Social Media Networks Unveiled.  
Mapping the Romanian and German Youth

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Abstract: In the present study we focus on the use of social network sites by Romanian and German youth in a comparative manner. Our research questions are 1. Are there differences in the use of social network sites by young people in Germany and Romania? 2. Are there differences in the motivation to use social network sites? and 3. How do they see the information shared on social networks? The present study is of exploratory nature and it was only the first step in analyzing the differences between Romanian and German students with respect to the use of SNS such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp. Based on a qualitative methodology, our results cannot be subject for generalization. Nevertheless, we emphasized some relevant tendency such as a migration towards...
Instagram in both Romania and Germany and similar reasons for this behavior. Privacy seemed to be much more relevant for the German students than for the Romanian and this is reflected in news sharing behavior. Differences in the diffusion of information and innovation are not that relevant taking into consideration a global digital perspective.

**Keywords:** Social networking sites (SNSs); Facebook; Instagram; Uses and gratifications approach; Germany; Romania; Comparative study.

**Context and theoretical framework**

Social media has become nowadays a relevant item of the media diet of the majority of the population in many countries. It is a dynamic field where platforms and usage practices are subject to constant changes in an established culture of connectivity (Van Dijck 2013) with multi-directional information flow in a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013). Carr and Hayes (2015) define social media as a computer-mediated communication, where individuals generate content of their own, see and interact with content of their friends’ or other users online. Our interest is in social networking sites (SNSs), a subdomain of social media, that are networked communication platforms in which participants:

1. have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data;
2. can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and
3. can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site. (Ellison & Boyd 2013, p. 157 in Alhabash, Ma 2017, 1).

The main SNS we are discussing is Facebook, as it is the main network where people can also share news and has a more informative character than the others. Twitter was not taken into consideration, as previous studies showed us that it does not have the same popularity as Facebook. For example, in 2011 there were 44000 Twitter accounts and 2,95 million Facebook accounts (Aparaschivei 2011); moving to 2017, Twitter remains the Cinderella of the SNSs that are used in Romania, with only 8,4% of the of internet users in the country and over 9 mil. Facebook accounts (Gemius 2017) with account on this platform.

In the present study we will focus our attention on Romanian and German youth, as they are the main users of Social Media Networks. In Germany, the main age groups that use Facebook were, in 2014, between 18-24 (24,11%) and between 25-34 (27,76%). On the other hand, in Romania the main age group that uses Face-
book is between 25-34 (26,83%), followed by the 18-24 (21,47%) and 35-44 groups (21,15%) (Facebrands 2017).

In recent years, young users are migrating from Facebook to Snapchat and Instagram, as shown by Alhabash and Ma (2017). Nonetheless, Facebook remains the main network used in Romania and Germany. Given the fact that university students have large Facebook networks and spend a lot of time on Facebook (Iordache et al. 2015, Gorghiu et al. 2016), we consider that the focus on students is important as it helps us to reveal a piece of the puzzle that is the use of SNSs in Romania.

In the last few years, social media has gained a lot of attention from researchers. From the discussions on the diffusion of fake news (Zhang et al. 2016), better defined as democratically dysfunctional news sharing (Chadwick et al. 2018) and to the most recent – the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison 2018), the use and the implications of using social networks have never been so intensely discussed. But even with this new information about the downsides to social media, and Facebook in particular, people are still using them at the same rate, with no signs that accounts are being closed as a response to the lack of control over the personal data of the users or the truthfulness of the information they gather this way. A central theory that can explain this type of behavior was developed in the 1970, namely the uses and gratification approach (Katz 1974). This theory is built around the idea that the audience members are active and goal-oriented consumers. Furthermore, as the name suggests, people gratify certain needs through the use of social media. As Alhabash and Ma (2017) put it, users are perceived as rational actors that are aware of their interests and motives, which lead them to select media and entertainment material that provides gratification. Moreover, the uses and gratification approach targets the psychological individual differences and the media use motivations, as social media is a potpourri of information, entertainment, surveillance, personal relationships, identity and diversion (Al-Menayes 2015).

According to what the recent literature revealed (Bene 2017; Buehler 2017), the motivation to use is a predictor for the intensity of use (definition of each). More than that, the relationship between the time participants spend daily on the platform and the intensity of use is a predictor for all platforms. The nature of each platform indicates the usage time and, subsequently, the intensity with which it is used. For instance, Facebook and Twitter are more time-consuming than Snapchat and Instagram. Younger audiences prefer content that is easier to consume, and platforms like the latter are not saturated by news and text.

Referring to the way people are using SNS, we can adapt Rogers (1964) on Diffusion of Innovation Theory, a theory that has seen a huge development over the
years. Five types of consumers were identified:

1. Innovators. These are people who want to be the first to try the innovation. They are venturesome and interested in new ideas. These people are very willing to take risks, and are often the first to develop new ideas. Very little, if anything, needs to be done to appeal to this population.

2. Early Adopters. These are people who represent opinion leaders. They enjoy leadership roles, and embrace change opportunities. They are already aware of the need to change and so are very comfortable adopting new ideas. Strategies to appeal to this population include how-to manuals and information sheets on implementation. They do not need information to convince them to change.

3. Early Majority. These people are rarely leaders, but they do adopt new ideas before the average person. That said, they typically need to see evidence that the innovation works before they are willing to adopt it. Strategies to appeal to this population include success stories and evidence of the innovation’s effectiveness.

4. Late Majority. These people are skeptical of change, and will only adopt an innovation after it has been tried by the majority. Strategies to appeal to this population include information on how many other people have tried the innovation and have adopted it successfully.

5. Laggards. These people are bound by tradition and very conservative. They are very skeptical of change and are the hardest group to bring on board. Strategies to appeal to this population include statistics, fear appeals, and pressure from people in the other adopter groups.

The spread of news – perceived as an innovation – emphasizes the importance of single users’ influence, network structures, and characteristics of the innovation or content analyzed. People tend to follow similar activities as their peers, because the social influence plays a critical role in recognizing, adapting and sharing news. Among the behaviors identified we note: news sharing in the context of online media use, users’ and organizations’ attitudes and characteristics and their relation to news sharing behavior and users’ motivation to share news in social media (Kümpel et al. 2015).

**Methodology**

The methods used for the present research are the focus-group. The respondents chosen were between 19-23 years old, with background in Communication science. There were several focus-groups conducted in a time frame of 3 months: four in November 2017 (two in Romania and two in Germany), three in December 2017 in Romania, three in January 2018 in Germany, with 10 to 12 participants for each one. The main topics covered by the interviews were: willingness to share, risk propensity, intensity of use and gratification.
RQ1. Are there differences in the use of social network sites by young people in Germany and Romania?
RQ 2. Are there differences in the motivation to use social network sites?
RQ 3. How do they see the information shared on social networks?

Mapping the problem. The focus-groups

Motivation to use social network platforms

The first topic of the focus-groups covered the motivations behind the use of social networking platforms. The German respondents tended to use the platforms mainly to inform themselves. However, the first striking observation that can be drawn is the critical lens they use when analyzing the material: *On Facebook, all kind of superficial information gets through.* Another girl stated: *If you really want to know more, you need to go to websites.* There is a constant need to review and double-check the information they read. Also, they present themselves as being extremely aware of the mechanisms behind the social media platforms and the fact that their interests are being recorded. One of the boys stated: *The social media platforms are analyzing your habits. They show the content you like.* They further on suggested that social media platforms do not offer you as much freedom as one thinks. The two notions which arose are trustworthiness and credibility on all accounts. And the German youth seems to think social media lack these traits.

Another issue they mentioned is the shortage of criteria for the content they want to analyze on the social networks. They sometimes go to portals which present raw facts like the DPA (Deutsche Presse-Agentur), to see unfiltered topics or they turn to big news platforms which are known to provide valid information.

A third tendency recorded during the focus-groups was that of leaving Facebook, trend that can be also found in SNSs statistics. Among the reasons invoked, one can identify boredom, lack of enjoyment regarding the content shared and the perception of it being the “network of their parents”. The content does not prove to be as engaging for them. Some invoked the fact it was time-consuming and that their online presence is on constant watch: *The world today is transparent enough. I do not have to give more information.* Also, both respondents from November 2017 and January 2018 declared that since Instagram and WhatsApp appeared, Facebook became outdated.

Furthermore, both the boys and the girls admitted that they created their Facebook accounts out of the need of being in the same social network with their friends, back in 2009-2010. Something else that emerged during the focus-groups with the Germans was their powerful tendency towards privacy and intimacy. As several of them declared: *There is no need in following anybody.*

However, there are certain differences present, when looking at the answers provided by the Romanian respondents. They are more willing to connect and fol-
low others, while keeping their Facebook accounts active. All of them have their profiles up-to-date and are constantly using them. Moreover, they like to keep an eye on their friends’ actions, hence their declarations: *I like to keep track of my friends’ activity. To see where they are and what they are doing now.* In this respect, while the Germans were talking about setting boundaries and having closed circles, the Romanians enjoy expanding their networks and tracking what the others do. Still, among Romanian respondents, one could observe the tendency of checking others’ activity, whilst not being so inclined to post much about oneself: *I enter on social media to check what my friends are doing and sometimes I post myself, but on rare occasions.* And, they showed a slight aversion towards the Facebook content: *I use Instagram more. There are a lot more things to see from others, where they have been, where they have travelled.*; *I use Facebook when there is really nothing else to do.*

**Sharing information**

The second topic and one of the most ardent, was that of news sharing and sharing information, in general. Here, both the German and the Romanian participants were not inclined to share information.

The most frequent motive provided by German students was the boredom with Facebook. They already deleted their accounts, have a poorly curated accounts: *There is too much irrelevant information. You find only funny cat videos and so on. I prefer using Instagram for Instagram stories and Snapchat.*, And barely use it: *I never share information on Facebook. I have lost interest in it or feel anxious to share information with all the list: If I share information, which I normally do not do, I just send it via a message.*; *I never share news with all my friends and so on.*

Most of the Romanian students also prefer not to share information. They stated they do not enjoy it, and only do it if there is special content which they consider interesting and think that their peers would also perceive it in the same manner. Coupled with this, some pointed out about the importance of the information shared: *I try to share information which might help others. Otherwise, it is between me and my friends.*

What was intriguing in their answers (both for Germans and Romanians), was the reference to their parents. They mentioned their parents are the ones who like to massively share information: *My father does that a lot. And his friends. They share opinions and news about politics and spiritual matters.* The respondents were asked if they think their parents do that in order to present themselves as well-informed. Both the Germans and Romanians consider they do this because they were used to mass communication channels, in an era when everything that was presented was viewed as being true: *They value everything they read as being important.*; *They think everything they read on the internet is true.* This issue led us to the next topic of discussion: fake news.
Credibility and democratically dysfunctional news sharing

We wanted to discover whether our respondents think of them as rational users of SNS, with the ability of discriminating between real and fake content. Students from both countries claimed to be aware of manipulated content present on SNSs. They also provided answers regarding the mechanisms they use to avoid fake news. The German respondents mentioned the importance of checking several news outlets. They consider that social media platforms are not trustworthy: *If you really want to know more, you need to go to websites.* I would not say one country’s media is the right one or spreads the truth. They also identified some of the agenda-setting effects and one of the respondents encompassed extremely well the collective thoughts in his declaration: *The issue with media is they do not solely give you facts. They present everything in a way so that you form an opinion based on what they say.*

Others talked about identifying strange website domains, as well as the clickbait techniques. And when inquired what they consider would be the optimal solution, one of them resumed: *It is a phenomenon which can never be stopped. The only solution is education. Better education for everyone.*

The Romanians also suggested they believe there is a lot of fake news circulating on social media. And they also suggest checking multiple sources for accuracy: *I consider that on Facebook there are a lot of fake news. A lot of bad news gets sucked in by the newspaper, then another takes it, modifies it a little and passes it on. And this circle continues and you end up not understanding anything.* One of the male respondents said he gave up following news on Facebook, because of some groups which were posting absurd information. And it was extremely obvious the information was fabricated. There was, however, a slight difference in approach, when comparing Romania and Germany, because there were Romanian respondents who declared not being news consumers. Two of them actually noted: *I am not a news consumer. I consider that if it is something truly important, I will hear about it.* Another girl added: *If there are common news, I prefer not to fill my memory with that. There are a lot of interests which influence the news.*

Also, there were additional considerations about news sharing. Neither the Germans, nor the Romanians share news. What is more interesting, is that both groups invoked the same reasons: *My friends are already reading the news. If I choose to tell them, I do it in private.*; *There’s no point in sharing news. It is like underlining the obvious.*; *I do not share news, because I consider they are public information.* However, although the general behavior is avoiding news sharing, they said they would do it if there was something truly big and important. Mostly news of political or social nature, connected to their community.

Because the respondents from both countries considered themselves internet savvy and suggest they can easily detect fake news, we asked them to offer some
examples and criteria for the credibility of sources. The Germans mentioned their big media outlets, which gained reputation in time. Also, they search for sources that carry the “verified” sign. Their media outlets search the information on various sources and post the story only afterwards.

The Romanians also believe that the pages that share that information give credibility. If they offered quality materials before. Also, they look at the sources quoted inside the articles: *I look at the statistics, and the numbers. If they can be validated or not., I look at statistics from institutions with credibility.* Two respondents added that they look for the credibility given by other people. For instance, if there is the case of a well-reputed reporter or a beloved professor who shares information, the respondents are more inclined to believe and give that source credit, but keeping an eye on the content provided. Past experiences with click bait made the Romanian respondents very skeptical. Also, one of the girls took the idea further and said that the multiple source check is not working anymore, because those who produce fake news already learned that trick. They produce content through several webpages, so it is harder than ever to identify which content is deceitful.

**Discussions**

The first research question aimed to uncover the differences in the use of social networks between young people in Romania and Germany. Here, we differentiated between the social network sites preferences and the intensity of use. From what we could extract from the respondents’ answers, the Germans are not as keen on using social network platforms. At one point they got bored and declared they prefer smaller connections through networks such as WhatsApp, instead of Facebook.

In terms of motivation, while the Romanians use it daily, in order to stay informed about their friends’ activity, some of the Germans deleted their accounts, led by a strong urge to protect their privacy. Furthermore, the Germans prefer using their social media presence mostly for professional activities. To find jobs and to be found by potential employers. This is why they are careful what they post and when, in order to preserve a good image. The Romanian respondents use social network sites to maintain connections with their friends and relatives, and to search for content. Even though the motivations are different, both the Romanian and the German participants show a tendency to leave Facebook and turn towards networks such as Instagram, WhatsApp or Snapchat, because they consider Facebook the network of their parents. The perception is that the content is outdated and boring in many cases.

When opening the subject of what they share or how they perceive the information they encounter on social media, they underlined the fact that there are a lot
of fake news and content which bores them. More than this, they developed a very critical system through which they judge the information they read, especially the news. There is a strong need to check everything from multiple hands and to form some sort of criteria which helps analyzing the information they read. And, unlike their parents, they are very skeptical about what they stumble upon.

**Conclusion**

The present study is of exploratory nature and it was only the first step in analyzing the differences between Romanian and German students with respect to the use of SNS such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp. Based on a qualitative methodology, our results cannot be subject for generalization. Never the less we emphasized some relevant tendency such as: a migration towards Instagram in both Romania and Germany and similar reasons for this behavior. Privacy seemed to be much more relevant for the German students than for the Romanian and this is reflected in news sharing behavior. Differences in the diffusion of information and innovation are not that relevant taking into consideration a global digital perspective. Cultural differences are much more to be considered, but this is a subject for a future research.

**References**


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