

Being Immersed in Social Networking Environment: Facebook Groups, Uses and Gratifications, and Social Outcomes

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Abstract

A Web survey of 1,715 college students was conducted to examine Facebook Groups users' gratifications and the relationship between users' gratifications and their political and civic participation offline. A factor analysis revealed four primary needs for participating in groups within Facebook: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information. These gratifications vary depending on user demographics such as gender, hometown, and year in school. The analysis of the relationship between users' needs and civic and political participation indicated that, as predicted, informational uses were more correlated to civic and political action than to recreational uses.

Introduction

IN 2008, FACEBOOK reported having 67 million active users (those who returned to the site within the last 30 days), with more than half of them returning daily and spending an average of 20 minutes per day on the site.¹ Since Facebook has allowed college student populations to form "friends" on the site, it has been successful in providing them a pathway to bridge their online and offline contacts.² In addition, many studies^{3,4} have been conducted to figure out the link between Facebook use and civic and political involvement based on social capital theory. However, it is not clear what specific features of Facebook produce those effects. Among the diverse applications of Facebook, Facebook Groups is a particularly popular and useful module that allows discussion forums and threads based on common interests and activities.⁵ Because of this application's ability to recruit members and spread messages easily through social networking, diverse political, social, and other special-interest (e.g., global issues, health concerns) organizations are creating online groups and utilizing the useful and fun enhancements of Facebook Groups.² Once they belong to a political or civic group on Facebook, individuals can receive mobilizing information that may not be available elsewhere. These individuals may also encounter more opportunities to engage in political activities.³

Therefore, this research examines the link of Facebook Groups use with political and civic engagement. Prior

studies^{6,7} have argued that specific gratifications and uses of social network sites (SNSs) may mediate different social outcomes, such as civic and political involvement. One study⁶ suggests that increasing SNS use stemming from information motivations is more related to higher levels of social involvement than to entertainment purposes. In addition, the social needs of these online groups strengthen social contacts, community engagement, and attachment by connecting the whole community through networks.⁸ However, previous studies do not focus on different types of Facebook applications that function uniquely to satisfy different needs. For example, while users leave short messages for friends, these messages are likely to involve interpersonal communication. Groups are created to organize meetings or events and share or discuss common issues about campus, community, politics, or casual issues.

Thus, this study refines existing research by identifying the needs that drive Facebook Groups use associated with real-world social activities. One study⁷ indicates the necessity to explore the personal and social needs that individuals fulfill by using Facebook and MySpace. The two-way nature of online technologies such as e-mail, bulletin boards, and chat rooms requires audience members to be active users.⁹ In spite of the significance of users' active participation in Facebook and MySpace, little research focuses on this area. One way to explore the needs individuals are meeting by using SNSs is to apply uses and gratifications theory.⁷ Although a weakness of the uses and gratifications approach has been reconfirmed

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in many Internet-related studies,¹⁰ this approach is still a useful framework to understand Internet usage and users' needs. Therefore, to understand individuals' Facebook Groups uses and gratifications and political and civic involvement, this study examines the needs of college students, who are the most prevalent visitors of Facebook.³

RQ1: What are college students' needs for participating in Facebook Groups?

Individuals join online groups on the basis of similar interests, but each motivation or gratification could vary depending on their demographic characteristics.⁹ Therefore, the current study examines how college students' gratifications of Facebook Groups use are correlated with their demographic variables.

RQ2: How are college students' demographics related to the gratifications of Facebook Groups use?

In order to examine the relationship between users' different needs and civic and political involvement, this study controls users' demographics and their level of life satisfaction and social trust. Previous studies^{3,4} have demonstrated that life satisfaction and social trust are significant factors that influence the relationship between individuals' SNS use and political and civic involvement.

RQ3: How are college students' needs for Facebook Groups use related to their political and civic involvement offline after controlling for demographics, life satisfaction, and social trust?

Methodology

In this research project, data from 1,715 participants (ages 18–29) who have joined or used Facebook Groups are presented. An e-mail invitation to participate in an online survey

was sent to randomly selected students who had agreed to list their e-mail addresses publicly at two universities in Texas. The e-mail contained a link to an online survey hosted by Survey Monkey. Respondents were surveyed between November 9, 2007, and December 9, 2007, and they were given the opportunity to participate in a random draw of four \$25 gift cards from Amazon.com as an incentive.

To assess Facebook Groups uses and gratifications, respondents were given a list of 16 statements regarding Facebook Groups use. They were asked to rate their level of agreement with specific reasons for using Facebook Groups, including information acquisition about campus/community, entertainment/recreation, social interaction with friends and family, and peer pressure/self-satisfaction (1, *strongly agree*; 6, *strong disagree*) (Table 1). These statements were adapted from the cluster of the categorized dimensions describing online groups participation.^{11,12}

Life satisfaction was assessed by asking the level of agreement (1, *strongly disagree*; 6, *strongly agree*) with the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale, which is among the most widely used measures in psychology to measure global life satisfaction, showing high levels of internal consistency and temporal reliability.¹³ In addition, social trust was measured by asking items adapted from a popular measure of social trust structured by Rosenberg's Faith in People scale.¹⁴ This standard of measurement followed one study¹⁵ that broke down the original Rosenberg scale into single items and expanded response choice by using a 5-point scale (1, *never*; 5, *all of the time*).

In order to assess political and civic engagement, respondents were asked about their experiences in 9 items regarding volunteering for charity, environmental, and political groups and participating in election (1, *yes, within the last 12 months*; 0.5, *yes, but not within the last 12 months*; 0, *no, never*). The scale was developed by CIRCLE,¹⁶ an organization that has conducted several national surveys related to youth engagement.

TABLE 1. FACTOR ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK GROUP USES AND GRATIFICATIONS

Reasons for participating in Facebook Groups	Factors			
	1	2	3	4
<i>Factor 1: Socializing</i>				
To get peer support from others	0.81	0.15	0.24	0.23
To meet interesting people	0.79	0.11	0.19	0.15
To feel like I belong to a community	0.70	0.21	0.32	0.19
To talk about something with others	0.70	0.26	-0.00	0.33
To stay in touch with people I know	0.60	0.23	-0.08	0.32
<i>Factor 2: Entertainment</i>				
Because it is entertaining	0.19	0.86	0.04	0.19
Because it is funny	0.14	0.84	0.08	0.20
Because it is exciting	0.49	0.61	0.32	0.11
<i>Factor 3: Self-status seeking</i>				
Because I feel peer pressure to participate	0.02	0.04	0.81	0.06
Because it makes myself look cool	0.14	0.33	0.73	0.07
To develop my career through group participation	0.24	-0.02	0.73	0.12
<i>Factor 4: Information seeking</i>				
To get information about off-campus events	0.23	0.19	0.09	0.86
To learn about on-campus events	0.21	0.19	0.10	0.86
To get useful information about product/services	0.42	0.09	0.21	0.63
Eigenvalue	7.04	1.68	1.34	1.05
Variance explained	30.91	10.21	8.40	11.53
Cronbach's α	0.87	0.81	0.81	0.83

The demographic variables included gender (1, female; 0, male), hometown (1, within Texas; 0, elsewhere), ethnicity (1, white; 0 = other), year in school (1, freshman; 2, sophomore; 3, junior; 4, senior; 5, masters; 6, doctoral), and highest level of education completed by parents or guardians (1, less than high school; 2, high school; 3, some college; 4, college; 5, graduate).

Results

Facebook Groups uses and gratifications

Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed the following four needs for using Facebook Groups: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information. Each factor had an eigenvalue of at least 1 (socializing, 7.04; entertainment, 1.68; self-status seeking, 1.34; information, 1.05), accounting for 69.5% of the variance. Two of 16 motivational statements had factor loading of less than 0.60 and thus were not included in any of the factors (Table 1).

Individuals who participate in Facebook Groups to satisfy socializing needs are generally interested in meeting and talking with others as well as getting peer support and a sense of community. Entertainment gratification refers to engagement in Facebook Groups for leisure and amusement needs. As for information needs, Facebook Groups users intend to learn about on- and off-campus events and details regarding specific products and services. Finally, survey respondents are likely to participate in Facebook Groups for several reasons related to seeking and maintaining their personal status through online group participation. The respondents answered that they joined groups because they felt peer pressure, wanted to make themselves look cool, and to develop their career.

Correlation between users' demographics and gratifications

A correlation analysis was conducted to determine users' varying gratifications depending on demographics (Table 2). Facebook Groups users' gender and hometown are significantly, though very weakly, related to information seeking ($r = 0.15, p < 0.05$; $r = -0.17, p < 0.01$ respectively). Female students and college students whose hometowns are outside of Texas are more likely to use the Facebook Groups for obtaining information. The respondents' year in school is weakly associated with all of the motivations for Group use: socializing ($r = -0.21, p < 0.01$), entertainment ($r = -0.17,$

$p < 0.01$), self-status seeking ($r = -0.16, p < 0.01$), and information ($r = -0.23, p < 0.01$). The fewer years in school the students are, the more eager they are to look for information concerning on- and off-campus events and socialize with others through Facebook Groups. In addition, the underclassmen are likely to engage in online groups for needs relating to entertainment, peer pressure, or making themselves look cool to their friends on Facebook.

Facebook Groups gratifications and civic and political involvement

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine gratifications to predict civic and political involvement. Information needs positively and significantly predict Facebook Groups users' civic participation after controlling for demographics, life satisfaction, and social trust ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.001$). Respondents who use Facebook Groups to learn about on- and off-campus events are likely to actively engage in civic actions taking place around them (Table 3). Life satisfaction and social trust significantly predict civic engagement among Facebook Group users ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.23, p < 0.001$ respectively). Even after controlling for demographics, the level of life satisfaction and social trust determines whether Groups users engage in civic events in their local communities. Respondents with greater life satisfaction and social trust more actively participate in civic activities than do those with lower life satisfaction and social trust.

Facebook Groups users' political engagement is positively and significantly predicted by Facebook Groups use for gathering information about events ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.001$), socializing ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$), and self-status seeking ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$). When the four categories of gratifications are added to the model, the R-square change is 6% after controlling for demographics, life satisfaction, and social trust. While entertainment-purposed Groups users do not contribute to users' participation in political actions, information-purposed users are likely to be involved in political events through friend networking. In addition, they feel peer pressure to join and participate in Facebook Groups, which in turn makes Groups members engage in political actions (Table 4).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore college students' Facebook Groups uses and gratifications and civic

TABLE 2. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FACEBOOK GROUP GRATIFICATIONS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Correlate (r)	Facebook Groups uses and gratifications			
	Socializing	Entertainment	Self-status seeking	Information
Gender (1, female; 0, male)	0.03	0.04	-0.04	0.15*
Hometown (1, Texas; 0, elsewhere)	-0.03	-0.04	0.04	-0.17**
Ethnicity				
Black (1, yes; 0, no)	0.03	0.04	-0.00	0.04
Latino (1, yes; 0, no)	0.02	0.03	-0.01	0.02
White (1, yes; 0, no)	0.03	-0.03	-0.05*	-0.04
Year in school (1, freshman; 6, doctoral)	-0.21**	-0.17**	-0.16**	-0.23**
Parents' education (1, less than high school; 5, graduate)	-0.03	-0.04	0.01	-0.01

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 3. HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF PREDICTORS OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Predictor variables	Regression 1	Regression 2	Regression 3
Gender (1, female; 0, male)	0.06***	0.05***	0.05***
Hometown (1, Texas; 0, elsewhere)	-0.04**	-0.03*	-0.03*
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
Black (1, yes; 0, no)	-0.04	-0.04	-0.05
Latino (1, yes; 0, no)	0.02	0.02	0.01
White (1, yes; 0, no)	0.01	-0.00	0.00
Year in school (1, freshman; 6, doctoral)	-0.21**	-0.21***	-0.21*
Parents' education (1, less than high school; 5, graduate)	0.02***	0.02***	0.02**
Life satisfaction		0.27***	0.25***
Social trust		0.23***	0.20***
<i>Needs for using Groups</i>			
Socializing			-0.01
Entertainment			-0.10
Self-status seeking			0.01
Information			0.14***
R ²	0.04	0.08	0.16
R ² change	0.04	0.05	0.08

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

and political engagement. The data shows that students join Facebook Groups because of the need to obtain information about on- and off-campus activities, to socialize with friends, to seek self-status, and to find entertainment. The activities on Facebook Groups provide channels that college students deem enjoyable when having concerns and participating in social events and politics. These findings develop the existing line of literature regarding SNSs by elaborating the impact of general Facebook use into "Group" activities among different applications on Facebook. Since participation of social activities on Facebook is mostly carried out through the Groups application,³ it may be appropriate to highlight Groups when exploring the impacts of Facebook use in promoting individuals' civic and political involvement.

A major contribution of this study lies in understanding the relationship between uses and gratifications of Facebook Groups and civic and political engagement offline. The findings show that users who seek information are more likely to participate in civic activities. In an open-ended question that was part of the survey, in fact, a number of students stated that they have frequently used Facebook Groups to organize and support meetings or parties on campus. On the other hand, the entertainment need is not a significant factor to explain the extent of political participation. Students who mainly use Facebook Groups for recreational reasons tend to mostly be involved in the more familiar and comfortable types of activities or associations, such as hobby clubs or environmental groups. However, they may not have as strong an emotional attachment to political causes as

TABLE 4. HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF PREDICTORS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Predictor variables	Regression 1	Regression 2	Regression 3
Gender (1, female; 0, male)	-0.03*	-0.04*	-0.04
Hometown (1, Texas; 0, elsewhere)	-0.05***	-0.05***	-0.05***
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
Black (1, yes; 0, no)	-0.03	-0.02	-0.03
Latino (1, yes; 0, no)	0.03	0.03	0.03
White (1, yes; 0, no)	0.04	0.04	0.04
Year in school (1, freshman; 6, doctoral)	0.21***	0.23***	0.23***
Parents' education (1, less than high school; 5, graduate)	0.01*	0.01*	0.02*
Life satisfaction		0.01	-0.02
Social trust		0.10	0.07
<i>Needs for using Groups</i>			
Socializing			0.12**
Entertainment			0.01
Self-status seeking			0.12**
Information			0.13***
R ²	0.04	0.06	0.12
R ² change	0.04	0.02	0.06

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

to civic activities. Thus, Facebook Groups use, which is mainly for entertainment needs, might not encourage users' participation in political events. These findings imply that students who use Facebook Groups more actively and purposively are inclined to engage in civic and political activities offline.

Another contribution of this study is related to the relationship between college students' year in school and their Facebook Groups use. The results suggest that underclassmen are motivated to use Facebook Groups with varied purposes and to participate in civic and political activities more frequently and actively than are upperclassmen, who often have little spare time and experience high stress levels because of the urgency and pace of their studies. This result reflects a tension between academic pursuits and social activities in college life.

Given the cross-sectional nature of this study conducted in two Texas universities, we cannot generalize the findings to the U.S. college student population. However, our findings do suggest that Facebook Groups use integrated into Texas regional communities can help students engage in civic and political involvement. This research could provide a case study to provide understanding of the nature of the trend regarding Facebook Groups uses and gratifications and their social outcomes. Future research can explore Facebook Groups use in other contexts and diverse communities.

An additional limitation of this study was derived from the low R-square value. The low R-square value indicates that other variables may be involved in predicting political and civic engagement. This limitation could be improved by including multiple indicators and employing a different statistical analysis. Therefore, further research is needed to identify subtle relationships among the variables. Rather than examining total effects by regression analysis, future study can explain whether relationships between two variables are direct or indirect and which variable mediates these relationships.

Overall, this study is valuable in that it sketches the uses and gratifications and social outcomes of a particular Facebook application, Groups. The survey analysis of Facebook Groups use suggests that Facebook as an online tool plays a significant role in facilitating youth engagement in civic and political activities. Rather than driving people who are already highly motivated to engage in social issues, diverse Facebook Groups could provide platforms through which young adults who are not interested in social or community services and politics in general can socialize with others on the basis of social issues and common interests. It shows the potential of SNSs as an emerging yet powerful tool for drawing young adults' attention to societal concerns and uniting the young generation as active participants in society.

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