Why People Use Social Networking Sites

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Abstract. One of the recent popular social media platforms is the social networking site (SNS). Thus far, few previous studies have empirically investigated people's motivations for SNS usage, especially not outside the U.S. This study combines a large-scale quantitative and qualitative research design, by asking 1,200 SNS users an open question regarding their reasons for using SNSs. An important conclusion drawn from a preliminary content analysis is that people often report *many motivational reasons for using SNSs*. The most important reason is to get in contact with new people (31%). The second most valued was to keep in touch with their friends (21%), whereas the third was general socializing (14%). A total of 11 different reasons and several sub-reasons were identified; that all give insight into the personal incentives that drive people to use SNSs and thus contribute to our understanding of how to develop successful social networking online.

Keywords: Social networking sites, user participation, friends, user motivation.

1 Introduction

Every day, thousands of new accounts are created on social networking sites (SNSs), though many have a very short lifespan [1]. SNS are also one type of online community that relies on user contributions. This raises the question of how user motivation and participation can be inspired for continued use. What makes an SNS successful in terms of both end-user loyalty and highly motivated users is still unknown [2]; yet, this is critical knowledge for designers and human factor engineers who build SNSs. Therefore, on a general level, it is necessary to understand the people who will use the service, as well as the goals and personal incentives they have for doing so. Similarly, Preece [3] points out that the developing online communities require a deep understanding of social interaction and the mediating affects of technology.

Some few attempts have been made to understand why people participate [4] or do not participate in SNSs or online communities [2, 5]. These attempts have mainly developed theoretical frameworks or featured an empirical focus towards a certain type of user (e.g., lurkers). Results from other studies on similar social media platforms such as blogs show that bloggers ranked pouring out feelings and connecting with people as the two most valued rewards for blogging [6]. Research done in previous online communities has stressed the following motivational factors: 1) people with shared interests, 2) experiences and needs, 3) supportive and sociable relationships, 4) strong social feelings of belonging, and 5) a sense of shared identity [7] [8] [9]. Other

suggestions include 1) user visibility, 2) feedback channels, 3) a large user population, 4) low barriers for entering the community, and 5) accessibility and usability for end-products [10] [11].

New forms of online communities, understood in this paper as SNSs, that target the majority of the user population (e.g., Facebook and MySpace) provoke a revision of understanding the social interaction and the kinds of activities people want to engage in on such sites [2]. SNSs is defined according to Boyd and Ellison as a "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" [12]. A recent special issue section of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* [12], collected studies of a variety of topics ranging from the history to the development of SNSs. However, none of the studies explained user motivations in social networking or how users themselves determine their motivations. Thus, in a section discussing future research, the editors, Boyd and Ellison, pinpointed the limited understanding of who uses SNSs and their purposes for doing so, especially outside the U.S.

With this in mind, we investigated people's subjective motivational reasons for using SNSs by performing a quantitative content analysis of 1,200 qualitative responses from social networking site users. The location of this study, Norway, is particularly interesting for an investigation of these issues from a European point of view. In addition, it is interesting an interesting context investigating SNS usage because Norway is characterized with high use of information and communication technologies in general and SNS services in particular [13].

1.1   Theory

Several attempts have been made to understand the choice, use, diffusion, adoption, and acceptance of media technology in the user population. Among the most central of these attempts are the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) [14], the Unified Theory of Use and Acceptance of Technology (UTAUT) [15] and the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory. When it comes to user motivations, the U&G theory has been the most common approach, explaining "why" certain media behaviour occurs. Users are seen as goal-oriented, with rationales for their use (and non-use) of various media. According to McQuail [16], there are four main motivational needs: 1) information, 2) entertainment, 3) social interaction, and 4) personal identity. How and in what way these motivational needs also can explain SNS behaviour as well is not for certain. One reason might be that previous studies of online communities have tended to describe the workings of the community for an external audience without addressing the needs of the communities or their participants themselves [17].

1.2   Objective and Research Question

The objective of this study is to investigate end-user motivations to SNSs, in regard to why people use online SNSs, analysing how users themselves determine their motivations for using an SNS. This knowledge will help us identify the personal incentives behind the usage of SNS. We will further discuss if these are consistent with the four motivational needs proposed by McQuail [16]. Our research question (RQ) is the following: *What motivates people to use online SNSs?*

2 Method

An online questionnaire study took place over a three-week period in March 2007 among the users of four different SNSs in Norway. A total of 5,233 people responded to the questionnaire, and the mean ages for the respondents in the four different SNSs 1) Underskog.no (mean age, 29 years), 2) Nettby.no (mean age, 22 years), 3) HamarUngdom.no (mean age, 17 years), and 4) Biip.no (mean age, 16 years).

The above SNSs were chosen because, at the time of the investigation, they were the most popular SNSs in Norway; consequently, they should provide a good picture of what typical SNS members sought regarding their user motivation in popular sites. The frequent usage and popularity of these sites are documented in a recent report for The Ministry of Government Administration and Reform in Norway [13] which provides a detailed overview of the most popular SNSs in Norway. Nettby.no is the biggest SNS service in Norway with 800,000 users, and Biip.no is the most popular among teenagers (350,000 users). HamarUngdom.no was one of the five leading SNSs in Norway until 2007 (when we did this study), but has since been discontinued. Underskog.no is the most popular SNS for users older than 25 years. The four SNSs chosen represent typical SNSs similar to better-known services such as MySpace and Facebook and fit well into the definition of SNSs provided by Boyd and Ellison, as described in the introduction [12]. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. MySpace and Facebook were not included in this study because they were in little use among Norwegians at the time of the investigation when the market was still dominated by national or more locally bounded SNSs.

To collect user data, we used online user surveys distributed by banner ads on all four SNS portals. This afforded the opportunity to access a large number of users while they were actually using the sites. In order to motivate as many users as possible to take part in the survey, participants were entered in a raffle with the possibility of winning a travel gift coupon worth US$1,750.

2.1 Content Analysis

The SNS users were requested to respond to the open-ended question, "What is your most important reason for using social networking sites?" This question was designed to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the subject's own personal descriptions of why they participate in an SNS. The main goal was to reveal the motivations and meanings of social relations and practices in a diverse SNS population.

We decided to approach the data using content analysis to be able to identify the reasons people use such sites, using the same approach documented in another study by Brandtzæg and Heim [2]. Content analysis is proven to be useful in describing and making inferences about the characteristics of communications and patterns of usage, as well as making inferences about the consequences of communications [18].

With more than 4,700 responses, it was necessary to reduce the comprehensive content of qualitative information into a manageable portion of user statements. To avoid user statements that lacked meaning or had low information value, we decided to select the 1,200 longest user statements in terms of number of characters. This was based on the assumption that longer statements were given by users who had taken

time to reflect on the questions. The qualitative material (N 1200) was manually coded and quantified by one researcher using an Excel sheet. The coding categories was based on an in-depth analyze of the 150 first user statements, which ended up with all the 12 categories reflected different reasons (see results). Some users reported more than one reason; we counted only the two first reported reasons for each user. Thus reported reasons are therefore more than the number for respondents. To ensure reliability of this analysis, another researcher repeated analysis of a sub-sample of 100 randomized user statements. To test the inter-rater reliability between the two analysts, the differences and similarities in their ratings and interpretations of the different content categories in the quantitative content analysis were measured and compared to be an inter-rater reliability of 89%.

From the responses to the open-ended question, several typical statements related to user motivation were selected for a further in-depth qualitative analysis. This was done to assess the respondents' incentives for use, beyond analyzing the mere frequency of responses. Thus the quantitative information is not used fully and the analysis most therefore be regarded as preliminary.

3   Results

The following section gives a description of the different categories and some examples and quotations from the survey participants typical of the most important purposes they have for using SNSs, derived from the content analysis. These purposes are shown in ranked order, with the most frequent reasons listed first. As shown in Figure 1 below, a total of 12 categories were identified, reflecting the most important reasons for using an SNS. In total 1200 participants, reported 1518 reasons[1], indicating that several participants had more than one single reason. However, a notable finding is that people often have multiple reasons or personal incentives to use SNSs. Therefore, identifying a single reason as the most important gives the wrong picture;
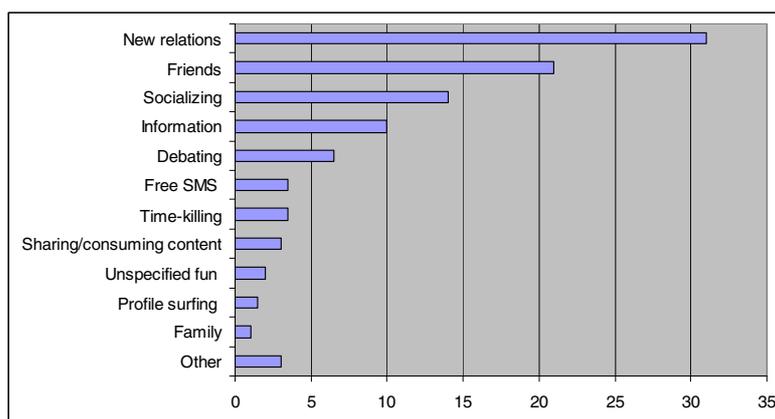
Fig. 1. Overview over the user motivations in SNSs in % , NC = 1518 (N 1200)

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[1] Number of reasons is from know referred to a number of counts (NC).

the different reasons should be seen in connection with each other. Thus, the most reported reasons provide a good picture of what the users find most attractive when using an SNS.

In the following, frequency is reported both in percentage and in number of counts (NC).

1. **New relations** (31%/NC = 668)**:** These users reporting the motivation of seeking new relations and the opportunity to meet new people. Easy and cheap opportunities for contact with new people are seen as the main incentive. Several of the users are aware of the danger of "risky contacts," but find it both more convenient and more exciting to meet new friends in an online situation like this than to be concerned about potential risk. Further, an SNS makes it possible to verify the person and his or her profile (e.g., interests, look, friends) and to see if he or she is interesting or "safe," as opposed to ordinary open chat rooms without any public profiles. In addition, through SNSs, people meet each other in ways that might be more truthful and open than offline meetings; in that sense, SNSs have the potential to facilitate communication between people who might be prejudiced against one another in the "real world." Further, these findings imply that several relationships that begin online migrate to other settings. According to one user, "It is easy to get in touch with new people, but also to limit or to cut off contact if the person is getting too eager or aggressive or because of other reasons. There is also other fun aspect with those sites, such as free SMS on www.biip.no". Subcategories include:

   a. People with new girlfriends or boyfriends;
   b. People who like the opportunity to make friends in new areas after moving to another town/city;
   c. People at school or university who have not dared to approach others in real life and find it easier to do online;
   d. People searching for new friends with common interests;
   e. People living in rural areas seeking new friendships with likeminded people: "I meet funnier people online than in my home district" ;
   f. People that are lonely and searching for new friendships online;
   g. People seeking new relations with users from a different cultural background;
   h. People tracing and getting in touch with people they have only "met out in the city."

2. **Friends** (21%/NC = 460)**:** Users reporting contact with both close friends and acquaintances. Often, people refer to their friends and classmates. They also often report that they are part of a community just because their friends are, too. Those who stress contact with friends describe the use of SNSs as an efficient tool to keep in contact with several friends at the same time. They also regard SNSs as a cheap and efficient way to keep in contact with friends and to follow what their friends are doing and who their friends are in contact with. This category might also comprise several subcategories, which help deepen our understanding of what the different users actually mean by "friends":

    a. Meet "old" friends: people they have not been in touch with for a while, often friends they had at school.
    b. Keep in touch with other students/friends around the world after moving away abroad to go to school or after graduating, or with other students they know who have chosen to study in a college or university in another part of the world.
    c. Easy way to have contact with friends when living in a rural area and to keep in touch with long-distance friends; "It is difficult to keep in touch when you live in a small rural area and are 'shielded from the world." (female 16, Nettby).
    d. Keep in touch with friends on a new level, e.g., by sharing stories, news, pictures, guest books, etc.
    e. Keep in touch with acquaintances or friends not seen very often.

3. **Socializing** (14%/NC = 298)**:** Users reporting the sharing of experiences in general, reporting activities such as making small-talk and commenting in each others' guest books, but also social support on different issues. A girl 14 years old from Biip is saying it like this: I have something to do in my spare time (…). I have contact with friends, write in friends'. guest books, comment on peoples' pictures, send SMS, and submit pictures of myself and things." While a social activity, the prime motivation here is the social aspect in itself, not necessarily the making of new contacts. In terms of social support, one participant mentions the SNS was a place to get a kind of support when she is depressed and wants to commit suicide. Others pinpoint a kind of verbal ping-pong, which they find interesting. Others mention self-confirmation as a reason for chit-chat, which also gives them a feeling of being a part of something, of a community. People also mention humor and the opportunity to be unserious as reasons to participate.

4. **Information** (10%/NC = 220)**:** Users reporting access to information, including about fashion, music, literature, cultural events, current happenings in their neighborhood and access to new and shared knowledge regarding people's opinions related to everything from politics and to more tedious matters. Information updates are related to: a) Friends; b)Neighborhood; c) City events; d) Fashion; e) Music; f) Happenings; g) Help with homework at school f) interests/hobbies; g) Other and more customized forms of information than on TV and radio. A typical user statement that highlights both this and the debating motivations is: "I get informed about events, publications, and net experiences; at the same time I am making bonds and having discussions with other people. (Male 42 years, Underskog).

5. **Debating** (6.5%/N = 143)**:** Users highlighting debate and discussions inside the SNS. This category might be difficult to separate from "information" (see table 1) because debating often takes place in order to gain access to new information through a collaborative discussion process. The ability to discuss different things with people that you do not know or do not discuss things with regularly was also stressed, as a means of making the discussion more open and thus more interesting, as identified by the participants. Others point out the opportunity to discuss with people their contradictory viewpoints on matters, as described in the following quote: "It's the differences between the people that make the discussions, and that's what I like" (Male, 23, Underskog).

6. **Free SMS** (3.5%/NC 78)**:** Users reporting access to free SMS (short messaging service) while a member of the SNS.
7. **Time-killing** (3.5%/NC = 78)**:** Users reporting passing time as a main reason.
8. **Sharing/consuming content** (3%/N = 66)**:** Users reporting the sharing and viewing pictures and videos as an incentive. They report in particular the excitement of checking their profile to see if anyone has commented on their posted content.
9. **Unspecified fun** (2%/NC = 43)**:** Users reporting fun, without describing any particular reason. Includes only those reporting SNS usage "for fun."
10. **Profile surfing** (1.5%/NC = 34)**:** Users reporting the opportunity to surf other users' profiles as a main reason. This reason is related to the information category, as people often search other profiles for information updates related to different people. Several people who do this are motivated by pure curiosity.
11. **Family** (1%/NC = 26)**:** Users reporting family contacts is almost absent as an important reason for visiting an SNS. Only a limited number of respondents, mostly girls reported this as an important reason. As the following quotation show, the few respondents who actually mention contact with family members all bring up "contact with friends" as their most important reason for visiting the SNS. A young female typically mentions friends first, followed by family. "I keep in touch with friends and family. I think it is fun to participate in discussions (…). Beyond that, it is maybe to find some people that I have met once in order to know them better." (Female 16, Nettby.no)
12. **Other** (3%/NC = 72)**:** Related to other motivations users reported for using an SNS. Includes everything from using SNSs because they are curious about other cultures and users to more goal-oriented activities such as promoting their own work. For example, musicians, artists, and photographers are able to show and promote their work.

4 Discussion

One of the main challenges for user research in this domain is the rapid change that is taking place in both technological developments and user preferences. Thus, some of the major motivations or preferences may be stable over time because they connect to some basic needs among people, for instance, the need for social interaction. Nonetheless, how these "stable" needs are satisfied, and through what types of channels or communication modus, may change over time and between generations. In this study, meeting new people was found to be the most important reason for using SNSs, whereas maintaining contact with friends was the second most important reason. The results presented herein is surprisingly in accordance with research on older virtual communities; suggesting a promiscuity in "friending' behavior online. Typically we should expect that people use networking sites to connect to others with whom they share an off line connections, but our finding does not agree with the notion that online social networks principally are coupled with geographically bounded relations such as family, friends or students. However, the excitement of meeting new people and making new friends is still a key incentive in the use of modern SNSs. Therefore, SNSs seem to be an environment where the users easily foster the formation of weak ties because of the availability of cheap and easy many-to-many communication [19]. It is no wonder that it is younger people in particular who use SNSs to become

acquainted with new people and to maintain relationships with their peers, despite an awareness of the possibilities for unwanted contact with "risky" strangers. A study on Facebook also found that usage of this SNS supported both bridging and bonding social capital among students [20]. This indicates that SNSs are complex systems that facilitate numerous forms of motivations related to different forms of social interactions, which our study also suggests. Several of the users statements describe the difficulties separating different motivations from each other, and many users also document several different purposes for their participation.

Thus, these motivational needs may be classified to a higher level of understanding in order to gain a better overview. As mentioned in the introduction, there are four main motivational needs, according to U&G theory: 1) information, 2) entertainment, 3) social interaction, and 4) personal identity. Our finding of why people get involved in SNS usage and how; fit this U&G framework quite well, as suggested by Table 1 below. Categories shown in parentheses are done because it is unclear how precisely the category fits to the U&G theory.

Table 1. U&G theory related to this study's results

U&G theory	Our findings
Information	Information, sharing and consuming content, debating
Entertainment	Unspecified fun, time-killing, (profile surfing)
Social interaction	Socializing, friends, family, New relations, free SMS
Personal identity	(profile surfing)

However, it is interesting to note that self-presentations or identity not are mentioned as a key personal driver for participating in SNSs, despite the fact that researchers name SNSs as a technology for personal branding and narcissism [21]. Thus, contact with friends may be linked to a strong social feeling of belonging and a sense of shared or social identity. Further, the interests of looking at other user profiles (profile surfing) and the sharing of pictures clearly indicate an interest in how other people choose to present themselves on these sites. Thus, personal self-representation might be too abstract a notion for most users, who might not be aware of its presence as a motivational incentive if not directly asked about its role. The method used in this study may therefore have its limitations in grasping the personal identity issues.

It should further be noted that this study only involves preliminary analysis of the data set presented. The researcher plans to expand the results of this study with additional analysis using statistical methods to identify how different motivational patterns are linked to age, gender, education, and different user types. To achieve a more holistic picture of user motivations, this study's analysis should be extended with analysis about other aspects related to motivations and end-user loyalty, such as why people decrease or stop their use of SNSs. Another limitation is that the SNS members that participated in this study were self-selected directly for the study and are therefore not representative. However, the strength of the present study is that the sample was large and included users from four different SNSs. A quantitative content

analysis does include a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data which contributes to the reliability of this study in terms of richer data. Thus, future studies should include a larger sample and cross-national samples of representative online users.

Despite several limitations, the present study documents to large degree users' motivations for frequenting SNSs. From these finding it is clear that there are many ways to improve SNS usage experiences by increasing the sociability. Better tools for supporting different levels of social interactions and different forms of information exchange and sharing is a key conclusion. Consequently, encouragements to support close social ties as well as weak ties and easy facilities for discussion and sharing of information opportunities will produce improvements and. As pin pointed by Preece, the people and the interaction among them is the pulse of any community [9].

5   Conclusions

The main motivation behind engaging in SNSs is to make, maintain and foster social relationships. The most important reason was to get in contact with new people (31%). The second most valued reason was to keep in touch with friends (21%), and the third was general socializing (14%). Thus, a key conclusion drawn from the analysis is that people often have multiple reasons for using SNSs. In total, 12 different reasons (defined as important purposes for using an SNS) were identified; however, several of these reasons contain important subcategories of motivations that give insight into the personal incentives that drive people to use SNSs and thus contribute to our understanding of how to develop successful SNSs.

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