

“I realized that Facebook is just totally absurd” – Reasons of Non-users for Their Abstinence from Social Network Sites

Carmen Klingenberg, Gabriele Irle, Thomas Mandl

Department of Information Science & Natural Language Processing
University of Hildesheim, Germany
c.klingenberg@web.de, {irle, mandl}@uni-hildesheim.de

Abstract

Nowadays social network sites are present in all parts of our daily life. Nevertheless there are a lot of people who do not use them. What reasons do non-users have for their abstinence of social network sites? To answer this question six semi-structured interviews with German non-users were conducted. A qualitative analysis of the data shows that there are two main relevant aspects. Firstly, their general life situation, and secondly, different reasons for the abstinence of social network sites need to be considered. Two of these reasons which we identified have not been revealed in previous research. The concept of friendship and the communication style in social network sites as e.g. users who show a distorted presentation of themselves to show off were strong motives for abstinence.

Keywords: Social network site, Facebook, Non-users, Technology adoption

1 Introduction

Today, we are confronted with social network sites in all parts of our daily life. They are used for communication with friends or when sharing ideas

In: F. Pehar/C. Schlögl/C. Wolff (Eds.). Re:inventing Information Science in the Networked Society. Proceedings of the 14th International Symposium on Information Science (ISI 2015), Zadar, Croatia, 19th–21st May 2015. Glückstadt: Verlag Werner Hülsbusch, pp. 326–337.

with others. Social network sites enable people to stay in contact easily over a long distance and communication becomes more vivid with photos, videos and comments. Despite the big success and the high acceptance of social networks, there are still many people who do not use them. What motivates them and which consequences arise from a decision against such a widespread medium? It is interesting to see which reasons people have to avoid social network sites.

2 Background

Only few studies so far have dealt with abstinence from social network sites. Most deal with Facebook because of its predominant role among social network sites. For the same reason, Facebook was also used in our study. Portwood-Stacer (2012) considers non-use as a critical and political statement and thus as a conscious decision. She sees abstinence as part of a liberal consumer culture in which users feel empowered to make decisions. The research has been done by conducting interviews and analyzing published statements. The focus on publications has probably led to a bias toward outspoken political arguments. Obviously, this represents a limited perspective and neglects other reasons like the ones stated further down. Lampe et al. (2013) found five different reasons that were stated by non-users: Time constraints, channel effects, privacy, context collapse and lack of interest. They used a questionnaire study in which they collected open answers from non-users to identify reasons. Baumer et al. (2013) also analyzed questionnaires about Facebook use from about 400 respondents between 19 and 76 years from various countries. Their paper deals with the data retrieved from answers to open-ended questions. They identify six different kinds of motivations for abstinence: Privacy; Data Use and Misuse; Banality; Productivity; Addiction, Withdrawal, and Envy of the Disconnected; Social, Professional, and Institutional Pressures. One of the main contributions of Baumer et al. (2013) is the result that a binary distinction between users and non-users does not mirror reality. Along a similar line of argument, Leavitt (2014) researches temporary non-use of technology. He argues that patterns of situational non-use could be used to improve technology. In social situations, where users with different temporary usage styles encounter, the situation is

even more complex. Loder (2014) is especially interested in the negotiations between users and non-users. Avoiding undesirable effects as far as possible is of interest for users. They may adopt practices of obfuscated use and partial use. For that, they need to arrange their atypical forms of usage with other users.

Interestingly, like in most other studies, general negative attitudes toward technology are not in the list. Such motives are often behind abstinence from entertainment technology in traditional communities. Also, lack of ease of use which is often stated for abstinence from encryption software doesn't appear as an issue for social networks.

3 Methodology: qualitative interviews

Since the motivations for non-use are not well researched and because we were interested in understanding them better and the ideas behind them, a qualitative approach was adopted. The identification of non-users is difficult and could have required monetary support. Therefore, we used convenience sampling and six semi-structured interviews with non-users were conducted. The three female and three male interviewees were aged 21 to 42 years and found through personal contacts. Three of them are students, namely of educational studies (P2), ergotherapy (P4), and in teacher training (P5). The other three participants work as a health care management assistant (P1), psychotherapist (P3) and as a machine operator (P6).

The interview guide was produced with the help of the so-called SPSS approach suggested by Helfferich (2005). SPSS is an abbreviation for the German equivalents of collect, check, sort and subsume. Additionally, the participants had to fill out a questionnaire with their personal information. We conducted qualitative interviews in order to get varied and deep insights into non-users' attitudes. Open questions were formulated with the aim of collecting longer narrations from interviewees. The interviewer asked about the (non-)usage of social network sites, the reasons for abstinence, other people's reactions, the non-users' general attitude towards technology and their opinion towards social network sites. A simple system of transcription by Dresing and Pehl (2013) was chosen.

The data analysis was undertaken carried out as suggested by Mühlfeld et al. (1981). It begins with marking promising text passages. Secondly, a pre-existing category system is used and, if necessary, expanded, to categorize the data. While the text is read for the third time, significant passages are marked and new relations between the information are elaborated. Especially congruent or inconsistent statements are sorted together. Different perspectives on actions can thus be clarified. In the fourth step the text of the analysis is formulated and then the passages are checked for a last time.

4 Results

The results are presented in the following two subsections which cover the life situations of non-users and motivations for the abstinence from social network sites. Further results can be found in Klingeberg (2013).

4.1 Characteristics of the interviewees

All participants had knowledge about Facebook. They have obtained information from the media or from friends and some of the participants have used Facebook previously. Those interviewees have not always had a critical attitude towards Facebook and joined social network sites when they were younger. With the years their attitude has changed and they have become more critical. When asked from their friends why they do not use Facebook the interviewees' reactions can be reserved, open or completely tolerant. When other people learn about non-use, they often react surprised. Often, users emphasize the prevalence of Facebook as a way of communication. Non-users have difficulties to understand how others can feel fine being part of such a social network. Users, by contrast, sometimes lack the understanding which motivations were responsible for the abstinence of Facebook.

Social pressures become obvious in the case of two participating students. Reluctantly, they joined Facebook because it was the preferred way of communication for group work in university. When the interviewees mentioned that they do not use Facebook, uncomfortable situations arose, so the non-users gave in. Nevertheless they decided to use it with a fake profile and to strictly limit their use. Their membership on Facebook had an undesired con-

sequence: The students were confronted with the expectation that they would be willing to be added as friends by their fellow students.

Conversations with friends also contain references to Facebook. The feeling of being an outsider is known by the non-users and arises when they are confronted with information they did not receive at all or received late.

4.2 Motivations for the non-use of social media network sites

This study adds two motivations for non-use to the existing literature. It was found that the interviewees discussed Facebook's definition of friendship and boastful behavior of users as two important objections, although none of the interview questions explicitly asked for these topics. The section is completed by a third paragraph summarizing other reasons that were motivating the interviewees to their decision. The interviewees admit that Facebook can be useful to stay in contact, but nevertheless the negative aspects predominate for them.

Concept of Friendship

One reason to avoid Facebook is the inappropriate way of communication with friends. Social network sites use the term "friends" but the meaning of it is considered to be different than in "true friendships" in real life.

From my point of view it's a disadvantage [...] when something is advertised as an advantage for me which I don't see as an advantage, for example that you can stay in contact with your friends on Facebook. Whereas I have the feeling that Facebook does not replace or express true friendship, but Facebook seems to be a reflection of reality which in reality is not true. [...] These people [on Studivz.de, a formerly popular German social network] were just one more friend on a social network site but in reality they had nothing to do with real life. (P1, 30 years, health care management assistant)

One interviewee deleted her own profile and made the experience that people thought she would have ended their friendship.

I got so many messages suddenly. Like 'Hey, did you delete me?' and completely pissed. And they thought I had ended our friendship. [...] That's a real WAR in a friendship (laughing) and they just don't understand it. (P2, 21 years, student)

The interviewees consider the communication as too superficial.

I just think that when [communication on social networks] becomes more and MORE that in general we impoverish completely in our communication and that we don't get to KNOW the people as much as we do normally. That at

some point it is just ‘Oh, I love your jeans’ [...] but that really deep conversations will occur less often. (P4, 23 years, student)

Others think it is an illusion to maintain friendships just by being friends on Facebook. Real friendships need much more time and conversations.

I think that instead of an invitation on Facebook using such and such list I’d prefer if they REALLY had the wish to have me as a guest. Yes and when they have to think of me and write a personal message to me, you know? (P5, 26 years, student)

A concern mentioned several times is that if they used Facebook, they would lose time to share with their friends physically.

Showing-off

The unrealistic self-presentation in social network sites is seen critically, too. It is described as exaggerated boastful.

Everybody tries to sell himself in the best way possible and doesn’t express himself such as he is but just tries to sell himself best possible so that the presented image does not match the reality but is a projection of what everybody tries to be. (P1, 30 years, health care management assistant)

One of the participants shared a story about a friend who has passed away. The participant has the impression that the condolences on the friend’s profile are a way of showing off in front of others.

I had a very good friend. And he passed away and he is still on Facebook. It’s three years by now. And his profile is still there and his friends are STILL his friends and STILL write on his profile. [...] That just drives me mad. Because this showing off ‘Uh, I’m so great, I’m thinking of you’ [...] I think that’s so AFFECTED. And that was also the moment when I deleted Facebook. (P2, 21 years, student)

The number of friends is also seen as a mean to impress others.

I think [using Facebook is] also always to make a name for yourself like ‘I’m just great, I have such and such a number of friends.’ Many people just need that, you know? (P2, 21 years, student)

Further motivations for abstinence: privacy, uselessness, addiction

The interviewees gave further reasons for non-use of Facebook, which will be summarized in the following paragraphs.

One reason for interviewees to avoid Facebook is their worrying about privacy. Some of the participants are insecure about what happens with the information; some have detailed knowledge about this question. Some are careful because potential employers could look up information about the applicant. Another way to be careful is to upload photos in which the people

can't be recognized. Some care about their self-presentation. Others think that Facebook might have pictures of their face. The non-users state in the interviews that they do not understand how people can be so careless with their private information. They guess that many users do not think enough about data protection. Furthermore, some non-users expressed worries about children and their data, either published by themselves or by their parents. The fact that Facebook bought WhatsApp, the popular chat program, caused even more reluctance and carefulness. Nearly every interviewee uses WhatsApp and they consider the possibility that Facebook uses this information, too. Some participants also mentioned that most friends in their social group don't use Facebook and that this is the reason why they don't use it either. In the case of other interviewees, most of the people they know have Facebook.

During the interviews it became clear that the social network sites attract people, even if they are non-users. When they use it for the university they end up using other functions, too. Especially, they look at photos and posts of friends. This could be called passive use of Facebook. Other non-users are conscious about the danger of losing time looking at information on Facebook and they try to be disciplined. When the interviewees are asked what they would do if they adopted Facebook most of them guess that they would become average users. Nevertheless, they don't feel comfortable to admit that.

5 Discussion

It is noteworthy that the interviewees have some previous knowledge about social network sites and therefore have an own opinion about them. More knowledge enables a thoughtful decision against or for social networking. But even if the non-users are not interested in social networks they are confronted with the topic because of conversations on the job or with friends and the media. Interviewees stated that they neither like to draw much attention nor to look like being outsiders during conversations about Facebook. Many prefer to avoid confrontations. Other non-users are more open and explain their attitude without hesitance, although it could provoke a discussion. The surprised reactions of the users can be attributed to the normality of Face-

book’s presence in many users’ daily lives. Mutual comprehension is considered as seldom. Similar to the findings of Baumer et al. (2013), there was evidence that non-users and users sometimes encounter difficulties to understand each other’s perspective. The interviewed students were confronted with Facebook in the university. As a consequence, they joined Facebook to avoid tensions in discussions about group work. This is an example for peer pressure. Nevertheless the interviewed students are more careful with their information and try to remain anonymous. Alternatives for students who do not want to be part of a commercial social network site should be considered; nevertheless this can be difficult due to the popularity of Facebook.

Even the non-users know that Facebook is attractive due to its features. Features that attract the standard user are attracting the interviewees, too. They try to resist, although they see the danger to use more features than they would like to. One strategy of non-users is the creation of a fake profile, so that they are able to use the functions of Facebook without disclosing personal information. Obfuscation has also been mentioned as a strategy to engage in partial use by Leavitt (2014) and Loder (2014). Another argument against Facebook use is the time the non-users do not want to invest. They prefer to use their time for other things but they are worried to spend more time with the social network sites than intended. They describe this as similar to addiction, as it was also observed by Baumer et al. (2013).

If no one in the social group of the participant uses Facebook, there is no motivation for the person to adopt it since the published news and comments are only interesting if their authors are known. But, of course, there are also people who decide against social network sites although most of the people around them are members of social network sites. Even if they are sometimes surprised of being the last of their peers to get informed it would not be a sufficient reason for them to become a member.

Peer pressure is criticized by the non-users, as it was also observed by Baumer et al. (2013). An example for this is the behavior of the fellow students who aim to integrate the students into their Facebook communication. The peers’ exertion of influence is remarkable because they are interested in the growth of their circle of friends of Facebook. The pressure is seen negatively and intimidates the non-users. Facebook seems to be an informative and social network site so the participants have the impression to miss information. The feeling of being excluded can result. The non-users build up strength against this feeling. The enormous amount of information frightens

the non-users and the expectation of other people to be available at all times puts them under pressure, so they avoid this by not logging in.

Technology is generally regarded as a help for the participants' daily life. The general interest people have in technology does not precondition that they are interested in social network sites. There are interviewees who are very interested in technology without being interested in social network sites.

Age is an important factor when talking about Facebook, too. For the younger generation it is much more difficult to understand why somebody opts against using Facebook. In contrast, middle-aged people accept that there are differences in communication behavior due to age and that newer forms of communication are less interesting for them. Some interviewees also pointed out that, as children or teenagers, they were less aware of the dangers and when they got older their opinion became more critical. The initial reasons to adopt social networking became meaningless for them and they were not willing anymore to spend the same amount of time on Facebook.

Concerns about private information are another reason against the use of Facebook. The information is used for personalized advertisements and Facebook earns money with the information which is provided by users. Non-users explicitly do not want to support this process. Also it can be used by employers to obtain information and even if the student is sure that her own page does not show any important information she is aware of the danger when using it. It is possible that non-users are shown on photos without even knowing it and they can get annoyed when they are informed. Here the attitudes of the careful non-users and the careless users are confronted. The non-users cannot understand how the users can act so imprudent with information. They do not trust in the security that is proclaimed by the companies so they are not willing to disclose information. The participants are also worried about children. They think parents should not upload photos of their children and it should be explained to them how to use social network sites without disclosing private information.

Nearly all the interviewees use the chat program WhatsApp on their mobile phones. The acquisition of WhatsApp by Facebook was critically reviewed in German media because of the suspicion that Facebook might abuse WhatsApp data. The fact that the use of WhatsApp is more anonymous makes it popular. Despite the fear that data might be abused, users do not want to delete WhatsApp because most of their friends use it, too. It seems to be adopted with less reluctance as Facebook.

Friendship is considered differently in the real life than on social network sites. The values of friendships are different and it is important to be aware of this. Users may get annoyed with non-users because they were defriended. This shows that Facebook can have a huge influence on social relationships. Users should be aware that being friends on Facebook can have a different importance for another person. Most non-users put a higher emphasis on direct contact with their friends. They do not like the lack of gesture and facial expressions and prefer to spend time with people in real life. Facebook would not replace a friendship for them even if it can help to stay in contact over a long distance. The non-users do not think it is necessary to use Facebook as there are enough alternatives which are seen as more appropriate for their way of communication. It is suggested here that a cross-cultural comparison could shed light on this specific topic of friendship. It is possible that culturally specific concepts of friendship and of who is seen as a friend can have an influence on the reaction towards Facebook's concept of friends.

Content is not only criticized for its banality, as the criterion of Baumer et al. (2013) suggests. This became evident when non-users judged that some profiles are used to show off and to present an ideal version of life to the readers. Self-presentation on social network sites is a main reason to use the social network sites (Spiliotopoulos and Oakley 2013). Nevertheless for the non-users it is a reason *not* to use them. It is criticized that people don't give an authentic image of their life and exaggerate only to call the attention of other users. This behavior can provoke envy and other negative emotions in users. This result has also been central in a study including interviews and diaries for high school students by Krasnova et al. (2013) as a reason for negative effects when using Facebook. Here, it has been identified as a factor to completely resist the social network.

6 Conclusion

Our results show that there are many different reasons for being abstinent from social network sites. Uncertainties or worries about private information can be important reasons. Non-users often need to justify their behavior because networks like Facebook pervade daily life more and more. The negotiation between users and non-users as suggested by Loder (2014) has been

described in detail from the students' perspective. We also replicated the finding that there is no binary distinction between users and non-users as emphasized by Baumer et al. (2013). We saw that even the notion of use is ambiguous. Some users accessed Facebook pages without creating a personal profile and considered that as non-use. Some of the other reasons identified by previous studies were confirmed by our analysis, like banality, social pressure, addiction, or lack of time. We did not find strong hints for the issues withdrawal, envy of the disconnected, institutional or professional pressures. The original findings of the study consist in revealing two additional motivations of non-users. Firstly, it has been shown that boastful behavior of others can repel to an extent that it becomes a motivation for abstinence. More generally, some interviewees stated that the characteristics of the communication on social network sites are annoying them. Secondly, the particular concept of friendship has not been identified in previous publications. Interestingly, for both motives some knowledge of social network content is required. Overall, our study has identified additional factors toward a more comprehensive picture of reasons for not joining social network sites and the motivation for this behavior. Future research needs to show whether these are motives particularly for Germany or if they can be identified in other qualitative studies as well.

References

- Baumer, E. P. S.; Adams, P.; Khovanskaya, V. D.; Liao, T. C.; Smith, M. E.; Schwanda Sosik, V.; Williams, K. (2013): Limiting, Leaving, and (re)Lapsing: An Exploration of Facebook Non-Use Practices and Experiences. In: *Proceedings of CHI 2013*. Paris, France, pp. 3257–3266.
- Dresing, T.; Pehl, T. (2013). *Praxisbuch Interview – Transkription & Analyse. Anleitungen und Regelsysteme für qualitativ Forschende*. Marburg.
- Helfferich, Cornelia (2005): *Die Qualität qualitativer Daten. Manual für die Durchführung qualitativer Interviews*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.
- Klingeberg, Carmen (2013): *Gründe der Nicht-Nutzer für ihre Abstinenz aus sozialen Netzwerken*. BA Thesis. University of Hildesheim.

- Krasnova, H.; Wenninger, H.; Widjaja, T.; Buxmann, P. (2013): Envy on Facebook: A Hidden Threat to Users' Life Satisfaction? In: *WI2013 – 11. Intl. Tagung Wirtschaftsinformatik*, 27.02.–01.03.2013, Leipzig, Germany.
- Lampe, C.; Vitak, J.; Ellison, N. (2013): Users and nonusers: Interactions between Levels of Facebook Adoption and Social Capital. In: *CSCW 2013*. San Antonio, Texas, USA, pp. 809–819.
- Leavitt, A. (2014): When the User Disappears: Situational Non-Use of Social Technologies. In: *ACM CHI. A CHI 2014 Workshop Considering Why We Should Study Technology Non-use*. <http://nonuse.jedbrubaker.com/proceedings/>.
- Loder, C. (2014): Negotiating Space Between Use and Non-Use. *ACM CHI. A CHI 2014 Workshop Considering Why We Should Study Technology Non-use*. <http://nonuse.jedbrubaker.com/proceedings/>.
- Mühlfeld, C.; Windolf, P.; Lampert, N.; Krüger, H. (1981): Auswertungsprobleme offener Interviews. *Soziale Welt* 32 (3), 325–352.
- Portwood-Stacer, L. (2012): Media refusal and conspicuous non-consumption: The performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention. *New Media & Society*. <http://nms.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/12/04/1461444812465139>.
- Schoenebeck, S. (2014): Developing Healthy Habits with Social Media: Theorizing the Cycle of Overuse and Taking Breaks. In: *ACM CHI. A CHI 2014 Workshop Considering Why We Should Study Technology Non-use*. <http://nonuse.jedbrubaker.com/proceedings/>.
- Spiliotopoulos, T.; Oakley, I. (2013): Understanding motivations for facebook use: usage metrics, network structure, and privacy. In: *CHI '13*. Paris, France, pp. 3287–3296.