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Uses and Gratifications of Online Communities in Japan

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Abstract

In recent years, a variety of online communities have gained popularity among internet users. In order to understand the motives behind using online communities, a questionnaire survey was conducted in Tokyo in 2005 (N = 455). A factor analysis of 21 statements regarding motives for visiting online communities found that four-factor models accounted for 67% of the variance. The four factors included self-disclosure, socializing, information seeking, and entertainment. The first dimension, i.e., the self-disclosure motive, was significantly and negatively correlated with age. These motives are conceptualized along two dimensions, namely, ritualized/instrumental and information/relationship dimensions. The self-disclosure motive is a ritualized and relationship-oriented motive, which has not been systematically discussed in previous studies. Results indicate that this motive was significantly correlated with positive attitudes toward virtual relationships and was especially associated with the use of social networking services. The theoretical meanings of this newfound motive were also discussed.

Keywords: online community; uses and gratifications; motives; virtual relationship; self-disclosure; Japan.

With the evolution of internet technologies, new services on the internet are continuously introduced every year. One of the important characteristics of new services is the interactivity among users. Users not only consume the content on the internet but also provide content and information themselves. A social networking service (SNS) (e.g., MySpace, Orkut, and Mixi in Japan) allows people to connect with one another in a unique way. These services have created a new type of online or virtual community. Few studies have explored online communities.

The purpose of this study is to examine why people use online communities. An online community is defined as a web space where people interact with one another through the internet. Such a community is different from the real-world community in that: (1) interaction is mostly through text messages and (2) communication is sometimes anonymous. Some online communities support groups or people who have already known each other (real-group–based community), while others support those who do not know each other but share common interests (virtual-world–based community).

The online community has several different psychological functions for users. Ishii and Ogasahara (2007) showed that the membership of real-group–based online communities is positively correlated with social-bonding gratification and negatively correlated with information-seeking gratification. The use of online

communities is affected by cultural factors. Japanese users prefer virtual-world–based communities, while their Korean counterparts prefer real-group–based ones.

Previous studies

Traditionally, uses and gratifications studies have attempted to explain the uses and functions of the media for individuals and society. Rubin (1987) identified two television news audiences, namely, ritualized and instrumental audiences, based on audience motives. Ritualized audiences focus more on the medium than any particular content and are associated with diffused motives and a greater exposure and affinity with the medium. Instrumental use is "more intentional and selective, and reflects purposive exposure to specific content" (Rubin & Perse, 1987, p. 59). In contrast, ritualized audiences are assumed to be less active than instrumental audiences, whose choices of exposure to media content are more intentional and based on goal-directed motives and attitudes, and who will be more attentive to the media content.

Most studies apply the uses and gratifications approach to the mass media, especially to television, while some studies apply this approach to interpersonal communications. For example, Rubin, Perse, and Barbato (1988) applied the uses and gratifications approach to interpersonal communication, in order to examine the role of interpersonal communication motivations and found six factors _ pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation, and control _ among interpersonal communication motives. Leung (2007) also applied this approach to the use of short message service (SMS). He found that gratifications obtained from SMS use included six factors: entertainment, affection, fashion, escape, convenience, and low cost.

The internet is different from the traditional media since the former can be used as either communication or mass media. Thus, the motives for using the internet are more varied than those for using the mass media. Recently, a number of studies have applied the uses and gratifications approach to internet use. For example, Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) found five factors including interpersonal utility, passing time, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment, and suggested distinctions between instrumental and ritualized internet use. Ferguson and Perse (2000) also found four factors such as entertainment, passing time, relaxation, and social information. Similarly, Ebersole (2000) found eight factors from the factor analysis of motives for visiting websites among students. These factors included: (1) research and learning, (2) easy access to entertainment, (3) communication and social interaction, (4) something to do when bored, (5) access to material otherwise unavailable, (6) product info and tech support, (7) games and sexually explicit sites, and (8) consumer transactions. Lin (2002) found that the perceived gratification expectations from online services consisted of escape/interaction, information/learning, and entertainment. Several studies in this area found that social interaction (e.g., communication and social bonding) is one of the gratifications obtained from the internet. In Japan, Mikami (2003) found a motive associated with virtual reality. Based on survey data for World Internet Project, he found four factors accounting for

internet use among Japanese people such as virtual world gratification, amusement, surveillance, and diversion. Interestingly, this study found similar factors for using television programs and PC and mobile websites. Results indicate that young people generally show a higher level of the first motive (virtual world gratification) for watching television programs and visiting PC and mobile websites. These studies target the motives for using the internet; however, few studies have focused on the uses and gratifications of online communities except for ethnographic case studies (e.g., Darling-Wolf, 2004; Matsumura, Miura, Shibanai, Ohsawa, & Nishida, 2005).

The purpose of the study

This study is an exploratory study, which intends to explain the use of online communities from a psychological perspective. The purposes are threefold. First, this study explores how different gratifications are associated with the use of different types of website services such as SNS and blogs. Second, this study examines how different gratifications are associated with demographic factors such as age and gender. More specifically, it examines how different motives are associated with demographic and socio-psychological factors. Third, it explores how the virtual and real personal relationship motives are associated. In order to understand the role of virtual relationships, this study tests the correlations between the real-world and virtual relationships. Hence, research questions of this study are as follows:

RQ1: What motives lead users to visit online communities?

RQ2: How are these motives associated with demographic and socio-psychological factors?

RQ3: How are real and virtual personal relationships associated?

Method

Procedure and Sample

A questionnaire survey was conducted in Tokyo in November and December 2005[1]. A sample was selected from Tokyo residents, whose ages ranged from 20 to 69 years, using a two-stage random sampling method. In the first stage of the sampling, 42 areas were selected in Tokyo (the metropolitan area). In the second stage, 500 respondents were assigned to these target areas such that the number of respondents for each area is proportional to its population. Survey company staff visited the homes of the respondents and requested them to answer the questionnaire. The questionnaire was collected by the company after the respondents completed it. There were 455 successfully completed responses. Of the completed respondents, 230 (50.5%) were males and 225 (49.5%) were females. The average age was 42.5 years

[1] Hashimoto(2006). This project headed by Professor Hashimoto was supported by the Japan 2004 Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (Project no. 17330111).

(SD=13.3). 77.6% of them owned PCs, and 71.0% of them used the internet via PCs in the home. Because this survey was conducted in the metropolitan area of Tokyo, the internet usage rate (71%) was higher than its survey counterpart conducted across Japan, which was approximately 60% to 65% at the time of the survey.

Measurement

Online community motives. Twenty-one statements of motives for using the online community were presented to the respondents. Respondents' options ranged from "not at all" (= 1) to "exactly" (= 4). These statements were recorded separately for two different types of communities, namely, group-based and individual-based communities. A group-based community is defined as a webspace managed by a group, while an individual-based community is defined as a webspace managed by an individual. For example, if an SNS allows individuals to manage their own space, it is defined as an individual-based community. Respondents were requested to rate these motives for online communities which they normally visited. Of the 455 respondents, 139 respondents used a group-based community, 159 used an individual-based community, and 107 respondents used both types of communities. In total, 191 respondents (42%) visited at least one type of online communities. These respondents were requested to rate their motives separately for both community types. The two different motives were pooled together, and thus, the total number of observations is 298 in the following analysis.

Frequencies of using online communities. Respondents were asked how often they visited online communities and posted messages. Respondents were also asked how often they visited SNS sites, blogs, and other websites.

Other scales about attitudes toward virtual relationships. Three paired statements were rated based on a 5-point Likert scale. Each pair consists of two statements with opposite meanings such as "I can trust people whom I get to know on the internet" and "I cannot trust people whom I get to know on the internet." Respondents were asked to locate their attitude between these two statements using the Likert scale. Chronbach's alpha is 0.597 for these three items (N = 320). This value is not sufficiently high to prove the reliability of the additive score, and thus, only each item will be considered in the following analysis. In addition, for measuring the degree of the friendship strength in the real world, respondents were asked how openly they talked with intimate friends. Respondents chose one of the following answers: "talk only about unimportant matters," "talk a little bit about personal matters," "talk about personal matters quite openly," and "I do not have an intimate friend."

Results and Discussion

In order to examine what demographic factors determine online community use, the logistic regression model is employed. A binary variable representing the online community use (1 = using, 0 = not using) is regressed on demographic factors including gender, age, marriage status, income, status of student, and education level. Results indicate that gender, age, and education level have a significant effect on the use of online communities (Table 1). In particular, males, young people, and people with higher education are more likely to use an online community. Of these variables, age is most significantly and negatively correlated with the use of an online community. Such characteristics have been commonly observed in the early adopters of new information technologies (Ishii, 1996).

Table 1 . *Logistic Regression Coefficients Predicting Online Community Use*

	Coefficient	Wald	
Constant	1.277	2.853	
Sex (M = 1, F = 2)	−0.481	4.294	*
Age	−0.059	27.163	***
Marriage status	0.269	0.945	
Income	0.120	3.473	
Status of student	−0.188	0.095	
Education level	0.270	4.466	*

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Previous studies have shown that media use motives are not orthogonal but interrelated, and thus, the nonorthogonal factor analysis is recommended (Rubin & Perse, 1987). Considering these studies, the present study employed the principal axis factoring and oblique rotation to determine the online community motives. The factor solution yielded four factors with greater than one eigenvalue and explained 64.1% of the total variance.

Factor 1 (self-disclosure) explained 35.5% of the total variance. The factor is loaded mainly with "because I can let many people know my opinions" (0.735), "because I can become popular" (0.795), and "because I can express my feelings" (0.559). This reflects the seeking of self-disclosure on the internet (Table 2). Factor 2 (socializing) explained 13.4% of the total variance. This factor is loaded with "because I can deepen relationships with my friends" (0.743), "because I can let friends know how I've been getting along" (0.723), and "because I can know how friends have been getting along" (0.733). Factor 2 reflects motives for maintenance and development of the existing relationships. Factor 3 (information seeking)

explained 8.4% of the total variance. This factor is loaded mainly with "because I can get new ideas" (0.805) and "because I can know what is happening in the world" (0.709). These items reflected activity related to information seeking. Factor 4 (entertainment) explained 6.8% of the total variance. This factor is loaded with "because I can be relaxed" (0.678), "because it is enjoyable" (0.749), and "because it is interesting" (0.704), reflecting ritualized use related to relaxation and entertainment.

Table 2 *Online Community Motives: Factor Loadings*

I visit online communities…	MEAN (SD)	Factor 1 Self-disclosure	Factor 2 Socializing	Factor 3 Information-seeking	Factor4 Entertainment
because I can get information that is not available elsewhere	3.07 (0.98)	−0.143	−0.044	0.630	0.033
because I can solve daily issues and life problems	1.98 (0.98)	0.193	−0.016	0.461	0.095
because I can get new ideas	2.51 (1.00)	0.130	0.092	0.805	−0.040
because I can know what is happening around the world	2.47 (1.02)	0.029	−0.108	0.709	−0.029
because I can express my feelings	1.75 (0.99)	0.559	0.258	−0.016	0.178
because I can let many people know my opinions	1.62 (0.86)	0.735	0.272	0.070	−0.068
because I can become popular	1.53 (0.84)	0.795	0.182	0.041	−0.055
because I can kill time	2.17 (1.03)	0.018	−0.155	−0.014	0.577
because I can relieve myself of the loneliness	1.48 (0.7)	0.509	−0.197	−0.085	0.502
because I can be relaxed	1.87 (0.96)	0.217	−0.094	−0.076	0.678
because it is enjoyable	2.77 (1.01)	−0.099	0.284	0.011	0.749
because it is exciting	2.06 (0.97)	0.127	0.002	0.311	0.437
because it is interesting	2.94 (0.99)	−0.156	0.194	0.166	0.704
because I can get a topic for conversation	1.87 (0.96)	0.346	0.041	0.227	0.334
because I can forget my worries	1.33 (0.61)	0.555	−0.229	0.027	0.340

just because it is my habit	2.51 (1.05)	−0.038	0.155	0.143	0.515
because I can make new friends	1.53 (0.84)	0.691	0.193	0.095	−0.055
because I can make boy/girl friends	1.26 (0.58)	0.642	0.082	0.066	−0.074
because I can deepen relationships with my friends	1.98 (1.13)	0.226	0.743	−0.008	0.121
because I can let friends know how I've been getting along	1.84 (1.04)	0.279	0.723	−0.034	0.049
because I can know how friends have been getting along	2.11 (1.15)	0.131	0.733	−0.094	0.069

Table 3 *Correlations between factors scores*

	Socialization	Information-seeking	Entertainment
Self-disclosure	0.428***	0.266***	0.440***
Socializing	1	0.097	0.132*
Information-seeking		1	0.414***
Entertainment			1

Note: N = 284. * p < .05, *** p < .001.

Table 4 *Correlations between gratification factors and use of SNS, blogs, and other websites*

	(1) Self-disclosure	(2) Socializing	(3) Information-seeking	(4) Entertainment
Frequency of visiting				
SNS	0.445 ***	0.409***	0.169 *	0.170 *
Blogs	0.102	0.098	0.234 **	0.185 *
Other websites	0.141	0.195*	0.297 ***	0.287 ***
Total frequency of visiting	0.106	0.191**	0.164**	0.180**
Total frequency of posting	0.366***	0.297***	0.155**	0.310***

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

The self-disclosure and socialization motives are correlated most highly with the use of SNS. Table 4 demonstrates that these motives are highly correlated with the use of SNS. In contrast, the use of blogs and other websites is more correlated with information-seeking and entertainment motives. Table 4 also

indicates that these motives are more highly correlated with the frequency of posting messages than with visiting online communities, except for information-seeking. This result suggests that these three motives (self-disclosure, socializing, and entertainment) are better satisfied by posting messages than just by viewing messages.

In order to examine what factors determine these motives, these factor scores are regressed on demographic factors such as gender, age, educational level, and income. Since the data was pooled with two types of online communities, the effect of the type of online community (group-based versus individual-based) was also tested with this regression model. Table 5 indicates that younger people are more likely to access online communities with these self-disclosure and entertainment motives. Results also indicate that unmarried people have a stronger socializing motive and visitors of a group-based online community demonstrate stronger information-seeking motives.

Table 6 demonstrates correlations between these motives and attitudes toward virtual relationships. Results suggest that the self-disclosure motive is closely associated with a positive attitude toward virtual relationships. In other words, self-disclosure motives can be satisfied through virtual relationships.

In order to examine whether personal relationships in the real world affect the self-disclosure motive in the virtual world, the ANOVA model was employed. Table 7 indicates that the averages of self-disclosure scores are not significantly associated with the friendship strength for real-world intimate friends ($F = 0.419$, $DF = [3, 280]$, $p > 0.1$) and attitudes toward virtual relationships are also not significantly associated with the friendship strength. In sum, no significant correlation was found between virtual relationships and real-world friendships.

Table 5 *Regression Parameters Predicting Four Factor Scores of Motives.*

	(1) Self-disclosure	(2) Socializing	(3) Information-seeking	(4) Entertainment
Gender	0.095	0.010	−0.084	0.022
Age	−0.167 *	−0.108	−0.082	−0.293 ***
Marital status*1	0.029	−0.173 *	0.097	0.134
Education	0.089	0.113	0.141	0.004
Income	0.039	0.122	−0.035	−0.018
Type of webpage*2	−0.079	−0.036	−0.185 **	−0.096
R^2	0.052	0.092	0.069	0.075

*1 Not married = 0, married or divorced = 1, *2 Group-based community = 0, Individual-based community = 1.

Table 6 *Correlations between motive factor scores and attitudes toward virtual relationships*

	Mean (SD)	Self-disclosure	Socializing	Information-seeking	Entertainment
(1) I can trust people whom I get to know on the internet	3.58 (0.83)	.291***	.122*	.153*	.130*
(2) I can express myself more freely on the internet than in the real-world	3.58 (1.13)	.267***	.045	.078	.188**
(3) A person I know only via the internet can be a friend	3.60 (1.22)	.306***	.086	.135*	.274***

N = 189.

Table 7 *Relationships Between Closeness of the friendship and self-disclosure in the online community*

			Averages of Closeness of the friendship		
How openly do you talk with your intimate friends?	N	average of self-disclosure score	(1) I can trust people ...	(2) I can express myself more freely....	(3) A person I know only via the internet ...
I talk only about unimportant matters	5	−0.059	3.600	3.400	3.800
I talk a bit about personal matters	41	−0.044	3.415	3.293	3.073
I talk about personal matters quite openly	226	0.024	3.580	3.659	3.619
I do not have an intimate friend	12	−0.276	3.417	3.500	3.500
F value		0.419	0.586	1.272	2.327

Conclusions

Results indicate that the motives for visiting online communities can be conceptualized along the two dimensions shown in Table 8. The first dimension represents the distinction between ritualistic and instrumental motives. The second dimension represents the distinction between relationship- and information-oriented motives. These two dimensions have been widely discussed by previous studies; however, most of these studies overlooked the combination of the ritualistic and relationship-oriented motive, which is labeled as self-disclosure in this present study. While this combination may be somewhat

strange to some readers, such motive (self-disclosure) is very important for understanding the motivations behind visiting recent online communities.

The self-disclosure motive is stronger among young people, probably because they are quicker in grasping and adopting innovations. In other words, young people enjoy the online community differently than older people, who tend to consider that the online community should be connected with relationships in the real world. Results suggest that the self-disclosure motive is not a substitute for friendship in the real world, as shown in Table 7. In other words, users enjoy a virtual relationship per se, without considering the connection with the real-world relationship.

Table 8 *Conceptualization of ritualistic/instrumental- and relationship/information-oriented motives*

	Relationship oriented	Information oriented
Ritualized motives	self-disclosure	entertainment
Instrumental motives	socializing	information seeking

Uses and gratification studies on television viewing paid attention to para-social interaction. Horton and Wolf (1956) conceptualized a seemingly face-to-face relationship between the spectator and performer as a para-social relationship. However, most studies on the internet assumed that the relationship-oriented motives should be associated with its counterpart in the real-world. Several studies have focused on the effect of the internet on the real-world relationship (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998). In the famous essay "Smart Mobs," Rheingold (2003) envisioned that human relationships would be reorganized by new network technologies. However, these studies have over-emphasized the instrumental functions of the internet and have overlooked the fact that several users enjoy virtual relationships, irrespective of their real-world relationships.

In Japan, such unique self-disclosure motives were observed even before the advent of the internet. In the mid-1990s, it was common for Japanese high-school students to have chats with their distant friends called "beru-tomo" (pager friends) using pagers. Pager friends did not know each other's names and had never met; however, they constantly exchanged messages by pagers every day, reporting their daily news and feelings to each other (Ishii, 2004). These virtual relationships are unique in the sense that they did not disclose objective self (name, gender, etc.) but disclosed only their subjective self (emotional state) in frequent messages. Such unique preference for anonymity among Japanese people can be observed even in comparison with other countries in Asia. For example, only 30.5% of online community users knew each other in Japan, while 61.2% of their counterparts in South Korea knew each other. In addition, only 20.6% of the Japanese online community users used their real name, whereas 54.9% of the Korean users used

their real name (Hashimoto, 2006). These unique characteristics suggest that, in Japan, relationships among online community members are strongly virtual-oriented and some people seek such virtual relationships rather than real-world relationships.

Motivations for visiting online communities may be strongly affected by cultural factors. I have discussed unique patterns of internet use among Japanese people in an article (Ishii, 2004). The study found that Japanese users showed the highest subjective disclosure level while they also showed the lowest objective disclosure level. In this sense, blogs are the most appropriate tools for Japanese people to express themselves on the internet since the blog system allows bloggers to express their daily feelings while maintaining anonymity. Considering such unique communication patterns among Japanese people, it is not surprising that Japanese language accounted for 37% of the world's blogs (Technorati, 2007). However, we do not yet know how cultural factors affect the usage patterns of the internet worldwide. Future research should further examine the motives related to virtual relationships in the international comparative framework in cooperation with the World Internet Project.

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