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**Why Do People Use Social Media Platforms? The determining Factors
Which Make a Social Media Platform Successful**

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Research Based Project

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explain why people use certain social media platforms more frequently than other ones. Additionally, it aspires to deduce which factors make a social media platform more favourable than its rival platforms. This research paper uses Katz and Blumler's (1974) Uses and Gratifications theory as the theoretical foundation as well as Harold Lasswell's Four Uses of Mediaⁱ to justify that people have basic needs which hence need to be fulfilled. This phenomenon can equally be seen in people's expectations for social media platforms. A content analysis was carried out on a range of popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter. Each social media platform's function and type were considered in the process of the content analysis, as to ensure the accurate collection of comparative results of these platforms' user interfaces. These findings were then compared with the results coming from an assortment of unsuccessful social media platforms' user interfaces, so to illustrate the discrepancies between the successful and unsuccessful social media platforms. This research paper is of quasi-experimental design with the scope to prove which factors verify to be the essential factors which make a social media platform more successful and thus more favourable than its rival platforms. All the findings are collected from the year 2022. Lastly, the present research paper aims to examine and answer the following two research questions: What are the determining factors that make a social media platform successful? Second, based on the coding system carried out in this research paper, what level of mediality does a social media platform need to have to be considered a successful social media platform?

Keywords: uses and gratifications theory, social media network platforms, content analysis, codebook, user interface, success-determining factors of social media platforms

Method

Sample

To conduct the content analysis, an array of social media platforms had to be selected for analysis. The selection process was based on social media platform popularity. The sample hence derived from the statistic created by We Are Social, and Hootsuite, and DataReportal (2021) called the *Most popular social networks worldwide as of October 2021, ranked by number of active users (in millions)* (see Table 2 in Appendix). The 19 social media platforms selected for the content analysis were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Tumblr, Quora, Yelp, Twitch, Soundcloud, Spotify, Smule, and Podcast. To determine the discrepancies between successful and unsuccessful social media platforms, a group of 3 unsuccessful social media platforms were selected for comparison: Vine, DailyBooth and Blogger.

Instrument

To conduct the content analysis on the 19 social media platforms, six variables representing the six essential categories were established. These were used in the code book as guidelines for a methodological content analysis. These categories were: *Openness/Dynamic Nature, Conversational Method, Participation Style, Connectedness, Visual Richness, and Mediality*. The first following categories: *Openness/Dynamic Nature, Conversational Method, Participation Style, Connectedness*, were already pre-established in the study by Ayoola J. Morayo, who applies the uses and gratifications approach on social media platforms to determine their individual success rates. During the research process, 2 more categories were coined: *Visual Richness* and *Mediality*. These 6 variables were applied into the codebook which was the type of measurement for this research paper. The codebook consists of 4 different elements (see Table 1 in Appendix). Firstly *Variable Name*: consisting of 7 variables: Q1- SMP (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter...), Q2- Dyn,

Q3- ConMet, Q4- ParStyle, Q5- Connect, Q6- VisRich, and Q7- Med, secondly *Variable Description*, thirdly *Value Labels*; where values are either numeric (where 0=no, not present unless another labelling is described in the codebook, and 1=yes, present) or categorical (there is a scale of 1-3, where 1= poor, 2=good, and 3=excellent), and lastly *Variable Level* where the result deriving from the analysis is either qualitative or formal.

Overview of the Codebook Variablesⁱⁱ

These categories are essentially the factors that make up the nature of social media platforms. In theory they help to determine a person's decision in choose a particular form of social media platform over another. According to Ayoola J. Morayo, the first 4 variables mean the following: *Openness/Dynamic Nature*, Social media services allow for feedback and user participation. Users can share information, comment, like, and rate. It does not tend to have strict barriers preventing access or use of content. Secondly, *Conversational Method*, Traditional media is more broadcast-oriented (one-way communication outwards to (a) media consumer(s). In this case, social media enables two-way communication between the broadcaster/creator and the consumer. Thirdly, *Participation Style*, social media encourages the contributions and feedback from various users simultaneously. It gives room for feedback from everyone who is interested. It removes the barrier between media and the audience. Lastly, *Connectedness*, every form of social media thrives on its element of connectedness which makes the use of links to other sites, resources, and people. Finally, the two variables coined in this paper, *Visual Richness*, the quality of visual and video content as well as its richness. Videos are an example of easily consumed content. Lastly, *Mediality*, how many and which different media forms and tools are present on a platform, such as visual or audio-visual.

The User Interface

This research paper has one unit of analysis: the user interface of social media platforms. Apart from the content analysis that was carried out on a range of successful and unsuccessful social media platforms, all 19 platforms' user interfaces were analysed qualitatively, which was guided by the six variables to create a codebook (see Table 3 in Appendix). The User Interface is the most vital component of a social media platform. Moreover, it is the launchpad for all actions and interactions that can be made on a social media platform. It should be simple, interactive, neutral, straightforward, dynamic, and above all user-friendly. The more complex the user interface is, the more tiresome and overwhelming a social media platform appears, causing users to potentially not use it and seek an alternative platform. Typical features of a user interface are a home button, a private messaging button, a creator's tool to create or post content, a search bar, a feed to explore and scroll through public content, some sorts of information filtering tools, a settings and personal profile button, interactive buttons to interact with content such as a like, share, repost, follow, bookmark, direct message, and comment button.

Design

The design was purely observational. A content analysis was carried out using the 6 determining factors found in various successful social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest, Podcast, and Blogger. The 19 social media platforms were allocated either a formal or qualitative coding, which was then recorded in the code book (see Table 3 in Appendix). From this information discrepancies between the social media platforms were able to be discerned and certain key trends in success rate were identified. Data regarding the popularity ranking of social media platforms was limited. This was seen in the statistic by We Are Social, and Hootsuite, and DataReportal (2021), where some social media platforms that were to be analyzed in this

paper were not listed. Additional similar statistics to compensate for the missing social media platform information in the list could not be found in any other reliable sources. In this case, a list of the relevant data and social media platforms was drawn.

Results

Variable Results of the Successful and Unsuccessful Social Media Platforms

The results obtained from the content analysis on the 19 successful social media platforms are presented in Tables 3, 5, and 6a. The findings showed that all the successful social media platforms, except for Snapchat and Spotify, had more than 3 ways of interacting with media content and information. This proves that most social media platforms are very dynamic in nature. As for the unsuccessful social media platforms, only Vine was an example of a more dynamic social media platform. DailyBooth and Blogger both had less than 3 ways of interacting with information or media. A mean value of 0.875 of the sample were dynamic in nature, a median value of 1, and a mode of 1 were calculated. This supports that majority of the successful SMPs are dynamic in nature. In terms of the conversational method in successful SMPs a mean value of 0.875 was calculated indicating that most SMPs employ a two-way communication method. Additionally, a median value of 1 and mode value of 1 were calculated supporting that the most common communication method was a two-way communication method. All successful SMPs except for Spotify and Podcast employed a two-way communication method. As for the unsuccessful SMPs, all employed a two-way communication method. The participation style for the majority of successful SMPs showed to have a simultaneous participation style in users. The unsuccessful SMPs all employed a simultaneous participation style in users. For the successful SMPs a mean value of 0.8125, a median value of 1, and a mode value of 1 were calculated. For the SMPs, a mean value of 1, a median value of 1, and a mode value of 1 were calculated. All these results support that the majority of SMPs support a simultaneous participation style in users. Interestingly all

successful SMPs had the availability for connectedness. A mean, median, and mode value of 1 was calculated for each element, proving it standard for SMPs to allow for connectedness. As for the unsuccessful SMPs, a mean value of 0.666, a median value of 1, and a mode value of 1 were calculated. All unsuccessful social media platforms except for Blogger had the availability for connectedness. In terms of visual richness, the majority of the successful SMPs has a rating of 2. This indicates a “good” quality of media content, or content that is easy to consume. Only six successful SMPs received a rating of 3 indicating “excellent” quality of content. These six SMPs were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube. A mean value of 2.5, a median value of 2, and a mode value of 2 were calculated in terms of “good” and easy to consume quality of content in successful SMPs. This shows that the majority of SMPs have very good quality content. As for the unsuccessful SMPs only one SMP was rated with 3, “excellent quality of content”, being Vine. Blogger was rated 1, and DailyBooth was rated 2. A mean value of 2, a median value of 2, and a no mode value were calculated. These unsuccessful SMPs were all so different in format and sector. This finding did prove that Vine, which was rated 3, and closest to our contemporary TikTok, was the most visually rich platform in comparison to the other unsuccessful SMPs. Exactly half of the successful SMPs (8) had two or more media modes present on their user interfaces’ that could be interacted with or seen. The SMPs that apply under this category were Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Smule. TikTok, YouTube, Quora, Yelp, Twitch, SoundCloud, Spotify, and Podcast all had less than 2 media modes present on the user interface. To support these findings a mean, median, and mode values of 0.5 each were found for this variable in successful SMPs. In terms of the unsuccessful SMPs, all 3 SMPs had less than 2 media modes present on the user interface to interact with. A mean, median, and mode value of 0 for each element was calculated. This shows how simple SMPs were before these SMPs were discontinued.

Discussion

In terms of the similarities between the successful social media platforms investigated in this research paper, they all tended to have more than 3 ways of interacting with media. From the qualitative analysis of each social media's user interface and features, this variable was seen in the form of interactive features allowing a user to "like", "comment", "share", "retweet", "repost", bookmark or "save for later", send a DM or a PM, reply to comments, or rate posts and media with pictograms, stickers, emojis, gifs, and interactive emojis. This is one of the most vital set of tools on a social media platform as it allows people to express themselves to the best extent that they can without being present. These types of dynamic interactions are the fundamental blocks that allow for traction and movement on social media platforms. Without them, social media platforms would be simple media platforms employing a traditional broadcast-oriented nature. The majority of the successful social media platforms shared another variable, having 2 pathways of communication. The majority of all successful social media platforms had a two-way communication style. This means that communication can take place between users and the content creator or broadcaster. This feature and possibility to cross-communicate is important because social media is reactionary, and interaction causes messages to flow and trends to be created. It is only natural that this feature is implemented and is vital to users on social media platforms because, interaction and human contact as well as expressing emotions is a basic human need, as well as to seek validation and attention from others. Some platforms such as TikTok are generated to fulfil this need to a great extent by providing a dopamine surge through the generation of likes. The only successful social media platforms that did not have a two-way communication method were Spotify and Podcast, which is understandable due to the media format being presented on their streaming services platforms. Furthermore, the majority of the successful social media platforms allowed for simultaneous participation for users, content creators and media.

This simultaneous participation style allows all users, who are not restricted in any way, to interact, contribute, as well as offer feedback to other users on their profiles and media such as posts. Additionally, this participation style enables the feature of “going live” with another user either also per video or per chat as seen on Instagram with Instalive sessions, Facebook, or even Twitch where a content creator enables a live stream, communicates to his or her followers starting a conversation or announcement. Viewers can react in live time per live chat, by texting or sending emojis of various types. A variable that every single successful social media platform shared was connectedness. This variable allows users of every social media platform to share and disperse media content through links within the platform or even outwards to other platforms and users. This feature is extremely important for a successful social media platform. As stated earlier, sharing, and interacting causes traction and momentum. Sharing media content on social media platforms comes in the form of sharing URL links to other applications or platforms, or “retweeting” as seen on Twitter, reposting, or “sharing to your story” on Instagram. In terms of visual richness and easy consumption of media, the successful social media platforms ranked at the top of the statistic by We Are Social, and Hootsuite, and DataReportal (2021) were also proven to be the most successful ones through the findings of this research paper. In the statistic, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Pinterest, Twitter, and Quora, were the top 8 platforms. In the research paper, the same social media platforms came out with the highest values. From this selection of the top successful social media platforms, they all had “excellent” visual richness apart from Pinterest and Quora who had “good” visual richness. Visual richness is determined by the quality of the content and how easily the content can be consumed by the user. From the sample of 19 successful social media platforms, those platforms that were rated “excellent”, visual richness were social media platforms that had very simple user interfaces instead of busy complex, hub-like interfaces, with the rare exception of Facebook.

Additionally, these social media platforms were found to host mainly content in audio-visual format. Videos showed themselves to be the most easily consumed media content on social media platforms today. Those platforms with the highest visual richness were Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Twitter. Nevertheless, the rest of the analyzed social media platforms were rated with “good” visual richness, which sets the standard for visual richness high, and highlights this variable as being an essential criterium for the success rate of social media platforms. Interestingly, in terms of mediality, half of the sample of successful social media platforms had 2 or more media modes and the other half of the sample had 2 or less media modes present on the user interface. Media modes refers to how many different media forms or tools are present on a social media platform. An example for this would be whether there is purely visual content such as photos, or audiovisual content on a social media platform. For instance, Instagram had more than 2 media modes present on its user interface. It comprised of audiovisual, visual, and textual media forms and content. The user interface was comprised of a “home feed” where you can scroll down through the consecutive photo or video posts of the users that you follow. User’s “Stories” are aligned above the feed, of which you can “swipe” through. Stories tend to be in the form of videos or photos. A search bar is also available to search hashtags, other users, pages, and services. There is a private message feature called “DMs” or direct messages where users can interact privately instead of in the comments section of public posts. There is a notifications feature where you can get notified if another user has shared a link, photo, video, or other media form with you, or if he has liked media content of yours, followed you or “tagged” you. There is a creator tool that allows the user to make a new post video or photo immediately. The Instagram user interface showed itself to be extremely user-friendly, compact, and simple, had no hub-like features, its presentation was modern, calming, and timeless since it featured black and white colours. What made Instagram medially interesting and easily

consumable was not only the type of easily consumable audio visual and visual media that it supported, but also its automatic and simple nature. Stories are automated to immediately launch the next story, and the scrolling concept makes time spent of this platform endless and addictive. For each of the 19 social media platforms an in-depth analysis of their user interfaces was carried out. In comparison to the unsuccessful social media platforms their visual richness varied according to what sector they belonged to, which additionally determined their mediality rating. Vine each was rated 0, meaning they employed less than two media modes on their user interfaces'. The same went for Blogger and Vine. It seems the reason why these social media platforms were unsuccessful was due to other factors such as a lack of connectiveness in Blogger, there was no sharing feature, and DailyBooth lacked in interaction features, all that could be done was users commenting on the limited medial form of photos. Content creators could not directly reply to comments as on Instagram.

Conclusion

In theory it would be assumed that the more multi-medial a social media platform is the more successful it is. If this were true, why is TikTok or Twitch so popular? The truth is that the number of medial modes alone on a social media platform does not determine its success rate. On the contrary it has been proven through the content analysis of this research paper that the perfect combination of variables has been discovered over the last decade and have been maintained and adapted to every new social media platform brought to the market. The determining factors that make a social media platform successful have proven to be the following: the content must be mainly audio-visual. Videos are the easiest consumable media content on the internet. Reading and searching through texts are too time consuming and overwhelming for the average person in our day and age. According to a survey by GlobalWebIndex and DataReportal on the most popular reasons for internet users worldwide to use social media as of 2nd quarter 2021, the most popular reasons for using social media is

to fill spare time ranked #2 (36.4%) and to find entertaining content ranked #4 (31.1%), and not so much for reasons of work-related networking and research which was ranked #11 with 22% from the 16 reasons. Not only does a social media platform with easy to consume audiovisual content increase the chance of success but so does the factor of connectives. This is one of the most important essential factors that needs to be present if a social media platform wants to be successful. The aspect of being able to link people, posts, accounts, and platforms through a sharing option is vital. Without this there is no traction or growth on social media. If this factor is missing a social media platform will face some issues. Also, a platform should have a simple and calming layout. Its design should be sleek and modern, the color palette should be neutral and timeless. Many of the analyzed successful social media platforms combined white, grey, black, blue, or red on their user interfaces. It should be as user friendly and uncomplicated as possible. Having a “feed” as the “home” of the user interface is the best layout because it enables mindless scrolling and swiping through the platform. Hence the user stays longer on the platform and consumes more of the easy content, and ends up sharing and liking more, which creates traction and movement on the platform. This propels other users to participate, and an algorithm develops. This ensures the longevity of a social media platform. The more features there are enclosing the user interface, the more complex and overwhelming a platform becomes and repels the user. Another important factor that determines the success of a social media platform showed itself to be the visual richness. The quality of the content should at least be good, it should be easily consumable; either in video or photo format is best. Another extremely vital factor that needs to be present to ensure success of a social media platform is its dynamic nature. Any social media needs to have a dynamic nature. Users must be able to like, comment, share, repost, bookmark, and follow social media. They must be able to interact with other users and the user interface as much as possible in these ways that are very simple in nature. If this variable is missing a

platform is bound to have a dilemma and become unpopular. It is a basic need for humans to seek attention, validation, and communication from other humans. Therefore, the dynamic feature is so important. Without it, users cannot fulfill their basic need. It is vital to understand that as soon as one of the two variables, dynamic nature or connectiveness is missing, a social media platform cannot survive. This is the reason why DailyBooth and Blogger failed long-term. DailyBooth was missing the dynamic nature factor and Blogger was missing the connectiveness factor. Neither of the two unsuccessful social media platforms had more than 2 modes of media, which shows that the level of mediality does not determine the success of a social media platform. TikTok has under 2 modes of media and is successful because it is neither missing connectiveness nor its dynamic nature. A social media platform will thrive if it has those two essential factors, and high values of the other 4 variables. When comparing these findings to corporate platforms such as LinkedIn, it had an overall good score. Naturally corporate platforms tend to be considered uninteresting and bland, but LinkedIn proved otherwise. It did not have an “excellent” visual richness value but a “good” visual richness value. The quality of the content is very good, and for its sector it is presented in an easily consumable manner, however it is still not as easily consumed as other more common social media platforms such as TikTok or Instagram. It can be considered the business version of Facebook. As both share a similar user interface which includes a more hub-like layout, yet it is simple and its colour scheme encompasses blue, grey, black, and white just like other successful social media platforms. Just like all successful social media platforms it has a creator’s tool where you can post audio-visual or visual posts, schedule events, and write articles. There is even a “discover” feature, a profile, and bookmark button, a search bar, and home page which allows for scrolling through subscribed pages and profiles all just like on Instagram. Most importantly, LinkedIn had both a high connectiveness rate and a high dynamic nature including the features: like, comment, share, direct message, and

live chat messaging. In terms of mediality, LinkedIn had more than 2 media modes, that being audio-visual, and visual. Many more features are available. It seems, LinkedIn was trying to end the bland stereotype of corporate platforms and adapted features from the more common social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to be more successful and make a working environment more fun, dynamic, and manageable. Finally, the level of mediality or any other factor alone does not determine how successful a social media platform it is. Any social media platform from any sector, whether corporate business or entertainment and media sharing, can be successful if it makes sure to include a high dynamic nature and connectivity as well as the additional variables to compliment the nature of that platform.

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Appendix

ⁱ Communications Theorist, Harold Lasswell's, describes 4 uses of media. He argues that the general audience of media content has basic needs that need to be fulfilled. Firstly, there is the need for Surveillance. A user has the need to follow different forms of media in the sectors of news such as on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter. Secondly, users find the need to develop their personal identity. Therefore, they search for media content found on social media platforms where they can develop and inspire their identity, such as on Instagram where a user would follow a fitness channel or watch makeup tutorials or celebrity interviews on YouTube. Thirdly, media users want to develop and feed their personal relationships. They do this by bonding with people outside media over media, or bond with fictional characters within media. Lastly users feel the need for diversion. They turn to social media to tune out of their daily lives for entertainment.

ⁱⁱ These variables were inspired by a Study conducted by Ayoola J. Morayo, who applies the uses and gratifications approach to social media platforms with the scope to determine their individual success rates.

Table 1

Codebook Template of Essential Social Media Platform Variables and Their Descriptions

Variable Name	Variable Description	Value Labels	Variable Level
Social Media Platform (SMP)	6 Variables to be analysed for on SMPs.	Range: 1-6	Qualitative
Openness/Dynamic Nature (Dyn)	Users can interact with information on social media.	0= Less than 3 ways of interacting with information.	Formal

		1=more than 3	
		ways of interaction	
		with information	
		on a SMP.	
Conversational Method (ConMet)	The number of communication pathways for information.	0= one-way communication 1= two-way communication.	Formal
Participation Style (ParStyle)	Simultaneous or non- simultaneous. Participation option for users, content creator, and media.	0= non- simultaneous participation 1=simultaneous participation.	Formal
Connectedness (Connect)	Availability for connectedness.	0=no connectedness 1=connectedness available	Formal
Visual Richness (VisRich)	Quality of content, especially easy to consume content.	1=poor 2=good 3=excellent	Qualitative
Mediality (Med)	Number of media modes present in a SMP that can be used,	0= 1 or less than 2 media modes 1= 2 or more media modes	Formal

interacted with,
or seen by a user
(User Interface).

Table 2

Most popular social networks worldwide as of October 2021, ranked by number of active users (in millions)

Ranking	SMP	MAU (in millions)
1	Facebook	2,895
2	YouTube	2,291
3	Instagram	1,393
4	TikTok	1,000
5	Snapchat	538
6	Pinterest	454
7	Twitter	436
8	Quora	300

Note. More SMPs were mentioned in the We Are Social, & Hootsuite, & DataReportal statistic but were left out here because they were not subject to analysis in this paper. To see the original Statistic, see Bibliographyⁱⁱ

Table 3*Codebook – Results of the Content Analysis on the 19 Successful Social Media Platforms*

SMP	Dyn	ConMet	ParStyle	Connect	VisRich	Med	Sector
Facebook	1	1	1	1	3	1	Networking
Twitter	1	1	1	1	3	1	Buisness Networking Media Sharing
Instagram	1	1	1	1	3	1	& Microblogging Media Sharing
Snapchat	0	1	1	1	3	1	& Entertainment Media Sharing
Tiktok	1	1	1	1	3	0	& Entertainment Media Sharing
YouTube	1	1	1	1	3	0	& Entertainment
Linkedin	1	1	1	1	2	1	Buisness Networking Bookmarking
Pinterest	1	1	1	1	2	1	& Microblogging

							Bookmarking
Tumblr	1	1	1	1	2	1	&
							Microblogging
Quora	1	1	1	1	2	0	Discussion
Yelp	1	1	0	1	2	0	Consumer Review
Twitch	1	1	1	1	2	0	Media Sharing
Soundcloud	1	1	1	1	2	0	Media Sharing
							Media Sharing
Spotify	0	0	0	1	1	0	& Streaming Service
							Media Sharing
Smule	1	1	1	1	2	1	& Streaming Service
							Media Sharing
Podacast	1	0	0	1	1	0	& Streaming Service

Table 4*Codebook – Results of the Content Analysis on the 3 Unsuccessful Social Media Platforms*

SMP	Dyn	ConMet	ParStyle	Connect	VisRich	Med	Sector
DailyBooth	0	1	1	1	2	0	Media Sharing
Blogger(Blogspot.com)	0	1	1	0	1	0	Blogging and Publishing Media
Vine	1	1	1	1	3	0	Sharing & Entertainment

Table 5*Statistics on Data Collection – Mean, Median, Mode for 16 Successful Social Media Platforms*

	Dyn	ConMet	ParStyle	Connect	VisRich	Med
Mean	0.875	0.875	0.8125	1	2.25	0.5
Median	1	1	1	1	2	0.5
Mode	1	1	1	1	2	0,5

Statistics on Data Collection – Mean, Median, Mode for 3 Unsuccessful Social Media Platforms

	Dyn	ConMet	ParStyle	Connect	VisRich	Med
Mean	0.333	1	1	0.666	2	0
Median	0	1	1	1	2	0
Mode	0	1	1	1	2, 1, 3	0