University Students: Famous People on Instagram and

Parasocial Interaction

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Abstract

This study examined college students' (N=105) use of the popular social media application, Instagram, in relation with parasocial interaction (PSI) bonds with famous people they follow (both celebrities and athletes). An online survey was used to help further understand the strength of the PSI relationship between famous people and users, specifically millennials. The present study gives insight into the two-way communication between the user and the famous person through computer-mediated environments instead of traditional PSI environments such as television and radio. The present study explores factors such as time spent using Instagram and actions made by the famous person such as replying to users' comments, addressing their followers directly through photo/video captions, hosting live video sessions, and including family or friends in their posts. Analysis of the data revealed college students have a strong PSI relationship with famous people through Instagram. Multiple significant correlations were displayed between a famous person's actions (e.g., replying to fan's comments, host live videos, include friends and family's photos etc.) on Instagram and a strengthened parasocial interaction with followers. Amount of time spent using Instagram did not prove to have a significant relationship with strength of PSI bond. Implications of these findings and future research directions are discussed further.

Introduction

The current shift from traditional media (i.e. print, radio, TV) to new media, also known as digital media or new technology, is undeniable, (Adornato, 2014). With this shift, comes the rising popularity of social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. In the past decade, social media have revolutionized the life of many people and thus attracted much attention, not only from industry professionals, but also academia, (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). This move towards a stronger online presence is highly influenced not only by the creation of smartphones and mobile applications, but also by a new digital generation comprising of millennials, those born between 1982- 2001 and often times referred to as "digital natives," (American Press Institute, 2015). Their comfort with new media and consumption of information is different from other generations (Leung, 2013). Millennials demand constant access to technology, display group-orientated characteristics, and have high levels of interconnection (Rosengard,Tucker-McLaughlin, & Brown, T. 2014; American Press Institute, 2015; Dookhoo, 2015; Howe & Strauss, 2007).

New media allows for engagement (i.e., celebrities responding to fans online) and interactivity that millennials prefer and it is evolving the paradigm of parasocial interaction. Parasocial Interaction is a theory coined by Horton and Wohl (1956) as a form of intimacy where viewers establish a close relationship and connection with media personae (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). However, this parasocial bond used to be unreciprocated by the celebrity. Traditionally famous people had an outlet to their fans through television or newspapers. "However, social media platforms provide a personalized and unfiltered method of communication," (Kim & Song, 2016, p.571). With the addition of new media, celebrities can now respond and engage with the user. "With easy access to direct and interactive communication methods with

celebrities, fans following celebrities through social media may feel like they "know" the celebrity and experience increased intimacy and a strong parasocial relationship," (Kim & Song, 2016, p.570).

"That being said, the connections formed through social media have yet to be explored in their entirety," (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012, p.481). The present study focuses on Instagram, a mobile photo-sharing application, that is particularly popular among digital natives. "These devices seem to lend themselves to a different sort of photographic communication - one that involves telling stories with images," (Weilenmann, Hillman, & Jungselius, 2013, p. 1844.) A 2016 Pew Research study by Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan states when compared to other social platforms, Instagram use among young adults is consistently higher than other age groups, with almost six-in-ten reporting having an Instagram, 51% of users stating they access the application daily, and 35% reporting they do so several times in one day.

We need a deeper understanding of this relationship describing the developed two-way communication between the user and the famous person (celebrities and athletes) through Instagram and computer-mediated environments instead of traditional PSI environments such as television and radio (Labrecque, 2014). Even though this theory has evolved and been applied to social media, there is still a gap in literature concerning Instagram.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the strength of the relationship between famous people and users, specifically millennials. There is also a focus on celebrities' use of Instagram and its effect on PSI bonds with millennials with things such as replying to fan's comments, addressing their followers directly in photo/video captions, hosting live video sessions, and including family or friends in their posts. It also explores time spent by the user in relation to the PSI bonds.

Literature Review

Overview of Social Media

Social media is an ecosystem of mobile and web-based tools created by interactive platforms in which people and communities share, create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Kietzmann, Hermkens, Mccarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). These interactive platforms are known as social network sites (SNS) Boyd and Ellison (2007) define SNS as "services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." Currently the most visited SNSs are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter respectively. The mainstays of these SNSs are the visible profiles of its users that display a list of their 'friends', or 'followers' depending on the platform, who are also users of that particular SNS (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This essential factor of SNSs is what separates them from them from other types of computer mediated communication.

The principal function of SNSs is for users to consume, create, and distribute personal content; sharing content can help ensure that users stay engaged and continue to visit the sharer's profile (Bakhshi, Shamma, & Gilbert, 2014). Social media expert, danah boyd, states SNSs allow people to maintain connections, and it is no surprise that they are now embedded in the life of every user (2007). The reasons why users are on social media varies from person to person but Whiting and Williams (2013) utilized uses and gratifications theory to categorize the top ten uses displayed in Figure 1.
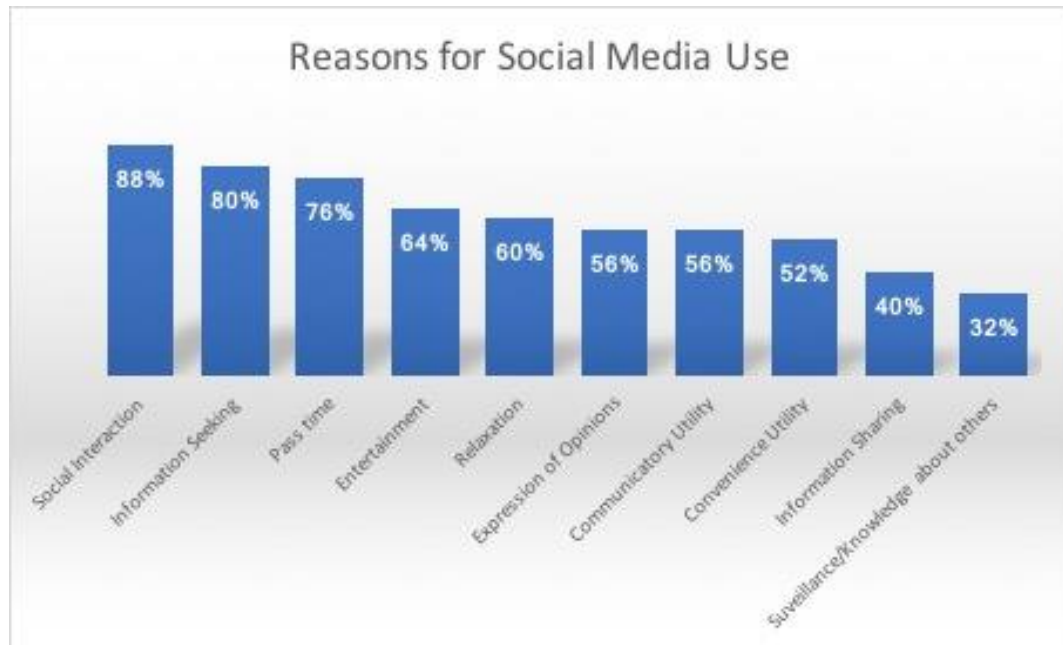
Figure 1: Top ten reasons of social media usage (Whiting and Williams, 2013).

Social media use amongst young adults (18-29) is a prime area for research due to their

usage rates. In 2009 Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr (2010) reported 72% of young adults

used social media; by 2015 that statistic had risen to 90% (Perrin, 2015). At that rate, it could be

posited that the percentage of social media users among young adults will continue to rise and be

very close 100%. The role that celebrities play on social media is far different from the role of

the status quo social media user. SNSs allow celebrities and fans to interact at a level that

previously had never been seen. While social interaction is essential to a celebrity's role on

social media, information sharing is as well; users who engage in information sharing on social

media separate themselves from the 60% of social media users reflected in Whiting and Williams

(2013) study that do not use social media to share information about themselves. Social media

enables celebrities to create a sense of intimacy with their 'friends' and 'followers' by "sharing

what appears to be personal information with fans, using language and cultural references to

increase affiliation, and publicly acknowledging fans and their creative works" (Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013).

Millennials/College Students

Social media expert, danah boyd, states most SNSs were developed with young people in mind and they still account for the majority of users in America (2007). Although some experts, like boyd, believe young adults do not actually understand these SNSs as much as they use them (2007). These platforms present a lot of questions to researchers and are constantly evolving at a pace that can be hard to follow. "Millennials are defined by an Internet and media landscape that permeates nearly every facet of their daily lives (Dookhoo, 2015, p.1)." Millennials, make up the largest generation in America and are described as being more affluent, ethnically diverse, and better educated than previous generations, (Howe & Strauss, 2009).

Generation experts, Howe and Strauss (2007) describe millennials as having group orientations. Howe and Strauss state this attribute combined with technological advances, "has increased levels of interconnection among Millennials who are less interested in the anonymous freedom of the internet than its potential to maintain their peer networks," (2007, p.2). Millennials like immediate contact and are comfortable with it being through virtual presence (Holt, 2012). Millennials also like when they receive feedback, but show low tolerance when this feedback is delayed (Holt, 2012). Their focus on social network sites is based on the way they enable the users to create and also maintain both social and relational interactions, which is the main use millennials give SNSs (Park, Lee, & Kim, 2012).

Overview of Parasocial Interaction

Parasocial Interaction is a conception of the developed intimate bond between media personalities and viewers through viewing the character or persona over a period (Horton &

Wohl, 1956). The audience becomes reliable to the persona or character becomes reliable and thus the persona or character grows fan loyalty. "They 'know' such a persona in somewhat the same way they are aware of their chosen friends: through direct observation and interpretation of his appearance, his gestures and voice, his conversation and conduct in a variety of situation" (p. 216). Parasocial interaction is an alternative way for viewers to gain an interpersonal relationship with the media characters (Rubin et al., 1985). It is based on vicarious interaction, television viewing, as opposed to actual interaction (Rubin et al., 1985).

Parasocial Interactions and Television Viewers

According to Horton and Wohl (1956), watching television programs comprise viewers to gain a parasocial interaction bond. Throughout the progress, the spectator will choose to either accept or reject the parasocial interaction relationship. Therefore, if the viewer accepts the relationship, he or she will be most likely to continue to watch the program and in result receive an ongoing parasocial relationship bond. At the same time, as the program ends, people have the choice to continue to engage in the parasocial relationships (Caughey, 1984). The newscaster was another type of television personality. Levy (1979) suggests people who watch more television news are more potentially to be engaged in parasocial interaction with news personalities.

Relationship Development

The more frequent the interaction, the more likely the relationship will develop over time. "The amount of television exposure (communication) leads to increased attraction to (liking of) a media character; parasocial interaction results from both exposure and attraction" (Rubin and McHugh, 1987, p. 281). A sense of intimacy is promoted to magnify the relationship by production techniques (e.g., close-up shots, camera angles, zooms) (Rubin et al., 1985). This

intimacy allows viewers to feel a sense of connection in which viewers can understand the

persona on television equivalent to the way viewers view their real-life friends (Rubin et al.,

1985).

The amount of time for viewers to spend on a particular medium to follow the persona or

character is significant in developing a parasocial interaction bond (Armstrong & Rubin, 1989;

Cole & Leets, 1999). According to Berger and Calabrese (1975) suggest the amount of

communication during an interpersonal attraction increases communication intimacy over time.

Interpersonal attraction is defined as "an individual's tendency or predisposition to evaluate

another person or the symbol of the person in a positive or negative way" (Walster et al., 1978,

p.3-4).

There is a positive correlation between the amount of exposure and the amount of

attraction (Berkson & Romer, 1980). Individuals who hold similar attitudes with others can be

able to communicate more often with each other (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970) and more

importantly, feel accepted by others (Erwin, 1982). Research has shown that those who are

considered to be physically attractive are also identified to be more socially attractive (Goldman

& Lewis, 1977).

PSI, Social Networking Sites, and Celebrities

Social media have developed new ways for individuals to connect and interact with one

another (Wallace et al., 2011), especially in different medium platforms (Sutton, 2012).

Parasocial Interaction originally was defined as a face-to-face interaction that occurs between

media figures and their audiences (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These face-to-face interactions event

(e.g., television programs, commercials, talk shows, or interviews) allow viewers to possibly

form an opinion about that character and carries it to the next event (Perse and Rubin, 1989). As

mentioned before, television viewing can create the illusion of intimacy at a distance when consuming media content (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial interaction is more based on vicarious interaction than actual contact. This two-sided relationship involves mostly between celebrity performers and their fans (McCutcheon et al., 2002). Parasocial Interaction bonds are companionships and personal identity functions when media figures remind viewers of people they knew and allow viewers to use media characters' situation and behavior to help identify or understand their lives (Giles, 2002).

Social media have become significant in online websites to allow celebrities to interact, reply, chat with their fans in a personal level (Stever and Lawson, 2013). Twitter, for example, is a platform for celebrities to communication with their fans (Stever & Lawson, 2013). Thus, celebrities would use Twitter as a way to reach out to fans and establish a "real" relationship with them (Stever and Lawson, 2013). For other celebrities, Twitter is used to communicate information about their personal hobbies, preferences, and to freely convey information (Stever & Lawson, 2013). At the same time, fans can send celebrities personal messages, and when inappropriate, the celebrity has the option of blocking the fan (Stever & Lawson, 2013). Twitter allows the concept of actually "being there" with the celebrity and provide a more intimate media platform to communicate and connect with fans (Stever & Lawson, 2013).

Parasocial Interaction Bonds Develop in the Online Communities

The online community provides opportunities for organizations and individuals to build special and deeper relationships with customers and fans (Armstrong & Hagel 2000). According to Cole and Leets (1999), there are three relational development theories in which parasocial interaction develops in the online community. The first theory, uncertainty reduction theory, describes how relationships develop over time as the certainty increases (Berger, 1986). In other

words, if uncertainty decreases the enjoyment increases. Secondly, personal construct theory suggests viewing media figures can develop an idea and sense of 'knowing' the media character through interpersonal (Perse & Rubin, 1989). The third is social exchange theory, which explains how value progress through parasocial interaction by linking intimacy and relationship, cost and reward concepts (Homans, 1961). Therefore, a parasocial interaction with a media figure would have a high reward and lost cost exchange (Homans, 1961).

Research Questions

RQ1: Do college students have a strong Parasocial Interaction relationship with celebrities through Instagram?

RQ2: What do celebrities do on Instagram that strengthens Parasocial Interaction bonds with college students?

RQ3: Is there a relationship between the amount of time students use Instagram and the Parasocial Interaction bond with the celebrity?

RQ4: How do the strengths of Parasocial Interactions vary between the types of celebrities on Instagram?

Method

Participants

This study examined college students' parasocial bonds with famous people through the popular application Instagram. An online survey was administered during a one-week period in the Spring 2017 semester to undergraduate college students attending a Central Florida university using a convenience sampling method. A URL link was distributed through e-mail to undergraduate courses. Participation was voluntary. Once students provided consent, they were directed to a website where they completed the survey using the URL link.

After initially collecting data from 163 respondents, the dataset was cleared to reflect inclusion criteria (i.e., college students, have Instagram downloaded). Participants (N=105) ages ranged from 18 to 23 years old (M=19.97 , SD=2.81).

Females made up 62% of the sample and 37.3% of participants were male. Participants were predominantly White/Caucasian 52.5%, Hispanic/Latino 21.5%, 7.6% Asian/Asian-American, 9.5% self-identified as Black/African-American, 7.6% Multiracial and 0.6% responded Other. All participants have an Instagram account.

Measurement

The questionnaire consisted of six sections. In the first section, participants were asked to respond to basic demographic questions including age, gender, and ethnicity. Participants then answered questions related to their media use. Items included what kind of media platform they use to follow celebrities, the top three celebrities they follow, and their interest in Instagram (i.e. "Instagram is part of my everyday activity", "I'm proud to tell people I use Instagram", and "Instagram is part of my daily routine"). The third section measured how much time they spend on Instagram and how many times they checked on Instagram throughout their day. The fourth measures the parasocial interaction bonds on Instagram using a parasocial interaction scale which builds on the concept of user's involvement with the persona (Rubin et al., 1985, p.156). The fifth section examines the different actions famous people do on Instagram (e.g., "replying fan's comments", "host live video sessions", "address the followers directly in photo/video captions"). The last section, based on the participant's famous people's names, separating them into categorizes (i.e., celebrities or athletes) were taken action.

Dependent variable: Parasocial Interaction Scale. The scale included 22 items which were adapted and modified to fit our research. A 7-point scale was used ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with each statement. Anything above the average of 3.5 is defined

as a strong PSI bond.. Items to measure parasocial interaction (M=4.25, SD=.91, α=.91) included "Instagram shows me what the Famous Person is like," "When my Famous Person jokes around on Instagram, it is enjoyable," "I feel sorry for my Famous Person when he/she makes a mistake."

Time Scale. Participants' time spent on Instagram was measured by using quarterly time which includes morning, afternoon, evening, and overnight with the option from 0 to 6 hours in 30 minutes frequence. Participants' times checked on Instagram were also measured by quarterly times, morning, afternoon, evening, overnight, as well as "during the hour before taking this survey" and "during a typical hour in your day" with 20 times frequence.

Results

Research Question 1 examines if college students have a strong PSI relationship with celebrities through Instagram.

One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 3.5					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
OverallPSI	8.484	105	.000	.75129	.5757	.9269

Results showed college students have a strong PSI relationship with famous people through Instagram and is statistically significant M=4.25, SD=.912, t(105)=8.48, p<.001.

Research Question 2 looks at what celebrities do on Instagram that strengthens Parasocial Interaction bonds with college students.

Results showed multiple significant correlations between a celebrity's actions on Instagram and a strengthened parasocial interaction with followers. The strongest correlation was in replying to fan's comments (r=.42, p<.01), followed by addressing their followers directly in photo/video caption (r=.33, p<.01), hosting live video sessions on Instagram (r=.21, p<.05), and including family or friends in their post (r=.21. p<.05).

Research Question 3 looks at the relationship between the amount of time students use Instagram and the Parasocial Interaction bond with the celebrity.

Results showed the amount of time spent using Instagram and parasocial interaction have a negative correlation and is statistically significant (r=.21, p<.05) p=.03.

Research Question 4 categorizes the relationship between the strength in PSI and the types of celebrities on Instagram. An independent samples T-Test was conducted. Results showed there were 91 celebrities (M=4.23, SD=.91) and 14 athletes (M=4.16, SD=.62). The relationship between the strength in PSI and the types of celebrities on Instagram is not statistically significant t(103)=.29, p>.05.

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