

News Dissemination Gratifies Needs for Social Media Users

Teresa Velasco, The University of Texas at San Antonio, USA

Chad Mahood, The University of Texas at San Antonio, USA

Abstract

Social networking sites (SNS) are increasingly used to disseminate and consume news stories, perhaps at the expense of traditional mass media sources. This manuscript explores how receiving news from social media “friends” may be changing how individuals prefer to consume and interpret news. Data gathered from 508 participants showed that “keeping in touch,” “reading posts,” and “browsing” were top gratifications from SNS. With these possible gratifications a user who posts news stories through social media will provide an interpretive view on the news for their online “friends”. Online practices are discussed how they fit within Uses and Gratifications Theory. Results showed news posted by “friends” online is positively correlated with a user’s personal social media usage and knowledge of news events. Hierarchical regression analysis used several controls with personality factors, social media use, and news consumption. All variables together explain 33% of the variance in news consumption. These results provide insight into how and why users are consuming more news information online.

Keywords: news, SNS, gratifications, dissemination

A Needed Change in Uses and Gratifications

Since the development of Facebook in 2004, the world of new media has changed from a place to *connect* and learn to a place to *interact* and learn. Facebook and other social networking sites (SNS) have become a place to inform and interact with online “friends” about news (Xu, 2013; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). On social media the power of interactivity with comments, likes, shares, etc. bring more discussion about news events along with the bandwagon effect of allowing users to decide what might be news to their “friends” on social media (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). This online interactivity could be a gratification to social media users as they take responsibility to publish content, which may or may not always be favorable to their “social circles.” Research indicates that the U&G Theory does not explain social actions as media use can be identified as more of a two-way action than a habitual one (Westerik, Renickstorf, Lammers, & Wester, 2006). This is especially true with new media use and news information. The Uses and Gratifications Theory involves an understanding of how an individual develops specific needs with media, and then how individuals use that media to gratify their needs. These needs and gratifications once identified can aid in further explanation of an individual’s consistent use of SNS and how the dissemination of news information can be so valued by users. However, more research is needed with the Uses and Gratifications Theory in how the theory provides further explanation into specific actions performed online and how they gratify a user’s need to obtain news information.

Agency-based gratification known as bandwagon

Sundar and Limperos (2013) described the bandwagon approach as tending to be swayed by the choices of our unknown peers. This is provided from activities in SNS such as friending, sharing, liking, and trending, which lead up to a bandwagon gratification. However, online activities such as browsing, searching, or reading posts are also related to this gratification as individuals seek out the most popular “shared” and “liked” posts while on social media. A gratification of expected rankings to determine the likeability of a news story is not at all surprising when users’ motivations for joining SNS was “because a friend suggested it,” in a previous study (Quan-Hasse & Young, 2010). SNS may have the possibility of gratifying a user’s need to know the news of what is popular with their friends through the amount of hashtags, shares, comments, likes, etc. can give users the knowledge of what their friends think as “important” news.

Social Media and News Sharing

A social media post is not just connected with the person sending the message and their friends but to an entire network of friends within a social media site. In a study conducted with a popular news-networking site called Digg.com, users had the ability to view and promote popular news stories by either “digging” or “burying” them. Results indicated the number of diggs was a significant indirect effect of the bandwagon perception and perceived newsworthiness, (Xu, 2013). Although this study was done with a news-networking site for the sole purpose of studying news likability and dissemination, it is important to study these significant features as indications of readability in relation to news information. The current research investigates the gratification of viewing the collective opinions of others and interpreting this information as credible in relation to news information.

Interacting With News and Obtaining Gratifications

Sundar and Limperos (2013) describe interactivity as the ability to allow users to make real-time changes to the content within the medium. An example is when a user comes to a website with a map and have the ability to partake in interactive features such as zooming into street view or dragging the mouse to change streets. If this capability is not met where the map is simply a dead shot with no interactivity then the user becomes dissatisfied (515). This can have a lot to do with popular news posts on social media. Whether or not the user is able to interact and engage with the “believable” news information is something they value. Examples of such content are for news stories on weather dangers, shootings, traffic, etc. Here a user may not necessarily post to become trending but because it can very easily be done. Twitter has become extremely valued with the news due to ability of networked individuals and on the scene reporters to disseminate breaking news with great efficiency (Barnard, 2014). A Facebook study showed that 64% of participants value the ability to easily share content with others (Hermida et al., 2012). The various capabilities of SNS give users the power of dissemination with news organizations by posting stories, photographs, and videos to experience a sense of agency (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). This may be a possible gratification to fulfill a user’s need to share information with others. The ability to share on new media platforms could also lead to the overall consumption of SNS. Thus far this manuscript has identified several potential gratifications that may come from SNS use and sharing is only one of them. This leads to the following research question:

Research Question 1: What popular gratifications are obtained from SNS?

Informed Users through SNS

Internet users in general have contributed to the creation and dissemination of news by interacting through social media online practices. In fact, 59% said they were exposed to more news and information from their SNS (Hermida et al., 2012). This rapid ability for users to disseminate breaking news may have personal opinions and should be studied in relation to the knowledge users believe they obtain through their “social circles.” The amount of links to news stories is high on Twitter with 55% of users posting links to news stories (An et al., 2011). The practice of posting and sharing as an interactivity-based gratification is a prominent practice in news dissemination because these actions involve user opinions and may have a relationship to news knowledge in general. This research will help determine whether social media users are listening to news on social media in addition to news directed from their social circles. The current study explores how social media use influences the news consumption of a social media user.

Hypothesis 1: Greater social media usage will relate to greater news consumption.

Informed users through “friends”

When it comes to news information, the “friends” or “followers” on SNS can be main contributors to news dissemination (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). With Facebook, 70% of those news links come from friends and family (Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2012). Research indicates that social media users believe their “social circles” within their SNS provide them with an even broader range of news and information than only relying on traditional forms of media (Hermida et al., 2012). The practices of news dissemination have become both friendship driven and interest driven (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). For example, information spread through “social circles” may be of a news story of a dad returning home from military service or mom who is undergoing treatment for a rare disease. These posts provide the users a chance to tell their own story and allow others to become fans of support (Hermida, 2014). Either way further research is needed on whether the views or likes of a user’s friends are engaged with them in news information.

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of friend posted news will relate to greater news consumption.

Personality Factors Influence Social Media Use

The idea of friend posted news brings their personal views and habits to comment on topics and engage with those of similar and opposing viewpoints. Research indicates that personalities such as extroversion and introversion are displayed while interactive online (Kim, Hsu, & Zuniga, 2013). This researched produced a correlation with introverted personalities and civic engagement due to their increasing network heterogeneity while on social media (509).

Extroverted Social Media Users

Research has treated social capital as an outcome for those involved with SNS (Lin et al., 2011). Through what is known as bridging and bonding social capital, social media users are able to generate strong and weak ties with those on their social networks. Bridging social capital can provide a user who has distance from their friends to build bridges or connections with those they feel possess weak ties with. Whereas, bonding social capital provide a “strong tie” with those a user is already close with allowing for emotional support through their SNS (Lin, 2001). These developed social capitals can differ with users’ personalities, as extroverts may be less open-minded to heterogeneous opinions while partaking in online activities such as sharing and commenting (Kim, Hsu, Zuniga, 2013). This is important with online news, as extroverts use social media more and stand more to benefit from SNS (Lin et al., 2011). Therefore, they could have a stronger attachment to news by sharing more news content to enforce certain beliefs to their various social groups.

Hypothesis 3: Extroverted individuals consume more news.

Hypothesis 4: Extroverted individuals are frequent social media users.

Empathic Personality

A SNS is a place of self-expression, yet it is also a place of reciprocity. This can come in many forms through everyday social media practices such as responding to a friend request, acceptance of an invitation, liking a friends photo, and tagging those who appear in them (Vallor, 2011). Even those large organizations such as advocacy groups and news organizations hope that by posting a devastating photograph or video will produce these online activities to their page. People with empathy can be more action bound to give their voice to a friend on social media (192). This could not only apply to a user’s social circles but

with sad news events or stories as well. Therefore, when upsetting or uplifting posts are seen, some social media practices may be helpful in gratifying their needs.

Hypothesis 5: Individuals with empathy consume more news.

Hypothesis 6: Individuals with empathy are frequent social media users.

Method

Participants

To test the research question and hypotheses a hardcopy survey was administered to 508 college students at a large American University. Participants completed surveys in University classrooms before the start of various liberal arts courses. The participants ($n = 508$) involved in this study ranged from ages 18-52 with 20 as the median age ($M = 20$ $SD = .49$). Both male and female participants (Male = 40%, Female = 59%) were involved in this study.

Procedures

IRB approval was obtained prior to commencement of this study. Participants filled out the surveys anonymously and voluntarily. They were asked to complete a multi-item survey with 7-point Likert-type items. The surveys were distributed in class to the participants with permission from the class professor. With approval of the professor the class was asked to take part in a voluntary survey about their social media habits for participation in the research. A total of 508 surveys were completed and inputted to an SPSS dataset.

Measures

Four predictor variables of personal social media use, friend social media use, extroversion, and empathy are explored in this study. While news consumption is the primary criterion variable, possible social media gratifications were also measured to determine an individual's usage of specific social media practices. Several control variables were also measured.

Personal Social Media Use. Personal social media use is an individual participating in an online social network. The measure of an individual's social media use was established by asking participants the following question: "I check social media online." Based on a 7-point Likert-type scale they could answer 1 as "Not at all/Often" to 7 as "Very Often." This was an original statement used to measure a possible correlation with participants' news consumption, extroversion, and empathy.

Online News Consumption. Online news consumption is the amount of news information an individual learns while online. This is important to measure in addition to social media usage as previous research suggest in order to fully understand how internet usage is to affect an individual's life one needs to know what, where, and how their activity is being met online (Shah et al, 2001). Therefore, to measure online news consumption, a scale was created with 9 items measuring the amount of news participants receive from various forms of new media. This scale was created to possibly correlate with the amount of time spent on social media and the amount of knowledge provided by one's online friends. Participants would answer questions such as, "I receive updates on my phone from news organizations," "I read news online posted on news websites," and "I read news online in social media." The participants could answer on a 7-point Likert-type scale where 1 was "Not at all/Often" to 7 as "Very Often." This scale was created to measure the possible correlation with a participant's personal social media usage, friend social media usage, extroversion, and empathy. This scale of online news consumption was tested and found to be reliable ($\alpha = 0.77$, $M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.25$).

Friend Social Media Use. Friend social media usage is the participation of an individual's online "friends". This variable is used to measure an individual's news consumption in relation to the news information produced by their online "friends". Participants were asked "I believe my social media friends make me more knowledgeable." This item could be answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale where they answer 1 as "Strongly Disagree" to 7 as "Strongly Agree." The statement was created to test the frequency of participants' news consumption since research states one's online friends are more likely to get a user's attention to read an online news story and will increase friends' credibility (Xu, 2013). This can produce more persuasion with news content in terms of attitude and behavioral outcomes (758).

Extroversion. Items for extroversion were adopted from Davis (1980). The 12 survey items asked participants how much they viewed themselves as an extrovert (i.e. "I am a talkative person," "I can easily put life into a dull party," "Other people think of me as very lively,") on a 7-point Likert-type scale with 1 as "Strongly Disagree" to 7 as "Strongly Agree". Two of these items were reverse-coded (i.e. "I tend to keep to the background on social occasions," "I am usually quiet when I am with other people."). This scale was used to possibly correlate

with online news consumption and personal social media usage. This scale was tested and shown to be reliable ($\alpha = 0.92$, $M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.19$).

Empathy. Items for empathetic personality factors were adopted from Francais, Lewis, & Ziebertz (2006). The 14 survey items included statements of (i.e. “Seeing warm emotional scenes melts my heart and makes me teary-eyed,” “I am quite touched by things I see happen,” “When I see someone being taken advantage of I feel kind of protective toward them”). Four of these items were reverse-coded (i.e. “Occasionally I am not very sympathetic to my friends when they are depressed,” “Usually I am not extremely concerned when I see someone else in trouble,” “Sometimes I don’t feel sorry for other people when they are having problems,” “When I see someone being treated unfairly I sometimes don’t feel much pity for them”). The items with this scale were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale with 1 as “Strongly Disagree” to 7 as “Strongly Agree”. This empathy scale was used to measure the possible correlation of empathy with news consumption and personal social media use. The empathy scale was tested and shown to be reliable ($\alpha = 0.87$, $M = 5.27$, $SD = .95$).

Gratifications of Social Media. Scholars have only recently begun studying online gratifications with the effects of news through social media (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). Social media activities such as sharing and commenting gratifies this need to discuss stories in the news media by bringing personal opinions to light and help clarify where users stand on particular issues (215). Therefore, various items were used in this study for measuring the uses and gratifications through specific social media activities. The 14 items were created as necessary to understand individuals various uses for social media and how they relate to news consumption. Participants responded to the question, “How much do you value each of the following activities?” The items included the following: posting, commenting, liking, networking, sharing anything, sharing news articles, hyperlinking, chatting, reading posts, keeping in touch with others, friending, following, searching, and browsing. For each motivation the participants could answer from 1 as “Strongly Oppose” to 7 as “Strongly Favor”. Here provided a range of possible gratifications users obtain while measuring social media and news consumption.

Control variables. News dissemination through SNS has been related to users’ age, gender, and political affiliation. In online involvement females are more numerous when it comes to

online interpersonal relationships (Sheldon, 2008). Also politically active individuals will engage in current events through SNS as the use of various online activities give them the chance to increase their civic engagement (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). These three characteristics were included to measure the demographics of participants in relation to news consumption.

Data Analysis

The proposed research question on gratifications obtained from social media was assessed with frequency analysis and a correlation matrix. All hypotheses were first tested individually with correlations. The hypotheses were then tested simultaneously with hierarchical regression analysis.

Results

Social Media Usage and Gratifications

To measure gratifications of a social media user frequencies were run to measure the strongest gratification of the 14 original items on social media activities. Of the 14 items the top 3 activities were “keeping in touch” ($M = 5.71, SD = 1.34$), “reading posts” ($M = 5.48, SD = 1.40$), and “browsing” ($M = 5.30, SD = 1.53$). While the lowest motivation was “hyperlinking” ($M = 3.99, SD = 1.69$). Therefore, in answering the Research Question it was found that “keeping in touch,” “reading posts,” and “browsing” were the top gratifications obtained from SNS of the 14 items tested. These top three gratifications are in relation to the agency-based gratification known as *bandwagon* where individuals on social media look for specific posts, photos, videos, etc. to become informed on what’s popular with their friends within their “social circles.” Not surprisingly, these top three gratifications were all significantly correlated with general social media usage (see Table 1).

Social Media Usage and News Consumption

For the first hypothesis a correlation was run with the item representing personal social media usage with the scale created to represent how much news participants consumed online. With these measurements a positive correlation was found between an individual’s social media usage and an individual’s online news consumption, $r(505) = .53, p < .01$. Stating that the more time an individual uses social media the more news they are exposed to. Hypothesis 1 was supported. Not to be confused, those users are not more knowledgeable about news

information but with many interactivity features users could be receiving more news content than they are reading it. They may have more access to news content due to fast production and dissemination but it does not equate to users reviewing and interpreting news information online.

For the second hypothesis a correlation was run on the association between items representing how participants saw their online friends of providing news knowledge with the scale of online news consumption. The result was a positive correlation between “friend” online usage and an individual’s personal news consumption, $r(506) = .36, p < .01$. Hypothesis 2 was supported. With social media news consumption in correlation with their “friends” online news knowledge information on news events and topics could be in direct relation to what their friends see as “news.” Not knowing what kind of news is posted by users online “friends” we cannot assume it is any news information in particular. If a user’s news information is based on how much their friends know of the local to world news than a personal and bias viewpoint of the news may be likely as users frequently post stories to gain support or discussion from online “friends”

Social Media Usage and Personality Factors

Hypothesis 3 involved the extroversion scale (Davis, 1980) in relation to the created scale on online news consumption. It was found that extroverted individuals consume more news information, $r(506) = .26, p < .01$. Hypothesis 3 was supported. Similarly, hypothesis 4 involved how extroversion related to social media usage. It was found extroverted individuals are more frequent social media users, $r(505) = .20, p < .01$. Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Correlations were also run to test hypotheses 5 and 6. These related the empathy scale adopted from Francais, Lewis, & Ziebertz (2006) with the scale of online news consumption and the item on social media usage. Hypothesis 5 involved the scale on empathy and the scale on online news consumption. It was found individuals with empathy consume more news, $r(506) = .20, p < .01$. Hypothesis 5 was supported. Hypothesis 6 involved the scale on empathy and the item on social media usage. It was tested and it was found individuals with empathy are more frequent social media users, $r(505) = .24, p < .01$. Hypothesis 6 was supported.

A Full Model Test of the Influence on News Consumption

Although all hypotheses were supported initially it is important to understand each variable's relative influence on news consumption. Specifically, does social media use (personal use and friend use) influence news consumption over and beyond the influence of the control variables (age, gender, and political affiliation) and personality variables (extraversion and empathy)? The relative influence of these variables was tested with a hierarchical regression analysis. Block 1 tested the influence of the control variables on news consumption, Block 2 added the personality factors, and Block 3 added social media use. All Blocks were significant and each added new variance explained, totaling 33% variance in news consumption to be explained (see Table 2). It can be concluded that social media usage factors significantly predict news consumption over and beyond the influence of control and personality variables.

Discussion

As news stations rely on television to get their story to the public it seems audiences may already possess some of their prepared information from social media and online “friends”. However, we do not know whether users are provided with accurate news information from social media where news audiences rely on research done by journalists. Social media it seems rely on friends for information from online “social circles. While prior research identifies social media use as an opportunity for audiences to become informed about breaking news, our current research states social media users are more exposed to news because of possible friend updates, comments, and shares (Holton et al., 2014). The current study has confirmed this claim by demonstrating a significant correlation between social media use (personal and friend use) and news consumption. Further, it was shown through hierarchical regression analysis that accounting for gender and personality (extroversion and empathy), social media use can explain 33% of the variance in news consumption. These findings go a long way to help explain the shifting influence of newer forms of media on news consumption. What follows will go into more detail and unpack the influence of each variable.

The old saying “your friends make you smarter” can be the case with social media “friends.” As stated by hypothesis 2 simply interacting with online friends and their friends' preferences can increase users' news consumption. If those individuals online have social media friends who post frequent news information, then as stated in hypothesis 2, there is a significant

correlation with social media users consuming more news as they read their friends social media posts. However, it could be the case that the friends on social media are the source of their knowledge and not necessarily Facebook or other social media sites. In addition, how individuals partake in social media with relation to news dissemination could be due to personality factors.

Extroversion is a personality trait involving those who value and seek out external approval and acceptance from friends. While some may assume there is a correlation with extroverted individuals and social media, the significant correlation provided was quite low indicating introverts could be just as involved with social media practices and news dissemination. The hypothesis stated that the more extroverted an individual is the more they will use social media which is not surprising since one of the highest gratifications obtained from this study was “keeping in touch”. Since social media includes the largest amount of “friends” to communicate with extroverted individuals may relish the practice of engaging with so many individuals at one time. Extroverted individuals provide engagement and activity with these sites where they may also contribute to the amount of news knowledge obtained from SNS.

As stated earlier extroverts want to feel accepted by others therefore they will want to view popular posts with the largest number of “likes” and “shares” posted through the bandwagon gratification. Therefore, it could be more extroverted individuals are heavily influenced by this bandwagon gratification with only an interest in “popular” online news. Both extroverted and introverted individuals, however, may contain other personality traits that affect their social media use and news consumption.

Empathy is another personality trait related to social media usage with this study. Studies show that those empathetic individuals have the ability to showcase this trait while partaking in online social media activities. This could be one reason as to why the more empathetic a person is the more social media they will use. Empathetic individuals may also value the agency-based gratifications of online social media practices such as liking, sharing, retweeting, etc. Therefore these online activities allow an individual to show their personality with their online friends and current news events in their capability to be interactive online with news stories posted online. These social media practices could also be an aid to help individuals develop their empathic skills.

While empathy may contribute to social media usage, there was also a correlation found with news consumption. Since there are many news stories filled with dramatic images and taglines it would not be uncommon for an empathetic individual to again take their time on social media to display their own empathetic abilities through “sharing” and “liking” a news story. While it is unknown that these social media practices are possible gratifications to help with their need to show empathy, we still must take news posts into consideration as this may have an impact with their interest to online information.

Finally the idea of learning from news content with activities such as sharing through social media needs further research (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). With the top 3 social media motivations discovered allows for a possible contribution to the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Social media has the possibility of engagement like no other medium today. As a 24-hour social network perhaps this provides individuals the ability to connect with others they wouldn't normally interact with, and in return allow a flow of information from organizations to “friends” to “followers”. This could be a likely need as this study provided the highest motivational average for social media users as “keeping in touch”. In addition the second and third highest motivation were “browsing” and “reading posts.” Of course there are thought to be many forms of gratification, which social media can provide but to understand how they pertain to news dissemination is imperative (Weeks & Holbert, 2013).

Limitations

This study provided statistically significant results for all 6 hypotheses. Nevertheless, there are a few potential limitations that should be discussed. One limitation is the use of a convenience sample of 508 participants. These preliminary results will need to be replicated with a larger, more representative sample in the future. Another limitation of the method used is that correlation does not mean causation. The results provided significance with social media users and news consumption, but this does not mean social media is the primary reason for their consumption. Perhaps social media provides a network for them to read their online friends' posts which so happen to be news related. It again could be that the individual's friends are the ones providing them with the news knowledge and not social media, as there was some correlation specifically measuring friend posted news. Future research is needed to

understand how social media has evolved and how valuable news information can be to social media users.

Future Research

News is an important part of society, when individuals are more informed they can better understand their work, school, government, etc. Therefore, when it comes to news dissemination if we can understand how news is shared through these popular SNS we can better inform our public. This research is also important for news organizations to realize the importance of their social networking sites. If they want to get more viewers or followers they must spend time updating pages on various social networking sites. However, to further understand why users seem to become more knowledgeable on SNS further research on causation for reading news related posts is needed. Whether it may involve a trending post with the most “likes,” a video suggested by a friend, or breaking news updates, posts are being read and further research needs to understand why. What are the user’s interests or motivations with these posts? Could social media usage be linked to a need for news information or news dissemination? Further research can be done on whether hyperlinking is still valued in regards to news production and specifically how users access their news knowledge through social media. There should be more research on specific needs and gratifications provided by news posts on SNS, and on specific news information users are provided online by their social media “friends”. If the dissemination provided by social media users can become better understood then perhaps we can better inform our public by addressing the concerns and biases provided in the virtual world. If “friends” and “followers” are influencing news information through social media then perhaps journalists need to spend more time on these platforms to address posts during production of their own news stories. With the continuation of social media activities research in news dissemination needs to be ongoing to understand how and why the public is interpreting or misinterpreting news.

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