

Integrating ritualized media use, accessibility theory and cultivation theory to predict a Facebook-driven worldview

Staci Morrison
Boston University
Communication Theory
Dr. Tsay

May 4, 2012

Introduction

In his book, *You Are Not a Gadget*, Lanier (2010) argues that digital technology over-reliance is stifling innovation and self-expression. Technology does not have the creativity of humans, yet as we grow more dependent upon technology, we conform to the technology instead of conforming it to us. As a seasoned software programmer and virtual reality expert, Lanier's technologic expertise explains how legacy technology that laid the foundations for much of today's popular digital media and personal gadgetry requires humans to adapt to its inflexible framework if we want to use it.

Agreed, today's reliance on digital technology for daily communication may be taking its toll on the communication patterns of the most avid technology users. In his opinion piece for *The New York Times*, professor of linguistic sat Columbia University, John McWhorter (2012) explains that the digital media, be it laptop or smartphone, are not degrading the value of the old-fashioned written word, rather, reinventing it. As rap democratized music, texting has made writing collaborative and conversational. Human adaptation and integration of uncreative computer-based mediators has lead to an evolution of everyday communicating (McWhorter, 2012).

If human communication is changing in such a way to capture attention from both technologic philosophers and academic linguists, is this a sign that we are in the midst of a communication reinvention? If social media is the common denominator of technology-mediated communication - the shandy ways of socializing available to all - is there a critical mass of adoption to affect sociological change? Growing use of social media through the internet and internet-enabled devices is changing how we communicate in offline situations, effectively creating a social media-driven worldview. This paper will address the influential role of social media on interpersonal communication. Starting with the argument that human interaction is shifting to address digital mediators (Lanier, 2010; McWhorter, 2012), this paper seeks to

validate the widespread usage of social media by focusing on Facebook, and observing the communication habits of its users. Applying ritualized media use, accessibility theory to Facebook will demonstrate that heavy users of the social media site cultivate attitudes that align their offline communication behaviors with their online, Facebook communication behaviors.

Background

Prevalence of Facebook

Facebook is one of hundreds of social networking sites (SNSs) that exist today, which promote and house a wide range of interests and activities (boyd & Ellison, 2007). SNSs have existed since 1997, attracting millions of users, many of whom have built SNS networking into their daily lives (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Yet Facebook currently ranks the most popular SNS with more than 901 million monthly active users worldwide and 526 million daily active users who made over 125 billion friend connections as of March 2012 (Facebook, 2012). Facebook has an established global presence and the data to show it has a solid, steadily growing base of active users (Facebook, 2012).

Reasons to explain the heavy and growing usage of Facebook have been researched around the world; many studies point to different reasons for different users, varying with ethnicity, extroversion or a desire to build social capital (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012).

Likewise, the theory of uses and gratifications has been applied to support the hypotheses that young adults often access Facebook to satisfy the need for instantaneous information about friends, events, and to stay socially connected (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). The young adult demographic also showed a preference for Facebook due to ease of use building upon their digital technology familiarity and the transparency of information on others, even those outside their network (Day, K., Dong, Q., Urista, M., 2009). The current research focuses not on the motivation behind the masses of Facebook users, but the reasons why, such a high

volume of users is accessing the site regularly. Building upon a proven frequency of use, this paper will examine any effects of cultivation regular Facebook use may have upon users, focusing on those effects which manifest in offline, interpersonal communication and behavior.

Previous Research

The current study will combine the framework of the three theories: ritualized media use, accessibility theory and cultivation theory. These theories will not be tested but integrated to predict and explain the findings of this paper.

Ritualized Media Use

The theory of ritualized media use states that media are not only consumed for entertainment or informational purposes, but are consumed as part of one's everyday routine. Media becomes a habitual part of the daily routine, as a diversion or pastime. Ritual media use is usually attached to a temporary structure such as a watching a television show at the same hour each Monday (Rubin, 1984).

Applied specifically to Facebook, studies have shown that users tend to check their account multiple times throughout the day, spending up to an hour daily on the website (Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn & Hughes, 2009). Also, undergraduate research participants indicate that Facebook has become an essential part of their daily student life (Debatin, et al, 2009). Data suggests that Facebook users are not only accessing, but engaging with the site frequently, in the first three months of 2012 alone, an average of 300 million photos were uploaded to the site per day (Facebook, 2012). User behavior on Facebook has become ritualized similar to the ritualization of active and social television watching. In one case, a student explained how each Monday and Tuesday are designated to viewing the uploaded photos taken by friends over the

weekend (Debatin, p. 96). Considering the volume of photos uploaded daily, this student may represent a larger trend of ritualized photo viewing.

Accessibility Theory

The premise of Facebook is online-based interaction. Though uploading and sharing photos is not a requirement to be a Facebook user (Facebook, 2012), much of the socializing online revolves around posted media such as photos (Debatin, 2009). Accessibility theory contends that concepts that readily avail themselves in memory due to frequent activation, or unique and vivid features, will have a dominant influence over judgement (Dobson & Zillman, 2000). In the Facebook platform, photos, videos or other graphic media often accompany text. This text-image combination has shown specific, notable effects on how people perceive issues portrayed in the media. Whether or not a Facebook user actively uploads photo, upon daily logging into the website, he is frequently exposing himself to the text-image combination. Added to multiple instances of logging in per day, such vivid, often personal, interactive online elements play an increasingly greater role in influencing user perception of the issues and activities viewed through these media. Accessibility theory will activate when users are faced with a decision regarding the issue to which they have been exposed on Facebook. The perceptions conveyed through the strong, text-image combinations will be the most accessible mental schema when users are faced with a decision to make. Thus, ritualized Facebook use ingrains users with a dominant schema of Facebook-driven outlook which will surface when users must decide between enacting a new behavior or defaulting to a known, Facebook one. The research shows that the more accessible attitudes will exert the greatest influence on the choice made (Dobson & Zillman, 2000).

This theory could apply to the social media communication trend voiced by Lanier (2010) and McWhorter (2012). Concision-based, improvised interpersonal

communication techniques such as “C U later” (McWhorter, 2012) are reinforced with each Facebook login. Taking into account the average of 3.2 billion likes and comments by Facebook users in just the first quarter of 2012 (Facebook, 2012), it is arguable that these unique “fingered speech” (McWhorter, 2012, para.10) expressions are being readily accessed as a default means for expression even after Facebook users have signed off the website.

Cultivation Theory

Contending that heavy viewing of television cultivates a common perspective among viewers, cultivation theory has a Facebook application as well. Statistics show Facebook to be a pervasive technology (Facebook, 2012; Debatin et al., 2009), a modern day form of culture sharing pertinent to the theory of cultivation (Gerbner, 1969). Additionally, the necessity of a Facebook-saturated environment is shown through above discussion of ritualized, daily use and the readily accessed themes of the site. Therefore, the more frequently a user accesses his or her Facebook account, the more likely he or she is to perceive the offline world as an extension of the online Facebook community (Gerbner, 1969). Standard rules and behaviors on Facebook, such as constantly being in touch with friends’ activity and providing access to personal information (Debatin et al., 2009) could be cultivated into the perception of general rules of behavior in the real world. Repetitive themes of personal information transparency and ease of social network building will come to define the worldview of heavy users. This may lead to larger changes in user perception, such as a comfort “friending” strangers who approach one’s network. Such possibilities reinforce concerns regarding user vulnerability due to sacrifice of privacy in the interest of social network building (Debatin, et al, 2009).

Mainstreaming

Another effect of cultivation is mainstreaming, or convergence of attitudes among media users. Heavy Facebook usage will tend to converge the outlooks of users through consistent exposure to the same website and interactions (Gerbner, 1969). Granted, all SNSs offer social interactions online; each SNS requires the creation of a personal profile, an ability to list connections to other users and a view connections of other SNS users (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Yet Facebook offers specific features to facilitate connection building, including the *wall*, *pokes*, *status* and *like*. Through these functions, arguably the most frequently used features on Facebook (Facebook, 2012), the entirety of Facebook's 900 million users are sharing a consistent interaction experience. The Internet spans geographic barriers and gaps, Facebook itself is available in more than 70 languages (Facebook, 2012), attracting people worldwide to a shared place to communicate. As such, Facebook becomes the common storyteller among all 900 million global users, a medium through which otherwise diverse groups regularly meet to exchange experiences, videos, photos, messages. There is little distinction between the Facebook sites across the world, giving users little choice as to how to express themselves, except through the universal blue and white minimalist interface with predetermined interaction functions such as *poke*, *like*, *comment*, *groups* and *tags*.

Such saturation of Facebook-mediated communication is predicted to affect user perceptions of social values and norms. A Facebook *poke* is nothing more than a short message of greeting to friends (Facebook, 2012) whereas Oxford Dictionary defines the traditional definition as, to "jab or prod (someone or something), especially with one's finger" (Oxford, n.d.). Relating again to McWhorter's (2012) observation of linguistic shortcuts, heavy Facebook use likewise is affecting users' perception of acceptable means of salutation. A "virtual cult of concision" (McWhorter, 2012, para. 9) derived from people valuing brevity and ease of typing over grammatical correctness is a trend of social media communicating, permeating Facebook as much as text messages. Acronyms of emotion such as "OMG," infiltrate daily speech, evinced by

a studies like Pew Internet & American Life Project (2008) which found that, “50% of teens say they sometimes use informal writing styles instead of proper capitalization and punctuation in their school assignments; 38% say they have used text shortcuts in school work such as “LOL” (which stands for “laugh out loud”); 25% have used emoticons (symbols like smiley faces :-)) in school work” (Arafeh, S., Lenhart, A., Macgill, A., Smith, A., 2008).

Computer-mediated communication effects also appear in studies on self-presentation and how people’s behavior is influenced by the presence of others, such as a friends within the social network. According to Schlenker and Wowra (2003), public communication creates changes in one’s private attitudes to “bring those attitudes in line with public pronouncements” (p. 873). In the context of Facebook, public pronouncements may be comments or status updates, any expression viewable by others within the network. Or, if a user’s profile is not private, the public may extend to greater networks and viewers not associated with Facebook. These attitude alterations in turn affect the behavior of the individual, for when particular audiences, such as one’s Facebook friends, become salient, even in a non-Facebook situation, the past behaviors associated with this audience also become salient. Combined with data demonstrating real life friendships drive online friendships (NM Incite, 2011), behaviors enacted to maintain particular self-presentations online can be carried over to offline interactions (Schlenker & Wowra, 2003).

Complementary Research

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

It is also worth noting that these online communication patterns may be the result of a conscious effort to align ones real life with a constructed online life. Facebook presents users the opportunity to easily create social connections, satisfying a need to belong to a group and the tools to create an idealized version of oneself (Nadkarni & Hoffman, 2011). Referring to

Merton's (1948) self-fulfilling prophecy, a person may embrace a false definition of him or herself created on Facebook, "evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true" (p.195). Conceivably, one's offline life may eventually mimic the Facebook, idealized life.

Identity and Behavioral Changes

Additionally, a user's perception of publicness is a possible contributing element to a shift in behavior between an online platform and in-person situation (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). Similar to the findings of Schlecker and Wowra (2003), Gonzales and Hancock (2008) found that the presence of an audience will incite self-presentation changes in a user. A perception of an audience is enough to elicit a change, as the imagined audience motivates a person to internalize traits he perceives the audience to expect of him, and act accordingly. The application of this study applies to Facebook in to support the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948), wherein a user will internalize the persona he expects his Facebook friends desire him to be. As people use the Internet more readily to transmit a personality, confess testimony or share romantic interests, users may experience subtle shifts in self-perceptions that will accrue over time, eventually influencing social interaction (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008) outside the realm of the Internet.

Hypotheses

Based upon previous research and the theories summarized above, the current research will seek to address the following hypotheses:

H1: *Regular Facebook users will incorporate online, Facebook communication patterns into offline interactions.*

H2: *Over time through cultivation, Facebook users will align their social norm schemas and interpersonal communication habits to the norms and habits of Facebook.*

The following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: *To what degree has Facebook interaction become part of a daily ritual?*

RQ2: *What are the observed similarities of interpersonal interactions between users who are both offline and online friends?*

RQ2a: *What are the observed differences in interpersonal interactions between Facebook users who are not friends on Facebook?*

RQ3: *How do Facebook users and non-Facebook users differ in their perception of socially appropriate communication trends?*

Method

An online survey would be distributed to at least 150 undergraduate students at a large university, with the incentive of extra credit for participation. The survey would cover social media usage habits, frequency volume and patterns. Specific Facebook usage would be included, but not unproportionally, to better derive a general trend of online communication patterns of students and avoid the effect of priming. The survey would ask participants to rate their social media involvement on a Likert scale, gauging volume of interaction, type of interaction, frequency of interaction and overall attitude toward computer-mediated forms of communication. Responses will be assessed and of the total participants, a sample of at least 12, half male and half female, will be selected for in-depth interviews, observation and feedback through focus groups. The 12 participants will be selected according to their surveys: one third of the participants from each level of social media involvement: heavy, light, nonuser. Users will be individually interviewed by researchers on the topic of Facebook usage and personal

involvement, including questions of habitual or ritualized use and parallels between online and in-person friendships.

Participants will also be asked to participate in a focus group discussing the latest trends among their social circle and perceptions of effective and appropriate communication techniques in general. Focus groups members will vary, an ideal situation would group participants who are friends on Facebook with one or two other participants who are not friends on Facebook. If this is possible, researchers will observe interaction discrepancies between online and offline presentations during the focus group. Otherwise, participants will be grouped to include all levels of social media use to allow for observation of variance of response between varied Facebook use. Researchers will ask focus groups about social culture in general, observing Facebook and social media references that occur, and which participants reference the website. These interactions will be measured against the available Facebook interactions (participants will have the option to permit access to their account if it is not publicly accessible).

A longitudinal analysis of participant behavior would be necessary to fully test the second hypothesis. Of the 150 undergraduates, each will have the opportunity to opt-in to a long-term study in exchange for additional credit in a communication or psychology class. Researchers will monitor online interactions on the wall, comments, photos and news feed of participants and ask them to track their own usage in a daily media diary. Parallel monitoring of offline interactions would also be employed through daily logs and regular feedback between participants and researchers.

Results will code information provided by participants, gauging volume of use as well as types of interaction. From these codes, trends of usage should emerge to address the proposed hypotheses satisfactorily.

Contributions of the Findings

Awareness of Digital Communication Evolution

Perhaps of greatest importance, the current study will build awareness of the shifting relationship between humans and computer-mediated forms of communication. Social media like Facebook are pervasive or have the potential to become pervasive, affecting traditional expectations of communication. An awareness of the changing role of technology in the field of interpersonal communication can be utilized in a variety of fields: education, behavioral studies, psychology, business, marketing. We have seen the beginnings of potential applications of this study in the industry of consumer marketing. Explosive success of Facebook among young adults attracted the attention of many advertisers, who can tailor advertising messages to specific demographics according to the information made available to Facebook, and the customized “likes” of users.

Application of this highly targeted marketing to the offline world is reliant upon whether Facebook users are comfortable interacting in everyday life as they do online. Cultivation of Facebook attitudes will predict a tolerance to information transparency among users in a setting outside of Facebook. Because they have been saturated with the repetitive themes of connectedness, sharing and realtime status updates, regular Facebook users should adapt to personally-targeted marketing offline as they have online.

RFID Campaigns

Launching an offline marketing campaign with messaging targeted specifically to each individual would require amassing large amounts of data on a person’s purchasing and shopping habits. Online the tracking of consumer behavior is simplified with tracking cookies, click-through software and volunteered personal data to websites like Facebook or Amazon.com. However, no such personal tracking is yet in effect offline. Should Facebook users conform their interpersonal communication habits and norms to real life, individual behavior tracking would be feasible through Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) chips. Through a concept called “The

Internet of Things,” Rob van Kranenburg (2008) explains through RFID technology, “computational processes disappear into the background - into everyday objects...Buildings, cars, consumer products, and people become information spaces.” It is a theory called Ambient Intelligence (van Kranenburg) in which everything is “smart” and human behavior is traced, remembered and input offline as it is currently indexed online. In this way, a trip through the supermarket can be traced, each step send to brands in the form of data that will be used to build a customized profile of a person’s tastes. Or, friends can be alerted when someone in their close network is purchasing a new brand of cheese that complements the wine you just purchased, and a recommendation is sent to both you and your friend to meet up.

Coca-Cola launched the first offline RFID campaign through Facebook in 2010 to promote Coca-Cola Village, a water park in Israel. Promoted through its Facebook page, Coca-Cola invited visitors to Coca-Cola Village, where they would each get RFID bracelets to swipe at stations throughout the park. Called “Like Machines,” the stations were equipped to read the RFID bracelets and upload each swipe as a “like” that posts on the individual’s Facebook page. The three-day campaign generated 35,000 likes even though the park only hosts 650 visitors at a time (Fitzsimmons, 2010). RFID technology was also presented at the 2010 Facebook f8 conference as a test run for integrating conference activity with Facebook activity through realtime updates and tagging (Facebook, 2012).

Methodological Limitations

There are limitations to the proposed study which should be addressed in future research. Primarily, the observation of communication habits and perceptions across online and offline realms must be studied over an extended period of time. For accurate trends to be observed and causal relationships between online to offline patterns to emerge, repeated access to Facebook and study participants daily interactions is required.

A second limitation associated with a longitudinal study emerges as well. Since realtime tracking of participant behavior, both on Facebook and in real life, is likely impossible due to privacy concerns and the ideal duration of study, much of the data will rely upon self-reported behavior. Self-reporting allows for participant bias and the possibility of subjective reporting. A similar limitation may arise through the priming effect. Participants may be unable to provide wholly accurate data over an extended study of their Facebook use without being alerted to the fact that Facebook usage is the topic of study, or at least social media usage. Priming and self-reporting both may skew data as participants present data they perceive to be ideal for the research.

Theoretical Limitations

Agenda-Setting Functions

Ritualized media use, accessibility theory and cultivation theory do not address all factors that may contribute to the blurring of lines between online and offline worlds. An integration of the agenda setting theory, applied to Facebook as a mass medium may be appropriate (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Asserting that mass media do not influence viewer's judgement of portrayed issues instead succeeds in influencing what issues viewers think about, agenda setting claims that mass media determine what viewers - or users - consider important topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Facebook users are saturated with personal information and an ease of data sharing. It is possible that exposure to these repetitive, integral abilities of Facebook brings the salience of data sharing across networks to the forefront of users' minds. From there, it could be personal choice or preference that determines if each user enacts this sharing offline or if it is a valuable feature to incorporate into face-to-face interaction.

Modality Switching

The three applied theories, ritualized media use, accessibility theory and cultivation theory, do not account for the change in modality from computer-mediated Facebook communication to face-to-face communication. As such, changes in expectation of interpersonal interactions arise when users move online-based relationships offline. The expectancy violations that occur when an online relationship switches to a face-to-face relationship may also occur when heavy Facebook users attempt to implement online-based communication patterns into offline settings. According to the theory of modality switching, the expectancy violation can be a positive or negative change but is correlated with the accuracy of the experience maintained online. To this point, Facebook may contribute to negative expectancy violations through the ease with which users can create an idealized self (Nadkarni & Hoffman, 2011) and adopt behaviors that reinforce their idealized online identity (Schlenker & Wowra, 2003).

The technology to bridge the gap between online interaction and offline interaction appears to be RFID, the next step will be observation of whether user behavior will successfully make the transition as well.

Direction for Future Research

Thus far, more in-depth research must be conducted before a reliable, clear relationship between Facebook use and offline communication habits can be determined. The research indicates that Facebook is deeply integrated into users' daily lives, easily influencing perceptions of acceptable and newly adopted means of interpersonal expression. However, continued research on the potential for offline networking vis-a-vis Facebook structure is recommended.

A detailed study of the Coca-Cola Village campaign would provide a hybrid online/offline scenario and the opportunity to interview participants acknowledged to be regular Facebook users. A survey could be disbursed to each participant, assessing their enjoyment of the

campaign, their interactivity with the “Like Machine,” perceived social gain or loss from the blending of offline and online communication patterns. Additionally, a close inspection of Facebook activity before the campaign, during the campaign and after the campaign would provide insight to the effectiveness of Coca-Cola in promoting its Village and creating a social event for participants and online viewers alike.

Essential to future research is determining means to measure the direct correlation between one’s online interactions and offline interactions. RFID technology appears the easiest and least intrusive solution of tracking behavior, yet does not provide assessment of users’ perceptions or behavioral motives. In the end, research must rely on self-reporting, yet also incorporate unbiased observation of existing Facebook-oriented campaigns like that of Coca-Cola or of the f8 conference as well as study emerging uses of this technology.

References

- Arafeh, S., Lenhart, A., Macgill, A., Smith, A. (2008, April 24). Writing, technology and teens. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/Writing-Technology-and-Teens.aspx>
- boyd, d. m., & Ellison, N. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 210–230. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x
- Day, K., Dong, Q., Urista, M. (2009). Explaining why young adults use MySpace and Facebook through uses and gratifications theory. *Human Communication*, 12(2), 215 - 229.
- Debatin, B., Lovejoy, J.P., Horn, A-K., Hughes, B., N. (2009). Facebook and online privacy: Attitudes, behaviors, and unintended consequences. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 15, 83-108. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01494.x
- Dobson & Zillman, (2000). Reading between the photographs: The influence of incidental pictorial information on issue perception. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77(2), 355-366.
- Facebook. (2012). Designing f8. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=414747847792
- Facebook. (2012). Facebook Help Center: Pokes. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/help/pokes>
- Facebook. (2012). Newsroom: Key Facts. Retrieved from <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22>
- Fitzsimmons, C. (2010, August 24). Coca-Cola marketing event tracked Facebook users via RFID. *All Facebook*. Retrieved from http://allfacebook.com/coca-cola-marketing_b17809
- Gerbner, G. (1969). Towards cultural indicators. *AV Communication Review*, 17, 137-148.
- Gonzales, A. L. & Hancock, J.T. (2008). Identity shift in computer-mediated environments. *Media Psychology*, 11(2), 167-185. doi:10.1080/15213260802023433.
- Hofmann, S.G. & Nadkarni, A.(2012). Why do people use Facebook? *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52(5), 243–249. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2011.11.007

- Lanier, J. (2010). *You are not a gadget*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- McCombs, M. E. & Shaw, D.L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36 (2), 176-187.
- McWhorter, J. (2012, April 23). Talking with your fingers. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/23/talking-with-your-fingers/>
- Merton, R.K. (1948). The self-fulfilling prophecy. *The Antioch Review*, 8 (2), 193-210.
- NM Incite. (2011). [Graphic illustration of motivation for participation in Facebook December 19, 2011]. *Friends & Frenemies: Why We Add and Remove Facebook Friends*. Retrieved from <http://www.nmincite.com/?p=6051>
- Poke. (n.d.) In *Oxford Dictionaries online*. Retrieved from <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/poke?region=us&q=poke>
- Schlenker, B. R. & Wowra, S.A. (2003). Carryover effects of feeling socially transparent or impenetrable on strategic self-presentation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85 (5), 871-880. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.85.5.871
- Rubin, A. M. (1984), Ritualized and Instrumental Television Viewing. *Journal of Communication*, 34: 67–77. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1984.tb02174.x