

Motivations for the Use of Social Media among University Students: A Comparative Study

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The goal of this study is to ascertain the motives behind the use of social media among university students in two different countries. Several prominent motives have been assessed including seeking relationships, undertaking business, entertainment, seeking information, dating, job searching and passing time. A 30-item scale is presented along with initial information about the scale's construct validity. The results confirmed the significance of the prominent motives. Finally, the theory of uses and gratification was applied to the samples of university students to measure their communication motives.

Keywords: *Social media, uses and gratifications (U&G), university students, motives.*

Introduction

According to the report, Social Media Status 2019, which was prepared by Crowd Analyzer and in partnership with Hotspot and APCO, there are 20.85 million active accounts on social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and LinkedIn in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). According to the report, the UAE's active social media accounts were distributed across 8.8 million Facebook accounts, 4 million LinkedIn accounts, 3.7 million Instagram accounts, 2.3 million Twitter users, and about two million active accounts on Snapchat. The social networking site, Facebook, remained in the lead despite the slow growth in the number of users in the country with a yearly increase of 3.5 per cent.

Twitter and LinkedIn had the highest growth in total active accounts after increasing by 15 per cent and 14 per cent respectively, while Instagram's active accounts increased by 12 per cent a year. Moreover, the number of social networking site users in Iraq reached 19 million people or 48 per cent of the population. Also, the number of users accessing these sites



through mobile phones reached 18 million, an increase of one million users from last year. In addition, the number of Internet users in Iraq is 19.68 million people, an increase of six hundred and eighty thousand people from last year. It has been confirmed that 3.484 billion users of social networking sites exist in the world, and 3.256 billion users access these sites by phone. The adoption and use of social media around the world has rapidly evolved. The purpose of this study is to explore the motives of using social media and the gratification obtained from it among university students by designing a questionnaire based on the several motives identified from the uses and gratifications theory. Then, a survey was conducted via interviews on a sample size of 200 university students. The sample was divided among two samples in two universities, one in Iraq and the other in the UAE. Iraq and the UAE were chosen due to the differences in the economic, political, security, social, and cultural aspects of the two societies within the one geographical area of the Middle East. The UAE has stable politics and economic progress with a multicultural society, however, the security situation in Iraq remains unstable with political and economic problems. The university students were selected because this educated generation is important; they will play a role in the future of this region and are affected by social media, intellectually and politically.

The Significance of the Study

Social media is more than just a fleeting phenomenon. Therefore, students need to learn the basics of social media and its influence on their future, both positive and negative. In fact, the strength or weakness of representation on these channels may affect college admissions as well as the labour market in the future. Understanding the motivations of students in their use of social media enables us to determine the potential risks to their futures. Thus, this paper intends to examine the motives of students for using social media by applying the theory of uses and gratification to emphasise the importance of public appearance on social media. In a special comment about foreign students using social media to choose a British university at which to study, Jeremy Cooper, the director of the Hobson's Institution for Higher Education, said that nowadays, more than ever before, students around the world are using social networking sites to research and choose their colleges. The International Student Survey (ISS) this year revealed that the importance of social media is increasingly growing among international students. The survey also found that media or social media campaigns influence the views of these potential students in the United Kingdom (UK) as a place to study. Furthermore, Cooper said that for young people, social media is now the primary means of gathering information as well as communicating with friends and acquaintances. According to the results of the International Survey, 83 per cent of potential students utilise social media channels to search for universities, which is an increase of 19 per cent between 2016 and 2017. While preferences differ between countries, major social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, dominate over the use of other social networks.

Therefore, this study aims to expose the motivation behind social media usage among students in an important part of the world.

Literature Review

The predominant finding mentioned in previous research articles is that people engage in social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, or Instagram to satisfy particular social needs. There is a general consensus among scholars that social media enables users to embark upon weak relationships and reaffirm pre-existing, strong relationships.

Xu and Takai (2018) reported that the gratification approach explains why social networking users in Japan and China utilise social media. From the perspective of Eastern social networkers, social exploration and experimentation are mindful of social constraints. Meanwhile, in Western countries, especially North America, social networking users are keen to make new social connections over the Internet. Linberry (2012) conducted an in-depth study of social networking sites to understand and investigate how gratifications derived from social capital can lead to social networking patterns among college students. The researcher discovered that American college students primarily use social networking for bonding and bridging social capital. Essentially, most college students use social media to reaffirm close, pre-existing relationships or form new and weak relationships. Furthermore, Kearney (2018) investigated the relationships between social media use, gratification, and posting selfies on social media. To investigate why men and women post selfies on social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram, the researcher studied five gratifications including attention-seeking, escape, entertainment, archiving time, and communication.

The research found that females posted selfies to enhance self-presentation. Next, men and women alike posted selfies to Facebook to satisfy their entertainment needs. Finally, Instagram selfies were found to satisfy the needs of self-presentation, habit, attention-seeking, entertainment, and status-seeking. Based on this research, it is evident that social networking sites contribute to various forms of self-gratification. Picazo-Vela and Sandoval (n.d.) performed in-depth research of the social media site, Pinterest, to explain the increasing preference of social media users for this platform. The researchers proposed and hypothesised that individuals who use the platform are driven by entertainment, social interaction, information, passing time, and enjoying an aesthetic experience. Apart from that, Grissa (2017) studied the positive correlation between gratification and professional networking sites such as LinkedIn to identify user motivations. The researcher conducted eight separate interviews with companies and five interviews with focus groups to pinpoint the personal motivations of professional networkers. The main findings of the study indicated that individuals are primarily motivated by contextual motivations and generic motivations. Next,

al-Jasir, Bajnaid, Elias, and Alnawasrah (2017) examined the use of social networking from the perspective of Islamic culture and social norms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The study, centred on Saudi college students, indicated that while most students utilise social networking to achieve traditional social gratifications, Saudi college pupils mainly use Facebook to discuss looming social and political issues.

Rahmi and Othman (2013) investigated the impact of social media use on academic performance among university students. The researchers administered surveys to 80 undergraduate students and postgraduate students to ultimately find that there is a positive correlation between interactivity with teachers and peers. College students were found to primarily use social media to enhance collaborative learning opportunities with fellow students while increasing cooperation with teachers. Ezumah (2013) also attempted to explore the main driving forces behind college students' use of social media by fixating on gratifications. The researcher's project particularly focused on Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to establish a positive correlation between social media and gratifications. After questionnaires were distributed to 289 participants, it was found that college students primarily use social media to share photos, keep in touch with family, and reconnect with old friends. The explored journals state several profound generalisations regarding the relationship between social networking and gratification.

Scholars concluded that using social media to share pictures, reaffirm pre-existing relationships, and connect with old friends is a reoccurring theme among younger social media users. Moreover, the research results found that sharing photos is a powerful expression of increasing self-happiness and self-gratification. Furthermore, studies surrounding social media and the gratification theory discovered that entertainment is not the main concern of social media users. When conceptualising the popularity of social media sites, it is evident that platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, and Instagram, are more popular than professional networking sites such as LinkedIn. This trend indicates that there is a positive correlation between self-gratification, relationship building, and keeping in touch with pre-existing contacts.

Theoretical Framework

This study identified ten motives of uses and gratifications for using social media. These motives are to express opinions (by posting), relationship maintenance, publicity purposes, doing business, entertainment, seeking information, dating, building relationships, job search, and passing time. Furthermore, survey interviews with university students in two different Arab countries were used. Then, a comparative approach was adopted to assess the results of the surveys. The survey questions were designed based on the ten motives as well as the theory of uses and gratifications (U&G). The theory discusses the effects of media on people.

It explains how people use the media for their own needs and become satisfied when their needs are fulfilled. In other words, it can be said that the theory argues what people do with media rather than what the media does to people. The research questions were formulated with a U&G approach to social media as follows:

- o Which social media site caters more towards university students?
- o What are the differences in motivations for using social media sites based on the differences between the countries?
- o What social media sites are relevant for university students to keep up-to-date with current information?

The university students were conceptualised as actively participating in social media sites according to their motives to select the content and site, as well as to determine the exposure and participating needs. The U&G approach distinguishes between social media site preferences by specific social classes, such as the university students identified in this research. Then, the concept was operationalised by designing ten questions based on the ten basic motivations identified in the students' lives, according to the U&G theory.

Methodology

Face to face interviews were conducted using a snowball sample. A questionnaire was designed to measure the ten motivations according to the U&G theory. The survey instrument consists of two parts. Part A describes the user's demographic information and part B contains ten questions about the motives of encouraging the university student to use social media. The data was analysed using the software SPSS version 17.0 demographic analysis and descriptive statistical analysis.

The questionnaires were distributed using the non-probability snowball sampling method. 100 university students at Baghdad University in Iraq were interviewed using the questionnaires and the other 100 interviews were conducted at Alain University in the UAE. A total of 100 interviews were conducted between August 15 and September 15. Over 76 per cent of the interviews were completed in the first contact, 16 per cent were completed in the second contact, and 9 per cent were completed in the third interview.

The fieldwork was met with certain obstacles as detailed below:

- o There was a lack of cooperation from some students who questioned the reasons behind such studies.
- o Some respondents complained about the length of the questionnaire.
- o There were difficulties in conducting surveys with women.
- o There were difficulties in recruiting students to be interviewed in the snowball sample.

- It was challenging to find a suitable time for the interviews because students were busy with lectures.
- Some students did not want to disclose their personal information prior to interviewing.

Demographics of the Sample

Age and Gender of BU Students

Age of BU students	Frequency of the age of BU students	Percentage of the age of BU students
18–30	81	81.0
31–40	12	21.0
41–50	7	7.0
Total	100	100.0
Gender of BU students	Frequency of gender of BU students	Gender percentage of BU students
Male	54	54.0
Female	46	46.0
	100 interviews	

Age and Gender of AAU students

Age of AAU students	Frequency of the age of AAU students	Percentage of the age of AAU students
18–30	64	64.0
31–40	22	22.0
41–50	14	14.0
	100	100.0
Gender of AAU students	Gender frequency of AAU students	Gender percentage of AAU students
Male	42	42.0
Female	57	57.0
	100 interviews	

Findings

I. Uses of Social Media Sites

- Uses of Social Media Sites among Baghdad University students.¹

General uses of social media sites by BU students		Frequency of the uses of social media sites by BU students	Percentage of social media site uses by BU students
1.	Facebook	91	91.0
2.	Twitter	21	12.0
3.	Instagram	75	75.0
4.	LinkedIn	2	2.0
5.	Snapchat	51	51.0
6.	YouTube	83	83.0
7.	WhatsApp	21	12
8.	Telegram	19	19.0

- Uses of Social Media Sites among Alain University students.²

General uses of social media sites by AAU students		Frequency of uses of social media sites by AAU students	Percent of social media site uses by AAU students
1.	Facebook	37	37.0
2.	Twitter	52	52.0
3.	Instagram	81	81.0
4.	LinkedIn	4	4.0
5.	Snapchat	82	82.0
6.	YouTube	48	48.0
7.	WhatsApp	19	19.0
8.	Telegram	0	0

¹**Note:** Respondents were allowed to choose more than one option if they were using more than one social media site.

²**Note:** Each respondent was allowed to choose more than one option if they were using more than one social media site.

The table above shows a number of widely used social media platforms by university students of Baghdad University (BU) and Al Ain University (AAU). This survey highlights the increasing prominence of these visually dominant social media platforms in the regions, led by Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Telegram.

It's worth noting that the usage of Facebook at BU amongst students whose ages range between 18–50 years was the highest compared to all other forms of social media, as 91 per cent of students at BU used mainly Facebook. However, the second most popular website at BU was the Google owned company, YouTube, as about 83 per cent of students used it. Furthermore, the Facebook owned application, Instagram, was also popular at BU among Iraqi university students as 75 per cent of them used it in comparison to other applications like Snapchat at 51 per cent, as well as Twitter and WhatsApp, which were both at 12 per cent.

The table also includes LinkedIn as a social media outlet, but it has the least number of users as only 2 per cent of the participants use it. This could be attributed to the fact that LinkedIn is specifically designed for businesses and professionals, making it unpopular in student groups.

On the other hand, the ratios in AAU are slightly different. The results show that the most used application at AAU was Snapchat; 82 out of 100 students used it with a percentage of 82.0 per cent, while slightly fewer students used Instagram, as 81 per cent mentioned that they use this website. The other popular social media platform among AAU students was Twitter, as 52 per cent of the participants mentioned that they prefer Twitter over the other social media websites. YouTube had its share of popularity as well, as 48 per cent of the participants chose it as their top social media website, followed by Facebook at 37 per cent. Apart from that, the percentage of WhatsApp users amongst AAU students was about 19 per cent, when compared to other social media sites.

Similar to BU, the least used website at AAU was LinkedIn, as only eight of all participants mentioned that they use this application, with a percentage of 4 per cent.

The survey shows that Facebook is one of the biggest social media networks that is widely used among university students. Overall, the vast majority of the participants in the BU sample used it, while only 37 per cent of AAU sample students had Facebook accounts. In comparison, there is a significant difference in the popularity of this network between the two universities of approximately 54 per cent.

The same goes for Twitter, as the numbers show that it is significantly more popular at AAU rather than at BU. Only 12 per cent of the 100 participants used it at BU, while more than half of the students sampled were active on Twitter at AAU.

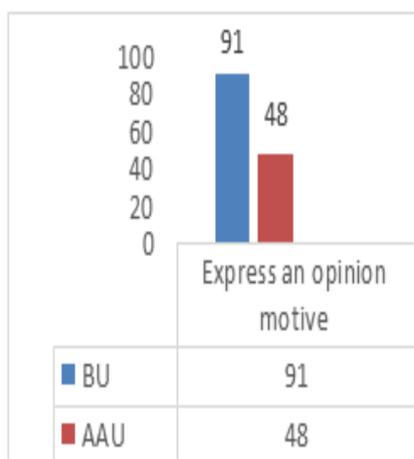
As for Instagram, a sizeable majority of social media users (75 per cent) used this application, including approximately 81 per cent of users at AAU. That shows there is only a slight difference in the proportion of Instagram users (6 per cent) between BU and AAU.

As mentioned above, LinkedIn was hardly used in both BU and AAU samples, as only 12 of the participants used the professional application out of a total of 100 university students. The tabulated results also show that Snapchat is the most popular application at AAU, as about 82 per cent of the AAU participants used Snapchat, while close to half (51 per cent) of social media users at BU used this application.

Next, the video sharing site, YouTube — which contains many social elements, even if it is not a traditional social media platform — was used by a notable majority of 83 per cent of users at BU, but less than half at AAU, which means that YouTube is 35 per cent more popular at BU.

Finally, the mobile messaging application, WhatsApp, was used by 19 per cent of users in the UAE and about 7 per cent less in Iraq, as a social media platform.

Express an Opinion Motive



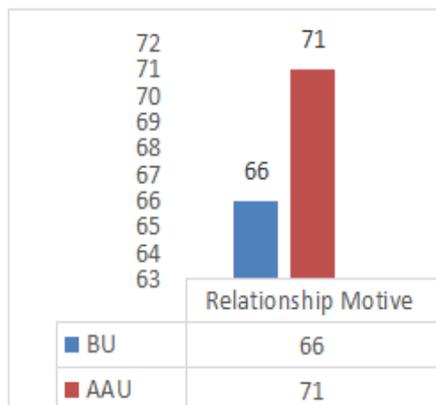
As mentioned earlier, this research seeks to identify the uses and gratifications obtained from social media, and one of these gratifications is the usage pattern of expressing opinions through posting on social networks. The tables above show the frequency of posting on these sites by the university students.

At BU, only 9 per cent mentioned that they do not post anything at all on social media networks, while over 91 per cent posted occasionally every few months, and a few expressed their opinions every few weeks.

In comparison, about 53 per cent of university students at AAU said that they do not post anything on social media platforms. Also, about 48 per cent were inclined to promote their opinions to the public.

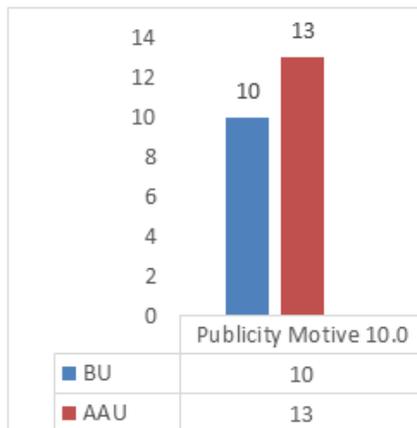
By comparing the percentages of BU and AAU, we found significant differences in the frequency of participants publishing their opinions on social media, as 53 per cent of AAU participants did not post anything, but 91 per cent of BU students wanted to share their opinions.

Relationship Motive



The second gratification obtained from social media is relationships. By networking with friends and family, these sites have been serving the primary purpose of channels for interpersonal communication. The results observed in the tables above allow us to draw a conclusion that a sizable majority in both groups, BU and AAU, used this method for communication with others. However, the table reveals that the AAU participants' percentage exceeds BU by about 5 per cent. The percentage of those who use the social networks for contacting others at AAU was 71.5 per cent, while at BU it was 66.5 per cent.

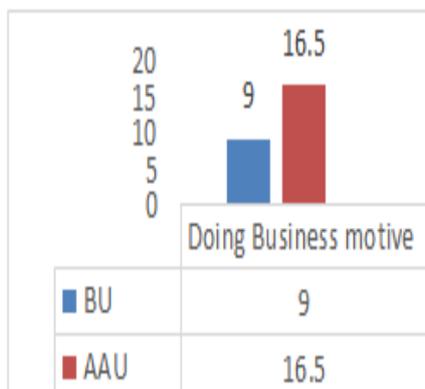
Publicity Motive



One of the main uses and gratifications obtained from social media is event planning, especially by those intending to manage and coordinate special events. Given that one of the basic event planning steps is creating a publicity plan, social media is the best promotion strategy.

The tables above again provide approximately close results, as in BU participants who used social media for planning an event were 20 out of 100 university students, making up 10 per cent in comparison to AAU. Apart from that, 26 students confirmed that they used social media for event planning and the percentage was 13 per cent, which is slightly higher than BU.

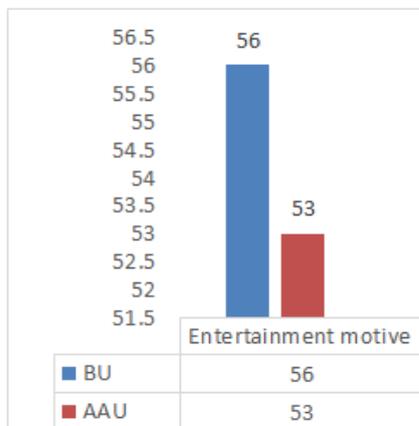
Doing Business Motive



Social media is also utilised to grow businesses as it offers many benefits to business owners. It allows them to reach out to their customers and to attract the attention of more people or potential customers, thus enabling businesses to gain exposure, traffic and market insights.

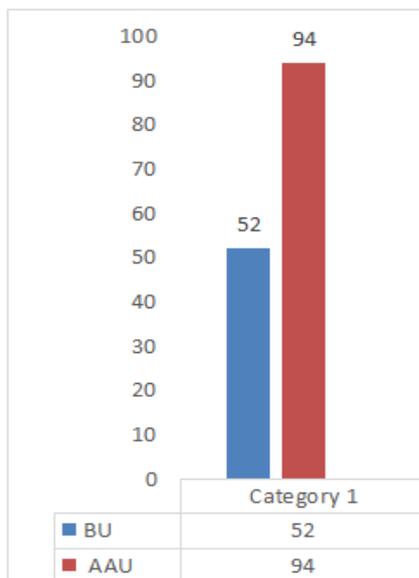
Our results show that only 9 per cent of the BU sample used social media for buying and selling, while at AAU, more students (16 per cent) used their primary sites for business.

Entertainment Motive



One of the main gratifications obtained from using social media is as entertainment, as people often use social media to pass time and enjoy their free time. This survey found that the number of people who pass time using social media at BU and AAU were notably close. About 56 participants at BU told us that they used social media only for entertainment, while AAU participants were slightly less with 53 who had the same purpose.

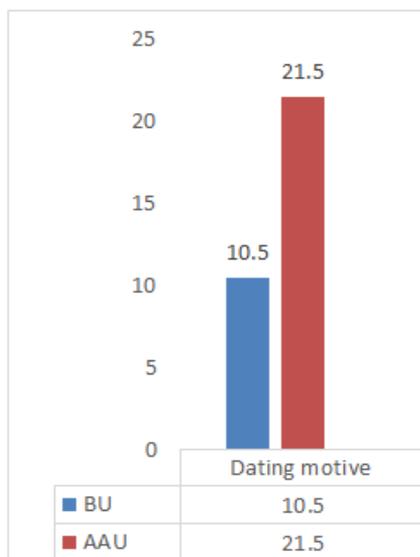
Seeking Information Motive



Over time, increasingly more people have started to obtain news updates from social media sites, whether public news or personal events. This study shows that about half of our participants in both the BU and AAU groups use social sites to keep updated on the events happening around them. Around 52.5 per cent of the students at BU mentioned that the purpose of them using social media was to receive news, while 94 per cent at AAU received their news from these sites.

Dating Motive

One of the main motivations for using social media is dating, i.e. online dating. Some social media users accessed social media to find their special other, that they could not find in real life. When we asked our selected participants at BU, about 21 of them mentioned that they used these sites for dating purposes, while double the number of AAU participants told us that they opted for online dating through social media.



Job Search Motive

Social media can open doors for job hunters. It can be used to present oneself professionally and find useful leads. Some people find social media to be of invaluable assistance when embarking on a job hunt or career planning.

Only six per cent of AAU participants mentioned that a social media presence supported their networking activities to identify job opportunities.

At BU the percentage was less, as only five per cent of university students said that they used social networks to find jobs.

Passing Time Motive

Many other participants mentioned that they only used social media sites for surfing the internet or passing time. Around 79 out of 100 at AAU said that this is the only reason behind using these sites, and at BU, 54 participants mentioned this reason.



Discussion

The results of this study found Facebook to be the most popular social media platform among students at BU, with Twitter as the most widely used social media site among the students at AAU. The use of social media is influenced by cultural values, and there is a shift towards liberal and democratic values. Around 90 per cent of the Iraqi and Emirati students sampled said that they use social media to express their opinions. This indicates that there is a growth in democratic values. Social media has become a major source of information and news for half the sampled students in both Iraq and the UAE, therefore implying a reduced reliance on other sources of information such as television, family and other traditional sources. Moreover, the differences in motives of use and gratifications were limited and relative. The biggest difference was in the choice of social networking site; the other motives were closely related and the difference between them was no more than 15 per cent. Furthermore, we can be sure that the theory of uses and gratification is applicable on the students from the two universities, namely Al-Ain University in the United Arab Emirates and the University of Baghdad in Iraq. According to the survey results, some of the motives suggest that social media networks have opened up opportunities for new behaviours that have been culturally and socially rejected in the past, such as the use of social media sites for dating and to express opinions.

Recommendations

- It is recommended for this research to be repeated in other countries to assess the possibility of different motives for uses and gratifications according to different locations. This is especially significant as each location has its own cultural, economic and political categories. These differences may affect user communication motives in social media usage.
- There is a need to address each motive and study it in detail to understand the depth of each motive based on the theory of uses and gratification.



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