There is Hope: Race, Gender and the Uses and Gratifications of Social Media

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Before you read this, pause. Think about the last time you reached to your phone, tablet, computer or other device to check the feed of your favorite social media site. Why did you do that? Was it to accomplish a task? To connect with someone? Were you bored? Feeling lonely? Or was it just out of habit?

”Why do people use social media?” is a broad and important question. It may seem obvious to suggest that people use media in goal-oriented ways or derive some form of pleasure or utility from its use. When we use social media to communicate with family and friends it satisfies the need to communicate with others. Reading, listening to music, or watching television or a film can also provide forms of satisfaction such as entertainment, providing relief from boredom, or even just to fulfill a habit. The ability for media to satisfy needs is often described by communication researchers as its uses and gratifications (U&G). This audience-centered approach to understanding media focuses on individual users of media, instead of the message or its medium, and specifically examines users’ motivations and goals. What do we know about the U&G of social media? And how do those differ across race and gender lines?

Why Do We Use Media?

The relationship between media use and satisfaction was noted early in communication research. Much research attention has been given to the relationship between the uses of media and the satisfactions people derive from that use. Communication scholars recognize that individuals select and use media in a variety of ways and for a myriad of purposes. These often reflect the medium’s availability, its affordances, and history of prior use (such as choosing to reply to an email with another email), but can also echo the medium’s interaction with the social environment (such as when an individual watches a television show to avoid doing homework)

(Palmgreen, 1984). Scholars working within the U&G tradition argue that people actively use a chosen medium to meet their own goals. Thus, they maintain, an individual's motives are directly reflected in the selection and use of media (Katz, 1959). In other words, U&G is used to examine media intentionality from the audience's or user's perspective.

U&G postulates that media gratifications originate in an individual's social environment. They reflect influences, such as an individual's gender, life stage, and social roles; socially distributed life chances, such as organizational affiliations or the number of one's friends; and the subjective adjustment or reaction of the individual to his or her situation, such as job satisfaction (Blumler, 1979). The *uses* of media refer to the purposes that individuals bring to their media use; *gratifications* are the benefits received from such use. For example, someone may wish to maintain contact with a friend who attends a different university via social media (the use). When the person makes a social media posts to which the friend responds, the gratification is the interaction that takes place.

What Difference Does The Internet Make?

As a research perspective with a long history, most early U&G work was done on traditional media, such as radio, TV, magazines, and newspapers. However, rapid advancement of internet-based communication technologies pushed U&G into new directions, such as explaining how people use the internet. Some researchers applied U&G to explain why people rely on multiple tools for online communication, whereas others have examined how the U&G approach explains social media activity.

The U&G of social media have been linked to a variety of behaviors and outcomes. For example, people using social media for its content, such as seeking news and information, use it more frequently than people who use it for entertainment (Lampe, Wash, Velasquez & Ozkaya,

2010). Information-seekers also participate more actively in civic and political activities than others (Park, Kee &Valenzuela, 2009). Because social media facilitate connection with others, significant attention has been given to social gratifications. Some social media U&G, such as entertainment, communication or professional advancement, have been found to be weakly predictive of social capital, although these studies have sometimes provided conflicting results (Quinn, 2016). This line of research examines how social media use relates to social capital, or the information and influence found in an individual's social network that aids the ability to accomplish or receive social and economic advantage (Coleman, 1988).

Applying the U&G lens to social media can be useful in understanding inequalities that are reified or challenged in the new information environment, including those along race and gender lines. With the introduction of the internet, researchers and policymakers started talking about a digital divide. Originally, the term referred to access to technology (e.g. having an internet connection or access to a computer) and the quality of that access (e.g. having a dial-up vs. broadband connection); this is now known as the first-level divide. As the internet and connected devices became more prevalent, the focus shifted to the second-level digital divide, or disparities in skills required to use digital technologies. Research suggests that females and minorities are more likely to be on the wrong side of both the access and skills digital divides (van Dijk, 2005).

Finally, with further proliferation of internet-based technologies the debate about the digital divide shifted to a third-level, or a focus on the different ways in which the internet can be used (DiMaggio, et al., 2004). U&G can be potentially insightful here, because it links online activities and offline outcomes (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Factors typically associated with the access and skills-based digital divides, such as income, education, race, and gender, have

been linked to users' ability to derive offline utility from their internet use. Previous research suggested that younger, more educated, and more able individuals were more likely to derive economic benefits, such as access to commerce or employment, from general internet use than were their less privileged counterparts. At the same time males and younger users were more likely to derive political benefits from internet use compared to females or older users (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). In other words, differences in the way the internet is used may amplify existing inequalities, whereby the rich and the powerful get richer and more powerful.

The key to unpacking the dynamics that challenge or reify existing inequalities and power structures related to the third-level digital divide lies in detailed understanding of different uses. DiMaggio et al. (2004) split the uses of the internet into capital-enhancing and recreational activities. Capital-enhancing activities include uses such as online banking, professional networking, social support, and political engagement; recreational activities primarily include gaming and entertainment. Previous research has found that citizens in non-democratic regimes, for example, are more likely to demand democratic reforms if they habitually engage in capital-enhancing uses of the internet, compared to those who engage more in recreational uses (Stoycheff, Nisbet, & Epstein, 2016). As such, understanding the interaction between race, gender, and media use, can help formulate policy, inform technology design, and enact behavioral change.

Exploring Uses and Gratifications

Previous research of general uses of the internet suggested that capital-enhancing and recreational uses of the internet tend to fall across racial and gender lines, thus reifying existing inequalities. We set to explore how differential uses of social media are related to race and gender. Based on previous research we expected to see minorities engage more in recreational

uses of social media when compared to white participants, whom we expected to see engaging in more capital-enhancing activities. Similarly, we expected to see females engage in recreational activities more than males do, and males engage more than females in capital-enhancing activities.

We conducted a self-administered, web-based survey, which included questions on the uses of social media. The sample (n=608) was representative of the US population, based on 2010 US Census demographics, on characteristics of age, gender, and income. The average age of participants was 47.8 years (SD=16.7, range=18-90) and gender was balanced (53.1% female, 46.2% male, 0.7% undisclosed). Racial composition was 8.9% African-American (n=54), 7.6% Hispanic/Latinx (n=46), 4.9% Asian (n=30), 77.0% White (n=468), and 1.2% multi-ethnic/other/undisclosed (n=7). Study participants were actively engaged with social media, with 90.8% reported having two or more social media profiles and 81.1% reported accessing their favored social media site at least once/day.

To capture the variety of ways in which participants used social media, we used previously tested questions which asked participants to rate how well 42 different purposes for using social media (U&Gs) described their own behavior on their most frequently-used social media platform. Responses ranged from 1 (“not at all like mine”) to 5 (“exactly like mine”). For example, participants indicated whether using social media “because it is helpful for my professional future” or “to keep in touch with distanced friends” was like their own behavior. We used exploratory factor analysis to determine categories of capital-enhancing and recreational uses of social media.

Exploratory factor analysis is a statistical method which allows us to identify various dimensions, or factors, of social media use by grouping items into clusters so that they can be

more easily interpreted and understood. When initially conducting the factor analysis, we had to eliminate six questions because they contributed to more than one dimension of social media U&G. We identified seven main uses of social media from the remaining 35 items, and these were consistent with U&G of social media found in earlier studies (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Whiting & Williams, 2013). To enhance comparability, we adjusted the U&G dimensions to equivalent scales (so that the potential score on each dimension could range between 1 and 20). We then used the U&G in one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to explore how each of the U&Gs differed by race (Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic/Latinx, and Asian) and gender (females vs. males). ANOVA allows us to compare, on average, whether differences exist between groups of individuals.

Differences in the Uses and Gratifications of Social Media

We categorized the seven U&Gs of social media as belonging to either capital-enhancing or recreational uses, based on previous work about general internet use (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008). The capital-enhancing group includes uses for communication (e.g,. keeping in touch with distanced others or providing care or encouragement to them), general information gathering (e.g., using social media to keep up with information of the day and to find specific information), social information seeking (e.g., finding out what people are like by browsing their profile), information sharing (e.g., sharing information that is of interest to others or providing information about oneself), and professional networking (e.g., using social media to post my work online or to professionally network). The recreational group of uses include entertainment (e.g. using social media because it is enjoyable or because it passes time) and companionship (e.g. to feel less lonely or when there is no one else to talk).

The first two columns in Table 1 summarize descriptive information about the seven U&G of social media. By looking at the mean scores (column 1), we can see that the most prevalent use of participant's most-frequently used social medium is communication. This is followed closely by use for entertainment, general information gathering, information sharing, and social information seeking. social media are used less frequently for companionship and professional networking.

Table 1 - Uses of Social Media

Social Media Use	***Mean***	***SD***	***By Race***	***By Gender***
Communication	14.03	3.81	X^2_3=4.69, p= .20	z_U=2.68, p=.007
Entertainment	13.32	4.02	X^2_3=11.96, p=<.008	z_U=4.46, p<.001
Information Gathering	13.16	4.20	X^2_3=21.32, p<.001	z_U=2.01, p=.04
Information Sharing	12.55	4.21	X^2_3=17.30, p =.001	z_U=.41, p=.69
Social Information Seeking	12.08	4.65	X^2_3=13.72, p =.003	z_U=.47, p=.64
Companionship	10.36	4.76	X^2_3=12.87, p <.005	z_U=2.06, p=.04
Professional Networking	9.07	5.03	X^2_3=46.52, p <.001	z_U=1.47, p=.14

To understand differences in social media use among racial groups, we conducted a Kruskal-Wallis one-way ANOVA (see column 4 in Table 1). This test examines the distribution of scores for each use of social media, to tell us whether they statistically significantly differ along the lines of race and gender. It is an omnibus test; that is, it does not tell us what the differences are, but indicates whether additional analyses are needed. We determined that there were statistically significant differences between the various racial groups in most uses of social media. Although there were no differences between the groups in using social media for communication, all of the other uses displayed significant differences.

To explore between which groups these differences occurred, we conducted follow-up analyses. We were surprised to see that differences did not reflect historical patterns of first- and second-level digital divides. First, we found that whites use social media significantly less than African-Americans did for entertainment ($p=.03$, $r=.12$), general information gathering ($p<.001$, $r=.18$), information sharing ($p=.02$, $r=.13$), and social information seeking ($p=.02$, $r=.13$). Yet, comparisons between these two groups and Hispanic/Latinx and Asian participants showed no other differences. Second, Caucasians use social media for professional networking significantly less than African-Americans did ($p<.001$, $r=.19$), Hispanic/Latinx ($p<.001$, $r=.18$), and Asians ($p<.001$, $r=.19$). One other finding was that companionship, which initially showed statistical significance, did not show differences between the groups once the results were adjusted for the multiple comparisons.

To compare how uses of social media differ between males and females we used the Mann-Whitney test. This test, reported in the fifth column in Table 1, explores differences in mean rank order scores of the individual uses of social media between the two gender groups. Again, the use of social media did not follow traditionally-understood patterns of internet use. There were no statistically significant differences between females and males in the use of social media for information sharing, social information seeking, or professional networking. at the same time, females used social media significantly more than males did for communication, entertainment, general information gathering, and companionship.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Based on prior research, we had expected that capital-enhancing and recreational uses of social media would fall along the lines of race and gender in a way that reifies existing inequalities. We expected to see racial minority participants engage in fewer capital-enhancing

uses of social media, compared to whites. We also expected to see women engage in more recreational uses of social media, compared to males. Our results surprised us. Although some results confirm previous findings about the third-level digital divide, others suggest that some of the historical differences may be disappearing, or importantly that women and minorities use social media in capital-enhancing ways.

One interpretation of these results is that society has begun to arrive at a critical mass in skills and access to the online environment. In other words having basic internet skills and access to the internet are more universal, and this has blurred differences between groups. Alternatively, because our sample sought to explore these ideas with those who already use social media, we may have tapped into a more elite user group within minority populations.

Aligning with existing literature, we observed more nuanced relationships between race and gender than a simple dichotomy between Caucasians and minority groups or males and females. When compared to Caucasians, African-Americans used social media more for entertainment and companionship purposes. We also observed more recreational use of social media (entertainment and companionship) by females than males. These observations are consistent with research on the third-level digital divide, demonstrating that women and minorities engage with more recreational activities online, and suggest that some aspects of historical digital divides persist.

We also observe that some historical inequalities appear to not exist for some minority groups at all. We saw no statistically significant differences among Caucasians and Hispanic/Latinx and Asian groups for most capital-enhancing social media uses, nor for recreational uses. Further, we found no statistically significant differences between males and

females in the capital-enhancing uses of information sharing, social information seeking, and professional networking.

Most surprisingly, the use of social media for professional networking defies traditional understandings of the third-level digital divide. It was the single use on which Caucasians and racial minorities differed -- but in a direction indicating lower use of social media for this capital-enhancing purpose by Caucasians. We see two possible explanations for this. First, social media may provide new mechanisms to access professional resources for those in minority groups. Such access has been historically more limited for minorities, and social media may be lowering the barrier to entry to professional networking for individuals in these groups. An alternative explanation may be that whites may already have sufficient access to these types of resources in traditional offline venues, so they may not need to rely on social media for professional networking purposes.

In summary, it appears that people in traditionally less-advantaged social positions use social media in more capital-enhancing ways than other media forms. We note that prior observations about racial and gender differences related to capital-enhancing and recreational uses of the internet were made a while ago, and focused on general internet (not social media) use. Perhaps the levels and nature of internet adoption have changed since then, with many online activities becoming ubiquitous and transparent, and that female and minority users are becoming more adept at using all aspects of the internet for personal gain. Alternatively, people's use of the internet more generally (e.g. search, accessing static pages) may differ from their use of social media – meaning the differences we observed may be related to the medium itself. In other words, the third-level digital divide may manifest differently in social media than in general or historical internet uses.

Our observations, although not necessarily contradicting prior research, indicate the importance of understanding distinctions in how and why people use media. They suggest that not all social media uses are equal, and emphasize the importance of studying the dynamic nature of the media landscape.

It's Your Turn: What Do You Think? What Will You Find?

1. Keep a log of your social media activity for a day. Note the ways in which you engage with the various accounts that you have. How many ways do you use your social media accounts? To send a message to a friend? When you are waiting for a ride? Compare your uses with those that we found in our study. How many are capital enhancing? How many are recreational? Can you identify other uses that should be considered?
2. Search and view television commercials for social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. What kinds of uses are being promoted by the platform sponsors? How do these align with uses that have been identified by researchers? Why do you think the platform sponsors focus on those specific uses?

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