

How University Students Communicate with their Peers, Family and Other Various
Demographics Through the Use of Different Popular Social Media Platforms
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Over the past 20 years the internet has grown exponentially, and the possibilities for communication have expanded alongside it to include a whole host of platforms. To a large degree these platforms are offering similar communication functions, but each have certain identifiable characteristics that make them stand out from the rest (Hwang & Cho, 2018). The primary purposes of these sites are often different but share some common functions such as the use of text, picture or audio to convey a message or communicate. With all these communication pathways it becomes beneficial to understand why and how these platforms are being used by people today. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how university students utilize these identifiable characteristics across platforms to communicate with their friends, families, or other demographics on popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Additionally, this study intends to aid in understanding the reasons college students use certain platforms over others.

The reason this study is significant to both the field of communication, and to university students in general, is that by studying how and why these platforms are being used, students will be able to make more informed decisions regarding their current social media use. This could lead to more productive use of social media and provide feedback on communication patterns that social media companies could use to improve their user experience. Currently, there are no other studies that specifically address the process of how university students choose which platforms to use during everyday life, how they communicate differently on each platform, or which characteristics of these platforms make them use it more. Further understanding of these details could significantly advance current communication theory.

There has been a vast amount of research done on related subjects. This study makes use of Katz's (1973) Uses and Gratifications Theory as the basis for the research as well as a small

focus on the Two-Step Flow of Communication Theory. This qualitative research was established using convenience sampling to measure the Immediate Use Method (IUM), and the Current Communication Model (CCM). As further support for this study, the researchers aimed to make use of previous studies that highlight the primary determinant of how the social media sites that university students choose has to do with their quality of social interaction as well as how they are actively engaging with each other on these sites. Additionally, the level of communication with other demographics or cultures is examined via the participant's individual online engagement.

Literature Review

The following review of literature will focus on three main themes: potential effects of micro-influencers and opinion leaders, non-students' use social media, and college students' use social media.

Potential Effects of Micro-Influencers and Opinion Leaders

The first thing to keep in mind when studying social media is how micro-influencers and opinion leaders affect what people think and share. The issue of fake news is one that has been brought to light more heavily in the past few years and its spread is an obvious effect of social media influencers. Since a significant portion of news is spread via Twitter, a large-scale study was conducted focusing on identifying fake news on Twitter. Agrawal et al. (2019) surmised that, rather than news being purposely fake, the language used to deliver news on Twitter often mislead readers, causing them to misunderstand the message. Fake or misleading news was found to be easily identified by observing algorithms. People often cross-check or reference facts on Twitter and can attach links to back it up.

Additionally, publisher reputation of a page or news outlet often determines how much people trust their word. Agrawal et al. (2019) also found that the individual spreading the news article can be a more significant feature than the words appearing in the title or description of the news item itself. This makes fact-checking what people read on Twitter even more important to keep them from becoming misinformed and spreading misinformation. The function of communication in spreading news is influenced by the person sending the information out. Therefore, this study can be linked to the research being conducted on social media platforms and their communication influences. In addition to fake news, micro-influencers can use social media to subconsciously persuade their audiences to act in certain ways.

For example, Instagram's model, where pictures and videos are the basis for communication, is a perfect platform to demonstrate how micro-influencers affect their audiences. Stolarski, Lucena, Milani, and de Oliveira (2018) conducted a study on the product placement of dietary supplements through fitness bloggers on Instagram. Ten Brazilian fitness profiles were selected to take part in this study. The following categories were highlighted on each influencers page: the product placement of dietary supplements and information on aesthetics services or health professionals. These influencers made sure to post professional pictures and selfies of themselves looking fit and happy so their brand, as a fitness page, could sell these products. Their Instagram posts reinforced the idea of a healthy lifestyle, which made followers more apt to buy the products they were supposedly using to obtain their fitness goals. Even if influencers are not directly telling people to buy a product, they can use photographs to communicate a message—an idea and an image of a healthy lifestyle—to make people believe they can attain the same feeling if they purchase the advertised product. Keeping these effects in mind is imperative when studying social media, but it is the users that give influencers leverage.

Non-Students' Use of Social Media

It is important for influencers and researchers alike to know who uses social media. As a result, Sloan, Morgan, Burnap, and Williams (2015) conducted a study in which the demographics of Twitter users were explored and examined. The researchers examined two tools for the automated identification of demographic data from the profile information of Twitter users in the United Kingdom. The data included in the study are the age, occupation, and social class of Twitter users from the United Kingdom. The study goes into detail about each aspect of these demographics. For example, occupations were analyzed, and findings explained that certain career paths, or occupations, do not allow enough free time for scrolling on Twitter. The researchers, using Twitter's age detection algorithm, younger users made up more of the population of Twitter users than the United Kingdom's 201 Census would have predicted based on the data collected. However, projections showed that there are still many older users of the platform. Essentially, Twitter tends to be used more by young adults, but does contain outliers of younger and older users.

If the study conducted by Sloan et al. holds true, then the presence of seniors on social media is increasing, so researching their use is becoming more and more necessary and fruitful. In a research study conducted by Ivan and Hebblethwaite (2016) on family communication, grandmothers discuss how they utilize the internet and new age digital media to stay connected with their children and grandchildren overseas. Staying up to date on photos and news from their family was found to be two of the biggest incentives for these grandmas to be online. The study investigated how grandmothers use Facebook specifically to facilitate conversation with family that has moved far from home. The study found that the use of Facebook itself was passive while the grandmothers focused on engagement with photos or statuses that evoked emotions. They

found video chat was preferred over Facebook as a communication medium as video chat facilitates the feeling of being present now with their grandchildren. The preference of being able to speak directly to their grandchildren, either by video chat or on the telephone presents opportunity to foster deeper personal relationships. Although, in one case where a Romanian grandmother faced a language barrier between her grandchildren, she expressed her preference for sharing content such as photos, quotations, and videos on Facebook so her grandchildren could “like” it and feel connected. This alternative allowed her to be more involved in her grandchildren's lives. Since the current study is focusing on university students, it only makes sense to look at studies already conducted on university students and social media.

College Students' Use of Social Media

Over the years, communication research has advanced significantly and has produced results that can be of great use to people from all age groups, gender identification, and socioeconomic status (Rahman, Hassan, Osman, and Waheed, 2019). As the presence of social media has increased, so too has the focus of communication theory with an increasing focus on how newer generations are using social media. As an example of this, Celebi et al. (2018) examined both Turkish and German university students to see how they were using social media and to determine if there were any differences between the groups. They found that there were not too many differences between the Turkish and German students in how they used social media. However, the researchers did find that the students had multiple different uses for the various social media sites they used such as conversing with peers, sharing personal stories, having political discussions, and more. But how do these findings hold up when only one platform is scrutinized?

To answer this, Hwang and Cho (2018) examined an individual social media site instead of the entirety of sites available to university students. Using Katz's (1973) Uses and Gratifications Theory, Hwang and Cho (2018) examined why university students in Korea decided to use Instagram as a means of communication. They found the main reason the students were attracted to Instagram was the quality of communication they had with each other, specifically through the act of sharing pictures. The researchers also found that sharing pictures was not only used for its communication value, but as a means of entertainment as well. This is supported by a 2019 study that showed 61% of the students studied used social media for entertainment (Tayo, Adebola, & Yahya). However, these trends may differ when students travel for vacation or study abroad.

Zavodna and Zavodny Pospisil (2018) investigated this phenomenon by studying how Czech university students used social media during the travel process. The researchers discovered that during the travel process, the students primarily used social media as a means of getting other people's opinions on the locations and various areas they visited. Additionally, they used social media to share pictures and videos during their travels. Surprisingly, unlike the results of many other studies such as Celebi et al. (2018), the researchers found that Facebook was the primary site used by the university students.

In a similar study that looked at the social media usage of university students Aleksandrova and Parusheva (2019) found that out of all of the popular social media sites available, ninety seven percent of the participants said they used Facebook and eighty eight percent of that group reported that they use it on a daily basis. These findings are in line with Zadovna and Zavodny Pospisil's (2018) results that Facebook was the most popular platform. However, it must be noted that this was only in the context of academic communication. When

other contexts are considered such as those in Hwang and Cho's (2018) study on the use of Instagram by Korean university students, then the most favored platform changes to fit other needs.

Keeping with the trend of academic communication, Khan, Kend, and Robertson's (2016) studied the use of social media by accounting students. They examined a total of one hundred and 26 participants and found that much of the academic communication they engaged in was through Facebook. Communicating through this channel was also found to have a positive impact on the student's grades. These findings further support the results found in Zavodna and Zavodny Pospisil's (2018) study.

Looking further into the question of how university students use social media, Purdue University librarians Howard, Huber, Carter, and Moore (2018) conducted a study of Purdue students to determine which platforms the students preferred the library to use as well as what they want to see from the library. They also found that, of the 128 students they surveyed, their most frequently used platforms were Facebook, Youtube, and Snapchat, with Facebook being used most frequently. Howard, et al. (2018) stated the occurrence of this phenomenon of the students using Facebook more than recent surveys would have predicted could be explained by Facebook's utility. However, the students preferred for the library to increase their presence on Facebook, as well as Instagram and Twitter instead of Youtube and Snapchat. This is likely because of the focus on interpersonal communication tendencies on Snapchat compared to the social and mass communication focus on Instagram and Twitter. The caveat being Youtube, where students wanted to see library service information on that platform. This research, concurrent with this study, could help all libraries and other organizations learn to reach college students on social media.

As the diversity of American university student bodies continues to increase, the way they communicate with those international students must continue to evolve to match. A 2015 study published in the Malaysian Journal of Distance education found that Nigerian students utilized Facebook, WhatsApp, and Youtube the most in concordance with Katz' Uses and Gratification Theory (Musa, Azmi, & Ismail). These results are similar to a study conducted by Ammigan and Laws (2018) to determine the best strategies for American universities to use to reach international students. Ammigan and Laws (2018) established that international students utilized Youtube, Facebook, and Instagram the most, both in their home country and at university in the United States. As such, these studies suggest that universities in the United States should diversify their presence over many social media platforms. Additionally, more research on the Media Information Utility Theory would be beneficial for determining what approaches to take on each platform.

The following research questions will be addressed in this study:

RQ1: What difference, if any, is there in the way university students use various popular social media sites to communicate?

RQ2: Does communicating with different demographics have any effect on the use of social media by university students?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of eight students from Kennesaw State University (n=8). Of these participants there were two seniors, two juniors, two sophomores, and two freshmen. Both male and female participants were randomly selected. The ages of the participants ranged from early to mid-twenties. They consisted of three females and five males.

The ethnicity of the participants was representative of more than three cultural backgrounds and is inclusive of the general population diversity.

Sampling

All the participants were recruited by the researchers who used multiple methods to acquire an acceptably sized sample. A simple random sample model was used to select participants. The first method used by researchers was that they went out on campus and asked random university students to take part in the study. This way the participants were random and had the chance to give the proper consent to take part in the focus group. Additionally, a Facebook post was sent out on multiple Kennesaw State Facebook pages that contained a link to the study so that anyone who saw it could contact the researchers if they were interested in participating in the study. Therefore, the study was essentially made available to the student body as a whole. All participants were self-selected and had the opportunity to leave the study at any time. Informed consent and statements on how participants would remain anonymous were all explained prior to the persons agreement in participation. The Rule of 10 was implemented in our focus group to ensure enough people were surveyed and unbiased opinions were being presented, not just one portion of the population.

Procedures

Everyone who agreed to participate was then emailed the essential information about the focus group such as the researcher's contact information, and all the information required by the International Review Board (IRB). The email also explained where and when the focus group session was going to take place, as well as provided the informed consent form for the participants to sign that laid out some expectations of the study. The informed consent form did not tell the participants what exactly was being researched, but the basic guidelines of what we

would be discussing was presented. The use of intentional deception was not necessary in this research study. Additionally, a release form was required to be signed asking the participants for permission to record the session. It also included statements by the researchers saying that the participants names, and personal information will remain purely confidential. In the study, their names will be changed appropriately when referencing the results. For example, the first male in the study will be referred to as participant (M1), and the first female will be referred to as participant (F1). Also, all the information they provide will only be accessible to the researchers.

Once they arrived at the location the researchers greeted the participants and asked a total of seven questions over an hour period. These questions asked about the participant's own personal social media use and preferences, and their thoughts about specific social media sites. After half an hour the participants were given a break and refreshments. After that the questioning continued until all the questions had been asked and the participants were thanked for their time. No payment or compensation was given for their time as it was completely voluntary and monetary bribes could influence results.

Variables

The variables measured in this study were in large part in relation to how one's communication patterns differ across various social media platforms. The researchers analyzed the data collected by focusing on the primary reasons they used each individual app. The independent variable in this study is one's social media use and the dependent variable is their communication techniques. Through a series of questions about what initially brought the participant to social media platforms, what was their primary use for it, and what about their most frequently used platform made them use it more than others, the researchers were able to analyze the data collected.

Analysis

The process of analyzing the data was relatively simple. The focus group was recorded and snippets of the recording were sent to each researcher to split up the transcription process. The data was then recollected on a Google Docs document and the researchers gathered together to find the trends and themes. Some of the themes found include community, comfort sharing specific content, and internalized purpose of the platform.

Results

In conducting the focus group, a series of questions pertaining to the research, were asked to 8 young adults. Their ages range from 19 to 22. Most of the participants were college students at Kennesaw State or surrounding schools.

The first question asked to the participants was which social media platform they most frequently used. The results collectively showed that Instagram is the most common among this age group. Other responses included Discord, YouTube, TikTok, and Reddit.

Secondly, they were asked what initially brought them to the app and how their use differs from when they started. The participants answers were similar in that their reason for getting the app was the popularity and newness of it at the time. Instagram was referred to as “Facebook for Pictures” by participant F2 (22). While the reasons the participants were drawn to the app initially were all similar, their uses for it today all differed. Participant F1 (21) stated that her primary use for the app now is modeling, Participant F4 (19) stated that her use for the app now, the reason that she originally downloaded the app, was because of its popularity.

The third question asked the focus group participants what features their preferred platform has that makes them use it more than others and asked what they believe their platform offers them that others do not. The participants responded with many different reasons as to why

they prefer their apps over others. The majority of the group, who prefers Instagram over other apps, had the reasons of career pertinence (participant F1), access to updated pictures in real time (participant F4), and addiction, based around the features the app creators have developed in making Instagram (participant F2). Other participants expressed their reasonings for their app usage being either entertainment when watching TikToks (participant F3, 20) or gaming communication on Discord from participants M1 and M3 (21 and 20 respectively).

The fourth question asked to the focus group was geared toward which other social media platforms they use and what their primary reasons for using them are. The consensus of the group was all pretty similar; their other used platforms are Twitter and Facebook. The participants agree that their uses include using Twitter as a source of news as well as, a place to follow funny accounts, and Facebook is used more as a place to keep track of family and update close friends and family on their lives.

“Are there any platforms that you avoid using, if so, why?” This was the fifth question asked of the participants. Participants M2 (21) and F1 said they avoid using TikTok because of its lack of relevancy or the “cringiness” of the content. Participants M1, F3, and M3 said they avoid Facebook due to its average user age and outdatedness. Participant F2 said she doesn’t use Snapchat anymore because she feels like she outgrew it. Participant F4 avoids using Tinder because of the desperation it makes her feel.

The sixth question asked to participants was pertaining to how effectively they believe they communicate on these platforms and if effectiveness changes depending on which platform is being used. The consensus was they mostly observe while on “Facebook” and are more actively engaged and communicating on “Instagram”. Participant F1 said, “[On] Facebook, I

have to completely censor and filter myself because I have my bosses and family on there, so it's very family oriented".

The seventh question asked was if there was a demographic that they tended to communicate with more on these platforms? Participants claimed to communicate better with people they know and who share their similar interests than with others. On the apps where interactions take place with more random people, such as TikTok, less communication and interactions occur. Instagram, however, is where people they know or know of are posting, and the participants are more actively interacting with these posts.

Discussion

The researchers found that people's communication patterns change depending on what platform they use. Different personas of people are portrayed across different platforms. People consciously and subconsciously portray themselves differently across platforms because the intended audience and use for each one differs. Facebook was found to be more professional relationships and a family friendly environment. People were found to post less photos on Facebook and use it more to observe and keep up with family and others. Instagram was found to be used as a more personal site as the people you select to follow is based solely off the photographic content they post. Participants reported using Instagram to keep up with people, but a different demographic than on other sites. Instagram is a newer platform; therefore, less adults and business professionals are connected to college-aged kids on it. People felt they expressed themselves the most on Instagram because they have the freedom to control who exactly is seeing their content. It is necessary to have different spaces to share and express different kinds of content. This is an example of code switching on social media. People are alternating communicating in different ways with different people through the use of different platforms.

One may be through text and the next through a simple photo, but all communication techniques are sending messages. The use of code switching across platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, directly relates to RQ 2—interactions between different demographics plays a role in how and why these platforms are frequented. Also, the fact that the participants did have different uses for the various social media platforms successfully answers RQ 1.

Some platforms were found to be commonly used to communicate with just family, others with just friends, and even others solely for personal reasons, such as artistic inspiration. There is no limitation to communication techniques, and the internet has created a place where multiple communication functions are able to diverge. Photographs, text posts, news articles, and other multimedia are constantly communicating a message from sender to receiver, and how we receive and respond to these messages is delivered through these various channels.

The results found by the researchers were consistent with what was expected, and the research successfully answered the research questions presented. They are also consistent with Katz's Uses and Gratifications Theory. The findings for why people avoided certain communication platforms often stemmed back to the relevancy and outdated style of the apps. For example, people were found to censor and filter themselves more on Facebook because they have bosses and family on there. This family-oriented design of Facebook led to decreased use of the platform. Younger generations are more apt to frequent social media sites they feel they can be their true selves on. Some results showed participants prefer to not be the ones posting content, but solely absorb content presented by others.

However, this research was limited in the number of participants that took part in the study, and the location of the study. The sample collected could be representative of a population, but further research needs to be conducted to confirm consistent opinions. Future

research could build off these findings by increasing both the number of participants, and the locations they are sampled from so that the results will be more generalizable to the wider population. By doing so communication theory will be further advanced and people's use of social media could be further studied through their communication habits.

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