

Even If You Are Not There, You Are Home: Exploring The Positive In The Self And Virtual Relationship Experiences Of Emerging Adult Filipino Facebook Users

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ABSTRACT

Facebook is considered as one of the most popular social networking sites in the world and it is apparent that Filipinos are one of its top users. Despite the popularity of the site, empirical evidence has implicated Facebook use with a wide variety of negative outcomes but with less knowledge on the positive effects of its use. The present investigation seeks to understand the positive experiences of Facebook use among Filipinos to capture a deeper understanding of the positive influences of the social networking site on the self and social relationships. Six individuals were asked to share two Facebook posts that they believe had a positive influence on them. Semi-structured interviews were conducted which focused on the two shared posts. The results of thematic analysis using Giorgi's (1975) phenomenological analysis show four themes: Facebook makes families closer; Facebook facilitates connection with people; Facebook contributes to identity formation and; Facebook facilitates positive emotions. The findings of the study provide insights on positive Facebook experiences, family dynamics, and Filipino virtual identity.

Keywords: Facebook, Self, Virtual Relationships, Social Network, Filipino

Introduction

Social networking sites are considered virtual communities which allow individuals to interact with one another or simply “hang out”. Among these sites, Facebook is one of the most popular (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011). The popularity of the social networking site appears to be more so among emerging adults, who are the usual consumers of social media (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013; Hayes, Van Stolk-Cooke, & Muench, 2015). In the Philippines, there were approximately 30 million users of the said social networking site in 2012, making the country 8th in the world with the highest number of users (Labrague, 2014).

Effects of Facebook Use

Empirical literature suggests that individuals use Facebook in order to satisfy their need to belong and self-presentation (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012), for self-expression and identity formation (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), and to seek information, entertainment, and social relations (Kwon, D’Angelo, & McLeod, 2013). Despite the perceived utility of the social networking site, however, research has associated Facebook use with a wide variety of negative outcomes. Some of the notable negative outcomes include deterioration of mood (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014), jealousy, anger, distrust, and emotional hurt (Muscanell, Guadagno, Rice, & Murphy, 2013), loneliness (Lou, Yan, Nickerson, & McMorris, 2012), low school performance (Junco, 2012), depression and anxiety (Labrague, 2014), emotional distress, and low self-esteem (Chen & Lee, 2013; Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011). Moreover, Ryan and Xenos (2011) found that Facebook users tend to be more extraverted and narcissistic but less conscientious than nonusers. Clayton, Osborne, Miller, and Oberle’s (2013) findings showed emotionally attached Facebook use is predicted by anxiety, alcohol use, and marijuana use, while Liu and Yu (2013) found no significant link between Facebook use and wellbeing. In a study by Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright, and Hudiburgh (2012), Facebook use was associated with extraversion but was also negatively associated with competence in initiating interpersonal relationships.

One of the most salient perceived benefits of Facebook is social support (Kwon et al., 2013). On the other hand, there have also been a few studies that have further explored the benefits of the said social networking site. For example, Kim and Lee (2011) investigated whether and how Facebook promotes the subjective wellbeing of college-aged individuals by focusing on the number of Facebook friends and self-presentation strategies, particularly being positive versus being honest. Analysis of cross-sectional data showed that the number of friends and positive self-presentation may enhance one’s subjective wellbeing but may not be grounded on perceived social support. Despite evidence linking Facebook use with low self-esteem (Chen & Lee, 2013; Kalpidou et al., 2011), Gonzales and Hancock (2011), argued that Facebook could also enhance self-esteem but this happens when there is selective self-presentation by becoming self-aware through viewing one’s own Facebook profile. Tazghini and Siedlecki (2013), on the other hand, showed that it is various self-esteem levels that contribute to different online behaviors, especially in Facebook. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) studied the relationship between Facebook use and social capital and found that using Facebook is strongly associated with bridging social capital. The researchers, however, could not establish the direction of the causal relationship. In a later study by Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009), this link between Facebook use and social capital was found to be small. In a study conducted by Liu and Yu (2013), the effect of Facebook use on wellbeing was investigated. The researchers found that online social support is an extension of general social support. While general social support is associated with positive wellbeing, online social support was not found to have a direct effect on wellbeing.

Social Media Use among Emerging Adults

While Facebook has billions of active users (Cheung et al., 2011), a significant number of the userbase is composed of individuals with ages ranging from 18 to the late 20s. According to Coyne et al. (2013), emerging adults spend more time using media than any other activity, with most of their media use involving the internet. They argued that this is because emerging adults deliberately seek out ways to express autonomy, to explore their identity,

and to build as well as maintain social relationships. In Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood developmental theory, emerging adults go through an intense period of change to form a stable sense of identity as well as form meaningful relationships. Such individuals seek to refine their sense of self based on their values, personality characteristics, and interests. This is also the point where individuals start to look for different kinds of social relationships that complement their own identities. Fox and Warber (2012) argued that social networking sites, particularly Facebook, enables emerging adults to do just that. On the other hand, Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) argued that identities established through Facebook are predominantly implicit rather than explicit. This means identities are more "show rather than tell" and are emphasized on consumer identities rather than personally narrated ones. While emerging adults turn to Facebook for their interpersonal relationships, Clayton, Nagurney, and Smith's (2013) findings show that Facebook usage actually relates to negative relationship outcomes and that relationship outcomes are mediated by Facebook-related conflicts.

Facebook Use in the Philippines

In the Philippines, Facebook is considered as the most popular website, with a userbase that far surpasses that of other social networking sites (Carvajal, 2014). Consequently, several studies on the use of Facebook in the country were conducted. In 2014, Carvajal investigated the social transformations facilitated on Filipino generation Y users. The results suggested that the social networking site facilitated superficial friendships, selective socializing, a "puffed-up" self-presentation, oversharing, easy communication, and flaunting of luxurious possessions and experiences. Basilisco and Cha (2015) focused the impact of Facebook use on social capital and life satisfaction among Filipino users. The results showed that Filipinos use Facebook to seek convenience in establishing communication. They also use the site to look for information, friends, and entertainment. Unlike what is suggested in other literature (Kwon et al., 2013), social support was not found as a significant motivation for Facebook use. On the other hand, the results suggest that Filipinos use Facebook to enhance their social capital, that is, to strengthen and maintain relationships with family and friends. Life satisfaction was also found to be positively associated with Facebook use (Basilisco & Cha, 2015). Depression was not found to be associated with Facebook use among Filipinos (Datu, Valdez, & Datu, 2012). On the other hand, Labrague (2014) explained that while frequency of use does not predict depression, duration of use does. Facebook was also seen as possible platform for online education in the Philippines as investigated by Esteves in 2012.

Theoretical Underpinnings in Facebook Use

Previous studies have explained Facebook use using several theoretical bases. The uses and gratifications theory, for example, asserts that consumers of media are influenced by the form of media that satisfies consumers' goals to address their needs (Rubin, 2002). Hence, Facebook use is highly dependent on its perceived uses and how people are gratified for using it. In a study by Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) on Facebook use among college students, popular uses and gratifications found involved trying to catch up with friends, maintaining communication with friends, and making new ones. These gratifications satisfy a "friend" need, while other gratifications such as learning about events and posting social functions satisfy a need involving information. Aside from social information and sociability, Quan-Haase and Young (2010) found other gratifications such as past time, affection, sharing of problems, and fashion. H. L. Yang and Lin (2014) made use of a value theory perspective on Facebook use and highlighted epistemic value (capacity of Facebook to provide novelty and information), social value (communicating with others and improving self-presentation), and hedonic value (use is pleasurable, fun) as key factors in using the said social networking site. Attachment theory was also used in explaining Facebook as shown in the study of Hart, Nailling, Bizer, and Collins (2015) where anxious attachment was found to predict frequent Facebook use. Darvell, Walsh, and White (2011) also explained Facebook use through the theory of planned behavior including self-esteem, partner trust, and demographic characteristics. The theory posits that Facebook use is determined largely by intentions, which are influenced by attitudes, positive and negative

evaluations of the planned behavior, norms, pressure to conform to performance of behavior, and perceived behavioral control (Darvell et al., 2011).

The Present Study

Despite empirical findings associating Facebook with negative outcomes, there is no denying that Facebook use is a common and continuing phenomenon (Cheung et al., 2011), warranting the notion that individuals must find something positive in Facebook use despite its perceived disadvantages. Even among studies relating to emerging adults who are primary consumers of social media, empirical evidence also points to negative outcomes in terms of identity formation and interpersonal relationships (Clayton, Nagurney, et al., 2013; Zhao et al., 2008). While there are several studies that do explore the benefits of Facebook use (Ellison et al., 2007; Kim & Lee, 2011a; Liu & Yu, 2013), findings do not suggest a direct relationship between Facebook use and positive outcomes and comes with a wide variety of conditional effects. Moreover, in such studies Facebook use is used as an independent variable and while some associations with positive outcomes were found, it does not explain what about Facebook can be considered as positive. Consequently, there exists a gap in the literature in explaining Facebook use in the context of the actual lived experiences of the users. The same can be said among studies on Facebook use in the Philippines (Basilisco & Cha, 2015; Carvajal, 2014; Datu et al., 2012; Labrague, 2014), whereas much of the focus has been on motivations for use and negative psychological outcomes. Moreover, theoretical explanations on the use of Facebook appears limited to outcomes, predictors, and motivations of use (Darvell et al., 2011; Hart et al., 2015; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; H. L. Yang & Lin, 2014), while explanations on the mechanisms behind the benefits of use are not provided. It is for this reason that the present investigation sought to explore the benefits of Facebook use in the lived experiences of individuals who use the social networking site. Hence, this study focused on subjective positive experiences of Filipino emerging adults.

Method

The present qualitative study is phenomenological in nature based on Giorgi's (1975) phenomenological method, which emphasizes quality of data rather than quantity. Giorgi's method is aimed at arriving at meanings of phenomenon as revealed by others.

Participants

The participants in the study consisted of six individuals (3 males and 3 females with an age range of 18 to 26 years). Five of the participants were enrolled students (one undergraduate student, one doctoral student, and three masteral students), while one is an employed non-teaching staff of a university in Manila. Snowball sampling was used to recruit the participants. However, the participants have to be active Facebook users for at least one year prior to the study. The recruited participants were given an informed consent form and were presented with their rights as participants, as well as assured them of the confidentiality of their identities. Queries from the participants were also answered before proceeding with the data gathering procedure.

Procedures

After getting consent, the participants were met at a later time and were asked to prepare two Facebook posts that they believe had a positive influence on them. The posts were of the participants' preference regardless of time acquired. The posts were either their own or a post they encountered in their feeds. A one-on-one semi-structured interview was then conducted focusing on the subjective positive experiences that revolve around the shared Facebook posts. Interview questions include "Could you walk me through the experience of when you encountered the post?" and "What do you think this post symbolizes?" The interview questions were asked in English, but the participants were allowed to answer in Filipino. Back translations were not done as all interviewers were proficient in speaking both English and Filipino languages. The participants were debriefed at the end of the

interview and were given the full details of the study. Interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission and were immediately transcribed afterwards.

Data Analysis

Data acquired from the participants were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis based on Giorgi's (1975) method of data analysis with four steps. The first step involved looking through the interview protocols to get an impression of the whole while suspending judgment and preconceived ideas. The second step proceeded with the identification of 'meaning units' as expressed by the participants. This was done through open coding which will allow the creation of themes. The third step involved the re-evaluation of the themes created resulting to the final set of themes. Once this was done, the last step involved the creation of descriptive statements from the themes established in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. No deviation from the said steps of analysis were made. Participant validation was conducted by confirming to the participants the accuracy of the statements taken during the interview sessions. Transcribed interview data were coded and subjected to thematic analysis along with the presence of external auditors to establish triangulation.

Results

Analysis of data from the six participants resulted to four themes. The themes were converted to descriptive statements relating to the positive experiences of Facebook use among emerging adults. These include: Facebook makes families closer; Facebook facilitates connection with people; Facebook contributes to identity formation and; Facebook facilitates positive emotions.

Facebook makes families closer

Across participants, the most salient positive experience on Facebook use was related to the family and how the use of Facebook makes family members closer together. The experience revolved around the notion that the use of the social networking site enables them to communicate with their family members, which they feel makes their relationship with them stronger. One participant said, "...*nagkaroon ng communication naming sa isa't-isa mas lalong lumawak.*" Participants also reported that the use of Facebook gives them a sense of being with their loved ones even if they are far away. One of the participants remarked, "*Even if you are not there, you are home.*"

Facebook facilitates connection with people

The accounts of the participants suggest that Facebook enabled them to communicate with their friends and relate with them. The findings show that Facebook opened opportunities for the participants to share content with their friends and interact with them, regardless of where they are. The positive experience revolves around how their friends are able to acknowledge and compliment the content that they share in the social media site. These are embedded in the statements of the participants such as, "*Pati yung mga friends ko na matagal ko nang hindi nakikita nagko-comment po sila*", and "*Hindi pala ako nag-iisa.*"

Most of the participants mentioned that the number of reactions and shares associated with a Facebook post contributes to how likely they are to pay attention to such posts. However, the findings suggest that the positive experience of Facebook is not about the number of reactions or shares a Facebook post has but with who or what the post is involved with. This means that Facebook facilitates how the participants are able to connect with people and objects that matter to them. These include their close family members and friends, people they admire, and objects of their faith or that is associated with their own views and values. In one interview account, the participant mentioned, "*Kasi kung everyday friends ko lang parang, okay, pero kung big time persons like professors, napapansin nila ako for my talent, tataas si self-esteem.*" Another participant was referring to a person he said he respects very much when he said. "I believe I share the same optimism that he had."

Facebook contributes to identity formation

The results of the study show that Facebook helps the participants establish their identity as they use the social networking site as a means to express who they are and what they are capable of doing. At the same time, Facebook enables them to learn more about themselves as the site gives them a reflection of their affiliations. One participant said, "They appear to reflect my affiliation to a certain extent, the groups that I belong to, and in some ways, my interests and passion." Another participant remarked, "From the two posts, I learned more about myself."

Facebook facilitates positive emotions

The second most salient positive experience involving Facebook use is the experience of positive affect. This is characterized by the participants feeling happy. The results of the study showed that all participants reported some form of positive affect out of their experiences with the shared Facebook posts. The most mentioned codes were happiness, along with the participants saying they felt good, blessed, motivated, hopeful, contented, looking at things in a positive light, and laughter. Facebook also gives inspiration. Most of the participants shared Facebook posts that not only lets them experience positive affect but also experience being inspired. In the accounts of the participants one of them said, "*It also inspires me... to use my life para, not only for myself, pero para rin other people could benefit.*"

Discussion

Despite the numerous evidence implicating Facebook use with several negative effects (Chen & Lee, 2013; Clayton, Osborne, et al., 2013; Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014; etc.), Facebook is not all bad. The results of the present study suggest that using Facebook can improve social relations and this appears to be significantly linked to participants' own identities online. In contrast to the findings of other studies on the benefits of Facebook focusing on social support (Kim & Lee, 2011b; Kwon et al., 2013; Liu & Yu, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2009), the findings of the present study highlight the quality of relationships the participants have instead of the perception of social support. Particularly, the data showed that Facebook use is beneficial because the participants were able to connect and relate with their peers and family by reacting on their posts. Studies by Kwon et al. (2013) and Gonzales and Hancock (2011) did suggest that Facebook use facilitates social support online and self-esteem through self-representation. However, what is interesting to point out in the data is that the participants felt positive about the posts not because of the number of reactions from others but because of whom the reactions were from. While it is true that participants wanted to be known in Facebook based on their groups, talents, and abilities, they wanted to be known and acknowledged by the people who matter to them. Ellison et al. (2007) describes this as using Facebook as a means in bridging social capital – beneficial social relations. Apparently, the positive experiences in Facebook may be brought about by the quality of relationships the participants have offline. According to the ecological systems theory, identical social experiences across contexts may lead to good adjustment as how one interacts within one context may determine how one interacts in another (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). In a study of Khalis and Mikami (2018), for example, it was found that having more accepting peers offline led to less narcissistic self-presentation in Facebook.

The results of the study as explained by the ecological systems theory implies that having healthy and accepting offline relationships may play a role in the positive experiences of the participants in Facebook. This is very much manifested in terms of how participants linked their positive experiences in Facebook with their family relationships. This is because the site is able to facilitate communication among family members and share content that would make individuals feel that they are not so distant from their loved ones (C. C. Yang, 2018). Interestingly, empirical studies do not say much about family dynamics and beneficial Facebook use. Ball, Wanzer, and Servoss (2013) investigated family communication patterns among young adults who decided to "friend" their parents in Facebook while Placencia and Lower (2013) looked into complimenting behavior on Facebook among family members. However, their studies do not cover family dynamics beyond conversation patterns. Still, among individuals with lives firmly rooted on everyday family routines, web-based communication plays a significant role in

maintaining family bonds (Siibak & Tamme, 2013). In the Philippines, the family continues as its role a primary socializing agent even when family members are far away from each other (Uy-Tioco, 2007). It is for this reason that Filipino society has always considered the family as the foundation of society (Tarroja, 2010).

Facebook has always been associated with identity formation, where most studies look at how identity is established through social interactions within the social networking site (Coyne et al., 2013; Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2012). Zhao et al. (2008) explained that identity formation in Facebook is more implicit rather than explicit – a “show rather than tell” identity wherein users show people who they are instead of telling them who they are. This is also evident in the results of the present study wherein the participants are able to share who they are through posts pertaining to their likes, dislikes, hobbies, and talents. Literature on Facebook and identity have focused on identity or self-presentation, whereas identity is more of “management” than development (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Wilson, Gosling and Graham (2012) explained that self-presentation on Facebook is anchored on the profile page that is customizable depending on the preferences of the user. On the other hand, they did note that how these profile pages are constructed is still influenced by interactions with other Facebook users. According to Reich (2010) Facebook users do not really have a sense of identity online, but do use the site for identity exploration.

In the present study, the participants claimed that using Facebook has enabled them to know more about themselves by knowing who they are in the context of their interactions with others online. It is possible that Filipino Facebook users are able to maximize this as Filipinos have always established who they are through others. According to Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino (2000), the Filipino concept of *kapwa* originally refers to how one identifies himself in others. They cited Virgilio Enriquez, the proponent of Filipino Psychology in explaining that obtaining an idea of the self in others is not about maintaining smooth relationships with others, but rather, about interacting with or being one with others. Filipinos place value on how others perceive them and at the same time places value and awareness on how they present themselves to others (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). This is also evident in the way the participants shared the content they post on Facebook. They wanted to inspire others just as how they are inspired by others that they interact with online.

The results of the present study may have some implications on theory building in explaining Facebook use. While there are several theories that explain Facebook use (Darvell et al., 2011; Hart et al., 2015; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; H. L. Yang & Lin, 2014), it is important to take note that these theories focus largely on explaining what influences the use of the said social networking site. Apparently, the results of the present study suggest that there is more to Facebook use than antecedents and outcomes. The findings of the present study provide data that does not solely focus on motivations or predictors of Facebook use but also sheds light on the actual process of use. The exploration of actual lived experiences may provide more opportunities to theoretically bridge the gap between antecedents and outcomes of Facebook use in terms of family dynamics and identity formation.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study addresses certain gaps in the literature, particularly a focus on benefits rather than outright outcomes of Facebook use. To the knowledge of the authors, this is one of the few studies that investigates benefits of Facebook use out of the lived experiences of the users themselves. The findings also reveal some perspectives worth further exploring such as family dynamics and identity formation in Facebook use. However, a major limitation of the study is that the positive experiences reported by the participants were largely based on Facebook posts of their preference. While these experiences are from using Facebook, it does not indicate the overall benefits of Facebook. Future research may consider lived experiences across different types of Facebook posts or focus on experiences of actual use of the social networking site (e.g. scrolling through the feeds, tagging photos, etc.) as these may reveal more of the mechanisms that pertain to its use. The study is also limited in terms of considering demographic characteristics of the participants such as socio-economic status, profession, or educational attainment, which may influence perceptions on Facebook use. Future studies may consider differences across these demographic characteristics as patterns like what the findings of other studies show (Carvajal, 2014; Cheung et al., 2011; Coyne et al., 2013; Ellison et al., 2007). Because the findings of the present study highlighted

family interactions and identity formation as major components in Facebook use, research may also investigate online family dynamics and identity through Facebook. Research looking into a theoretical perspective on the mechanisms underlying Facebook use may also be warranted considering that there is lacking theory-driven empirical research that addresses the communication and interactions that occur within social networking sites, especially Facebook (Cheung et al., 2011; Ryan & Xenos, 2011).

Conclusion

The results of the present investigation are clear that Facebook can facilitate positive experiences among its users, and that how it is used and experienced has been significantly influenced by the users' values and culture. These positive experiences revolve around family interactions and identity formation. These findings suggest that Facebook use may not be limited to antecedents and outcomes but may also have underlying mechanisms that play a role in users' experiences. While the present study is limited to the subjective experiences of Filipino emerging adults, further investigation on the theoretical underpinnings involving the mechanisms underlying social media use is considerable.

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