

Exploring the Uses and Gratifications Theory in the Use of Social Media among the Students of Mass Communication in Nigeria

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Published online: 29 August 2016

To cite to this article: Aisar Salihu Musa, Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi and Nur Salina Ismail. 2015. Exploring the uses and gratifications theory in the use of social media among the students of Mass Communication in Nigeria. *Malaysian Journal of Distance Education* 17(2): 83–95. doi: 10.21315/mjde2015.17.2.6

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21315/mjde2015.17.2.6>

Abstract

For decades, the Uses and Gratification (U & G) Theory has been the main theory of communication that explains what people do with the media. To many, the theory seems old. However, the emergence of social media breathes a new life into this aging theory. This paper seeks to explore the current functions of the U & G Theory in the students' use of social media. Survey and focus group discussion were used to elicit information from purposively selected 111 final year students of mass communication. The paper discovers that majority of the respondents (98.2%) used social media for communication, collaboration, news sharing, research, expression of opinion, maintaining a connection, and making friends from other countries. Facebook and WhatsApp were the most preferred social networks among the respondents. The paper confirms that social media platforms have revived the functions of the U & G Theory and provided a plethora of media uses that the traditional media never could. Very few of the respondents used social media for information, to investigate why, the paper suggest that the Media Information Utility theory should be thoroughly investigated.

Keywords: social media, uses and gratification theory, usage of social media

Introduction

Social media become an area of interest to researchers, marketers, students, celebrities, and many other economic and socio-political institutions. This has to do with the belief that the power of globalisation has forced many people to be online in order to cope and survive with the demand of the 21st century technology. Nowadays, millions of people do their activities on social media because they have the opportunity to view, read, seek, and share whatever they like, anywhere, anytime, and on any topic (Vicen and Cavus, 2010, Papoola, 2014). As Internet penetration keeps widening (with over 3.17 billion users of the Internet today) and social media platforms continue proliferating, Whiting and Williams (2013) claimed that there is a little knowledge of why and how people use social media which is the basic foundation of the Uses and Gratifications Theory.

Some scholars (such as Ruggiero, as cited in Gallion, 2010) predicted that the emergence and widespread usage of the Internet would come with new changes in roles, personal, and social habits of media users. This diversification of the use of media is what promotes the U & G Theory. Similarly, Stafford et al. (cited in Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008), buttressed that the emergence of new media and computer-mediated technologies have rejuvenated the Uses and Gratification Theory and also provide a new wave of scholarship. Students are described as the major users of social media. Therefore, the Uses and Gratification Theory is an ideal theory to identify and analyse the reasons why they use social media (Whiting and Williams, 2013; Yoo and Kim, 2013). Furthermore, applying the U & G Theory in social media studies is of great importance because these new forms of mass media are somewhat new in relation to old media. Unlike the traditional media that provided users with limited choices, these new media come up with new options, and the theory will assist to explain the users' needs and the gratifications achieved (Gallion, 2010; Matei, 2010). As there are limited studies to revalidate the U & G Theory in relations with social media, therefore, this paper intends to apply the U & G Theory to help to explain whether the students are using social media and why, and the gratifications they achieved. For these reason, this paper seeks:

1. To investigate whether the students use social media

2. To examine the social networks preference among the students
3. To demonstrate the relevance of the U & G Theory in the students use of social media

Literature Review

Social Media

The most popularly cited definitions of social media is given by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61), as ‘a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content’. Furthermore, Douglas (cited in Papoola, 2014) views social media as any digital media that can be used to share messages, photos, news, information, music, and videos with cyber communities. For this reason, social media heavily relied on mobile applications and websites created for social interactions which allow users to generate, express, and share information about themselves or others. Considering this, social media are numerous, diverse, available, cheap and almost free to use. Wikis, Micro-blogging, Online Forums, Online blogs, and Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are among the most popular social media technologies. Similarly, as some people used these technologies for educational purposes, majority are online for interaction and information sharing. The typical examples of social media are Twitter, Blogs, Facebook, Google+ LinkedIn, Wikis, Pinterest, YouTube and Flickr (Lewis, 2009; Osatuyi, 2013; Whiting and Williams, 2013).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch pioneered the Uses and Gratification Theory in 1974. But according to McQuail (2010), the theory could be traced from the early 1940’s when researchers started investigating why people listen to popular radio programmes and why they read newspapers daily. Therefore, the theory emerged in response to the needs of explanation to why people use certain media and the benefit they get from them. Mass communication researchers are using the U & G Theory to examine, explain, and provide answers to why people use certain media and what benefits or gratifications they get after that. The basic assumption of this

theory is that people use mass media for different reasons and seek to derive various gratifications (Gallion, 2010; Wimmer and Dominick, cited in Asemah, 2011). However, the emergence of social media technologies changes the way people use mass media as they differ in forms and context. Therefore, people who use social networks and other computer-mediated communications are quite different from the mainstream media audiences who relied on specific media contents (Li, 2005). Social media audiences have the advantage and freedom to actively seek for information and many messages that are of interest and benefit to them. New media technologies did not only alter the way information is gathered and distributed but also changes the existing relationship between mass media and their audiences. Li (2005) stated that people use social media to satisfy their needs which include cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, tension release needs, and medium appeal needs. For this, social media become a fertile research field demonstrating the direct relevance of the U & G Theory and its participants (Matei, 2010).

In the review of the related studies, the researchers synthesised and examined works of Asemah (2011), Gallion (2010), and Whiting and Williams (2013). According to these scholars, majority of the people use social media for interaction, killing time, entertainment, seeking and sharing of information, socialisation, self-expression, education, surveillance and communication.

Social Interaction

Social interaction or integration (Asemah, 2011) is one of the key factors why people use social media. One of the key functions of mass media is to be a forum for public discussion. Social networks such as Facebook and Online Forums allow users to participate and interact on various issues. Whiting and Williams (2013) discovered that 88% of the respondents used social media to socialise and interact with their family, spouses, new and old friends. A similar finding was stated by Papoola (2014).

Killing Time

Many people use media for them to release their tension or as their diversion. In fact, 76% of the respondents in Whiting and Williams (2013)

and Edegoh, Asemah and Ekanem et al. (2013) used Facebook when they feel bored at work or in class waiting for a lesson to start. As mass media are many and sometimes can be used for the same purpose, Asemah (2011) added that sometimes people read books to release tension when waiting or anxious to meet someone.

Entertainment

Entertainment is undoubtedly among the most important functions of mass media as people often like to be entertained or in a happy mood. The emergence of social media sustain this trend as Park et al. as cited in Gallion (2010) found that their respondents solely use social media to satisfy their needs for leisure and amusement. Whiting and Williams (2013) elaborated that 64% of their respondents used social media to listen to jokes, play games, read funny and humorous comments, and watch craziest things that can make them laugh.

Seeking and Sharing of Information

Social media makes it easy for people to search and share information that they could not get elsewhere. According to Park et al. as cited in Gallion (2010), majority of the Facebook users are happy with the amount of political and civic information they get about campus activities. As the U & G Theory allows people to use certain media for different needs (demassification), 80% of the respondents in Whiting and Williams (2013) used social media to find information about deals, sales, products, businesses, birthdays, parties, and learn how to do things. Using media purposely for information enhances the credibility of the Media Information Utility Theory, which argues that people rely on media for information. This theory is closely related to the Media Dependency Theory.

Socialisation

According to Gallion (2010), socialisation is one of the central and most essential elements of employing the U & G Theory to social media studies. Desire to meet new friends and sustain relationship are among the socialisation needs. In the study on Facebook and Relationship

Management by Edegoh et al. (2013), respondents of the survey used Facebook to make new and rediscover old friends.

Self-expression

Some people like to be known while others like to make impact on others. With the emergence of social networking sites, people who do not have access to media or afford columns in newspapers and magazines, turn to social media platforms and act as analysts, pundits, activists and professionals. This personal identity/integration or self-status allows many people to engage in social networking. Whiting and Williams (2013) discovered that 56% of their respondents used social media to express their opinions and thoughts by liking posts, photos and comments. As there are many online groups for virtual communities, Park et al. cited in Gallion (2010) claimed that people joined those groups (Facebook) to promote their career. This saves them the cost of advertising.

Education

One of the cardinal functions of mass media is to educate people. Asemah (2011) buttressed that people turn to media for learning and self-education. The U & G Theory makes users more active by doing things themselves. The majority of the respondents in Omekwu, Eke and Odoh et al. (2014) and Papoola (2014) used social media for academic purposes. Social media search engines such as Google and Wikis allow people to look for educational articles to support their learning.

Surveillance

McQuail et al. cited in (Asemah 2011) stated that individuals used certain media to inspect what is happening within and outside their domain. In fact, 32% of respondents in Whiting and Williams (2013) used social media to spy and monitor what other people are doing. Similarly, as conventional media cannot report everything due to the vastness of space, fear and censorship, people with cameras and mobile phones can upload pictures, images, and videos on social media platforms. This is what champions the concept of citizens or guerrilla journalism (Papoola, 2014).

Communication

Social media give users an opportunity and freedom to communicate among themselves by using various groups, discussion boards, pages, and professional and educational forums. Whiting and Williams (2013) found 56% of their respondents using social media such as Facebook to talk, gossip and discuss with their friends about the thing they saw or read on social media. Unlike the traditional media where feedback is delayed or not guaranteed, participants on social media enjoyed the privilege of immediate feedback.

Research Design

Participants of the Study

The researchers collected the data from 111 final year diploma students of mass communication, Kano State, Polytechnic. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants of the study. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2014), purposive sampling is frequently used when mass media researchers are looking for respondents to answer some specific questions on how they use medium of communication.

Research Technique

The researchers applied sequential explanatory mixed method design to collect and analyse the data of the study. Survey questionnaire and focus group discussion were employed to elicit the respondents' opinions and perceptions on their usage of social media and the gratifications they derive. Descriptive statistics (with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences [SPSS]) and thematic analysis (with the help of Atlast.ti software) were used to analyse responses of the participants.

Selection Procedure

In the first phase of the study, questionnaires were distributed to all respondents. After the analysis of the questionnaires, students with the high knowledge and usage of social media were selected to participate in the focus group discussion.

Finding and Discussion

Result of the Survey

In the first phase of the study, paper-based questionnaires were distributed to 111 respondents with 79.3% were males (n=88) and 20.7% were females (n=23). Their ages ranged from 18–24; 71.2% (n=79), 25–31; 12.6% (n=14), 32–38; 2.7% (n=3). A total of 11 participants did not reveal their age. The majority of the respondents (44.1%) were self-employed, 34.2% were unemployed while 18.9% were employed.

Result of the Focus Group

In the second phase of the study, respondents who frequently use social media were invited to participate in the focus group discussion. The idea behind this is to have in-depth information and to understand why students used social media and the gratifications they gained. Out of seven participants that take part in this focus group discussion, four were males while three were females. All participants were aged between 18–24 except one who was aged between 39–45. The researchers used open-ended questions. After the discussion with the respondents, the data was video-recorded and later transcribed word by word into Microsoft office window. A coding sheet was open, and their responses were categorised according to major themes.

Table 1 Do you use social media?

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	109	98.2
No	2	1.8
Total	111	100.0

Table 1 indicates that out of 111 respondents of the study, 109 (98.2%) use social media while 2 (1.8%) do not. This reveals that the majority of the respondents (98.2%) are using social media.

Participants' Use of Social Media

Social networks have become an integral part of students' life. Students used social networks for different reasons including learning aspect. Participants in the interview used social networks to make friends, chat, communicate and improve their learning skills. They used many social networks, but majority prefers using Facebook, WhatsApp and Blog. Some participants responded in the following manner:

P1. 1:2 (16:16)

I use social networks to create a dialogue, making contacts, maintaining connection and communication with other colleagues may be in different countries. I use blog and other social networks like Yahoo, Twitter. . . . Social networks make things easy for you and assist you to be socialised in a learning aspect.

P2. 2:1 (20:20)

I use WhatsApp, Facebook and blog. Blog is one of the best preferable social networks presently to me and is also one of the best websites I use. I post and share whatever I have as news to many people.

P3. 3:1 (16:16)

I use social networks for communication, share ideas, and also collaboration. I prefer using Facebook, Instant Messenger, WhatsApp and blog.

Table 2 indicates that out of 111 respondents of the study, 78.4% preferred using Facebook while 72.1% preferred WhatsApp. This also demonstrates that Facebook and WhatsApp were the most preferable social networks among the respondents

Table 2 Which of the following social networks do you prefer to use?

Social networks	Frequency	Percent
Facebook	87	78.4
Twitter	23	20.7
WhatsApp	80	72.1
YouTube	26	23.4
Instagram	12	10.8
Skype	7	6.3
Blog	14	12.6
LinkedIn	0	0
Wiki	17	15.3
MySpace	2	1.8
Google	69	62.2
Others	24	21.6

Table 3 Do you use social media for news or information?

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	42	37.8
No	68	61.3
No response	1	.9
Total	111	100.0

Table 3 shows that only 37.8% of the respondents used social media to get news or information. This suggests that majority of the respondents were not using social media to get news or information.

Discussion and Analysis

This article explores the relevance, validity and significance of the U & G Theory in the students' use of social media. Employing the U & G Theory in social media research helps to uncover various reasons and gratifications why people use social media, what benefits do they get, and why they prefer some social networking sites over others that are available to them. From the survey questionnaire and focus group discussion, this paper identifies that the majority (98.2%) of respondents in this study are using social media. This result was in accord with Papoola (2014) that

majority of the students in higher institutions are using social media. This revolution can help educators in higher institutions to think of designing courses on social media to support their learning skills. Similarly, this study indicates the relevance and validity of the U & G Theory in relations to social media as some respondents used some social networking sites over others. Facebook and WhatsApp, 2go and Vadoo were the most preferred social networks among the students. This finding went in agreement with Omekwu et al. (2014) and Papoola (2014). This paper identifies seven reasons why students used social media which are: (1) communication, (2) news sharing, (3) research, (4) expression of opinions, (5) maintaining a connection, (6) collaboration and (7) making friends from other countries. Similarly, socialisation and personal relationship were among the most important gratifications that the respondents sought and obtained. These showed that social media allows users to satisfy and gratify many of their needs which could not be possible in the conventional media as supported by Ruggiero (as cited in Matei, 2010). This finding was similar with that of Edegoh et al. (2013), Gallion (2010), Omekwu et al. (2014), Papoola (2014), and Whiting and Williams (2013).

The paper contributes to the emerging trend of literature in mass communication in the following ways: first, the paper demonstrates that the U & G Theory is still valid and relevant to the students' use of social media and, therefore, should be given prominence (Whiting and Williams, 2013). Secondly, as some respondents used social media for education, the article reveals that some social networks can be part of today's learning whether formal or informal as such educators of mass communication should start thinking of designing courses on social media so that to support the learning pedagogy. Consequently, the need for the introduction of social media courses in teaching mass communication on the concepts such as news reporting, strategic communication and advertising becomes imperative. Thus, the study provides an in-depth analysis of the U & G Theory by revealing many uses of social media and the gratifications that users expected to achieve.

Conclusion

This study explores the U & G Theory in the usage of social media among the students of mass communication in Nigeria. The use of social networks

among the students in higher institutions in Nigeria is becoming pervasive as Omekwu et al. (2014) claimed that they were the major means of collective and interpersonal communication. This indicates that these social networks have established a big space in the life of students. Therefore, more and more studies of the impact (both negative and positive) of social media on students should be conducted. The results of this study contribute to both literature and theoretical framework of mass communication. The study shows that the Uses and Gratification Theory is still valid and relevant to social media studies as the respondents of this study used social networking sites to make friends from far places, collaborate, conduct research and socialise themselves in the learning aspect. As some respondents used social media for news and information, this study suggests that the Media Information Utility Theory should be explored in the students' use of social networking sites. Moreover, by using social media platforms, users can achieve certain goals and satisfy most of their needs which could not be possible or found in the mainstream media. Similarly, giving preference to Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube over other social networks demonstrates the functionality of the U & G Theory which gives users the freedom to select the media platforms they best like to 'gratify' their 'needs'. Considering the dearth of social media studies among the students of mass communication in Nigeria (Papoola, 2014), this paper adds to the limited literature and calls for further studies.

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