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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we focus on the social and the material aspects of social media practices that emerge through everyday use of a variety of social media platforms. We draw on the theory of affordances, and through a qualitative study (N=56), we identify two user orientations that operate under different affordances. The emotional orientation leads users to focus on the symbolic meaning behind social media actions and to make emotionally driven decisions about how they use various features. In contrast, a rational orientation is driven by functional considerations. We show how users operating under different orientations lead to conflicts and misunderstandings about the meaning and consequences of using the same material features. We also uncover a connection between orientations, behavior, and age. This work takes an initial step towards understanding and reconciling the conflicts arising from different affordances.

Keywords

Affordances; Social Media; Orientations; Interviews; Grounded Theory; Qualitative Comparative Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread diffusion of social media provides an opportunity to investigate how they pervade our everyday social practices (Leonardi 2011; Leonardi et al. 2013). In this paper, we focus on the concept of "affordances" defined as the possibilities for goal-oriented actions using objects (i.e., technologies) (Hutchby 2001). As Markus and Silver (2008, p. 622) point out, seeing affordances as "relational" (emerging through practices performed between people – or human agency – and artifacts – here the materiality of social media) implies that the same social media platform can be used in a given context (such as for private use or at work) in different ways by different individuals. This leaves the potential for conflicts between people who understand and interpret the same material features in different ways. It is important to understand different affordances in order to address these conflicts.

Because affordances consist of goal-oriented actions (Hutchby 2001), we study social goals or needs of various social media users and how they are pursued through the identification of emerging characteristics (or, better,

affordances) of the materiality at hand (Leonardi 2011). Namely, *How do people perceive and interact with the materiality of social media to achieve their social needs?*

We conducted wide exploratory qualitative fieldwork (N= 56 interviews) and were able to identify two main patterns of social media use which are related to two key goals. Many users (mainly young adults) draw on what we call an *emotional* orientation when using social media. They focus on the potential to share meanings through social media, such as Liking a picture to convey romantic interest. Other users leveraged a *rational* orientation when using social media. Put simply, they use social media in a more straightforward way and without attributing extensive meanings to actions performed online. For example, interviewees would unfriend people that they still consider friends in real life, but with whom they did not interact on social media. One could say that a rational orientation underpins a more instrumental use of social media, in contrast with an emotional orientation, where behaviors were driven by affective considerations.

Our results contribute to the literature on social media affordances (e.g., Majchrzak et al. 2013; Pearce and Vitak 2016; Treem and Leonardi 2013; Vaast et al. 2017; Vitak and Kim 2014) and has implications for understanding use and non-use of various features in social media.

BACKGROUND

Social Media Affordances

The literature on affordances draws from the seminal work of Eleanor Gibson, "*The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*" (Gibson 1986). Gibson's research focuses on animals' (visual) perceptions in the context of an environment. Namely, Gibson believes that studying an animal's visual perception while ignoring the surroundings does not give justice to a holistic view of one's understanding of the characteristics of objects. The literature, in various fields, has expanded on Gibson's original theorizing. Worth mentioning as related to IT is Norman's (1991) focus on (information) technology design. His theory of affordances focuses on "objective" affordances that are embedded in artifacts (software, interfaces etc.), but his key contribution rests on the sense of purpose (or goal, as others have reframed it) that people have when using them. That is, affordances can be discovered as long as they carry a benefit for the person

who is using a certain object. Further developments acknowledge the unintended use of IT, some have combined the "goal oriented" nature of affordances (Markus and Silver 2008) with emerging uses of the technology at hand (Fayard and Weeks 2007). In this way, affordances are seen as a relational construct (Hutchby 2001; Orlikowski and Scott 2008).

Scholars have attempted to single out sets of defined social media affordances (e.g., Majchrzak et al. 2013; Treem and Leonardi 2013) and have tried to explain how each leads to particular (associated) goals, as well as constraints, as IT can also prevent people from performing a certain activity (Leonardi 2011; Majchrzak and Markus 2012). Yet, past studies aimed at singling out social media affordances are mostly theoretical and/or rely on reviews of other empirical works – like the two we reviewed above. In this paper we do not aim to identify new typologies of affordances. Instead, through the affordance lens our goal is to single out practices in and through which users engage when they use social media. These practices can be "active", e.g., illustrative of content creation, reposting/retweeting, Likes. Or they can be "lurking" practices, which albeit less impactful to the network, are anyway meaningful for those who perform them (Crawford 2009). After doing so we discuss the underlying affordances with respect to the two orientation that we previously identified.

METHOD

In 2015, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 56 individuals who were at least 18 years of age. To understand social media uses for a variety of developmental stages, our sample is distributed across all of the adult stages. Namely, later adolescence (18-24), early adulthood (25-34), middle adulthood (35-59), and late adulthood (60+). Our criteria for inclusion in the study was that participants accessed social media at least once a week, and had been on a social media platform for at least one year (examples given were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn). This allowed us to interview users with a basic familiarity of social media and enough time on the platform to have had an opportunity to pursue basic objectives such as building their social network, reading and sharing content.

We performed two types of data analysis. First, we followed a grounded theory approach using open coding, constant comparison, and theoretical sampling until we reached theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This allowed us to identify the theme of orientations and the outcomes associated with them.

In order to see patterns and better understand differences associated with orientations and demographics, including age, we also performed a qualitative comparative analysis, also known as QCA (Ragin 2014). This technique calls for first capturing relevant qualitative insights (nuances, emerging results etc.) through an initial qualitative analysis using one's preferred method. As stated above, we conducted this first stage using a grounded theory

approach. Next, QCA involves a comparison of the "emerging" codes (those identified using the previous open coding strategy) with the literature. In our case, we referred to the literature of Newman and Newman (2017) to identify developmental stages that could affect social needs and behavior. Insights from these codes and the literature guided our subsequent round of analysis where QCA supported us through an articulated process aimed at identifying the most relevant themes across "cases" (users). In this study, we used QCA to understand who (individuals in different developmental stages) exhibits what type of orientations (emotional or rational), and whether they are connected to certain behavioral outcomes (e.g., perform social media actions driven by its symbolic meaning).

RESULTS

Emotional Orientation

We identified many individuals who would focus on the symbolic meaning behind their own and other's actions on social media, and the affective consequences. [K3] explains how social media is just a way to extend social life and symbolic actions into the online realm:

> Yes, it is a part of the ordinary life, it is not something different. "Liking" somebody`s photo means something. I know some people who are counting smiles (brackets). If the boyfriend sends one smile, it means that he is not really interested in you at the moment, something is wrong. But if there are ten smiles, then everything is fine. It really is like that!

Here [K3] interprets the meaning behind another's behavior, believing that the meaning goes beyond what one would see at face value. For example, [K3] goes on to explain the meaning behind a "Like" and how several times she has been terrified when accidentally clicking it:

> I never put "likes" to a picture of a person I am interested in. I feel a bit uneasy, embarrassed, because I know if I put like, it would mean something… a couple times I liked someone's pictures, but it was by mistake…After I realized, I put that "like" I was really afraid. And then I thought that person would think "she watched my profile, what could that mean?" and I do not want him to think that there is a meaning behind it.

Strategizing One's Social Media Presence

Our participants described discreetly manipulating various aspects of social media, yet the most prevalent was increasing one's "Likes". Several (usually younger) interviewees placed a premium on getting a lot of "Likes". However, many also distanced themselves from obvious techniques that might signal to others an unnatural approach to amassing likes, such as [L1]:

> I feel like some of those strategies can be a little transparent. Those people whom I follow, I know

that they really want a huge Instagram following, a lot of "likes", thousands of people watching them. So, to get to that number, they will post maybe 40 hashtags as opposed to my 2. Or will put on a comment saying 'Like my photo and I'll like yours.' There is something like that. And generally I think it seems a little desperate … I see that kind of negatively. I mean it is fine if that is what other people want to do, but I certainly would never do that.

Selective Engagement

Focusing on affective dimensions and viewing social media through a symbolic lens often led to selective engagement online. Impression management strategies were commonly crafted in consideration of how online actions are interpreted. This is reflected in [T1's] strategy of only liking recent pictures:

I "like" pictures of my friends that they have just posted, two hours ago maximum. I do not "like" photos that are two years old. Sometimes I look at old pictures of my friends… today I looked at pictures of my close friend in Facebook… but I did not "like" her pictures, as it was around 6 months ago. I thought if I "like" the picture, she will think "[T1] was looking through my old pictures, he cares about my 6 months old photos. Why? Is he fond of me?"

Rational Orientation

The participants who exhibited a rational orientation in how they enact social media were characterized by focusing on functional goals when it comes to theirs and other's actions. Even the decision of whether to post can be viewed from a utilitarian perspective as [M1] explains:

I just don't feel that I'm offering any type of benefit to anyone else sharing either my personal opinion or just something that's happening. I think they can see it in other ways, more accurate sources, and I'm not that reliable a source. So I don't feel any obligation to do that and that's why I don't do it.

[M1] consumed posts from his social media feeds, but did not post anything himself since he can't offer any additional useful or more reliable information. This is in contrast to individuals following a symbolic logic who often posted for the social significance (e.g., to show people that they are "alive" and present on social media) rather than content-related goals.

Using Social Features with Functional Goals

Many features on social media are given a label with social connotations such as being "Friends" with someone, or indicating that you "Like" a post. However, a lot of participants drawing on a rational logic treated these social features in an utilitarian way, without heed to the social

message it might send. For some, this included unfriending people who weren't active on the platform. [A2] summarized: "Well I usually unfriend people I don't have any contact with, mainly because they don't use Facebook anymore or they don't have time to." Keeping a symbolic connection to others was not useful for [A2], he was only concerned about engaging with others who were also engaged on the platform.

And even those who did not unfriend often had a practical rather than emotional or symbolic reason not to. When [A1] described his Facebook feed, he complained about "people who are just pretty useless, like a lot of useless information going through my newsfeed." However, he hadn't unfriended anyone since he was "just lazy." The effort to remove people was an often cited barrier to paring down on one's network.

Decoupling Actions from Feelings towards Someone

Those who operated under a rational orientation often distinguished their actions from their feelings about a relationship. One interviewee expressed this as "just because I don't like their Facebook posts doesn't mean that I don't like them as a person." So an action to restrict another or ignore someone did not have to carry any symbolic meaning for their relationship. They also viewed others' actions in this light. [M5] explained how she declared her relationships on Facebook:

I have a close friends group and then I have a family group but some of my family members won't… you know, you say what your connection is like husband or sister or whatever, some of them haven't declared that, so you know I think some people want to keep that information like private you know.

Negotiating Social Meaning with Tools

While many emotionally-focused individuals selectively engaged on social media to avoid sending the wrong signal (see earlier section about Selective Engagement), those rationally-focused took a different approach. [Z1] explained how he used textual and symbolic aids to communicate nuance and would address any ambiguities directly:

You use emojis, winky faces, the tongue being stuck out. You use those things that most people of my generation easily recognize and then you can pick up that you weren't being serious on the thing you were saying… If you don't get it the first time through usually it's like, wow, are you being serious there? Sometimes when people don't use emojis it becomes like, 'I hope you're just joking'…And you end up having, 'Right? You are kidding, right….?'

While using emojis and smileys is common to people drawing from either orientation, emotionally-geared individuals interpret and fret over the meaning of these

symbols while rationally-oriented individuals were either mostly satisfied with their ability to express themselves, or would just rely on asking for clarification when needed.

Relationship between Orientation, Age, and Behaviors

Having explained the orientations and the resulting social media behaviors and experiences, we turn next to a between case analysis of who exhibits these logics and behaviors. Using the Qualitative Comparative Analysis technique allowed us to surface patterns between different attributes and outcomes. We decided to analyze the relationship between orientations, behavior, and age. Individuals were coded as taking an emotional orientation if they ever focused on the affective or symbolic aspects of any feature. Rationally-oriented individuals never did.

Table 1 summarizes the results of the qualitative comparative analysis. Outcomes did not differ with fine-grained age buckets and so we combined them. Each row represents one of the four possible combinations of age (**A** = under 35 years old, **a** = 35 and over) and orientation used (**O** = Emotional, **o** = Rational). The "Number Participants" column indicates the number of study participants that exhibited that particular combination of traits.

What stands out in Table 1 is row 3. There are zero instances of older people who come from an emotional orientation (**aO**). In QCA, the absence of cases is just as telling as the presence. This suggests that older people may

not be likely to consider social media through symbolic meanings and emotion-driven interpretations. It may be peculiar to a younger generation.

Lastly, Table 1 is transformed to the final outcome, shown in Table 2. This was done by looking at how many people exhibited a given outcome in Table 1 and coding it as present (YES) in Table 2 if it meets the minimum consistency score (at least 75% of those people exhibit the outcome). Conversely, if less than 25% exhibited an outcome, the final code is absent (NO). Outcomes that were ambiguous (between 25% and 75%) are indicated with a question mark.

We see in Table 2 that there is definitely a connection between emotional orientation and engaging in behaviors driven by considering the emotional and symbolic meanings behind them (**AO = E**). However, the current analysis is unable to conclude whether emotionally-oriented younger people (**AO**) also exhibit behavior driven by functional considerations; half the participants exhibited the behavior and half did not.

Likewise, regardless of age, a rational orientation results in functional behavior (the equation **Ao + ao = F** reduces to **o = F** which shows that a rational orientation is necessary and sufficient for exhibiting behaviors shaped by functional considerations). More importantly, the table reveals that a rational-orientation towards social media precludes behavior shaped by considering symbolic meaning.

Number Participants	Young (<35 yrs)	Emotional Orientation*	Outcomes	
			Emotional Behavior	Functional Behavior
	(A)	(O)	(E)	(F)
11	YES	YES	10	5
20	YES	NO	2	20
0	NO	YES	--	--
25	NO	NO	2	25

Table 1. Causal Combinations and Outcomes Exhibited (*When Emotional Orientation is NO, a Rational Orientation is used)

Number Participants	Young (<35 yrs)	Emotional Orientation*	Outcomes	
			Emotional Behavior	Functional Behavior
	(A)	(O)	(E)	(F)
11	YES	YES	YES	?
20	YES	NO	NO	YES
0	NO	YES	--	--
25	NO	NO	NO	YES

Table 2. Causal Combinations and Final Coding of Outcomes (? indicates inconclusive outcome)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings illustrate how approaching social media from a certain orientation may lead users to discover very different affordances than if approached from another orientation. These affordances emerged through use (over time). In Leonardi's terms, the digital materiality of social media has *agency* in that it shapes (or at times drives) users' behaviors when they are online.

Furthermore, our findings do not simply reflect how orientation towards social media might lead to discovering certain affordances (while ignoring others). Our results also suggest that orientations could virtually change because of the affordances of the materiality at hand. We have reason to believe that one's orientation might change because specific social needs are constrained by certain social media characteristics. For example, some individuals reflected on how they learned the importance of Likes and started to interpret them in a symbolic way. This suggests that the affordances of social media can be learned and evolve for a given user. This may push the user towards an emotional orientation. However, because our study was not longitudinal, future research must be conducted to explore if and how orientations can evolve.

Implications relate to researchers, designers and organizations alike, who need to be cognizant of the different orientations driving their subjects and users. We showed that younger people may operate under an emotional orientation which places the utmost importance on social meaning. While others, including older individuals, take a rational approach when evaluating and using social media. Considering whether the same system should be used in supporting these different orientations, and how, is a big challenge.

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