

Teenage Use And Gratification Shift After Social Media Education By Famous “Influencer”

Collin Kartchner

By

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I certify that I have read this thesis and that, in my opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Professional Communication.


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Abstract

This content analysis takes a look into the needs that are satisfied when teens use social media in a certain fashion as suggested to late public speaker and influencer, Collin Kartner. Founder of Save The Kids Inc, Kartchner is known for his charismatic approach to internet safety and training for children, teenagers and parents alike. This “challenge” as coined by Kartchner included “taking a break from the fake”, deleting people who the teens did not know in real life from their friends list, as well as anyone who does not make them feel good, he also educated them on the power of relationships and challenged them to seek friends outside of the screen. By applying Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), this research found that the most common needs that were satisfied included improvement in self image, as well as improvement in relationships in the teens life.

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Introduction

It is widely accepted that children have access to and use screens and devices in many forms from a young age such as TV's, phones, tablets, personal gaming systems, etc. In recent years, much research has been done in order to find how screen usage affects children's behaviors and mental wellness. Conversely, there is very limited research on how screen use can affect interpersonal relationships that children build. There is also limited information about how a teenager's needs are met or unmet depending on how a teenager accesses and utilizes social media. This study analyzed teen's reactions and comments after taking a social media challenge from a famous public speaker and influencer, Collin Kartner. Founder of Save The Kids Inc, Kartchner is known for his charismatic approach to internet safety and training for children, teenagers and parents alike. This research will seek to identify needs that are satisfied through social media consumption after applying certain rules for social media use for teenagers. This research will look for themes and ideas that correspond to the Uses and Gratifications theory within the discourse as self reported by teens who have heard Collin's message either in person or on social media itself. This content analysis used a Uses and Gratifications framework to identify how changing one's use of social media can affect the needs that are satisfied from the action. One understudied area of research within Uses and Gratifications Theory is teenagers accessing social media as a means to meet their needs. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) outlines five needs that an individual may identify as their purpose in accessing media, such as to gain knowledge, establish relationships, or to be familiar with trends in order to fit in with their surrounding social life ((Katz, Gurevitch, Haas, 1973 in: Whiting and Williams, 2013).

Literature Review

The prevalence of screen usage is common in homes across The United States of America, including use of screens by children and adults alike. In fact, research has shown that children ages 11-14 use an average of around 9 hours of screen time per day (AACAP, 2020). The frequency of social media usage is rapidly increasing, along with the rate of depression among young people in the United States (Campbell, 2014). In the US and in other countries, young people are most likely to use social networks as a means of seeking information, disclosing personal information and receiving validation for any accomplishments (Ziv, I., & Kiasi, M. 2015). “Due in part to a study released by Kraut and colleagues in 1998, which concluded that Internet use is positively correlated with depression, loneliness, and stress, public opinion about the Internet has been decidedly negative” (Shaw, L. H., & Gant, L. M., 2002). However, with the internet becoming the number one source for information seeking, more doors have been opened to explore the phenomena of how social media can be leveraged to communicate and improve relationships (Westerman, D., Spence, P. R., & Heide, B. V., 2013). The content that is displayed on social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are often user targeted, which makes it difficult to navigate to find certain information. It is important for young people to learn how to navigate social media so that they can be aware of the dangers it can entail.

Uses & Gratification Theory

Uses and Gratifications theory illustrates how people are impacted by the content that is on their media feed. Rubin (1994) summarized that U&G is a user-centered approach, viewing audiences as active and media use as goal-directed. In this sense, when

people use the media for specific purposes, they get a certain satisfaction from this use (Stafford et al., 2008). The original theory focused on television and media communications, however, in more recent years the theory has evolved to apply to general use of the internet (Jovic, 2018). This theory has also been applied in order to investigate the motivations of people utilizing internet websites to find information, connect with others, purchase goods, and other online behaviors (Ko, Hanjun, et al., 2013). Uses and Gratifications theory is applicable to social media because of its origin in communication studies. This study will take an adverse approach to this theory as it seeks to identify any new motivations as social media usage is altered and changed in specific ways. The content analysis will identify any new motivations or needs that are satisfied along with the traditional categories introduced in UGT.

There are five categories of needs/uses surrounding the theory of Uses and Gratifications (Whiting and Williams, 2013). Cognitive needs relate to a person's desire to learn or acquire knowledge through the media they consume. For instance, learning factual information from a social media news platform. Affective needs include emotions and moods that motivate people to participate in media consumption. Personal integrative needs include the motivation to gain credibility, status or prestige, and reassure their self-image. This would be an example of finding something on social media and wanting to purchase it to help them fit in with their perceived social norms. Social integrative needs include socializing with family, friends, and people in society. This can include the idea of "FOMO" or the fear of missing out, causing people to engage in media usage that will help them feel more integrated with their peers. An example of tension free needs would be

someone using the media to escape the reality of their everyday life, and release any stress or conflict from their day (Temel & Neslihan, 2018).

Using Uses and Gratifications theory, Ziv and Kiasi (2015) found that if someone has high self esteem, they are likely to keep engaged on social media because they are more likely to foster new and healthy friendships. Likewise, the same study found that if one has low self esteem it will probably get worse as they continue to engage in the same behaviors. With this research, the authors (Ziv and Kiasi,2015) found that the ability to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, immensely contributes to psychological well being. The reason why social media is the route that teens take to meet these needs still needs more development.

It is well known that many different demographics use social media in various ways. The main advantage for the uses and gratification approach in this content analysis is that it gives an insight to motivation for consuming a particular media content in the particular way, which complements the findings about the interaction between the media and its users (Tanta, 2014). How teenagers use social media has been well researched, however applying uses and gratifications theory to the research is underdeveloped. This study will use uses and gratifications theory to categorize how changing the way media is used and consumed affects the needs that are being met within the teenage individual.

Teens and Screen Time

Research regarding children and screen time is relatively new, however, there is substantial evidence that shows that screens hinder development at different levels, and decrease adolescent well-being in some circumstances (Canadian Pediatric Corporation, 2018). This has become a popular discussion in public, political, and scientific

conversations(Kaur, S., & Vig, D., 2016; Best, P., Manktelow, R., & Taylor, B. (2014); Ziv, I., & Kiasi, M., 2015). One research study found a direct link between higher levels of youth screen time and increased sleep disturbances, which were then linked to higher levels of youth behavioral problems, no matter what developmental stage the youth were in (Parent, et al, 2016). Other studies recommended setting limits on screen use for kids based on their age and development in order to encourage imagination play and creativity, which is necessary in order to develop coping and problem solving skills as an adult (Anderson & Subrahmanyam, 2017). Because access to screens is so prevalent, it might be difficult for parents to keep track of how their children are using media and to monitor their behaviors on various devices. The effects of screen time goes far beyond just looking at a screen. Although those results are concerning, it is also important to understand how screens are being used by children. Technology, including the internet and social media, has been introduced to the adolescent society beginning at a very young age leading to changes in the development and behavior of youth (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2018). Another idea is that while using social media is not recommended for certain age groups, it is important for children to learn to navigate social media with their parents' approval, and in some cases it is better not to have social media as a distraction at all (Kartchner, 2018).

Adolescent members of many societies worldwide are facing increasing challenges when it comes to mental, physical, and emotional health. Depression in children and adolescents is a significant public health problem in terms of its prevalence, suffering, and impairment (Salvi, D. 2017). Over 2.2 million teens in America, aged twelve to seventeen will experience a major depressive episode before reaching the age of adulthood and over seventy percent of those children are considered to have a severe impairment due to their

mental illness (Major Depression, 2017). With the rise of depression in teens, there has not been a coinciding rise in percentage of treatment for those adolescents experiencing major depression. In fact over sixty percent of adolescents did not receive any form of formal treatment at all (Luxton, D., et al., 2012).

A study completed in Thailand has shown that the amount of emphasis that is placed on media interaction can be devastating to individuals and even societies (Campbell, C. 2014). Psychologists in this study found that young Thais who do not receive enough positive feedback on selfies (pictures of themselves on social media) are encountering extensive emotional problems, and ultimately leading to a loss of self confidence and negative attitude towards themselves (Campbell, C. 2014). Another study claims selfies are a way to make up for the lack of self esteem and to fill a gap in intimacy that brings upon these feelings of inadequacy for teenagers (Kaur, S., & Vig, D., 2016).

Young people seem to be putting their emotional health in the hands of an app, depending on how much engagement a post gets for positive self image. However, in more recent studies, this gap in intimacy was not found to be related to simply having a social networking account, or even the frequency or duration of use for those accounts (Salvi, D. 2017). Adversely, researchers have found a correlation between the depth of engagement on those social media websites and the feelings of poor self esteem, narcissism, loneliness and depression occurring within adolescent people participating in these activities (Kaur, S., & Vig, D., 2016; Best, P., Manktelow, R., & Taylor, B. (2014); Ziv, I., & Kiasi, M., 2015). Teenagers who create meaningful relationships with those they interact with on social media were found to perceive increased emotional support, reduced anxiety, and felt like they belonged in their environment (Manktelow, R., & Taylor, B. 2014). Social Media is not

going away, and sadly neither is depression. The negative impact of social media occurs mostly as a result of the social comparison users engage in while using it (Kartchner, 2018). Comparisons tend to lower self esteem, which in turn increases the risk and severity of depressive symptoms, anxiety and a host of other unhealthy feelings and behavior (Dube, Dabi-Elle, 2017). The study of the perception and impact of social media is relatively new, and many research studies have shown the positive effects that social media can have on society. However, without the proper tools, children cannot navigate the world of social media alone.

Save The Kids Movement

Because of this dynamic shift, some social media “influencers” (character’s with a large social following on the apps) have become spokespersons for children using social media. One such idol was Collin Kartchner, of Lehi, Utah, who passed away due to natural causes in October of 2020. Collin started what he calls a revolution to “Save the Kids” and “Save the parents” by introducing them to facts and statistics about phone usage and social media (Kartchner, 2018). He did this both through social media platforms, as well as in-person events where he talked directly to the parents and children (SaveTheKids.org).

Starting in 2017, Collin Kartchner had a unique tactic he used to combat his perceived issues with Instagram: He fought Instagram with Instagram. He kickstarted a national campaign called #SaveTheKids, and set forth to help people of all ages to be better than the negative effects of social media & screen-addiction, while showing the world how to use it for doing good. Most recently, he was on a crusade to “save teens both young and old to rise above the negative effects of social media & screen-addiction, while showing the world how to use it for doing good” (Savethekids.org).

Throughout his mission, he encouraged kids to change the way they use social media (if they intended to keep it at all). Collin told the kids to unfollow people who do not make them feel happy or empower them in some way (Kartchner,2018). As an inspirational speaker, he used humor, facts and stories to get the kids attention and get them thinking. Part of Collin's challenge included eight second hugs to improve relationships with friends and family, as well as "taking a break from the fake" that is on social media(Kartchner, 2020). After taking a break on social media or implementing his suggestions, he encouraged children to reach out to him and tell him how things have changed(Kartchner, 2020). Some of these kids took the challenge and expressed to Collin how they felt after this social media break. This research will analyze some of these comments and responses.

Research Question

Young people are looking online more and more for gratification, and while youth cannot control what other people post, they can choose who they follow and how they choose to use their own platform. In order to address how changes in social media use can affect the rates of depression, we must address how the younger generation is using and seeking to use social media. When social support and self-esteem perceivably increased on social media significantly, loneliness and depression was found to decrease by equally significant amounts (Shaw, L.,Gant, L. 2002). This content analysis will seek to identify how kids who have changed (or reportedly changed) their social media habits have been impacted as reported to the public spokesman, Collin Kartchner. This research will consider how different uses of social media can impact the satisfaction of U&G needs of teens between the ages of 12 and 18. Because all of the data being coded was collected

through social media, we know that the children have used screens and technology often. If previous research has shown that increased screen time affects both adults and children in regards to their behavior and mental wellness, identifying any shifts in behavior or attitude will be key in addressing the use of social media for kids.

RQ: According to the Uses and Gratifications theory, what needs do teens say are satisfied after they apply Collin Kartchner's social media challenge to their media consumption?

Method

A content analysis was performed using the five categorized needs as based off of the framework of the U&G communication theory. The discourse was obtained from publicly posted direct messages sent to Collin Kartchner on his Instagram profile. 104 direct messages were coded after they were posted publicly to Kartchner's personal Instagram account on his highlights between the months of April 2020 and October 2020. Every third artifact was coded during the time frame, in order to provide unbiased material within the research. In this portion of the analysis, each direct message was coded into one category based on the expressions within the discourse. The five categories used for coding were cognitive need, affectionate need, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension free needs. These categories were adopted from the Uses and Gratifications theory and adapted to this research. The direct messages were coded according to the following guidelines for each category.

Cognitive Needs

_____ Direct messages that included content relating to learning new things, improving brain and school function, and/or improving focus will be coded into the cognitive needs

category for this study. For example, a direct message stating that taking a break from social media helped them learn to focus more in school and learning how to use social media correctly was a great experience would go in this category.

Affective Needs

Direct messages that include conversations detailing improvement/decline on mental health, feeling happy or sad, or any emotion related to taking a break from social media or implementing Kartchner's challenge will be coded into the category called affective needs.

Personal Integrative Needs

_____ Direct messages in this category include comments relating to self confidence, fitting in or comparing to another person. Another example would be a direct message stating that the teen was overcoming social expectations and unrealistic ideals would also fit into this category.

Social Integrative Needs

_____ Direct messages in this category are limited to content surrounding ideas involving relationships, conversations, social gatherings, etc. This can include comments about missing a friend, or comments stating that a teen actually had more or less time to spend with friends and family after implementing Collin's social media suggestions.

Tension Free Needs

_____ Direct messages that include the idea of having a relaxing or more stress free environment after implementing breaks from social media or other guidelines would fall into the category titled "Tension Free Needs". This would include any data that states that the teen was not as overwhelmed by social media in general, or that they have found other ways to meet this need.

A single DM can be categorized in more than one way if it meets the requirements of separate categorized needs. This study seeks to identify all of the needs that are being met by teens using social media in a more purposeful way rather than directionless.

A content analysis is a justified method for this research because the specifics of the topic is not well discussed nor researched, background information needs to be found. This method also allows for less invasion of personal opinions and status of traditionally preemptive topics such as the use of technology. This research method should be able to identify how youth perceive the use of smartphones, and how changing or limiting their use impacts how their needs are met within the media.

Results

This content analysis presents compelling documentation supporting the needs outlined in the uses and gratifications theory through direct messages sent by teens. After completing the coding process for 100 random direct messages, all five categories presented themselves at various levels. The most popular categories were personal and social integrative needs, with affectionate needs trailing closely behind. The following data outlines the number of times each category presented itself, along with qualitative data that emerged from the coding process.

Personal Integrative Needs

Messages including personal integrative needs made up for a large portion of the artifacts. Thirty-one percent of the direct messages (32 artifacts) were coded into the Personal Integrative needs category. Some examples of this need represented in the data are “I actually feel worthy and stopped comparing myself to others” as well as, “I am not changed overnight, but I found the motivation to improve myself and do better”. For

example, if a direct message includes “After I deleted snapchat, I realized that I was being too hard on myself and I found it a lot easier to have more self confidence and worry less about being perfect” would fit into this category.

Social Integrative Needs

Social Integrative needs also represented a large portion of the direct messages that were analyzed. Social Integrative messages were coded to match thirty-one percent of the direct message(32), the same amount as in the Personal Integrated category. One example of an artifact that was coded into this category is:

“I used to be really insecure because I didn’t feel like I could keep up with what everyone else was doing and posting online, but when I took a break I realized that I had time to do fun things and my relationship with my friends and family have really improved. I even taught my five year old sister to read”

Another example is:

“My mom and dad are always on their phone, but when I stopped using mine as much I felt like they didn’t want to spend time with me. I got the courage to tell them how I feel and now we all make it a priority and we have a much better relationship”

Affectionate Needs

Affectionate needs were present in eighteen percent of the analyzed direct messages, or 19 total messages. Messages included phrases such as, “I feel like my entire school’s attitude changed after hearing [Collin] speak here” and “I feel so much more happy now that I have more control over my day”. Another example of affectionate needs being met was a message stating that a teen “did not know that [they] could be so happy after

not using social media as often”. Many times this data was in correspondence to other needs being met, especially personal integrative needs and social integrative needs. These categories are similar in some ways, and many of the messages were not mutually exclusive to each other in the data.

Cognitive Needs

Direct messages regarding cognitive needs being met after taking the social media challenge were represented by seven percent of the data collected. This was a total of seven instances of cognitive needs reported as satisfied within the study. These messages never overlapped with any other categories making this mutually exclusive compared to the other needs categories. Some examples from the data include “I learned how real this issue is for more people than just myself”, and “this was a wake up call for me to start taking social media seriously and using it to do good”.

Tension Free Needs

Tension free needs was the most overlapped category out of all of the sections. Direct messages were coded into this category 13 times, and was used in conjunction to another category 8 out of those 13 times. Many of the messages that were analyzed inferred that because they were not as caught up in what was happening online, they were able to catch up with friends, go on walks with their dog or family, and overall use social media more intentionally which made it less stressful. The authors also mentioned that they found other ways to relieve their stress such as hanging out with friends, learning new skills or making up games with their family members. An example of a tension free need would be a DM stating “I like taking walks instead of scrolling social media for hours, it really is

stress relieving”, or “I was so stress all the time on social media, but now that I have taken a break, I can see through the fake and it doesn’t affect me as much”.

Discussion

Based on the prevalence of the two largest categories, Personal Integrative needs and Social Integrative needs, a conclusion can be drawn that when teens are implementing Collin Kartchner’s social media guidelines, they are improving their self image and engaging in more face to face relationships. This is important data because many previous studies show that having quality relationships improves many different areas of life including academic and extracurricular aspects. One reason this may be the largest coded category would be because the guidelines in Collin Kartchner’s social media challenge are focused around improving self image and relationships. This data presents the idea that even if children are not completely deleting every social media account, when taught how to use them responsibly, they can experience large shifts in many aspects of their life. These shifts include cognitive, emotional, personal, social and stress related shifts that when combined can make a substantial difference to an individual, and especially a teen who is learning to navigate and recognize how to meet those needs in a healthy way.

It is interesting to note that multiple categories were represented within single DM’s. Over half of the analyzed artifacts were coded into two different categories displaying multiple needs. This could be used to say that although all of the needs are distinct and individual, when teenagers are using social media as suggested by Collin Kartchner, they are having more than one need met at a time. This also seems to say that the usage of social media is gratifying the teenagers in multiple ways instead of one distinct and isolated

way as suggested in the uses and gratifications theory. One example of this from the data is as follows:

“After I made changes to my social media like you said, I felt more responsible, I had more time to spend with friends and I even made more friends! I also had more time to spend with family, and more money to do things. I even had time to take my dog on a walk and enjoy the sunset. I have never been so confident and stress free! All this because I was using my phone less. Thank you so much Collin. Never stop doing what you do!”

This example includes social integrative needs, personal integrative needs, as well as tension needs.

While tension free needs only manifested in an isolated fashion seven times in the data, something to be considered is the idea that tension free needs were often paired with another need, notably personal and social integrative needs. This kind of data could be interpreted to say that as the teenagers were seeing changes in other areas of their life, they found themselves also finding other ways to release stress and fulfill their tension free needs. Some of the teens even stated that they thought that social media was a good release for their anxiety and stress, but after using it in a more careful way they realized that it was the way they were using social media that actually increased their stress and anxiety around certain topics.

Outside of the Uses and Gratification framework, there was a trend in the data that showed gratitude towards Collin Kartchner for being a “warrior” for the kids. Many kids reached out to him with their issues, and he was able to talk to them and encourage them to tell someone close to them who could get them the right kind of help that they needed.

The teenagers also reached out to say “thank you” in almost every message that was sent. They showed appreciation and satisfaction with the new way they were using social media. In other highlight bubbles, Collin also shared comments and direct messages that parents have made to him in regards to the adults personal journey with social media and the relationship that they share with their children. More research could be done in the future to identify what shifts, if any, have occurred within the parent child relationship after implementing the guidelines set up by Collin Kartchner and his research in Save The Kids Inc.

Collin Kartchner taught his message in many different formats, however it is not clear what formats were more successful or impactful on teenagers or their parents. Another key finding in the data is that a substantial amount of teenagers mentioned the Save the Kids podcast launched by Collin Kartchner as an impressive motivation for them making changes in their life. On a larger scale, kids were messaging Collin because they had heard him speak in person at their school and were moved to make changes to how they use social media in their daily lives. It would be important further data to analyze what changes were made by the audience based on where they heard Collin’s message (through a podcast/media website, or in person).

There is limited information on how students felt before taking Collin’s suggestions of taking a step back from social media, deleting people who you don’t know or don’t make you feel good, and using social media for a power of good. However, based on the qualitative data observed, every direct message that was analyzed included some sort of positive shift or change in the way the person felt about themselves or using social media in general. A further limitation is that there was no access to unlimited direct messages from

the teenagers. Because Kartchner was able to screen the messages, it is assumed that he excluded any negative comments about his method or challenge in order to promote the good.

Due to time constraints, it would not be feasible to interview the children or hold a focus group, which could be done in the future for a more comprehensive understanding of the results. In addition, more research could be done in focus groups in order to grasp a more deep idea of how limiting smartphone usage in a family dynamic can shift or change how that family interacts with each other as time goes on.

Conclusion

The research showed trends and patterns within the data that support the idea that when the teens changed the way they were using social media, their needs were still being met, but presumably in a different fashion based on the messages coded. Teenagers should consider the value that social media has, and use it appropriately to get the most true source of gratification. Collin Kartchner's guidelines were shown to work well for the teenagers who wrote the direct messages and they supported his cause by reporting on the changes that occurred in their life and in the satisfaction they were feeling. Uses and Gratification theory applies well to the teenagers who's messages were analyzed during this study. Although Collin KArtncher is no longer alive to share his message, it would be important for parents, teachers, or other future influencers to continue to educate teenagers who begin using social media of the power and capabilities that it has to both fulfill their needs, or make them feel like they are limited and small.

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