

Chapter 32

Online Multi-Contextual Analysis: (Re)Connecting Social Network Site Users with Their Profile

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes online multi-contextual analysis (OMCA) as a new multi-method approach for investigating and analyzing the behaviors, perceptions, and opinions of social network site (SNS) users. This approach is designed to extend methods currently available for the investigation of the use and social consequences of these sites with techniques that converge upon and triangulate users' perceptions of their online behavior. Using quantitative measures of SNS usage, OMCA provides a much neglected level of analysis. We discuss current methodological practice in SNS research and introduce OMCA as an alternative approach. We then describe two studies that have employed OMCA to illustrate the method's diversity and potential for providing new insights. Finally, we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of OMCA in comparison to single approaches and draw conclusions for theories of SNSs.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread adoption of social network sites (SNSs) has generated considerable interest among researchers in the uses and social consequences of these sites. SNS research has examined the

relationship between SNSs and such diverse topics as trust (Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007), information revelation (Gross & Acquisti, 2005), privacy (Dwyer et al., 2007; Gross & Acquisti, 2005), friendship formation and maintenance (boyd, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007), and well-being (Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten, 2006). The

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primary focus of these studies has been on the social change affected by the SNS, as well as the complex intersection between social change and system design and use. Key issues addressed in terms of social change are the development and maintenance of social relationships online and offline, the representation and changing notions of the self on these sites, and changes around privacy perception and enactment. However, with emerging research streams, new research struggles also arise. Similar to studies of the Internet, studies of social media wrestle with the limitations of 'old' data collection methods for examining these new media forms (Quan-Haase, Wellman, Witte & Hampton, 2002).

This chapter adds to the current discussion of new media and methodological concerns, opportunities, and challenges (Markham & Baym, 2009) by proposing a new approach to the study of SNSs. Specifically, we examine the utility and feasibility of online multi-contextual analysis (OMCA) as a new and particularly comprehensive method for SNS research. At the core of the method lies the assumption that in SNS research users have been disconnected from their data through both survey methods and data crawling techniques. OMCA draws theoretically on user-centered design and attempts to reconnect users to their data by asking respondents to comment and reflect upon their online behavior. Moreover, this method recognizes the strengths of triangulation as a means to converge different data sources, and the need to converge data analysis via the SNS profile page. Triangulation comprises the use of multiple data collection methods to cross-examine results, and allows researchers to both verify data validity and enrich data obtained from one source with data from another source. By drawing on different data sources, multiple contexts are created, allowing for the analysis of each context independently as well as the interplay between them. The data converge at the SNS profile page because this is the space of primary importance to SNS studies, providing, for example, demographic information on users,

data on profile choices, and an overview of site navigation and usage. We show in the chapter how OMCA's key principles help in gaining insight into users' decisions about how to use SNSs and the motivations for certain behaviors on the sites. This is, to our knowledge, a much neglected area of investigation in SNSs research.

This chapter commences with a review of the current work on SNSs, focusing in particular on the methodological approaches employed by researchers. Then the chapter shifts to describe OMCA as a new approach to investigating SNSs and learning about users' perceptions and attitudes directly. What follows is a review of two examples of research projects that illustrate the application of OMCA to SNS research: (1) Fieldtrip, an online community platform that combined user surveys with detailed records of member activity on the site and (2) an examination of Facebook, which paired profile data with user commentary and survey data. We conclude with a discussion of the value of OMCA to SNS research and avenues for future research.

SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

Social network sites¹ (SNSs), such as MySpace, LinkedIn, and Facebook, have rapidly increased in popularity. Statistics show that approximately 80 to 90 percent of undergraduate university students are active participants (Strater and Richter, 2007) and that adult use of SNSs in the United States has nearly quadrupled in the last four years—from 8 percent in 2005 to 35 percent in 2009 (Lenhart, 2009). The popularity of these sites is due to users' ability to converse with their friends and peers, to share digital cultural artifacts and ideas, and to connect with vast networks of peers (boyd and Heer, 2006). Through the construction of a profile users are able to signal aspects of their personality, which assists in identity formation and performance (boyd, 2007).

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