
I often go to my online social network to:
To post photographs. To update information about myself and my interests. To write updates about what I have done recently. To write comments on friends profile pages. To write a message to a friend.

Synchronous Communication- alpha reliability: .79
I often go to my online social network to:
I often go to my online social network to: To use instant-messenger on my online social network. I use features (IM, games, etc.) to communicate in real-time. I discuss things online with friends or family when we're both on the network.