Motivation in Using Social Network Sites by Romanian Students. A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract: *In a world where concepts like web 1.0 or CD are slowly becoming a part of the universal inheritance, a new era is slowly taking it's place among us. We are talking about the world of web 2.0, of gadgets and the world of the online communities. The main purpose of this study is to discover deep motivations that determine young people, mostly students to be a part of these online communities. The theoretical background of the research is the uses and gratification approach and the method that has been used is focus group. It is a qualitative approach; the method consists in focus groups. The motivations that determine young people to use online social networks are psychological ones, and they are strongly related to the human needs of communication, socialization, being an active part of a group, or maintaining long distance friendships.*

1. Introduction

Social network sites (e.g. Hi5, Facebook, MySpace, Netlog, Twitter) give birth to online communities which beside the geographical features have something else in common with the traditional real communities, something like needs, language, behavior, motivations etc. Relatively new, these social networks spread quickly,

catching millions of users in their web. Those who are most exposed to their influence are young people, but not only. We are talking about all kinds of people, without discrimination concerning age, gender, occupation, religion. What makes young people more predisposed to this kind of interaction is their tendency to use new technologies, computers, and the fact that they have much more free time than adults.

When talking about online communication, we also talk about social networks that are being frequently used by young people, becoming subject for many studies.

2. Theoretical background

"Virtual social networks are the last generation of mediated public space – a space where people can gather in a public place mediated by the technology. To some extent mediated spaces are similar to the non-mediated spaces, like malls, parking lots or coffee shops. Adolescents are there to interact with their friends. Other poeple that are around can participate in the discussion if the subject is interesting, or they can ignore it."[1] Virtual social networks are different than real social networks, geographically and even culturally limited, in which your identity is more visible than on the internet. "Adolescents create fake identities for themselves, such as name, age, or location, in order to protect themselves. While some parents encourage their children to adopt this strategy, in order to be protected from strangers, 47% of children adopt this strategy to protect themselves from the eyes of their parents."[2]

Social networking sites are a phenomenon of the latest years and are populated mostly by young people. Social networks satisfy the need for escape, for exploring, for interaction and socialization. The first social networking site was founded back in the 90s but the success of the sites was obtained with the rise of Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Hi5, only in the last four years.

The study conducted by Cheryl L. Coyle and Heather Vaughn, debates upon the problem of social interactions: is communication regarded as evolution or revolution? Their research starts from the assumption that communication through technology increases and strengthens social connections. They wanted to find out how social networking sites affects human interactions. The researcher's study came to the conclusion that social networking sites have not revolutionized communication and that they are, at least for now, just another form of communication that evolves in time in the sphere of technology.

Social networking sites are a space where one can develop and use their creativity and expressivity. They can help when building an image, but being sociable, open-minded, doesn't just assume using social network sites. A good technological communication is not enough in order to build up something reliable, credible. Some

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1 www.sociologie.ro/articol/8-17-Retelele_sociale_in_internet.html,/11.06.2009.
2 *Ibidem.*

scholars stress that face to face communication and spending quality time together will continue to dictate the growth of human relations.

The study conducted by Barry Wellman et. al. concluded that online communication establishes indirect contact between people that have been disconnected before, allowing them to reestablish a direct contact. Like is the case of former colleagues from primary or secondary school, high-school or university. Online social presence encourages relationships with users having more different social characteristics than the ones normally found in a person. These networks give the users more control regarding the amount of information that they provide about them. A tendency that was observed in Western countries is that online social communities have become more private, people spend less free time to meet with their friends face to face over a cup of coffee.

Social networking sites are specialized in maintaining connections between people who cannot see each other frequently. They are based more on sharing interests than sharing social characteristics.

One of the relevant research on social capital and social network sites is the study conducted by Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe, there is a powerful relation between Facebook and the maintenance of social capital. Social network sites include three functions: estimation, creating and maintaining social capital, and exploring a dimension of the social capital that verifies the capacity of human beings to interact with members of other communities. According to this study, there is a strong bond between social network sites and creating and maintaining social capital. Though, it cannot be stated which one is more important than the other, Facebook plays an important part in the interaction between young people.

Studies conducted on high school students show that virtual friendships and interactions can help cure the "friend-sickness" phenomenon (the change of environment and the lack of off-line friendships lead to online interaction). Facebook is one of the most popular social network sites among Romanian students. It is being used in order to maintain old friendships or in order to create new ones. Most of the students did not have negative experiences when using Facebook. The negative part includes undesirable messages or private information revealed to the public. Facebook is efficient in helping students to find out more about each other and to maintain contact (Ellison et al., 2007).

The research bellow uses a different theoretical background than the theory of social capital. The Uses-and-Gratifications-Approach, theory developed by Katz, Blumler and Gurevich can prove to be helpful when trying to understand the reasons why people in general are using social networks sites. The theory states that there are certain needs that people have during different stages of their lives, and some of these needs are satisfied through the use of social networks sites. According to this theory, there are five types of needs that are satisfied through media usage: "**cognitive needs**: the need for information, expanding one's knowledge, orientation, curiosity,

the need to control their environment, **emotional needs**: relaxation, resting (...) empathy and identification, escapism or simply the need to spend some quality time, **socio-integrative needs**: social interaction with media, talking about media subjects when talking with other people, identification with people that appear in media, and **habitual-integrative needs**: the need to feel safe, stability and ritualization." (Balaban, 2009:115). Among these needs there are some that are satisfied through social network sites usage, needs such as: curiosity, wanting to be informed at all time, the need to escape every day reality, wanting to spend some quality time with friends or acquaintances

3. Method

The method used for this study was the focus group. This method has been selected because it is a qualitative one, that has the purpose to discover motivations, needs, insights, beliefs of the participants, which suited our purpose of finding out the motivations that determine students to use online social networks. It is an exploratory research at this stage and a qualitative approach is more suitable in this case. Students from different faculties took part in our research. The reason for choosing them lies not only in the economy of the research but in the presumption that students are young people that tend to use new technologies and internet.

A series of three focus groups were conducted in April and May 2009. For each focus group there were seven participants from different faculties. The number of female and male respondents was quite similar. The selection was not random. We sought a certain feature in each participant, as shown: focus group no.1 - frequent user of social network sites (accessing the profile at least twice a week), focus group no.2 - occasional users (accessing the profile less than once a week) and focus group no.3 - non-users (not having a profile on SNSs). The meetings were conducted separately, in order to prevent the phenomenon of social contamination of the answers, and the participants were changed every time, but taking in consideration every time the common feature distributed to each focus group. Each meeting lasted about 30 to 60 minutes, and the answers were recorded by the members of the research team. For each focus group we built a set of specific questions; the three sets had common questions, but also had different question, specific for each and every focus group. The purpose of these meetings was to determine a profile of the online social networks user.

The study started from three research questions, each question being specific for each focus group. So, for the first meeting the question was: "Why do young people use social networking sites frequently?", for the second meeting, the question was:

"Why students do not use social networking sites frequently even though they are users and have a profile on one or more social network sites?", and the final meeting tried to answer the following question: "Why students do not use social networking sites at all?"

The answers to these questions were outlined based on the answers given by the participants, and their motivation is strongly related to the superior needs, such as the need to socialize, to interact, to create bonds and relations, to communicate etc.

4. Findings

A. Focus group no. 1

The answers given by the participants stressed their motivations that determine them to be frequent users of the social network sites, that log on to their profile at least twice a week. The frequently used social network sites by the participants of the first meeting were Hi5, Facebook and MySpace. The first words that they associated these networks with were: "friends, tradition, falsity, communication". They use these online networks: "to communicate easier with my friends", "because I was manipulated", "to find out information about others". Even though the *friends* category of everyone's profile counts up to several hundred of people, the ones that they really know counts up to maximum 30 persons. The participants made the distinction between friends and acquaintances: "I have few friends from real life on my profile, but I have a lot of acquaintances", "most of them are acquaintances, very few are my real friends". Questioned about a possible benefit that these networks may bring the respondents answered: "they are very useful, I found out new things and I kept in touch with my friends", "you can open up easier in front of a person you do not know". All of the participants to the meeting considered that the information exchanged on these networks is shallow: "the information is superficial, depending on the person"; "you use them when you want to find a date".

Talking about friendship relationships, all the participants considered that the online social networks strengthen them: "they help making friendship relationships stronger, because you need to have trustworthy friends".

The problem of morality when posting all sorts of photos on one's profile gave rise to a lot of controversial discussions: "wearing bikini on the beach I do not find to be immoral, but if I wear them in the bathroom, then it is definitely something immoral", "morality depends on the context". Personal information given on the profile of the participants were very few because the respondents considered that giving a lot of personal information implies great risks: "I provide only basic information: gender, name, age", "I flirt a lot, I give information only for fun", "if you meet with someone you do not know, someone you have just met on the net, then it can be dangerous, but if you do not meet with anyone then it's no risk".

Talking about the benefits that the online social networks can bring to one's image, the respondents considered that: "they bring benefits to your image if the image is credible", "they do not bring any benefit to one's image – I do not consider myself cooler just for having a profile on Facebook". The profile of the user drawn up by the participants to this first meeting looks like this: "young, sociable", "reserved", "all sort of people, of every age", "everyone that has access to the internet".

B. Focus group no. 2

The second focus group was oriented towards the occasional users of the social network sites, login on on their profile only occasionally, less than twice a week. The research effort tried to outline motivations that determine users to have this type of consumer behavior regarding SNSs. Social networking sites that the respondents used were also in this case: Hi5, Facebook, MySpace, Netlog, Tagged. The participants associate the networks with the following words: "connection, diversity, friends, acquaintances, new people, virtual relationships". Their reasons for using these networks were to some extent different than the ones of the first participants: "everyone uses them", "herd effect", "curiosity and need", "to maintain contact with friends at long distance". The reasons why the participants do not frequently use these networks are outlined by their answers: "they are a waste of time", "the bonds are superficial", "I do not see their point". This group also considers that there is a difference between *friends* and *acquaintances*: "there are differences; I know my friends personally, my acquaintances are virtual". There are also benefits of using these networks stated by the participants: "I can keep in touch with my friends". Likewise the first group of respondents, the participants to the second focus group considered that the information exchanged on these networks is shallow, superficial. Every participant preferred face to face friendships to the online friendships. Asked whether these online networks can strengthen a friendship relationship, the participants answered: "you cannot strengthen a friendship on Hi5, you can eventually maintain one", "It is not a real connection, only face to face friendships can be real", "in real life it is hard to maintain a friendship relationship; on Hi5 it is even harder". Morality in posting photos on the profiles arouses new controversial discussions. The participants consider that there should be a limit in posting photos on the net, but they cannot state what that limit is. The profile of the user of social networking sites drawn by the participants to the second meeting is a bit different than the one sketched by the participants to the fires meeting: "young people with a lot of free time", "young and bored", "people that want to play tricks", "people that seek diversity".

C. Focus group no. 3

The third meeting tried to find out motivations that determine young people not to use at all online social networks. The questions asked this time were slightly different than the previous ones used in the first and second meeting. The first words associated with online social networks were: "flirt, chat, photos". The reasons why these participants do not use social network sites are outlined by their answers: "why?", "I do not have the necessary patience", "I was afraid to post photos of myself on the net and then see them transformed in Photoshop somewhere else and people laughing at me". Still, the participants accesed an online social network even for just a couple of minutes. We wanted to find out what determined them to do this, if they do not have a profile: "out of curiosity", "to see certain photos", "I was influenced by friends".

The benefits of this kind of networks were tested on this group too. The answers were different: "they are useful for some users who hide themselves behind a screen, behind a virtual image". The type of information used on this kind of networks was tested also on this meeting: "the information is 100% superficial", "you can say something about yourself but you do not know if the information is true", "you cannot say that we are talking about real communication when leaving comments on some photos".

Concerning the capacity of the social networking sites to strengthen friendship relationships, the answers were: "the relationships are fake", "this superficial way of communication cannot sustain a real friendship"; "depends on what «friendship» means", "I do not trust this kind of relations". We wanted to find out in this meeting too, if the participants prefer an offline or an online friendship. The answers were 100% pro offline friendships: "I prefer a face to face friendship because it is real and you can turn to it whenever you feel you need to, without having to think about other elements like PC, electric power, network connection or special applications. Communication means a lot more than that".

The type of danger outlined by the participants is different than the one outlined by the other participants: " online social networks can be dangerous as ways through which certain viruses or unwanted programs can end up on your computer". The profile of the user drawn by the participants of the last meeting looks like this: "a ten year old child, third grade, with parents working eight hours a day, very busy".

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to discover deep motivations that determine young people to use online social networks. The model used by us is based on three focus groups that revealed insights, needs, aspirations, motivations of the participants. Based on the data, we could draw up a profile of the online social network user, through the answers received from the participants.

The motivations that determine young people to use online social networks are psychological ones, and they are strongly related to the human needs of communication, socialization, being an active part of a group, or maintaining long distance friendships.

Regarding the uses and gratification approach, the use of social network sites is fulfilling the four categories of needs. The main needs that are fulfilled by the use of SNSs are socio-integrative. Secondary cognitive needs that are in some regard connected to the emotional and needs are also fulfilled. To some extend also habitual-integrative needs are gratified by the use of SNSs.

The research has its limits. As a limit to this study we need to mention that the three focus group help us to build a general picture of the motivation in using SNSs, yet they were not enough to built a general theory of the motivations that determine young people to be users of SNSs.

Another limit to the study was the phenomenon of social contamination that appeared during the focus groups. Although the focus group moderator detailed

the questions and specified the imperative need of self expressing the answers, the participants were influenced by the answers of the other participants. Social desired answer are often for professional communicators such as students enrolled in communication and PR programs.

We consider the research as being an exploratory one, a basis for further research in the field, being aware that SNSs as research subject are not often been found in the Romanian communication scientific publications.

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