

Focus Groups
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Why Social Media is Interesting to Women in Their 20's
A Focus Group

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Abstract

This study was conducted to uncover which social media sites women in their 20's use and why. A focus group of women in this age range was held in the New York City metro area and found that this demographic has a preference for Facebook over all other media sites because of the ability to stay up-to-date on other people's lives. Ironically, this was also one of the elements they disliked most as they were uncomfortable with the fact that other users could "stalk" them online as well.

Additionally, this demographic wants control over how they share their content and is uncomfortable with having interlinked accounts that do not clearly outline how their profiles will interact with one another. While they enjoy discounts from companies on social media, they are not willing to share any pre-crafted information to get this deal, emphasizing the need for control over the content they share. This group also desires consistency and does not want to re-learn the functionality of social media sites.

Other reasons this group uses social media is for connecting with distant relatives, boosting self-esteem, and for receiving discounts and coupons from brands, particularly on Facebook. They also expressed interest in more visual sites, such as Pinterest. For future research, it is recommended to explore these types of websites further and find what is interesting about social sites beyond Facebook and why.

Introduction

In today's increasingly social online world, social media is a useful tool for entertainment, education, marketing, and research. With various websites being created, some become popular and others do not trend at all. Some sites continue to have a huge following for years and others see an immediate decline in membership. The dynamic and functions of websites change, such as the rapid transformation of Facebook from a "hot or not" rating site, to a college

network, to an open social network, to today's place of connection between individuals, companies, groups, and anyone willing to create a username.

In the midst of the ever-changing world wide web, the question must be asked – whether by researchers, marketers, or curious individuals – what is it that these users look for in social media? What interests them enough to keep them online or to have them switch platforms? The profile of a social media user is so diverse and dynamic, it becomes difficult to break down what interests certain demographics.

One key demographic is women, who according to the Huffington Post, make up 68% of Pinterest users with age skewing 18-44. Of those that are a fan of Pinterest on Facebook, 97% are women, showing the strong engagement of this group on social media (Palis, 2012).

On April 24, 2012 a focus group was held with four females in their 20's in the New York City metro area. Participants voluntarily participated in this research gathering to share their thoughts and opinions on social media. Through the analysis of results from the findings of this focus group, this study aims to answer the following research question: What attracts young women to social media and what certain sites are popular among them?

Literature Review

Users are attracted to social media as new technologies arrive and prove appealing, with visuals and ease of use bringing about popularity to new website. Some of these features are more appealing to women, although not much research divides this specific demographic. Social media users are mostly studied and examined from a marketing perspective, and profiles are created for the various types of consumers. In addition social media is a news source for many, taking on print and traditional media.

In examining one of the newer social media sites, Google+, Briody explains what is appealing about this site: "It's well-designed, fairly intuitive, fast, and a joy to use." The author

points to a trend in social media – the idea that the user wants to “start over” with a fresh new profile after being on others for so long (Briody, 2011).

The use of visuals has also been reported as adding appeal to social media. With short attention spans, today’s media consumers are looking for fast and easy to understand information which is easily portrayed with visuals. Imagery such as infographs can grab the visitor’s attention in seconds (Prithiviraj, 2010). This is further studied with the introduction of Pinterest, the new social media craze that relies entirely on images. The virtual bulletin board is “more interactive and user-driven than Facebook.” Although the article does not give insight as to why, Pinterest is very female-dominated. This had made the site a top referrer for apparel retailers (Denny, 2012).

Social media has become a form of communication that must be learned. It is therefore a useful marketing tool as well, where consumers can communicate with companies and vice versa. Social media users have also established citizen journalism, using the web to share news and become a news source themselves. Bloggers and the like become a source of information, emphasizing the need for companies to treat them as producers of new media (Barefoot, 2010).

The social media user is further broken down by Roger’s Diffusion Theory. Individuals are segmented into groups based on their social media use. These groups include the Innovators (the first to adopt new technology), the Early Adopters (adopt technology that proves valuable to innovators), the Early Majority (those that “wait and see”), the Late Majority (adopt technology the early majority adopts), and the Laggards (the group that may never adopt new technology). The Early Majority is the largest group and are the target for businesses to encourage social media adoption (Petouhoff, 2012).

In addition to entertainment, many people use social media as a source for news. Over 50% of people learn about breaking news through social media and 46% get online news at least three times per week. Of those that receive news this way, 60% are getting news from

Facebook, 20% from Twitter, and 13% from YouTube. Social media is one of the top news sources after TV and newspapers and as of 2012, online news revenue has now surpassed print newspaper revenue. However, 49% have heard news from social media that is not true, noting that social media news is not always factual (Laird 2012).

Findings

When discussing platforms, the most used social media sites in this demographic are Facebook, Pinterest, and LinkedIn, with Facebook unanimously being the favorite. However, this is constantly changing with one person saying about Pinterest, "It's not as popular as like a few weeks ago." When asked why they prefer Facebook to the other sites, the responses all indicated a liking for keeping up with others' lives, seeing what they are doing and where they are at any given time. One participant bluntly stated, "I can stalk people."

Ironically, this was also a feature that they disliked. While they enjoy the voyeurism, they feel it can be abused by others and it offers the ability for them to view your profile and contact you as well. One participant mentions social reader, saying, "Shit people are gonna see what I'm reading!" Another recognized this contradiction and said, "Like we love it but at the same time we hate how other people can stalk us as much as we stalk them."

In addition, participants also agreed that there is a general dislike for the constantly changing layouts and having to re-learn how to use these sites. Some enjoyed Facebook newsfeed and others did not appreciate this feature. Participants also mentioned the need for better privacy, mobility, and an overall dislike for linking all accounts, especially when the user was not in control of how these accounts interacted.

Social media was also useful for communicating with distant family and friends. They state that while they typically wouldn't "call them up on the phone," they are able to stay in touch through Facebook and say "Happy birthday" when they wouldn't otherwise.

One participant also pointed out that social media is used to boost self-esteem. She brings up her brother as an example who is insecure and uses Facebook as an outlet for his emotions. She says, "It's like therapy for him."

In regards to content on these platforms, participants connect with companies, particularly for discounts and coupons. This is considered the most valuable but is also considered risky by making users susceptible to viruses. In addition, participants added they want control over what they post to obtain these deals. Recipes are also of interest to this group, both on Pinterest and through brands on Facebook. Occasionally, celebrities and nonprofits are of interest as well, particularly on Twitter.

The absence of social media was experienced by all participants when on vacation. One noted, "You feel stranded, like you lost touch with the world." Another mentioned while on study abroad, peers "would freak out if they couldn't get on the internet because they want to see what everyone is doing back home." However, they do notice a change in their usage after college. Because of limitations at work and not having to keep up with college friends, post-graduation social media is slightly different and not as important. One participant, who is still in graduate school, said it is different for her because she is able to use it as a "break" between homework.

Looking ahead, participants saw future social media including more videos and would like to see a new site that mimics Pinterest, Instagram, Stumble Upon, or Skype. In the context of what new websites they would like to invent, they also expressed an interest in food sites like Urban Spoon and Yelp, and a desire to gather information on where friends travel and eat.

Interpretations

Overall, Facebook is considered the favorite platform, closely followed by Pinterest. Facebook is favored because of the ability to "stalk" others and see what people are doing in their personal lives, as displayed online. However, there is an overall contradiction over the use

of Facebook as online voyeurism, and this contradiction is even recognized and discussed. One participant mentions social reader and, despite the title of the application, not wanting others to see what she is reading. Along this same idea is that social media, although very prevalent in all of their lives, is reportedly less important after college due to the need to not keep track of friends.

This idea presents a new theme. The dislike for linking accounts and accidentally messaging others, the commentary on having control over what you post online to receive discounts from brands, and a desire for increased privacy, indicates a fear of losing control over what you as the user posts. With the idea of “accidentally” communicating the others as well as being tricked into advertising that ends up being spam, the social media user must be cautious when navigating online and finds comfort in controlling the messages.

Another surprising uses of social media within this demographic was using these sites to communicate with distant family that they would otherwise not communicate with. By simply saying “happy birthday” when one would not make the effort to say this through the phone shows that although informal and short, this communication is beneficial to the user. Additionally, a brief mention of the connection between self-esteem and Facebook shows that social media can be an outlet for deeper expression that just generic conversation.

As mentioned in previous research, an important reason for studying social media usage is for marketing. Companies attempt to engage current and potential customers through social media campaigns, and this focus group shows it can be effective. This demographic seeks discounts and coupons and feels participating in these social media campaigns is worth it if they receive a reward. However, the sense of control over the message they put out is important, as well as having limited fears of being spammed or obtaining a virus.

In looking at the future of social media, participants mention videos, as well as Pinterest, Instagram, and Stumble Upon. This indicates that the future of social media, according to this group, is very visual. This also contributed to the increasing popularity of Pinterest and

Instagram, which are entirely built around images and as Danny states, Pinterest is a site dominated by women and is a top referrer to retailer sites (Denny, 2012). Although not directly stated, this coincides with Prithiviraj's theories of a more visual internet on the rise due to shorter attention spans online (Prithiviraj, 2010).

Overall, the findings of this focus group show an overall contradictory like and dislike for the openness of Facebook, allowing a two-way window to see the lives of others and vice versa. This corresponds with the need to control what content is associated with you as the user, and your profile, and where that information ends up. Surprising uses of social media include connecting with distant family, an outlet for emotions, and connecting with brands for discounts. However, the future looks overly visual, with participants indicating an interest in pictures and video, corresponding with the increasing popularity of sites like Pinterest which is largely dominated by women, the demographic that these findings arise from.

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