Understanding the Role of Personal Motivations in Social Media Use and Choices for Interpersonal Communication

Karabo Sitto-Kaunda, University of Pretoria, South Africa

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Abstract

The public introduction of social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and exponential growth of social media as a medium in the last twenty years has been unprecedented, revolutionizing interpersonal interactions between people, marketing communication and driving up internet growth rates. The ongoing changes in preferences, uses and gratifications of SNS need to be examined, especially by communication professionals seeking effective ways to reach digital audiences, concerning the motivations behind people's use and fulfilment of their use, supported by the uses and gratification theory. As part of a study evaluating online interpersonal communication, 23 in-depth interviews were conducted to evaluate their experiences on how they keep in touch with their personal networks i.e., social circles. Participants reported how their primary motivation on which social media to use are reliant on who they seek to communicate with, and how the ongoing rise of new SNSs has fragmented their attention and interests, making them feel less connected in their relationships, leading to reduced content shared. Seemingly the fewer participants SNS users post the lower their sense of connectedness, and the higher the likelihood of SNS use diminishing. There is also an increased rise in the use of more private social media features such as messaging to maintain interpersonal relationships through those platforms. Understanding how to SNS users' online behavior changes as they seek to maintain personal connections and privacy is critical to informing successful communication practice in light of growing budgetary investment in social media advertising in the marketing communication mix.

Keywords: Social Media, Interpersonal Communication, Personal Networks, Social Networking Sites, Uses and Gratifications

Introduction

Social media networking sites' (SNS) growth since their popularity in the early 2000's has seen mushrooming of platforms that are global, regional and even national, revolutionizing the way people communicate and engage with one another. Social media's growth is directly linked to the acceleration of internet access throughout the globe. The growth of the internet has facilitated exponential growth in communication technology advancements. Poushter (2016) found that 76% of their study's participants across 40 countries that reported being online using the internet were using social networking sites. Advancements in communication technology have altered how people relate to one another, and the level of affection in their relationships (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). The growth and popularity of social media has resulted in these networking sites being considered mass interpersonal communication. At the heart of SNSs' popularity is people's need to maintain close relationships (Wang, Chen & Jiang, 2024) with their personal networks i.e., friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances known to them.

On the African continent, the rate of internet penetration has lagged behind significantly relative to global rates, with the World Bank (2021) reporting that only 36% of Sub-Saharan Africa population of individuals were using the internet. The main driver of the increase in social media usage through rising internet penetration rates, has been the mobile phone (Poushter, 2021), even in Africa, with smartphone penetration on the rise as they become more affordable. African governments are among those that have also recognized the power of internet-powered social media and have shut down internet access at least 19 times across twelve countries during pivotal moments of political and social unrest (AccessNow, 2023). However, these government actions in attempts to thwart internet access have not dampened the growing appetite for social media usage in developing countries. The internet in South Africa is primarily accessed through mobile, which is expensive, with access concentrated in urban centers (StatsSA, 2018).

In South Africa, the top social media platforms in order according to Cowling (2024) are WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and Facebook Messenger. However, there has been a significant shift in the use of different social media globally, with Gartner (2023) reporting that social media use will continue to decline in 2024 in response to misinformation, toxicity of platform users and the proliferation of bots. The main driver of social media growth has been the different manner in which people can remain in touch with members of their personal social networks (Urista, Dong & Day, 2009). The use of communication technologies, of which social media is a subset, is motivated by the purpose of one's communication, the relational ties and the geographic distance between those communicating (Yang, Brown & Braun, 2014). The widespread adoption of communication technologies has enabled close relationships to be maintained over long distances (Crystal Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Individuals may use digital tools like emoticons to help them personalize their online behaviors as a means to circumvent the lack of nonverbal cues in digital interpersonal communication (Matusitz, 2014). Malinen (2015) points out that over time, individuals' participation on social media inevitably changes.

The influence of social media has grown significantly, since its first public introduction in the mid-2000's. Over a decade ago, marketers were already committing significant budget of billions of dollars towards social media for reaching and communicating with consumers (Whiting & Williams, 2013). It has been recognized and well understood by communication professionals that social media is an integral part to the communication media mix for

effectively reaching desired audiences. Thus, it is important for communication professionals to whom social media forms a significant part of their organizational strategies, to evaluate the personal motivations of individuals' use of social media for carrying out interpersonal communication, to gain fulfilment from SNS. Organizations have increasingly relied on social media as part of their marketing communication mix to reach audiences, with global budgets having been on the rise and social media marketing globally being allocated the second highest advertising spend at 14% (Digital Marketing Community, 2018). South African organizations have followed the global trend, with digital channels, including social media, gaining the largest share of the marketing communication and advertising budget allocation (MyBroadband, 2023). Investment in social media marketing communication in South Africa has been supported by the exponential growth of internet penetration, which Kemp (2024) reported to be at approximately 74.7%, yet of those internet users only around 57% of them as active social media users. The growth in the reliance of social media in the organizational communication mix as a cost-effective way of reaching audiences requires closer examination and understanding of what attracts people to these SNS.

The Choice of SNS

The choice of SNS to use is often driven by personal social motivations of individuals to stay in touch with people they seek to remain close to. Often, people engage in the behavior of platform-swinging, i.e., switching between different social media platforms, with relationship management as one of the gratifications fulfilled by this behavior (Tandoc Jr, Lou & Min, 2019). Uses and gratifications theory outlines how individuals will select media among a range of competing media based on whether that media fulfils their needs and ultimately leads to their gratification of its use, with more gratification being a good predictor of not only the use of media but also recurrence of its use (Whiting & Williams, 2013). At the heart of the uses and gratification theory is the recognition of users/audience agency in selecting the media to use and being self-aware of their media use, as well being able place a value judgement on the media content (Tanta, Mihovilović & Sablić, 2014). Social media uses change over time as SNS transform, such as the introduction of platform policies resulting in less popularity of platforms like Facebook among young audiences (De Ridder, 2017), as well as the preference for images and video driving up popularity for Instagram, Snapchat and recently, TikTok. Uses and gratifications theory is premised on two main assumptions, namely 1) that the consumer of the media is active and self-conscious in contributing to their media choice, and 2) that the media consumer is motivated by social and psychological needs, thus seeking out media that will fulfil their goals (Kujur & Singh, 2020). The uses and gratifications theory is based on five main human needs, namely cognitive needs such as gaining information, affective needs linked to emotional pleasure, personal identity linked to needs of social status, integration and social interaction from relationships with personal networks, and escapism linked to tension release (Tanta et al., 2014).

There are three main categories of reasons for people's technology use in relationships, which include to develop, manage and enhance their relationships (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). Sustaining relationships across geographic distances has become common due to communication technologies (Crystal Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Baym, Zhang, Kunkel, Lin & Ledbetter, 2007), such as social media. The strength of the relationships determines the effectiveness of use of communication technologies in those relationships. Relationship tie-strength may be weak or strong, depending on the level of trust, closeness and levels of disclosure (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009). Individuals form and manage online relationships and become part of online networks through their relationships with various people,

managing their relationship tie-strength (Kietzmann, Silvestre, McCarthy & Pitt, 2012). Online interpersonal communication relies heavily on an individual's social ties and behavior, and relationship tie-strength can be weakened by reliance of sustaining relationships primarily online (Cummings, Butler & Kraut, 2002).

The growth in the use of social media for social relationship management has resulted in increased growth in the number SNS available for individuals to choose from. With the rise in the number of options available to individuals, their attention can become divided as they become more selective of the media they choose to use online, either to align with their interests or avoid certain topics, possibly resulting in digital fragmentation (Mahrt, 2020). Users seek gratification with the aim of obtaining it, and if the gratification they seek is not achieved, they may choose to stop using certain media or consuming the content (Tanta et al., 2014). A longitudinal study by Lichy and Racat (2012) found that local SNS are used by individuals simultaneously with global SNS, resulting in convergence of behavior and fragmentation with Gen Y and Gen Z individuals having multiple online identities and belonging to multiple online communities. Thus, online SNS audiences' attention is divided across multiple platforms, possibly leading to reduced activity by network members, because of their relationships, motivations and the gratifications they seek to gain from their online interactions. Understanding the personal motivations for the decisions in the use of different SNS for interpersonal communication may provide communication professionals with insight into the differences in changing preferences for different platforms to ensure more effective online audience engagement.

Methodology

The research approach to the study was qualitative to explore what communication media individuals use, including social media, for their interpersonal communication with their personal networks. A significant number of studies on social media are largely quantitative, focusing on metrics such as community size, volume of communication, and time spent, among others (Cummings, Butler & Kraut, 2002; Basuki, Akbar & Miharja, 2015; Hong, J. C., Hwang, Hsu, Tai & Kuo, 2015; Brailovskaia, Schillack & Margraf, 2020), much more so than the personal choices for remaining connected that inform the interpersonal interactions of individuals. Urista, Dong and Day (2008) conducted focus groups, however focused on specific decision to use specific SNS, namely Facebook and MySpace, among young adults. The research design was exploratory in nature because it sought to understand this phenomenon (Bezuidenhout, Davis & Du Plooy-Cilliers 2021) linked to how individuals make choices about their use of social media for interpersonal communication with people close to them.

The data analyzed for this paper was collected as part of another study, comparing online and offline interpersonal communication of voluntary economic migrants with their personal networks (Sitto, 2019). Voluntary economic migrants were defined as university-educated individuals, living away from their country of origin, who are professionals working in South Africa. The qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews with eleven (11) voluntary economic migrants living in Cape Town and Johannesburg respectively and twelve (12) members of their personal networks. The eleven participants that formed the core focus of study were identified through purposive snowball sampling, in line with the participant profile specified.

To ensure rigor in the research, this qualitative research employed criteria and standards evaluating the relevance, significance and usefulness (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002) of the research data. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is achieved through the following generally accepted criteria (Shenton, 2004):

a) Credibility (in preference to internal validity) – was addressed by ensuring that participants were frank during their interviews, and iterative questions were used to confirm and revisit participants' past responses, in addition to providing a detailed description of the phenomenon the research is studying.

b) Transferability (in preference to external validity/generalizability) – a detailed contextual description of the research has been provided for ensuring the settings can be compared, as well as a full description of the participants, the methods, and number of interviews conducted to collect the data, to provide a baseline understanding that can be used to compare future research.

c) Dependability (in preference to reliability) – the credibility will help ensure the dependability of the study, and all the research processes have been reported in detail to enable future repetition of the work, if not to gain similar results.

d) Confirmability (in preference to objectivity) – to minimize researcher bias, the findings have been considered from the participants' perspective, which the interview style helped ensure, and documenting the research process by tracing each research step looking at the decisions made throughout and a description of the procedures.

The voluntary economic migrants, were asked about their interpersonal communication patterns in remaining in touch with their transnational personal networks. The nominated network members were each asked about their relationship with the specific voluntary economic migrant, and their patterns of interpersonal communication for remaining in touch. Only the data concerning how communication is conducted between voluntary economic migrants and their network members was considered for this paper.

The main themes developed from the data analysis focus on the motivations for using specific SNS for keeping in touch with personal network members, keeping them updated on the voluntary economic migrant's personal life, convenience of platform and privacy with respect to the content activity on various platforms. The themes included:

Table 1: The Main Themes Developed From the Data Analysis

Theme	Note
Primary motivation for social media use based on relationships	Relationship tie-strength contribution of social media usage for interpersonal communication.
Growing preference for WhatsApp for multiple uses	Platform can be used for calls, video calls, updates, and group engagements seamlessly.
Reduced SNS attractiveness due to external content	Encroaching of marketing and advertising content from SNS platforms makes the platforms less attractive for use. There is waning activity, reflecting content reduction from personal networks on SNS to engage with.
Growing use of private SNS features for interpersonal communication	Users choosing to engage in private conversation or choose SNS that allows for more direct interpersonal communication features.

Primary Motivation for Social Media Use Based on Relationships

When participants were asked how they remain in touch with their personal network, some of them referred to calling or emailing directly through multiple other channels in order to remain in touch. Participants mentioned email, Skype (a video calling application), as well as calling. While some of the participants mentioned more expected traditional modes of interpersonal communication, most of them referred to some form of social media. The more 'traditional' digital channels of interpersonal communication were used to accommodate those personal network members without SNS accounts, or to supplement social media communication. Their motivations for the use of social media were the ease of use, cost effectiveness and ability to keep up with various people's milestones, irrespective of tie-strength. The choice in the use of social media was linked to the people the voluntary economic migrants desired to be in touch with, and what media they had access to.

> *VEM 7 - I chat to my mom at least two or three times a week on Face Time and sometimes communicate via Facebook. With my broader family it's normally over Facebook…. Again following them on Facebook and Instagram just to keep in contact, communicate…*

> *VEM 7-Network 1 - All her family's on Facebook so she posts a lot.*

> *VEM 2 - So before I used iMessage with most of my family and friends but the people who don't have an iPhone, you can't use that, so I'd use Facebook messenger sometimes.*

> *VEM 3 - Back home obviously there are means to stay in touch over social media or Facebook; my parents are both on messenger… My relatives are usually on Facebook.*

> *VEM 1 - Since I got settled in, I've gotten in touch with my old friends at home in Zimbabwe, we speak on WhatsApp.*

Each mention of the SNS used included a mention linked to particular individuals, whether family or friends, with respect to the ease of use in keeping in touch with them. In working to manage their relationships, they reported engaging in behaviors of platform-switching that Tandoc Jr et al. (2019) observed, to choose platforms tailored to different relationships.

Growing Preference for WhatsApp for Multiple Uses

The participants made mention of WhatsApp with almost all of them citing it as a platform they use to get in touch with their personal network members. The responses outline the usefulness of WhatsApp, not only as means for voice calling or video calling loved ones, but an easy way of also keeping up with people's lives, whilst having almost no intrusion from the platform, unlike other SNS.

> *VEM 1 - WhatsApp wins because nobody can sneak into my thing and suggest a friend and say, "Hey, add this guy."*

Participants considered WhatsApp as a social media platform, and not simply a messaging platform because of its multiple functions and ability to easily maintain interpersonal contact

with personal networks frequently. Over the last decade, WhatsApp has grown in influence, particularly in South Africa, with its recognition as a social media taking root recognized by its place as the top social media platform in South Africa (Cowling, 2024).

> *VEM 2 - not really WhatsApp…Americans joke only people use WhatsApp if you have friends and family overseas.*

> *VEM 3 - WhatsApp is huge here… Everyone uses… I never used WhatsApp in my life before I came to South Africa but that's all anyone uses here…They video, everything over WhatsApp.*

> *VEM 4 - Overseas it's more things like Skype or WhatsApp calls these days… So, we WhatsApp and calls and voice notes.*

Nearly all participants interviewed mentioned their use of WhatsApp as being convenient and cost-effective. Cost-effectiveness is recognized by communicators as an integral aspect of social media (Digital Marketing Community, 2018; MyBroadband, 2023).

Reduced SNS Attractiveness Due to External Content

The motivation for using SNS primarily to maintain relationships among the participants is a significant one. Among participants, the preferences for specific SNS over others was influenced by their perception of the level of control and autonomy they enjoyed over the content they interact with on the various platforms. Some participants were resistant to the perceived intrusion of other content pushed by the platforms themselves, which they considered as distracting to their main motivation for being online.

> *VEM 1 - For me it has morphed into something that is too busy now. It's just clutter. In the beginning, it wasn't clutter, it was interesting. You're not bombarded by these extra things that... Now they're suggesting friends to you and why? I don't get some of these things on the platform.*

Changes in the use of social media take place and Malinen (2015) highlights the change as inevitable over time. Participants report some of the reasons for their change being linked to gratifications not met, through the increased encroachment of platform content, not only their personal networks' content.

> *VEM 2 - I got a Snapchat account because I needed it for work and all my American friends were using it and I think I just missed the boat, like just a touch too old for it, but, because some of it is interesting... I'm just bad at the even like Instagram…I like sharing pictures from time to time.*

> *VEM 4 - Then you keep tabs on social media to a certain degree in terms of what's happening in people's lives. It's nice to…For that social media is nice to follow people and for them to follow you. The only thing it has become a lot more fragmented now. There was a time where everyone was on Facebook and everyone was updating Facebook that made it a lot easier. Now some people are on Instagram, some people don't update Facebook anymore. The fragmentation of social media channels and who uses what has been less ideal actually to stay in touch that way.*

VEM 1 - Network 1 - Communication, I would say usually it is Facebook. But lately it has been Instagram.

VEM 4 - Network 2 - Ja, on Facebook, but we don't use it very often.

VEM 5 - Network 1 - Well, we follow each other on Facebook, we follow each other on Instagram, she actually communicates with me on Instagram and she sends me something she likes.

VEM 11 - …but I feel like the Instagram, like I use Instagram a lot, mostly for the stories section. So, I do that quite a lot and I feel like that's a nice way of not really, I'm not really talking or message to anybody in particular…

The addition of more SNS seems to be linked to self-reported reduced online activity, resistance to adopt new social media or even abandonment of certain of participants' existing SNS accounts completely for interpersonal communication.

Growing Use of Private SNS Features for Interpersonal Communication

The use of social media for interpersonal communication is becoming more private, as individuals choose to have direct contact with their personal networks. Participants reported frequently using social media platforms for keeping in touch, but specifically the messaging aspects, for direct one-on-one engagement with their desired members. The decision to engage on multiple different platforms is also informed by their desire to maintain certain relationship ties and meet those particular personal network members where they engage most on social media.

VEM 1 - Network 1 - Communication, I would say usually it is Facebook. But lately it has been Instagram…The reason we chat more on social media is because of our interest in sport. Ja, we get to talk about those topics. Maybe after the game we message each other.

VEM 4 - There is a way for social media in there as well in terms of instant messaging and stuff. It is actually still a way because over the years you lose peoples phone numbers because people change phone numbers once in a while which means social media is the only way to get a hold of them.

VEM 6 - …and it's still Facebook, so probably one of the only reasons I don't delete Facebook is that I've got too many friends who are abroad and that's the only way we get to keep in touch.

VEM 2 - Other friends are like did you see this; I'm like I don't know. I post pictures from time to time I don't actually look at people's stuff… I refuse, I'm old school.

VEM 8 - And that's what something that they always complain about, say hey, you are living in such an amazing country, you don't post pictures and what. I say ja, I don't know, I'm not really into…[posting]

The reported changes in reduced posting or keeping social media accounts simply to maintain the network by participants supports the observations and predictions by Gartner (2023) of

the continued decline in social media usage of social media. The need for social status and social interaction (Tanta et al., 2014) by using social media tagging fulfils and gratifies those needs by outwardly showing pictures of them with members of their personal network.

Conclusion

Social media's growth and success has been hailed as transformative for communication. The figures of users globally maintaining social media accounts is significant and has drawn the attention of communicators that have increasingly committed more of their marketing budgets towards social media communication. When asked about their interpersonal communication, individuals consider social media to be an integral aspect of them maintaining relationships with their personal networks of friends, family and acquaintances. Some of the reasons social media platforms continue to have growing numbers of users, irrespective of the level of engagement is the link individuals seek to maintain with their personal networks. The main motivation for the use of social media is to facilitate interpersonal communication, as an extension of the offline interpersonal engagements. Individual motivation of social media use are seemingly driven by emotional, social and other needs that individuals seek to gratify in making deliberate choices about the platforms they choose. The global rate of social media activity is declining, yet it seems the motivations for interpersonal contact have driven the growth of more closed social media like WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger in places like South Africa. As individuals become more resistant to intrusive messages from platforms as well as regulations, communicators need to consider the effectiveness of their budget spend in reaching the right individuals on social media, whose main motivations for engagement with social media are driven by the need to foster their interpersonal communication.

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Contact email: sitto-kaunda.mk@up.ac.za