Chapter 6
How Do Social Media Impact Interpersonal Communication Competence?
A Uses and Gratifications Approach

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the role of psycho-social individual characteristics, social media motives, and social media use as predictors of interpersonal communication competence (ICC). Applying the uses and gratifications theoretical framework, this research seeks to explore the potential effects of social media use related to the second digital generation (2DG), or those born after 1990. A cross-sectional study design, surveying 373 college students ages 18-24 years, found that offline social capital, interpersonal interaction, and social activity were direct, positive predictors of ICC. Social media motives and use contributed a small but significant portion of explained variance in the model, above and beyond effects of psycho-social characteristics. Specifically, members of the 2DG who use social media to compensate for offline loneliness, as well as those who were more dependent on social media to fulfill a variety of needs reported lower ICC. Limitations and directions for future research are also offered.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 88% of 18- to 29-year-olds use some form of social media (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Considered members of the second digital generation (2DG), millennials born after 1990 differ from other generations in that they have grown up immersed in the social media environment (Taipale, 2016; Williams, Crittenden, Keo, & McCarty, 2012). These young adults, who had access to touch screens and smart devices from infancy, can navigate through platforms and different technologies with ease. Members of the 2DG prefer to stay connected to others via social media, tending to be drawn more to the functions of social media that relate more closely to face-to-face (FtF) communication (Taipale, 2016; Williams et al., 2012).

Given these preferences, it is important to examine the potential impact social media use has for offline interpersonal communication competence (ICC). ICC refers to an individual's perceived "ability to manage interpersonal relationships in communication settings" (R. B. Rubin & Martin, 1984, p. 33). Competent communicators are able to engage in effective self-presentation, articulate ideas clearly during conversations, and demonstrate appropriate perspective-taking skills (R. B. Rubin & Martin, 1984). Interaction on social media can present opportunities to learn about and test these skills; however, it is unclear how the use of this technology might enhance (or detract) from offline ICC.

One theoretical perspective that can be helpful in beginning to explore how social media affects ICC is the uses and gratifications theory (U&G). U&G is a functional perspective that focuses on how individuals actively choose media to fulfill their needs, which can lead to various effects (A. M. Rubin, 2009). U&G theory has often been applied to contexts where interpersonal and mediated communication intersect (A. M. Rubin & Rubin, 2001). Although ICC has not yet been studied as an outcome to social media use, other studies have explored how U&G can explain interpersonal constructs such as self-disclosure (e.g., Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014, 2015), communication apprehension (e.g., Punyanunt-Carter, De La Cruz, & Wrench, 2017), and social capital (e.g., Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to apply U&G theory to discover the impact of social media on ICC for members of the 2DG. The following sections will outline relevant research regarding U&G theory and the main predictors examined in this study, the methodology applied, the presentation of the findings, and a discussion of the implications of this research.

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